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Equitable work-integrated-learning: Using practical simulations in university marketing subjects

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ABSTRACT

Work-integrated-learning (WIL) activities assist development of student skills but the often used placement-based WIL model can be problematic, particularly due to equity issues. The purpose of this paper is to investigate use of a more equitable form of WIL - namely non-placement WIL practical simulations. Case study analysed design and delivery of a WIL practical simulation within an under-graduate marketing subject. Teacher reflection, observation of students, plus survey of students generated extensive data. The student survey, containing predominantly open-ended questions, was thematically analysed. Development of relevant key student skills valued by employers was identified in the activity. Teacher reflection coupled with student feedback generated recommendations for further improving the activity. Findings suggest WIL practical simulations eliminate equity issues associated with placement-based WIL models. WIL is under-utilised and under-researched within marketing subjects. The study contributes by showing how specifically designed WIL practical simulation can be delivered equitably to benefit numerous stakeholders.

CHINESE ABSTRACT

工作整合学习 (WIL) 活动有助于学生技能的发展, 但经常使用的基于实习安排的 WIL 模型可能会有问题, 特别是由于公平问题. 本文的目的是研究一种更公平的 WIL 的使用, 即非实习安排的实际模拟. 本文通过案例研究, 分析了一个在本科市场营销学科中的 WIL 实际模拟的设计和运用. 通过教师的反思, 对学生的观察, 再加上对学生的问卷调查, 我们得到了大量的数据. 学生问卷调查主要包含开放式问题, 并进行了主题分析. 活动中确定了雇主重视的相关关键学生技能的发展. 结合老师的反思和学生的反馈, 我们提出了进一步改进活动的建议. 结果表明, WIL 的实际模拟消除了与基于实习安排的 WIL 模型相关的公平性问题. WIL 在市场营销领域没有得到充分的利用和研究. 本研究的贡献在于展示了如何通过公平地运用特别设计的 WIL 实际模拟, 从而使众多利益相关者受益.

1. Introduction

There is increasing pressure for the higher education sector to produce graduates ready for the workplace (Anderson and Lees, 2017; Jackson, 2018). Work-readiness can be defined as 'the ability to function effectively upon entering the workforce and across a range of contemporary working environments' (Jackson, 2018, p. 23). More than ever, students and their parents are concerned 'about the effectiveness of undergraduate preparation for employment' (Peltola, 2018, p. 137), with employers frequently complaining about the poor quality of new graduates (Selingo, 2016). Examination of graduate employability is an 'emerging' area of study (McArthur, Kubacki, and Pang, 2017, p. 83) with various research suggesting that student participation in 'work-integrated-learning' (WIL), can assist the development of student skills valued by employers (James and Casidy, 2018).

WIL describes activities that integrate work practices with learning in an academic institution. In WIL, students undertake experiential learning relevant to their course of study, in either an actual physical or simulated workplace, or in the classroom (Oliver, 2015). There is a continuum of WIL – ranging from 'non-placement' WIL such as field trips, case studies, observation and practical simulation (of real-life workplace activity, as opposed to purely computer simulations), through to 'placement-based' WIL involving placements/internships. The most common type of WIL in Australia is placements (43%), potentially because placements are mandatory for various professional accreditations (Universities Australia, 2019). However, placement-based WIL can be burdensome and resource-intensive for both employers and university administration. In various instances, there is also a limited number

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of placements available and evidence that international students are under-represented in placement-based WIL (Felton and Harrison, 2017), crucial in countries where universities have a high proportion of international students. There can thus be equity issues with placement-based WIL 'not equally available to all students, with some students unable to access placements' (Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto, 2018, p. 141). Universities could potentially be in ethically or legally problematic positions if not offering inclusive educational experiences to all students (Hughes, 2015).

The issue of equity in WIL is under-researched but vital given the increasing popularity of WIL to universities in response to demand from numerous stakeholders for the generation of 'work-ready' graduates. Patrick et al. (2009, p. iv) define stakeholders in the WIL context as '[a]ny individual or organisation that participates in or impacts on WIL (university staff, university students, employers and government)'. Addressing the issue of equity brings benefits to all these stakeholders. Firstly, university staff will benefit by gaining greater satisfaction and reduced stress from being able to offer the same student experience to all students. Secondly, the many students who may not currently have access to placement-based WIL benefit by gaining an appropriate non-placement practical simulation WIL experience. Thirdly, employers benefit by gaining a greater talent-pool of graduates who have gained the benefits of a WIL experience – crucial given the concern from employers regarding the current overall poor skills of graduates (Brennan, Nhat Lu, and von der Heidt, 2018). Additionally, governments, as the fund provider for public universities can feel more confident that their funds are being put to more effective use.

Whilst placement-based WIL by definition gives students direct experience in workplace activity, it is proposed in this paper that specific design of non-placement WIL comprising a practical simulation of the workplace embedded in the university setting is an appropriate alternative to placement-based WIL, and provides a more equitable WIL option for all students.

The aim of the study is thus:

Within the context of a university under-graduate marketing subject - determine the effectiveness of a non-placement WIL practical simulation in providing students an equitable experience in developing relevant work-ready skills.

