

**Work Integrated Learning and Business Education: A Legitimate Reverse Mapping  
Approach?**

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## **Work Integrated Learning and Business Education: A Legitimate Reverse Mapping Approach?**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates whether work integrated learning (WIL) can be effectively implemented by using students existing workplace experiences (full-time or part-time). Students had to be in a work placement as a precondition for unit enrolment. The learning outcomes focussed on the 'authenticity' and relevance of University based learning when mapped against students 'real world' work experiences. Students were asked to reassess, question and integrate their individual (and collective) work-based experiences and acquired 'real life' knowledge against their business-based university learning. Students concluded that the learning topics had provided critical and personally useful insights into their own and the wider work environment. The learning experience(s) also led to a deeper and more engaged, as well as critical questioning of, university learning.

**Keywords:** Work integrated learning; placements; practicums; reverse mapping

### **INTRODUCTION**

Work integrated learning (WIL) is a significant challenge for business education in Australia. One version, full-time work placements or practicums, is a resource-intensive approach and difficult to manage educationally. This issue is exacerbated in business schools where the scale of large student numbers in business courses means that full-time work placements are not the norm. This paper details an alternative approach. Two key questions are involved: what are the educational parameters in the construction, and effectiveness, of such an alternative; and, is such an approach a legitimate WIL experience.

WIL normally refers to a situation where students are provided with professional work placements in order to provide a practice based component as part of their higher education learning process (Ford, Bosworth & Wilson 1995; Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh & Knight 2001; Bailey, Hughes & Thorton Moore 2004; Alderman & Milne 2005; Billett 2009; Schon 2009). It is invariably embedded in those discipline areas where there is a professional accreditation requirement to provide all students

with a practice based component of their learning, for example in disciplines such as teaching, nursing and journalism. A critical element within this learning approach is the authenticity of the student learning experience (Kolb 1984; Boud, Keogh, & Walker 1985; Britzman, 2003; Fanning, 2006; Taylor 2008; Darling-Hammond 2010).

This paper investigates whether work integrated learning can be effectively implemented by using students existing workplace experiences (full-time or part-time). The students involved in this study were enrolled in a relevant business school unit (BUS2011 Work Based Learning). This is a radically alternative approach to resolving one of the key problems for higher education institutions in this field. Is it possible to provide work integrated learning without the accompanying significant resource implications from the implementation of such a learning model? Work placements usually require significant amounts of organisational resources in terms of the provision of work placements; the supervision process both academic and in the workplace; and, the management of the reputational risk involved with placing a wide range of students in the workplace.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section provides a brief background; the second section details the methodology that was used; the third and fourth sections provide the results of teaching surveys and interview data elicited from the students enrolled in this unit. This is followed by the discussion section and then the conclusion.

### **BACKGROUND**

It is possible to utilise students' current employment experiences, either full-time or part-time, as part of their learning experiences within their degree programs. Billett and Ovens (2007) do argue that students already in the workforce have access to a set of experiences which would help them to develop insights into their current workplace environments and that it is possible to utilise this experience as an alternative approach in the WIL landscape. In other words, it is possible for this to act as an effective alternative to the usual resource-intensive approach involved with the provision and monitoring of student work placements in providing the professional practice based components of work integrated learning.

The particular goal for work-integrated learning in the Murdoch Business School (MBS) will be as part of curriculum renewal and a rethinking of the current pedagogical approach used across the

school. It is intended to move away from the over-focus on individual learning with some team based learning (which is used in a number of the discipline-based units at first, second and third-year levels) towards an enhanced combination of individual and team based learning approaches with deeper engagement in the learning process by the students themselves.

This WIL unit is aimed at providing an innovative work experience unit which enhances the preparation of business students in both understanding and performing to expectations (their own and their future employers) in their chosen career paths. There has been increasing emphasis across the professional areas within business to promote generic learning skills and learning outcomes that are not limited to the acquisition and mastery of pedagogical content or the professional body of knowledge. In particular, the professional accounting bodies, as well as other professional business associations, have placed increasing importance on generic skills such as communication; problem solving; innovative thinking; team-based skills; and, the ability to think creatively and laterally. The result is they are looking to recruit well-rounded individuals capable of both operating independently and collaboratively within teams to further the tactical and strategic goals of the organisations for whom they work. In addition, they are looking for graduates who are also work ready and capable within a short time of joining the organisation.

Currently there are no specific work integrated elements in the Murdoch University business curriculum that are specifically focussed on developing student skills in preparation for working within organisations across the private, public and non-profit sectors. The aim of this unit (BUS2011) is to utilise students existing experiences in the workplace while they are still studying full-time or part-time during their undergraduate degree programs. The intention is to enable students to embed and reflect on the applicability of their work experiences back to the curriculum content within their business programs.

This was a one-semester unit offering (for the first time) in semester one, 2010 and then offered again in semester 1, 2011 titled BUS2011 Work Based Learning. The unit was made available for enrolment only to second or third-year students. It was planned to integrate students learning experience(s) in the workplace with their learning in the academic curriculum at University. The aim

was to enhance vocational outcomes by integrating student expectations with organisational expectations of work readiness and professional expertise.

