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Challenges to providing workintegrated learning to international business students at Australian universities

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Abstract

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to report on a three-year Australian study of international business and accounting students and the transition to employment. For international students seeking to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive global labour market, foreign work experience is now an integral part of the overseas study "package". Work-integrated learning (WIL) is seen to provide critical "employability" knowledge and skills, however, international students have low participation rates. The high value placed on WIL among international students poses challenges for Australia as well as opportunities. Understanding the issues surrounding international students and WIL is closely linked to Australia's continued success in the international education sector which has broad, long-term, social and economic implications.

Design/methodology/approach - This paper draws on 59 interviews with a range of stakeholders including international students, universities, government, employers and professional bodies. Central to the paper is an in-depth case study of WIL in the business and accounting discipline at one Australian university.

Findings - Providing international students with access to discipline-related work experience has emerged as a critical issue for Australian universities. The study finds that enhancing the employability skills of international students via integrated career education, a focus on English language proficiency and "soft skills" development are central to success in WIL. Meeting the growing demand for WIL among international students requires a multipronged approach which hinges on cooperation between international students, universities, employers and government.

Originality/value - This project aims to fill a critical knowledge gap by advancing theories in relation to international students and WIL. While there is a significant body of research in the fields of international education and WIL, there is an absence of research exploring the intersection between the two fields. The study will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in both fields by exploring the emerging issue of WIL and international students.

Keywords International education, International students, Graduate employability, Work-integrated learning, Business and accounting education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

International education has become the focus of universities globally (Altbach and Knight, 2007). International education offers numerous social, economic, political, cultural and intellectual benefits and has the potential to deepen understanding and cooperation between nations (Universities Australia, 2009; OECD, 2013; Australian Government, 2015; Mellors-Bourne *et al*, 2013). However, for many western nations a major driver and benefit

associated with increased numbers of international students on campus is economic. Fee paying international students, particularly from Asia, have contributed significantly to university revenue, helping to expand domestic higher education in countries such as Australia, UK and New Zealand (Ruby, 2009). A key consequence of the rapid expansion of higher education globally has been the devaluation of educational credentials in both domestic and home country markets (Brown *et al*, 2004). At the same time, policy attention is focused on the capacity to develop graduate employability in line with employer perceptions and needs (Gibb *et al*, 2012). In the Australian context, the launch of a national strategy on work-integrated learning (WIL) and the creation of senior management positions in universities focused on graduate employability are evidence of the growing importance being placed on graduate employability (Universities Australia, 2015). International education provides both universities and international students with opportunities to develop forms of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Universities seek to increase social capital via networks of alumni in key source countries. International students aspire to build on the cultural capital of the overseas credential through relevant host country work experience, thus promoting their distinctiveness in their specialist markets. A key aspect of differentiation in the context of heightened competitiveness between universities globally, and more insecure employment for professionals, is the provision of WIL[1]. Universities are increasingly judged on graduate outcomes and work experience is considered a way for students to enhance their employability. Therefore, WIL becomes a form of personal capital that students can accumulate and which is highly valued by employers. In the highly competitive field of international business and accounting, WIL enhances the educational, cultural and symbolic capital that international students accumulate while at university and beyond.

The field of international education and Australian policy shifts

As the Australian higher education system has moved towards mass participation in recent decades, the proportion of government funding has dropped dramatically (McPhee, 2014). This has forced universities to seek alternate sources of funding, and the international student market has become an important source of revenue for many Australian tertiary institutions. In the mid 1980s the Australian Government's international education policy shifted from "aid" to "trade" when the Government encouraged education and training institutions to offer places to overseas students on a full fee basis to generate revenue. The changes in Australia's education policy coincided with rapid economic development in Asia and resulted in an increase in the number of international students studying at Australian institutions (Harman, 2005). The strong growth in international education in the last decade can also be attributed to Australian migration policy designed to encourage skilled on-shore migration to fill specific shortages in targeted professions (Koleth, 2010). This policy, introduced in 1999, provided international students who completed relevant degrees with additional points towards post-study permanent residency (Koleth, 2010). The policy had the dual aim of increasing the number of fee-paying international students and filling skill shortages with locally trained international graduates (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). However, after decades of growth and expansion, Australia's international education sector now faces a number of significant challenges. Since 2010, the Australian Government has sought to sever the education-migration nexus, shifting from a supply driven to a demand driven system where graduates require sponsorship and post-study work visas are restricted (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). A second looming challenge is intensified competition