Two research questions are addressed in line with this aim:

RQ1: What work-ready skills did the activity develop?

RQ2: How can this specific activity be improved and what guidelines can the teacher of this activity offer to fellow academics considering designing practical simulation-based WIL activities?

This paper aims to assist in filling some key gaps within existing WIL literature. Firstly, Mackaway, Winchester and Carter (2014, p. 226) suggest 'questions have been raised about student access and equity in WIL'. This is a critical issue and this current research provides a suggested solution to the issue. Secondly, despite the issue being a global phenomenon, the USA and UK 'dominate the employability literature' (McArthur et al., 2017, p. 83). This research assists to address this concern through examination within an Australian setting. This setting is highly impactful for Australia as the education sector represents Australia's second-largest export industry (Jacobs, 2017). Thirdly, WIL has traditionally been utilised in disciplines such as Law, Education, Nursing and Medicine but 'scope for a WIL experience is expanding … due to increasing pressure for universities to produce 'work ready' graduates' (Abery, Drummond, and Bevan., 2015, p. 87). The research is conducted within Australia where, amongst ten university broad disciplines, '[m]anagement and commerce' currently have the second-lowest level of WIL participation (Universities Australia, 2019). This paper hence extends examination of WIL within a less-researched area, the 'management and commerce' broad discipline' - appropriate given this discipline typically accounts for a large proportion of university graduates. Linked to this, research regarding graduate employability within this discipline typically treats 'graduates as one combined cohort, and is almost entirely nonspecific to marketing' (McArthur et al., 2017, p. 83). This research addresses the current gap by focussing specifically on a marketing subject. The paper thus seeks to build and expand upon previous WIL research and contribute in valuable ways to educational practice.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The literature review section provides detail regarding the important role universities play in preparing students for the workplace and also provides an overview of WIL (including the issue of equity). The subsequent research approach section describes the nature of the specific WIL activity and the manner in which data was obtained and analysed. This is followed by a results and discussion section detailing the key findings. A conclusion follows, leading to implications of this research and further research suggestions.

2.1. Literature review

2.1. Role of universities in developing work-ready graduates

There is a general assumption that universities will produce work-ready/employable graduates (Holmes, 2013). To achieve this, universities need to assist students to attain skills and attributes relevant to gaining appropriate employment (Holmes, 2013) in an increasingly competitive market-place (Fahnert, 2015) where employers demand 'work-ready' graduates (Spanjaard, Hall, and Stegemann, 2018). In the literature, the terms 'employability' and 'work-ready' are typically used interchangeably (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017).

Employers across the globe share concerns regarding serious gaps in graduate skills (Jackson, 2010) with higher education institutions increasingly being held to account for student outcomes (Runte and Runte, 2018). In India, only 25% of graduates are regarded as employable (Nadu, 2007), and only 10% in China (Farrell and Grant, 2005). Also, specific to business graduates, recent reports indicate problems with graduate skills (Karzunina, West, Moran, and Philippou, 2017). There is also a mismatch between student perceptions of their own skills, relative to the perceptions held by employers of student skill levels (Karzunina et al., 2017). Consensus by employers that students are 'underprepared in terms of workforce skills' is an issue requiring universities to develop better ways to assist students 'bridge the gaps between theory and practice' (Brennan et al., 2018, p. 66).

Exactly what skills do work-ready graduates require? Various researchers list specific student skills, with numerous overlap and commonality between these researchers. In some instances, there is also slightly differing terminology for basically the same skill, with some skills being perhaps a subset of a higher level skill. Indeed, most researchers do not actually provide definitions to explain their terminology. Based on university-wide research (hence not industry-specific), Fallows and Steven (2000, p. 75) suggested employability skills include 'retrieval and handling of information; communication and presentation; planning and problem solving; and social development and interaction'. Subsequently, Patrick et al. (2009), p.iv) defined a work-ready graduate (non-industry specific) as possessing 'a combination of content knowledge and employability skills, such as communication, team work and problem solving, which enables effective professional practice'. Based upon a literature review of published papers, Osmani et al. (2015), p. 368) identified the top graduate attributes in business and management to be (in order) - communication, teamwork,

Table 1
Employability soft skills identified by various researchers.

Industry	Fallows and Steven (2000) Non specific	Patrick et al. (2009) Non specific	AAGE (2014) Non specific	Osmani et al. (2015) Business and management	Karzunina et al. (2017) Non specific	Deloitte (2017) Marketing & Comms	McArthur et al. (2017) Marketing	Daellenbach (2018) Marketing
KEY SKILLS								
Communication	Y	Y	3	1	1	1	3	Y
Teamwork		Y	1	2	3			
Critical thinking					2	3		Y
Problem solving	Y	Y		3		5		
Digital skills/Specific technical skills				4		2	4	Y
ADDITIONAL SKILLS								
Motivation							1	
Time management							2	
Creative thinking				5				Y
Planning	Y							
Interpersonal skills				6				
Social development and interaction	Y							
Leadership				7				
Cultural fit			2					
Self management						4		
Retrieval and handling of information	Y							

