

For there to be a WIL there needs to be a way

An up-scale of industry- education cooperation is essential

by ANNE YOUNGER and JUDIE KAY [May 2021]

The combined impacts of COVID-19, accelerated digitisation and skills shortages have led to a new urgency and greater push for work integrated learning (WIL), with [broad industry acknowledgement](#) that exposure to authentic work environments is highly effective at increasing students' work readiness.

Rapidly changing business environments are placing pressure on graduates to [enter the workforce](#) with an agile mindset and the skills to learn quickly and operate in uncertain situations. Dealing with global interconnectedness and being able to work in real and virtual ways have also become key work capabilities.

Australian Industry Group [surveys](#) found that the most important recruitment criterion for employers hiring graduates changed from "*fit to the business culture*" in 2014 to "*having relevant work experience*" in 2018. The 2018 research found employer links with higher education increased from 29 percent in 2014 to 41 percent in 2018, with work placements being the leading type of link. A [snapshot survey](#) late in 2020 found 80 per cent of employers would take on either university or TAFE students as interns, cadets or higher apprentices in order to increase their skill levels.

It is clear that the goals of the proposed [National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund](#) (NPILF) have industry support, but what incentives will be provided to *industry*, in addition to universities, to facilitate enhanced engagement and connectivity?

The [NPILF Final Report](#) (Appendix A) includes options raised in consultations, such as: tax-based incentives, wage subsidies, a government matching platform and promotional campaign. But is this all that is needed, at least in the early stages?

The greatest [barriers to engaging employers](#) in WIL are a lack of time, limited resources and the capacity to supervise students. Other barriers include: limited WIL information; suitable projects; institutional inflexibility; and legal and safety concerns. These barriers are well documented and long standing.

Employers' increased engagement requires support as well as access to [innovative WIL models](#) that expose students to contemporary practices. Innovative WIL models enable different levels of capacity to engage (for example, micro- and on-line placements) and encourage expanded activity from a range of businesses, particularly small to medium enterprises.

Significant up-scaling of collaboration between industry and education is essential. The NPILF success will be greater if identified barriers are addressed *in tandem with* progressing the suggested industry incentives. Such a two-pronged approach is essential if the NPILF's good intentions are to be realised.

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