among host countries due to a growing number of nations entering the international education market. Traditional source countries, such as China, Singapore and Malaysia, also seek to attract international students by investing considerable sums into the rapid expansion of their higher education systems. This is likely to stem the flow of students abroad as domestic options become more available and attractive to students in countries such as China. In addition, on-campus modes of delivery of higher education are confronted by an ----expanding online environment fuelled by massive open online courses, offshore campuses and cross national agreements between providers and the entry of new providers of credentials including professional organisations, such as the Certified Practising Accountants (CPA), into the international market (Shah and Sid Nair, 2013; Gribble and Blackmore, 2012; Blackmore *et al*, 2014).

Another challenge relates to the shifting profile of international students studying at Australian universities. Up until the 1980s, international education remained the preserve of elite families, predominantly from South East Asia, typically scholarship funded, who returned home to take up positions in the civil service (Kell and Vogl, 2012). However, Asia's burgeoning middle class has led to a dramatic increase in the number of self-funded international students. For many of these students, the opportunity to work in Australia after graduation, or improved employment prospects in the home country, are the motivating factors behind their decision to study in Australia (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012). However, competitive graduate labour markets in Australia and other key source countries, coupled with the tightening of migration policy, has resulted in dissatisfaction among many international students who are unable to gain much sought after work experience (Gribble and Blackmore, 2012, Blackmore *et al*, 2014). Changes to the skilled migration policy between 2008 and 2011, designed to encourage employer and government sponsored migration to meet specific skill needs, made it difficult for international students to remain after graduation and resulted in a decline in international student enrolments. In response, a post-study work visa was introduced in Australia in 2013, in an attempt to both reverse the decline in international student enrolments and provide international graduates from Australian universities with the opportunity to "test" the labour market. Despite the new visa arrangements, international graduates continue to struggle to find employment in their field in Australia (Blackmore *et al*, 2014). Lack of work experience is considered a barrier to entry into the professional fields, such as accounting, for both local and international students (Jackson, 2013). Work experience can be considered a form of capital that adds value to the cultural capital of the education credential and is becoming key to graduate employment in both home and host country labour markets (AUIDF, 2013; Tadros, 2014). This situation raises some serious questions for Australian universities who are now expected to develop the employability skills of international as well as domestic students (Australian Government, 2015). How can Australian universities ensure that international students graduate with skills they need to compete in Australian, home country and global labour markets? Is it realistic to expect universities to produce "work ready" graduates? What role should employers, government and students each play in improving graduate employment outcomes? These are urgent questions for Australia, as well as the higher education sector more broadly. There are indications that the UK, Europe and North America are well aware of the importance of improving employment outcomes of international graduates and are making significant progress in this space (AUIDF, 2013; Ortiz and Choudaha, 2014).

What has emerged from current research into the employment outcomes of international students is the importance of WIL. While WIL has long been a key element of many university programmes, there is a growing interest in WIL which is seen by universities as a valid pedagogy, and as a means to respond to demands by employers for work-ready graduates. Importantly, students are seeking a return on investment and WIL is seen to provide critical employable knowledge and skills, in other words, a form of capital (Patrick *et al*, 2008). However, many international students struggle to find placements and institutions are grappling with how to meet growing demand for WIL (AUIDF, 2013; Gribble, 2014). This paper examines the factors contributing the growing importance placed on WIL and the barriers to participation for international students in Australia. Central to this paper is an in-depth case study of international students participation in WIL in the business school at one Australian university. The case study highlights barriers to participation and provides insights into how universities can enhance provision of WIL and improve the employability of international students.

The growing importance of WIL among international students

The project has drawn on Bourdieu's notion of capital, and in particular education as enhancing social capital. As argued by Bourdieu (1986, p. 241):

Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its "incorporated," embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that education credentials, as an institutionalized form of cultural capital, do not necessarily guarantee the outcomes in the same way for all holders because "as in the case of educational credentials, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 241). Brown *et al* (2004) refer to personal capital in a similar way to Bourdieu's social capital. Personal capital is how different students employ strategies in seeking and gaining a job that arise from their sense of self-identity. It is "the way that the knowledge workers of the future perceive, prepare, package and present 'themselves' in the recruitment process" and "how some winners in the education system maintain a winning streak in the job market, while other credential holders lose out" (Brown *et al*, 2004, p. 38).