'Y' indicates skill identified but non-ranked by researcher/s. Number indicates ranking of skill by researcher/s.

problem solving, technological skills, creativity, interpersonal skills and leadership skills. In terms of skill priority, the top three skills reported as needed by Australian employers (across all industries) are, in order - teamwork, cultural fit and communication skills (Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2014). Research by Karzunina et al. (2017, p. 4) compared findings from four non industry-specific studies and concluded that 'results vary from study to study, but the general message is clear: employers value communication skills, critical thinking capabilities, and teamwork-related skills'. Research reported by Deloitte (2017) in regards to soft skills for business success indicates the top five skills required by the 'marketing and communications' industry were (in order) - communication, digital skills, critical thinking, self management and problem solving. Specifically in relation to graduate entry-level marketing jobs within Australia, analysis of advertisements (in 2016) revealed the most desired student skills included 'motivation, time management, communication skills and digital marketing skills' (McArthur et al., 2017, p. 82). More recently, specifically in relation to marketing students, Daellenbach (2018, p. 172) suggested four skills, namely 'critical and creative thinking, good communication skills, marketing knowledge, and specific technical skills'. Overall, it is generally regarded that work-ready graduates require 'hard skills' (specific discipline knowledge) as well as 'soft skills' (generic, transferable skills). Table 1 indicates the key soft skills reported in various literature. The main soft skills identified were communication, teamwork, critical thinking/problem solving and digital skills/specific technical skills.

Educators of higher education courses need to be cognisant of the skills required by work-ready students and provide opportunities for students to develop these skills. WIL is regarded as a useful tool for providing such opportunities and is discussed in the following section.

2.2. Work-integrated learning (WIL)

Unsurprisingly, employers typically choose graduates possessing work experience over graduates without such experience (Stringfellow, Ennis, Brennan, and Harker, 2006). A key approach to increase work-readiness/employability in students is via WIL (Kaider, Hains-Wesson, and Young, 2017; Venville, Lync, and Santhanam, 2018). WIL is '[*a*]n umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum' (Patrick et al., 2009, p. iv). WIL is a relatively new term (Smith, 2012) and whilst used within Australia, the term 'work-based learning' is generally used in other regions such as the USA and Europe (de Villiers Scheepers, Barnes, Clements, and Stubbs, 2018). WIL is underpinned by active (Bonwell and Eisen, 1991) and experiential (Kolb, 2014) learning with students moving from listening to actually doing what they are taught. Hence, in WIL, curriculum design integrates theory with workplace practices. WIL comprises 'placement WIL' such as work placements and internships, as well as 'non-placement WIL' such as client-based projects and practical simulations (Jackson, 2018). Irrespective of the form of WIL, the key tenet is 'close integration of university study and professional or workplace practice' (Smith and Worsfold, 2015, p.22).

Associated with WIL is the issue of authentic learning (AL). Whilst various views have been proposed, '[*t*]he predominant view is that authentic assessments are those that reflect real world tasks' (Kaider et al., 2017, p. 155). Oliver (2015) and subsequently Kaider et al. (2017) developed a matrix of WIL 'proximity' ('degree to which setting resembles professional context') versus 'authenticity' ('degree to which task resembles professional work'). For example, a placement in which the student actually does professional work in a professional setting would be classified as high proximity/high authenticity. Whereas a multiple-choice test of factual knowledge would be low proximity/non-authentic – hence not WIL. Detail of AL is discussed in the ensuing section.

2.3. Authentic Learning (AL)

AL 'comprises a complex of principles that can guide institutions in designing curricula to prepare graduates for the real world' (McKenzie, Morgan, Cochrane, Watson, and Roberts, 2002, p. 426). It provides students with an environment to link concepts and theory from the classroom to a work-place setting (Borthwick, Bennett, Lefoe, and Huber, 2007). It is constructivist and enquiry-based (Prideaux, Worley, and Bligh, 2007). Characteristics of AL include - learning-orientated, activates prior knowledge, utilises knowledge in context, extends knowledge and understanding, has meaning for the student and provides work value (Prideaux et al., 2007). Similarly, Reeves, Herrington, and Oliver (2002) suggest that AL has ten key design elements, namely – real-world relevance, an ill-defined problem, sustained investigation, multiple sources and perspectives, collaboration, reflection, interdisciplinary perspective, integrated assessment, polished products, multiple interpretations, and outcomes.

AL environments have been shown to improve student engagement and educational outcomes (Herrington, 2006), assist the development of students' identities (McCune, 2009) and have a positive relationship with student satisfaction (James and Casidy, 2018). Whilst such activities are a highly effective method to enable tertiary students to learn about real-life issues relevant and valued by employers, students often find AL challenging. Students may have initial disorientation and frustration (Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves, 2003) as many students think there is always one correct answer. Via 'confronting students with uncertainty, ambiguity, and conflicting perspectives' educators assist students 'develop more mature mental models' and 'expose the messiness of real-life decision making' (Lombardi, 2007, p. 10). Whilst challenging, students are inspired and motivated by realistic problems (Keogh, Sterling, and Venables, 2007) and the authentic activities provide students opportunity to work on complex tasks, hence using 'higher level thinking skills such as critical thinking, analysing information, expressing ideas and making logical inferences' (Chan, 2007, p.188) - key skills required in work-ready graduates.

2.4. Equity and work-integrated learning

Based on the Kaider et al. (2017) WIL 'proximity' perspective, placement-based WIL offers the highest proximity (to an actual workplace), however, it has various operational problems. There needs to be buy-in from multiple stakeholders - the educational institution, employer and student. Universities need to find appropriate employer organisations or vice versa and this can involve significant administrative resources and a need to agree on issues such as the number of placements and timing. Universities may also regard some companies as unsuitable industry partners due to issues such as company size and location (Jackson, Rowbottom, Ferns, and McLare, 2017). Conversely, some employers are simply unable to find appropriate students (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, 2014). Problematic for students, lack of sufficient industry partners results in competition for the limited number of placements available (McSweeney, 2017). For example, within Australia, more students want to participate in placement-based WIL than the number of places available (Department of Industry, 2014). This results in some students missing out. This could be regarded as an equity issue. An additional issue with placement-based WIL specifically concerns international students who are under-represented in placement-based WIL partly due to perceived cultural skill issues and weak communication skills (Felton and Harrison, 2017). In Australia, international students represent 21% of university students (Studymove, 2017) and up to 44% at some universities (Times Higher Education, 2019). Considering the education sector represents Australia's second-largest export industry (Jacobs, 2017), there is pressure for Australian universities to ensure a quality international student experience - including appropriate WIL opportunities for all students. Given the expectation from government, employers, students (both domestic and international) and their parents that a key role of universities is to produce work-ready graduates, students not having opportunity to participate in placement-based WIL (if no other WIL options are offered) could be regarded as an equity issue (Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, and Carter, 2014).

The 'increasing competitiveness' for existing WIL placements and the associated issue of equity (Kaider et al., 2017, p.154) has placed pressure on universities to examine more innovative WIL models (Ferns, Russell, Kay, and Smith, 2018). Thus, the current research explores a suggested alternative to placement-based WIL that eliminates equity issues - namely a practical simulation where 'a student experiences all the attributes of a placement or workplace task in a university setting' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 6). Currently, within Australia, WIL simulations account for only 13.9% of all WIL activities (Universities Australia, 2019). In the context of the Oliver (2015) and Kaider et al. (2017) WIL/AL matrix, simulation activities are medium proximity, highly authentic.

3. Research approach

This research examines a specific assessment activity based upon a non-placement WIL practical simulation model - regarded as logistically more practical to implement, and crucially enabling a larger number of students, indeed all students, to participate in an equitable manner compared with the various constraints/problems including equity associated with placement-based WIL. The activity was designed to be highly authentic with the pedagogical framework underpinning the assessment design based upon the nine guiding design elements of AL suggested by Herrington and Oliver (2000).

The research involved a descriptive case study of the delivery of the assessment activity in a large, second-year under-graduate marketing subject – 'Advertising & Creative Strategy' within the Business faculty at a large regional Australian university. The strength of case study is in exploring 'what' and 'how' research questions, with descriptive case study describing the phenomenon within the context in which it occurred (Yin, 2014) and is thus appropriate for this research. This paper is written by the academic in charge of subject delivery and who also designed the specific assessment activity based upon extensive practitioner experience. 310 students were enrolled in the subject, with tutorial class sizes of approximately 30.

3.1. The non-placement WIL practical simulation

Students undertook the activity as their major assignment entitled 'Creative Brief and Advertising Pitch' - modelled upon, thus a practical simulation of what students can expect to encounter when working in industry. The assessment activity comprised two parts. Part A, conducted individually specified - 'You are employed as the Marketing Co-ordinator for Organisation X. Your Chief Executive Officer has asked you to examine the current Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) for Organisation X, and develop a Creative Brief/Request to Tender to send to advertising agencies with the aim of the agencies subsequently presenting a proposed new IMC campaign to Organisation X'. All students in the same tutorial were allocated the same organisation. 3–4 tutorials were allocated the same organisation. Each student was assessed upon the quality of their generated Creative Brief/Request for Tender. The best Creative Brief/Request to Tender for each organisation was used in Part B.

Part B, conducted in teams specified - 'You have decided to resign from Organisation X and have been head-hunted to work for "Creative Advertising Agency". Upon commencing your new job, you are allocated to a team of 4–6 and requested to respond to a Creative Brief/Request for Tender from Organisation Y. Your team subsequently develop a proposed IMC campaign in response to the Creative Brief/Request for Tender'. All teams within the same tutorial, as well as within 3–4 other tutorials were provided with the same Creative Brief/Request for Tender and hence in competition against other teams. Students had a different organisation for Part B relative to Part A. The response was a written as well as verbal pitch upon which students were assessed. The best pitches were also presented at the final lecture of the semester to assist learning for all students.