There is increasing and widespread agreement that a university degree alone does not guarantee graduate employment in highly competitive markets (Brown *et al*, 2004; Farrell and Fenwick, 2007; Kupfer, 2011; Teichler, 2011). The focus has therefore shifted to notions of graduate employability, as an expected and achievable outcome, as distinct from graduate employment, the desired outcome of higher education. Employability means that university graduates must, in addition to technical skills assumed with the credential, demonstrate a set of personal aptitudes and capabilities, described as "personal capital". Personal capital, such as interpersonal skills, appearance and accent, augments and we argue is becoming essential to, the combination of credentials, key technical and professional skills, improving employability and ultimately graduate employment (Brown *et al*, 2004).

The key to success in the labour market is a graduate's capacity to represent their experiences, character and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence

profiles and dispositions favoured by employers. Strategies which are implemented by various graduates in their job-seeking efforts stem from different aspects of their personal capital (Brown *et al*, 2004). By choosing to study at a "western" university, many international students who come to Australia with their own cultural and social capital hope to gain a competitive advantage in global labour markets via the accumulation of western cultural values or capital. In addition, the importance of acquiring globally recognised employability attributes has also come to the fore. Intensifying global competition has resulted in widespread recognition among employers, both in multinational and medium-sized local businesses, of key attributes considered essential in the workplace, including work experience of some form. Many international students consider the combination of western credentials and such global attributes as critical to their success in the competitive graduate labour market, either at home or internationally.

However, despite the importance placed on work experience by employers and themselves, many international students in Australia are dissatisfied with current opportunities to participate in work experience that is related to their field of study, particularly since work experience helps students build social capital through local networks, workplace acculturation and English language capabilities (Varghese and Brett, 2010). According to a major report on WIL in Australia, international students were the student group most frequently referred to in the data with participants arguing that matters related to international students' access to WIL required urgent attention. Issues raised in the 2008 report included visa requirements, variable English skills and limited understanding of the Australian workplace. At the same time, the report also found that some employers are reluctant to provide work placements to international students as they feel there is a limited return on investment when international students are unlikely to stay in Australia after graduation (Patrick *et al*, 2008; AUIDF, 2013).

Lack of work experience is a major source of frustration for international students studying in Australia (AEI, 2012; Bennet, 2011; Blackmore *et al*, 2014; Gribble, 2014).

While the post-study work visa introduced in March 2013 provides international graduates with the opportunity to seek employment in their field after graduating, Australian universities are realising that more needs to be done to improve the work~ readiness of international students. Improving the capacity for international students to participate in WIL opportunities is a key goal of the national strategy on WIL in university education launched by Universities Australia in 2015. The importance placed on relevant local work experience by international students and employers presents Australian universities with the opportunity to critically evaluate current WIL offerings in various disciplines and consider how to build on and improve existing WIL programmes. Providing international students with the opportunity to acquire valuable work experience in their discipline area is likely to both enhance the post-study employment outcomes of international students and boost Australia's appeal as a study destination.

Methodology

This paper draws on the findings of a three-year longitudinal study investigating why international graduates appear to have a low rate of employment in acknowledged skill shortages areas of health, engineering and accounting, despite having Australian-credentialed skills in these disciplines. While the broader study incorporates three universities, three discipline areas and over 270 interviews with a range of stakeholders, this paper focuses on the School of Business at an Australian public university given the

pseudonym of Bellwood University. It draws on 59 in-depth interviews carried out between 2011 and 2012 with key stakeholders including international students, university staff, employers and members of professional bodies. This paper examines the issues surrounding international students seeking work experience in business and accounting disciplines, highlighting some the challenges around the provision of WIL to international students. In regard to WIL in the School of Business at Bellwood University, the study sought to determine:

range of WIL opportunities, prerequisites for participation and support provided to international students in sourcing placements; level of preparation for WIL placements provided to international students; and barriers to WIL for international students as perceived by students, employers and university staff.