For Part B of the activity, teams were self-selected to simulate real-world workgroups 'more closely than randomly assigned groups' (Chapman, Meuter, Toy, and Wright, 2006, p. 576). To increase authenticity, each student within each team was allocated a specific role (e.g. Account Manager, Creative Director) 'to live the experience as themselves, in that role' (Pearce and Jackson, 2006, p. 222). The assessment activity was designed to enable

students to become both emotionally and behaviourally involved in experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). Part A and Part B of the assignment scaffold together providing academic integrity.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Prior to the commencement of the research, ethics approval was gained from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee. Given the researcher was also the teacher of the subject in which this WIL activity was conducted, this constituted insider research. Such research enables a 'deep level of understanding and interpretation' relative to 'someone not deeply embedded and involved' (Fleming, 2018, p. 311). The researcher's 'pre-existing understanding' of the situation 'assists in analysis and interpretation of data; and the knowledge is intended to be useful or relevant to the researcher's own practice in WIL' (Fleming, 2018, p. 319). However, insider research can present challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed, for example, potential conflicts of interest and possible desire for positive outcomes. Appropriate strategies recommended by Fleming (2018) were employed to address these challenges.

Data was gathered using a variety of collection methods. During the semester, the teacher utilised observation of, and reflection on student activity, behaviour, and engagement. Document analysis of final student reports and analysis of student presentations was also used. To assess their learning experience, all students enrolled in the subject were invited at the end of semester to complete a reflective questionnaire containing a mix of quantitative and (predominantly) qualitative questions incorporating both closed and (predominantly) open-ended questions. Due to the insider nature of this research, the questionnaire was conducted by a third party who securely stored the (albeit anonymous) data until after subject results were released – prior to giving the data to the researcher. Student responses to the open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis following guidelines developed by Miles and Huberman (1994). The variety of data sources assisted triangulation (Yin, 2014) and strengthened trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and credibility. Research validity was assisted by the use of the 'primary strategies' recommended by Creswell (2003). 310 students (65% female, 35% male; 87% domestic, 13% international) were enrolled in the subject from two Faculties - Business (60%) as well as Creative Arts (40%) - the prime candidates for jobs within advertising agencies. All students were typically aged in their early 20 s and in the 2nd/3rd year of under-graduate study. Prior to arriving in Australia, none of the international students had previous WIL experience, nor work experience in a marketing field. Less than 5% of the international students had part-time jobs (typically in the hospitality industry) in Australia. None of the domestic students had WIL experience prior to entering university, approximately 50% currently had part-time jobs (typically within the hospitality industry) with only 3 students working within the marketing field.

232 responses to the questionnaire were received, representing 75% response rate.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Improved learning and skill development

To aid student learning, when designing student activities educators need to overcome students' disinterest in various traditional teaching and learning delivery processes (Bobbitt, Inks, Kemp, and Mayo, 2000) and develop learning opportunities that offer 'meaningful engagement' (Bucic and Robinson, 2017, p. 165). Based upon the student feedback, 80% of students considered they learnt more from this specific activity relative to other non-placement WIL assessment styles (e.g. case studies), particularly due to increased engagement and application via the linkage of theory and practice, plus their perceived realism of the activity. The students typically had little or no marketing work experience hence it was difficult to accurately assess students' views regarding the perceived realism of the activity. However, 92% of students considered the activity to be 'realistic'. Typical comments included -*'very practical and "real-world" compared to other assignments', 'seemed more industry relevant', 'very practical which is a change', 'helped me see what I'll be doing after I graduate … made me want to get into marketing even more', 'it is the closest assignment to a real life situation I've had'*. Pleasingly, a student who had industry experience indicated - *'very* [realistic]*, I do this in my internship'*. The design of the assessment thus provided a high level of engagement and perceived realism, which assisted the students to learn.

Research Question One was 'What work-ready skills did the activity develop?' As noted earlier (Table 1), different researchers have identified a range of skills required by work-ready students. When asked what students considered they learnt most from the assignment, based upon thematic analysis of student feedback, there was strong evidence of the development of all the 'key' skills as well as most of the 'additional' skills. Examples of student comments are contained in Table 2. Dominant themes identified within the data were communication and teamwork, which are regarded as the two main skills required by work-ready graduates (Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2014; Deloitte, 2017; Karzunina et al., 2017; Osmani et al., 2015).

Students 'communication' skills appeared to be most enhanced due to the need to work effectively as a team to prepare both a formal written document and a formal oral presentation. Teamwork is a key skill required in graduates by employers, and universities 'are being criticised for not preparing students with the necessary team-related skills' (Bravo, Liucia-Palacios, and Martin, 2016, p. 304). Effective teamwork requires communication, collaboration, co-operation and compromise (Katzenbach, 1997). Numerous students initially felt *'overwhelmed'* due to the apparent complexity of the assessment. However, for various students, initial thoughts of *'slightly overwhelmed, as it seemed like a lot to accomplish'* changed to *'by breaking down the assignment into segments between group members, it was much more manageable than anticipated'*. The nature of the assessment allowed productive teamwork - *'fun, worked as a marketing team', 'This was the 1st positive group assignment experience I had', 'gave me a positive learning experience … as part of a group', 'enjoyable and let me work off others feedback in a group setting'*. The positive teamwork was aided by the role-play component of the practical simulation. Students were allocated roles and needed to work with each other - somewhat different than typical student team activities where individual input is often less defined. Students recognised the benefits of role-playing – *'felt like a marketing pro', 'allowed members to allocate sections of work easier', 'focus on my responsibilities', 'made it easier, could just focus on your part', 'helped to establish everyone's role in the team'*. This role-play aided team development. The role-playing aspect of the practical simulation also offered students the opportunity to explore and construct their 'professional' identity (Bowen, 2018), with evidence that some students clarified potential careers – *'role of copywriter was cleared up. Wouldn't mind pursuing that career path'* as well as *'explore further into creative, relates to my studies of graphic design'*.

Other 'key' skills required by graduates are critical thinking, problem solving and digital skills/specific technical skills. Evidence of these additional key skills was identified in the student feedback. Respective examples of student comments were - *'makes you critically think to create a campaign', 'implementing rather than just theory based', 'graphically designing ads, putting together presentation'*.

These results suggest the existing practical simulation design and content is appropriate in its current format to assist students to increase their learning and improve skill development in

Table 2
Examples of student comments that indicate skills developed in the WIL activity.

	Student comments
KEY SKILLS (per Literature Review)	
Communication	*'how to get your point across quickly', 'collaboration required for the assignment', 'presenting in a professional manner', 'communication with the group … it clashed a few times', 'how to put together a professional presentation', 'had to be confident in your work and present it', 'constant communication between group members is essential'*
Teamwork	*'teamwork is essential', 'to work and present in a team', 'fun to work as a group', 'group assignments aren't always HELL', 'by breaking it down into segments between group members, it was much more manageable than anticipated', 'learnt to work in a group', 'the people, the dynamics, the required teamwork', 'collaboration required for the assignment', 'learn new skills through both content and* other *students', 'working in groups and sharing ideas is more enjoyable', 'very overwhelmed at first but as the group went through the steps it started to feel accomplishable'*
Critical thinking	*'made us really think', 'how to look at a particular situation in varying ways', 'able to better understand through doing', 'analysing decisions made by companies was interesting'*
Problem solving	*'came up with the concepts based on theory and it made for work harder because you take ownership of it', 'needs us to think by ourselves', 'allows us to apply the concepts/theories in a way we can learn', 'how to apply theories to a real life task'*
Digital skills/ Specific technical skills	*'graphically designing ads, putting together presentation'*
ADDITIONAL SKILLS (per Literature Review)	
Motivation	*'elated, excited and enthused', 'a lot more thought provoking', 'more engaging allowing for better understanding', 'I was able to relate the theory to practice which enabled me to achieve a higher level of learning'*
Time management	*'group work and time management'; 'how to better manage people and time'*
Creative thinking	*'excited to be creative', 'how to think creatively', 'allowed me to be creative', 'creativity and ability to generate my unique work', 'think outside the box', 'the creative aspect – something that isn't usually addressed at uni', 'creativity turned into realistic plans', 'creating ideas … then working to create them, good to see it come together', 'thinking creatively and strategically'*
Planning	*'overwhelmed and confused. … I realised it was easier to understand once I began working on it', 'I wasn't expecting it to take as long as it took … and the amount of alteration', 'overwhelmed, I have many group assignment already', 'the workload seemed less when distributed to the group', 'breaking it up into parts really helped & doing one step at a time', 'Seemed like a lot of work to begin with but as we worked on it, it seemed to be not so difficult', 'very overwhelmed at first but as the group went through the steps it started to feel accomplishable'*
Interpersonal skills	*'justify my point of view', 'enabled me to use my strengths in the group part', 'collaborate with others – what works, what doesn't!', 'develop personal skills as well as communication skills'*
Social development and interaction	*'how to get your point across quickly', 'cooperating with the team and sorting out differences', 'my group supported each other', 'fun, worked as a marketing team'*
Leadership	*'a little overwhelmed, but divided it up between the group', 'difficult to organise groupwork'*
Cultural fit	*'enjoyable and let me work off others feedback in the group', 'working with people takes time and communication', 'coping with students not fluent in English'*
Self management	*'taught me that if you break up the work it becomes much less daunting', 'do an assignment in minimal space', 'harder than expected', 'scared but excited'*
Retrieval and handling of information	*'analysing decisions made by companies was interesting', 'I had to do the research myself and discovered a lot more', 'doing the initial research made you think', 'investigation skills', 'had to engage in research', 'helped to understand the research steps behind writing a creative brief'*

areas valued by employers. All key and additional soft skills were identified in the student comments. Additionally, development of hard skills (namely content/marketing knowledge) were observed by the teacher when the students presented both their oral and written reports. Indeed, based upon the teacher's practitioner experience, the content of many oral and written reports were regarded as being of appropriate quality expected within the workplace.

4.2. Potential improvements/Guidelines

Research Question Two was 'How can this specific activity be improved and what guidelines can the teacher of this activity offer to fellow academics considering designing practical simulation-based WIL activities?'