A total of 22 international accounting students from Bellwood University participated in the first round of interviews. Students came from China (17), Vietnam (2), Bangladesh (1) and Zimbabwe (1). Slightly more females (60 per cent) participated in the study than males (40 per cent). The average age of participants was 25.5 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Data obtained provided demographic information as well as participating students' views and narratives on study, work and life in Australia. Participants were asked about their experiences of studying and living both in their home country and in Australia and their experience of socio-cultural adaptation in Australia. They were also asked about previous and current work experience and their English language competency. Finally, participants were asked about their short- and long-term professional goals and about their views on Australian migration policies. In the first interview, participants were asked whether they would agree to participate in a second interview within 12 months. Those who were willing to participate in a second interview were asked to provide contact details. Five Chinese international accounting graduates from Bellwood University participated in a second interview, approximately six to 12 months later while four completed the final interview which took place between 12 and 18 months after they had completed their programmes in 2013.

Focused interviews of approximately one hour were conducted with 28 other stakeholders, including university staff, employers and industry bodies. University participants included the Head of School and a total of 15 staff, including three lecturers, three WIL academics, three senior managers, three international student advisors and three careers and employment advisors. A snowball approach to recruitment was adopted with academics frequently referring colleagues who had expertise in WIL or who had worked closely with international students. The aim was to select participants whose knowledge and experience in the WIL domain will lead to greater understanding of the central issues under investigation. A total of ten accounting employers from a mix of small, medium and large size firms were interviewed for the study. The aim was to gain an understanding of the breadth and depth of issues facing employers of different sizes. Two representatives from CPA Australia and the institute of Chartered Accountants were also included in the interview sample.

Findings

WIL opportunities in the accounting discipline at Bellwood University

In 2011, Bellwood University had over 40,000 higher education students enrolled across its three campuses (one located in a major metropolitan city and two in regional centres). In 2011 more than 6,500 international students were enrolled both on-shore as well as those studying with off-shore partners. Most international students studying at Bellwood University are enrolled in undergraduate programmes (65 per cent), with the vast majority located in School of Business (67 per cent) at the metropolitan campus of the university. Nearly half (46 per cent) of all international students at Bellwood University come from China, with 7 per cent originating from India and 6 per cent from Hong Kong. The majority (65 per cent) of international students are aged between 20 and 24 years. Bellwood University offers a three-year Bachelor of Commerce. After a first year of study in key business disciplines, students may choose from a wide range of major sequences, including accounting. All students in the Bachelor of Commerce have the option of undertaking WIL once they have completed 50 per cent of their degree. According to Bellwood University, WIL provides students with the opportunity to gain work experience that can make a significant difference when seeking employment after graduation.

The School of Business at Bellwood University offers three WIL options which are designed to prepare students for the day-to-day requirements of prospective employers, develop professional work practice and networks, apply theory to practice, earn credit points and contribute to students becoming more competitive graduates. WIL programmes in the School of Business involve no formal class contact and can be completed in Australia and overseas. Information on the faculty web site states that the university has existing relationships with a range of employers but also notes that students can source their own placement. Current WIL options at Bellwood University consist of a business internship, industry-based learning (IBL) placement and community based volunteering. The faculty has been offering business internships for 11 years, while IBL and community-based volunteering were only introduced in mid-2012.

Interviews with those involved with WIL in the School of Business at Bellwood University highlighted the many benefits associated with international students' involvement in WIL as well as a number of key challenges impacting on their successful participation. According to the WIL coordinator in the School of Business, WIL provides international students with a real world experience of the world of work, exposes them to professional issues and challenges and provides an important reference point when they are applying for work as a graduate. Importantly, as competition among graduates intensifies, a WIL placement provides international graduates with a point of difference in both the Australian and overseas graduate labour markets:

There are two major outcomes that any student would draw from a work-integrated learning experience, and this is critical for international students. First, an understanding of the world of work, an understanding of professional issues and the challenges that are alive in the work place, so that when they apply and they go for interview for a graduate role, they can talk about relevant professional workplace issues. And secondly, which I think personally is even more critical than the first, is a professional referee. If you've done a quality WIL experience, you're going to have, potentially, a partner in an accounting practice, the manager of accounting in a larger welfare organisation or a not-for-profit perhaps, or a business of some kind. And that allows the student to stand out from the pack, and that's what this is all about (Interview, WIL Coordinator in the School of Business).

Despite the many benefits associated with participation in WIL, quantitative data reveals that the participation rate of both domestic and international students in WIL programmes at Bellwood University is low. Importantly, international students' participation rate is substantially lower than that of domestic students. In 2010, 2.3 per cent of domestic students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce programme participated in WIL compared to 0.8 per cent of international students. In 2011 the WIL participation rate of domestic students remained at 2.3 per cent while the participation rate for international students dropped to 0.3 per cent. Our study revealed that while all of the international accounting students interviewed for this study prioritised WIL, only one student had participated in an internship and this was something that the student had organised privately via a local Chinese accounting firm rather than a university sanctioned programme. A discussion of the underlying reasons for low participation rates in WIL among international students follows.

English language competency underpins success in both WIL and employment

The English language proficiency (ELP) of international students in the Australian higher education sector has been the subject of concern and debate over many decades. English language standards for higher education developed by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA, 2009) state that providers need to ensure that students are sufficiently proficient in English to participate effectively in their higher education studies on entry, provide adequate support for students to develop their ELP throughout their studies, actively support ELP development and ensure that students are appropriately proficient in English when they graduate. Providers must also use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve support for the development of students' ELP and inform prospective and current students of their responsibilities for further developing their ELP during their studies (AUQA, 2009). Within the context of the national framework for ELP, our study suggests there is scope to provide greater ongoing English language support for international students in order to enhance their participation in WIL and improve graduate employment outcomes.

Among the 15 Bellwood University staff interviewed for this study there was agreement that emphasis on developing the English language skills of students to enable academic success and promote workplace participation should be prioritised in the School of Business. Accounting lecturers nominated ELP as a key issue among the international student cohort:

Issues, okay. First and foremost is the English language. And most of the students, especially Asian students, have limited communication ability in terms of the language capabilities. So that's a significant issue in my view (Interview, Lecturer 1).

University staff were also well aware of the link between ELP and participation in WIL programmes. According to academics and staff in careers and employment, the reluctance among employers to accept international students on work placements is due to concerns around ELP. Our interviews with employers in the accounting field also revealed that many employers harbour reservations around the ELP of international graduates. One employer in a mid-size accounting firm described verbal communication as critical and the reason why the company had not yet hired an international graduate:

The question I ask is: "Can I see this person as someone who in the short to medium term that I can have sit in front of a client one on one?" And if they're able to

achieve that then I'll move forward. So it comes down then to a language issue. Because it's not only being able to understand an individual, it's being able to then talk technically also and use technical terms which are appropriate in front of a client. I need them to be able to talk on the phone and present themselves like any other member in the firm (Interview, Employer 1).

There was the view among academics and support staff, that the university had an obligation to ensure students enrolled with English language skills that would allow them to fully participate and succeed in their academic programme. Staff also felt that the university needed to support international students to further develop their language skills so that they graduated with the requisite English language skills for the workplace. There was a prevailing view among lecturers and staff in student support and careers and employment that while there has long been concerns around the EIJ> of international students, the university had failed to adequately address the issue. The consensus was that an overarching strategy around ELP was required to both provide consistency and to ensure that the most appropriate methods are employed to enhance the language skills of students, leading to improved academic outcomes and workplace participation. This accounting lecturer explains the need for a strategic approach to ELP in the faculty:

Well, I think right now we've got divisional student life who looks at language and literacy right now and we sometimes utilise their support and they're promoting language and literacy into our courses. But I think within our faculty and across the whole university there needs to be a more strategic approach. There are different courses, different units doing their own thing right now but perhaps we need a more strategic approach to this. That's what I recommend (Interview, Lecturer 2).

According to staff in Careers and Employment, the ELP of international students is the "elephant in the room", an issue that those in senior positions are reluctant to tackle due to the enormity of the challenge. The Manager of Careers and Employment commented that the "the resources required to make sure that those students do have good English language skills would be phenomenal". However, she went on to describe the importance of addressing issues surrounding ELP among international students and the critical relationship between ELP and graduate employment outcomes:

[Among employers] there's a hesitation around language skills, and sometimes it's justifiable. A lot of the students who we see, even in final year when we're checking their resumes, their written language and spoken language is often not good, and most of the positions students are applying for, they can't just sit in a back room, and not talk to anybody. They're going to be out there, talking to clients, working with people, or their co-workers, or whoever, or stakeholders, so they really do need good communication skills, so that's an area that I think the universities need to be thinking about a lot more, because that's one major, major barrier, their communication skills. If they can't read, if they can't write, and they can't speak appropriately, they're not going to succeed. No-one's going to get a job (Interview, Manager of Careers and Employment at Bellwood University).