In relation to what students disliked regarding the activity, the only real issue mentioned by students was a perceived lack of direction provided by the teacher. To accomplish the assessment, students were required to analyse, decide and act within a deliberately broad set of instructions - characteristic of AL. Some students found this difficult. When students received the assignment, most students felt *'excited'* as the assignment was different than normal. However, there were some negative views. In the workplace there is generally no correct answer, nor does the manager inform employees exactly how to do a job, hence employees generally are expected to utilise their own initiative and knowledge. The assessment was deliberately structured with only broad direction being provided, requiring students (i.e. 'employees') to utilise their own initiative. This was problematic for some students – *'Way too broad', 'instructions could be more detailed and less vague'*. However, one student indicated - *'it was ultimately valuable but challenging through its duration'*. As noted by Reeves et al. (2002), design elements of authentic learning activities include real-world relevance and ill-defined problems, so any 'giving-in' to students by providing more instructions and problem definition would be inappropriate and undermine the AL principles upon which the assessment activity was designed. However, given that students studying marketing courses are typically uncertain of exactly what their profession entails (Van Doren and Corrigan 2008), when implementing the assessment activity in the future, to allay student fears, there is a need to clearly indicate to students the reason for the deliberately broad structure. Based upon student feedback, this was perhaps not done to a sufficient extent and needs to be improved in future iterations of this practical simulation.

Additionally, whilst the majority of students enjoyed the practical simulation, a few students wanted '*longer time for presentations', 'less page restrictions', 'more space to write', 'more exciting clients'*. In keeping with authentic learning design principles, to address these student comments, there is thus a need for the teacher to better indicate to students that when working in industry they may have to work to explicit rules and deadlines with specific clients, hence need to comply with any employer requirements.

As indicated above, students generally enjoyed the practical simulation, considered they learnt more than via other typical non-placement WIL activities, and had few dislikes about the

specific activity. This, coupled with the identification of skills students considered they needed to utilise in the practical simulation, suggests that the activity was appropriately designed and achieved positive results.

When developing resumes to give to potential employers, students typically include their University results for various subjects. Given the positive perception amongst employers of graduates possessing work experience (including WIL), students should be made aware by their teachers of the value of this WIL experience and be encouraged to highlight such experience in their resumes when job-seeking.

4.3. The role of the academic in assessment design

The foundational factor in the successful delivery of an authentic, non-placement WIL practical simulation activity is the initial design. Does the teacher (responsible for the design and delivery of the subject, including specific assessment activities) have the relevant skills to design the activity, or should the teacher seek assistance and input from industry practitioners? A key challenge in WIL delivery includes 'capability of staff in … designing WIL curriculum' which can deter the development of innovative WIL models (Ferns et al., 2018, p. 47). With teaching in higher education becoming 'increasingly challenging' (von der Heidt and Quazi, 2013, p.250), coupled with the global issue of work-readiness, teachers need to utilise 'a strategic approach to assignments and align their students with emergent skills' (Peltola, 2018, p. 47). Entry of university graduates into some professions is guided by various professional bodies that contribute extensively to curriculum design as well as learning outcomes and assessment. This occurs especially in disciplines such as nursing, welfare, law, and education (Patrick et al., 2009). Other than perhaps for accounting courses, there is far less involvement of professional bodies in the design of business-based courses (such as marketing). This, for better or worse, offers marketing teachers the opportunity to design content as they consider appropriate. Various teachers, particularly those with industry experience are in a better position to design relevant content (as was the case with the teacher and creator of this assessment activity). Overwhelmingly, 96% of students surveyed in this current research considered that having an academic teacher with industry experience was better than having an academic teacher with no industry experience. This view was summed up by the typical student comment that experienced teachers *'can pass on their real life experiences rather than basing everything from the pages of a text book'*.

Marketing academics generally teach based upon their personal experience, which may include little or no professional/industry experience (Stringfellow et al., 2006). Despite the imperative to align university curricula with the needs of industry, various researchers contend that some academic teachers could indeed be 'fuelling the skills gap' due to their 'lack of appreciation of contemporary workplaces' and 'limited experience' within the industry workplace (Jackson and Chapman, 2012, pp. 108–109). Similarly, indeed somewhat bluntly, Leeflang (2017, p. 1154) suggests various marketing academics 'have no idea what marketers [in industry] are doing'- which is problematic if such teachers are trying to design non-placement WIL activities. Via some process, teachers should ensure appropriate linkages (either directly or indirectly) with industry and/or professional bodies to enable relevant input into course development including assessment activities to keep university courses current (MacFarlane, 2016, p.173). This is particularly vital within the marketing discipline because marketing is the most rapidly changing component of the business world (Linkedin and Hubspot, 2015, p.5).

The general community considers the prime role of universities is to develop work-ready students, indeed, within an Australian context, it is suggested that the 'singular imperative' of universities is to provide students 'a pathway to employment' (Kerr, Waller, and Patti, 2009, p.273). However, university administrators might argue that research output is also a key requirement. Unfortunately, at least within the UK, published reports suggest academic staff involvement in producing work-ready students is constrained by the performance measures for academics in higher education being skewed towards recognition of research (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010; Lowden, Hall, Elliott, and Lewin, 2011). An ongoing debate is likely to occur regarding the best skill-set for academics to enable both generation of work-ready graduates as well as high-quality research output.