From the student perspective, lack of opportunities to interact with Australian students and the local community can have a detrimental effect on the development of their English language skills. Of the 22 accounting students interviewed at Bellwood University, none of whom had completed their previous education in English, and nearly all were disappointed with the development of their English language skills which they most attributed to the limited opportunities to engage with Australian students and the local community. Critically, this lack of engagement also impeded their 'capacity to develop social networks that facilitates access to work experience. When asked the reasons behind their failure to significantly improve their ELP, the following quotes are typical of their responses:

Not many social life, most of time just stay with Chinese and I don't think Australian local students are very friendly either. I don't think they want to talk to Chinese people, Chinese students (Interview, Student 1).

Most of my friends are from China, and I live in a house with guys from China. We use Chinese to communicate, so I don't use English language always. I see that as a big problem (Interview, Student 2).

Importantly, the students were quick to draw a link between English proficiency and access to WIL programmes. Students interviewed for this study were frustrated by both the lack of progress in English and limited opportunities to acquire work experience. Participation in WIL programmes often requires students to seek out work experience opportunities, submit a resume and participate in an interview in order to gain "real-life" job hunting experience. However, in these scenarios, international students often feel their language skills are a serious impediment. All of the accounting students interviewed nominated "communicating in English" as one of the major challenges associated with studying in Australia and one which impacted on all aspects of their experience. The following comment by an international accounting student encapsulates the views of many of the students:

It really comes down to communication skills, because I see a lot of international students, who still feel shy, in interviews or in talking in English in general. They don't really feel comfortable communicating with other people. So, I reckon, universities are not paying much attention to improve international student's communication skills, but rather international students still stick to international students and local student stick to local students. So, what university can do is first of all, improve international students' English skills to have like English Comer, or a buddy program or anything to build the bridge between the two groups and really let them mingle with the society a bit more. That would definitely help in improving their communication skills and improve their employability in the long run (Interview, Student 3).

Linguistic capital is therefore a key form of capital required for both academic success and the development of employability attributes, as well as being a key indicator of graduate employment.

International students struggle to find WIL placements due to limited local networks

The other critical factor impacting on international students' capacity to secure work placements is their lack of local networks. "Social capital" refers to the networks and relationships between people which, in sum, constitute a group (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). Possession of social capital allows a group member to draw on the resources available from relationships within the group, particularly from group members who are richly endowed with other kinds of capital (economic and cultural). Much has been written on the importance of networks in the job seeking process (Wanberg, 2011; Bramoulle and Saint-Paul, 2010), however, for international students lack of local networks acts as a barrier to both obtaining work experience placements and graduate employment. It also highlights how the capacity to form local connections and engage in the broader community has significant bearing on an international student's overall experience.

Often due to resourcing constraints, many WIL programmes, including those at Bellwood University require students to secure their own placement. The process of securing their own placement requires students to develop skills critical to future employment such as negotiation and communication, as well as enhancing their knowledge of the job application process and the Australian labour market. Many working in the WIL area concede that international students often struggle to find their own placement which some suggest is due to the gap between students' workplace attributes and the expectations of employers. According to the WIL coordinator at Bellwood University, work placements are more likely to succeed when students have researched, identified and negotiated their own placement:

Ownership of the negotiation process is critical to the success of a quality internship[...] if you've gone out and fought for it and you've knocked on 50 doors to get this opportunity, it's something you value and is dear and precious to you (Interview, WIL coordinator in the School of Business, Bellwood University).

As previously discussed, many university accounting courses are dominated by international students, often from the same country, reducing their opportunity to engage with native speakers, as was the pattern in this study. Our participants referred to the challenge of trying to both improve their language skills, engage with the broader Australian community and develop key networks when learning in classes dominated by Chinese and living with other Chinese:

Because most of my friends are still Chinese and you can see that because most of the international students who major in accounting are Chinese so I'm still in a Chinese environment (Interview, Student 4).

Chinese accounting Students at Bellwood University struggled to expand their networks beyond the Chinese-speaking community. For instance one Chinese accounting student who embarked on his overseas study experience with the goal of gaining work experience in a large accounting firm was forced to scale back his employment expectations and settle for an internship position in a small Chinese-owned firm in a neighbouring suburb. In hindsight, the student believed he should have been more socially active while studying, realising how his limited social networks reduced his capacity to acquire the necessary social capital for success in the labour market:

Firstly, social background or social relationship, like the influential background affects (employment) opportunities) because we are so independent here. We can't get any help from family, from friends. If I go back to my home country it should be easy for me, because I got some good relationships- influential relationships by my family (Interview, Student 5).

The social networks which had accumulated cultural capital in their home country for these students who aspired to study in Australia no longer existed. This required them to develop other forms of personal or individual capital which substituted for familial supports or to have universities provide this for them.

International students often have unrealistic expectation of WIL placements

WIL staff in the School of Business at Bellwood University also believe that the sometimes lofty expectations of many students (both local and international) prevents them from taking advantage of important opportunities. Students often place too much emphasis on obtaining positions with prestigious accounting and professional services firms at the expense of mid-tier and micro firms. According to the WIL coordinator in the School of Business, many students fail to see the value in smaller firms and often students would prefer to return to a coursework unit if unable undertake an internship in large, well-known firm. For those that are prepared to accept positions with smaller firms, the experience is generally very positive.

Our research reveals that many international accounting students have high expectations of their post-study employment outcomes. When asked about their career goals, a large portion of the accounting students indicated that they hoped to find employment at one of the major banks or "Big Four"[2] international accountancy and professional services firms. The aspirations of this international accounting student are typical of many studying in the business and accounting disciplines:

I found excluding for the big four auditing firm like Ernst & Young or KPMG, all the accounting firms are very, very small, maybe just some like five to ten people and doing some very, very preliminary level job like the tax return, some financial arrangement, or something like that, and that work experience cannot benefit me because if I go back to China, the industry environment is totally changed, and that work experience may be useless for me (Interview, Student 4).

However, securing a graduate position at one of the "Big Four" is an unrealistic goal for many international students. Most of the top tier banks and accounting and professional services firms, use work placements as a recruitment method and are often reluctant to take on international students for fear they will require additional support and will not transition easily into the workplace. Many large accounting firms and banks apply strict conditions on work placements, often requiring students to have permanent residency or achieve very high scores on the International English Language Testing System which excludes many international students studying at Australian universities.

The challenges facing international graduates hoping to find employment in one of the larger high status firms are highlighted by this graduate recruiter at a top tier firm:

In regards to international students (name of firm) has quite strict criteria for international students because our approach is we only want to hire international students if we can be 99% sure that they will get their permanent residency at some stage. Because our criteria is so strict we don't hire as many, we probably only hire a handful each year. So the ones that we do end up hiring, they are spot on, they are really, really good quality but that's basically because we are pretty strict (Interview, Graduate Recruiter at one of the Big Four).

In contrast, many smaller accounting firms are more likely to be open to the idea of taking on international graduates. According to one WIL staff member, international students often disregard the valuable experience to be gained by working in a smaller firm, choosing to turn down placements unless it is with a prestigious firm. These findings are echoed by other research suggesting that unrealistic expectations are a barrier to graduates success in the labour market (Patton, 2009; UNESCO, 2012). That is, the very dispositions that led students to aspire to be educated internationally had to be modified and adjust to accommodate the conditions of the Australian workplace.

Adequate preparation is critical to the success of a WIL placement

Much of the WIL literature highlights the importance of pre-placement preparation. Indeed one of the key findings of a major report on WIL in Australia is that "merely providing practice-based experiences for students is insufficient unless those experiences are enriched through preparation, engagement and opportunities to share and reconcile what has been contributed by these experiences" (Billett, 2009). Prior to participation in a WIL placement, students must be taught about the importance of observation and be prepared for active engagement in pedagogically rich work activities and interactions in the workplace (Billett, 2009). Adequate preparation is not only critical to the success of an internship or work placement, it is also vital in enhancing the overall employment prospects of all international graduates.