4.4. Consequences for support staff

Implementing WIL activities can have workload implications for administration personnel as well as academics (Bilgin, Rowe, and Clark, 2017). Of the range of WIL activities, placement-based WIL not only has equity issues but requires the most workload to deliver. The non-placement WIL practical simulation detailed in this research not only addresses the equity issues of placement-based WIL but requires less administrative workload. Providing the academic designing the practical simulation possesses appropriate industry experience, it is likely the actual workload required to develop the practical simulation activity would be similar to the work required in designing other, but less proximal, non-placement WIL activities such as case studies.

5. Conclusion

Developing work-ready graduates is a key goal of universities worldwide, however, employers often indicate graduates lack appropriate skills. Hence there is a need for universities to improve in generating work-ready graduates. WIL is regarded as a key tool for universities to use in assisting students to become work-ready. The issue examined within this paper is topical worldwide and under scrutiny by a range of stakeholders including universities, funding bodies (e.g. government in relation to public universities), students and their parents, as well as employers. In regards to the 'so what' question regarding this research - whilst placement-based WIL offers the closest proximity to the workplace, this form of WIL has crucial equity issues. To address this key issue, the purpose of this specific research was to investigate teacher and student experiences when participating in a specifically designed, equitable, authentic non-placement WIL assignment within a marketing subject. Such research advances our knowledge regarding how an equitable form of WIL can be developed and utilised.

The WIL activity described and analysed in this paper is suggested as an appropriate alternative to placement-based WIL and removes equity issues. The activity enabled over 310 marketing students to experience an authentic WIL activity - many more students than would have been able to experience a placement-based WIL activity. The university where this activity took place typically has approximately 110 placement-based WIL positions available annually across the entire Business faculty, hence generally less than 40 positions available specifically for marketing students. Whilst it is not suggested that the described activity replace placement-based WIL, it can provide an alternative for the majority of students who are unable to gain placement-based WIL, hence providing equity for all students.

Research regarding 'graduate employability is an emerging field of study' (McArthur et al., 2017, p.83) and this paper contributes in the following key ways. The paper provides a suggested alternative to address equity issues raised by Mackaway et al. (2014) concerning placement-based WIL. The paper examines WIL within the Business discipline, specifically within a marketing subject – an

area not traditionally linked with WIL research (Abery et al., 2015) despite the recognised importance of WIL. The research is conducted in Australia - outside the typically examined regions of the USA and UK (McArthur et al., 2017). Additionally, the paper seeks the views of students, a stakeholder whose views have not typically been sought regarding authentic assessments, particularly in the business discipline (James and Casidy, 2018). In providing these contributions, the paper also addresses comments by Nhat, Scholz, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2018, p. 138) regarding WIL having received 'limited scholarly attention' and a need to investigate the 'process, merits, and outcomes of different types of … WIL approaches'. By addressing the issue of equity, the current research also addresses the call for studies that 'focus on the challenges and barriers associated with participation in work integrated learning' (Nhat et al., 2018, p. 138) and the finding by Universities Australia (2019, p. 34) for 'further work … by universities to support international students to engage in WIL experiences'. This is beneficial given the majority of international students in Australia enroll in 'Management and Commerce' and gaining WIL experiences for international students in this area is a 'significant challenge' (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 21).

6. Implications for practice

Whilst some universities may have the resources to offer placement-based WIL to all students, the majority of other universities struggle to provide students such opportunities (Schonell and Macklin 2019), hence potentially depriving students of a WIL experience. The paper contributes to educational practice by improving understanding of how to design and deliver a specific, equitable, authentic WIL activity for marketing students that provides a solid alternative to the less equitable placement-based WIL. The paper provides fellow academics with useful advice to assist their own design and delivery of such activities. Significantly, the assessment activity described may not only assist students to become more work-ready but makes education more pertinent, motivational and engaging relative to many existing forms of student assessments.

7. Limitations and future research

The research was conducted within one marketing subject in a single, mid-sized Australian-based university. Future research could examine the usage of similar highly authentic/medium proximity WIL assessments in other marketing subjects. Given the nature of specific subjects, it may be easier, or more difficult, to design relevant assessments in certain marketing subjects. The broad issue addressed in this research is a global issue, hence, to assist generalisability of the results, study across various countries could be conducted. Likewise, the study was conducted within the context of a marketing subject - other subjects across other disciplines could be examined. Given the value of this WIL activity from an equity perspective, future research could attempt to quantify the level of increased work-readiness of students following completion of this WIL activity relative to other potentially less-equitable WIL activities as well as relative to other types of work experience. Also, considering the value of various WIL activities in assisting work-readiness, future research could examine the manner in which prospective employers could be better made aware of the work-readiness imparted by WIL activities.

Provision of authentic WIL experiences to students, while ensuring equitable access for all, is no easy task and has become an important global higher education issue. It is hoped this paper provides food for thought and guidance to assist tertiary teachers develop more equitable, authentic WIL activities to address the growing needs of students and their potential employers.

Two student comments that perhaps sum up the equitable, authentic WIL practical simulation activity examined in this research –

- *'an amazing, realistic opportunity for us students to gain experience'*
- *'the closest assignment to a real life situation I've had'*

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