Career education has emerged as a major theme in the broader study from which this research stems. University staff, employers and international students themselves all concur that more needs to be done to improve students' knowledge of Australian and global labour markets, understanding of local recruitment practices, as well as enhancing communication and "soft" skills. Evidence suggests that many international students in Australia have poor knowledge of the job application process, little understanding of employer-sponsored migration processes or think about employment too late in their degree (AUIDF, 2013; Blackmore *et al*, 2014). -----

The case of Bellwood University, highlights variations across disciplines in the way students are prepared for WIL. For example, in the School of Business, while students are not required to attend face to face classes, they are required to complete a pre-placement assessment task which involves documenting how they negotiated their placement, providing a profile of the organisation, establishing a learning plan for their placement and identifying learning goals. In the Faculty of Science, students are required to complete a number of modules that involve both contact and noncontact hours. The modules are designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing students with the skills and knowledge to operate in a professional environment. In contrast, the School of Engineering provides no formal pre-placement preparation for the mandatory 12-week professional placement. Students are required to secure their own placement and are

referred to the Careers and Employment centre for advice on possible placements as well as assistance with resumes.

The importance of providing students with adequate preparation prior to WIL placement is described by a WIL academic in the Faculty of Science at Bellwood University:

If students have gone through the placement modules for the preparation phase, they already know what's expected of them. So we haven't had any issues at all, as a result of them being international students, because they're prepared for it, they know what's expected. So our model is to make sure everybody involved, the academic, the student, and the industry provider, all have a very clear understanding about what is going to be delivered as a result, and what's expected during the placement. But if we didn't prepare them, I'd say we would have lots of nightmares (Interview, WIL academic, Faculty of Science, Bellwood University).

While there can be no one size fits all approach to preparing students for work placements, specific skills and competencies, such as communication skills and teamwork for active engagement in work activities, are required in order to successfully participate in a WIL programme. This suggests there are opportunities for universities to play a key role in bridging the gulf between international students' employability skills, student expectations as to employment and the expectations of Australian employers.

Conclusion

For host countries like Australia, international education has brought significant economic, social, cultural and diplomatic benefits over many decades. However, the rapid growth in international education, and particularly in business and accounting programmes, has also resulted in students seeking a return on investment in the form of graduate employment. For international business graduates seeking to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive graduate labour market, foreign work experience is now seen as a necessary part of the overseas study "package". WIL has therefore become a form of distinction in the international market, both in terms of universities attracting students but also in terms of employer expectations. Therefore, Australian universities are facing increasing pressure to ensure international students are "work ready" upon graduation. However, as our study reveals, while demand for WIL has increased, international students' experience of WIL is often unsatisfactory, with significant barriers such as ELP, lack of social networks and unrealistic employment expectations. Universities can improve the WIL experiences of international students and enhance their overall employability, although they cannot guarantee employment, through earlier career guidance, greater integration of international students into the social context and more structured and supported provision of WIL opportunities.

WIL offers many opportunities to international students in terms of enhancing their cultural capital and developing social capital which will make them more "employable". However, international business students are currently left to develop personal capital with little university support. WIL has the potential to provide international students with a valuable introduction to the Australian labour market, the chance to build a network of professional contacts in their field, to learn about Australian work culture and expectations, hone their English language skills and develop important soft skills. Importantly, WIL offers key benefits for employers, a form of collective capital, including opportunities to develop strong

partnerships with education institutions and to inform curriculum design and teaching practices. Strong education institution-industry relationships enable employers to work with institutions to ensure that graduates are being equipped with the specific skills and knowledge needed in their industry.

However, a "reality gap" currently exists between the promise of work-related experiences of various kinds for international students and their availability, with the potential to damage Australian higher education's reputation and image internationally.

Promotional campaigns need to be carefully planned and managed so as not to raise unfulfillable expectations amongst international students (AUIDF, 2013). Opportunities for international business students to participate in some form of WIL need to be expanded. There are also major knowledge gaps about internships and work placements for international students and, moreover, about the transition to employment by international students. Further research is required to establish the most effective ways of preparing international graduates for employment, developing critical language requirements for the workplace and to better understand the experience of international students transitioning to work in Australia.

Notes

1. WIL is an umbrella term used to describe learning that is embedded in the experience of work (McIlveen *et al*, 2009). The most common forms of WIL are cooperative education, work experience, placements, practicum, internships, field work, workplace projects, workplace research, work-based learning, sandwich years, cadetships, community-based learning and service-learning.

2. The Big Four are the four largest international professional services and accountancy networks. They are: KPMG, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, PwC and Ernst & Young.

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