A key element of this initiative is that there was no need to provide students with either internship or work placement processes because they were already working in a part-time or full-time mode. Currently a significant majority of students in the higher education sector are working (often more than twelve hours a week) whilst they are pursuing their further higher education studies. The resource implications for the University are minimal in this respect. The necessity to find work placement positions for students is a barrier that this initiative is not required to overcome.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to the research process (Yin 2008). A human research ethics application form was completed, submitted and then approved which enabled the fourteen students in semester 1, 2010 and the eighteen in semester 2, 2011 to be interviewed about their experiences within BUS2011 Work Based Learning. The students completed a teaching survey just prior to the end of semester one, 2010 and then participated in two focus group as well as individual interviews at the end of semester one, 2010 and also semester 2, 2011.

The interviews were conducted by a research associate employed in another research project (who had not been involved in any of the teaching during the semester) to ensure that there was no conflict of interest and minimise any likelihood of the unit coordinator being able to identify and/or penalise any of the students involved in this research. The semi-structured interviews were held on campus. The interviews lasted for approximately forty-five minutes up to one hour in length and the questions that were used are detailed in Appendix 1.

### **LEARNING APPROACHES**

The unit was one that used students existing work placements (existing part-time or full time jobs). Students were required to reflect on the synthesis between their workplace experiences and learnings and integrate those with their MBS based formal in-class learning in their respective Business majors. There were twelve three-hour seminars during the semester with learning activities that included a

reflective learning journal; a major individual essay assignment; and, a major teamwork based assignment. There was no final exam.

The reflective business experience unit focussed on learning topics and student experiences around the following eight themes:

- occupational health and safety
- training and professional development regimes
- management theories and supervision roles and practices
- leadership in the workplace
- professional ethics and values
- corporate social responsibility
- change management practices
- sustainable business

The unit was planned to give students the opportunity to consolidate their theoretical knowledge and develop their professional competence in the workplace. The learning experience took place inside and outside the classroom with students having the opportunity to participate in real world business experiences and integrating those with their formal business studies.

The first teaching period (semester one, 2010) started with an initial enrolment during December 2009 and January 2010 of thirty four students who were interested and initially enrolled in the unit. They had been recruited via a series of emails sent out to Business student cohorts over a two-week period at the end of 2009 whilst they were re-enrolling for first semester in 2010. However, the initial teaching period was changed from a Tuesday to a Wednesday evening and a number of students withdrew because of this late change just prior to the start of semester. A number of other students also changed their minds about being involved in a new unit and withdrew. The semester commenced with eighteen students enrolled and a further four withdrew during the semester because they felt (when giving feedback about the reasons they were withdrawing) that the work involved in the learning tasks and assessment was more than they anticipated. In semester 2, 2011 eighteen students completed the semester with an initial enrolment of twenty four students.

Students were placed into collaborative learning teams by the unit coordinator at the beginning of the semester and stayed within those allocated teams for the entire semester. They were asked to sit with other teams members for each of the twelve weeks of lecture/seminar sessions. This approach worked well and the level of team bonding early on was then sustained and effective and lasted through the entire teaching period. What this also meant that for the team-based learning tasks, as well as the individual learning tasks, they acted as a learning resource for each other in terms of learning support and clarification of the requirements of the different assessment tasks. Effectively they managed regularly to interact with each other and to 'teach' others in class as the semester progressed.

The teaching topics were selected because it was expected that all part-time and full-time work based students would be exposed to the work practices of these significant elements of work life and work cycles within their organisations.

The approach taken at each lecture/seminar was to cover the academic material and research findings in each of the topic areas in the first part of each teaching session. The students within each one of their teams then discussed the teaching material and the 'actual' work experiences in each of these areas. Having discussed each area in depth within the teams then there would be an overall whole class (plenary) discussion of the week's allocated topic. The focus each time was a complete reversal of what normally occurs in work integrated learning units. The usual approach is to assess the authenticity of the workplace experiences and the degree of integration between the University based in-class elements of work integrated learning compared to the students' actual experiences in the work placement itself. However, in this unit students were expected to analyse what they had personally experienced in the workplace and whether this could be 'mapped' backwards to what they were learning at university within the respective business majors. What therefore is being questioned and evaluated in this unit is the 'authenticity' of their University learning experiences in Business school majors when compared to their current 'real world' organisational experiences.

#### **TEACHING SURVEY RESULTS (2010)**

The feedback from a teaching evaluation survey, which students filled in during the week nine teaching session (there are twelve teaching weeks in the Murdoch semester) of the semester, was very positive. Appendix 2 details the tabulated results from the completed student teaching evaluation

forms. These results were well above both the Business School averages and the Murdoch University averages for these types of surveys. These results meant that the unit coordinator was being placed amongst the top 10% of teaching survey results in the past two semesters, which resulted in the receipt of a certificate from the university to that effect. This also meant that the unit coordinator was eligible to apply for the Vice Chancellors annual teaching excellence (TEX) awards.

In addition, several student written comments received as part of the evaluation process were as follows:–

**Student 1**

“David has an affective (sic) way of communicating and illustrating theories and ideas. He relates a lot to everyday life, treats us as intelligent human beings and simplifies things.

Examples that are used are very appropriate and encourage better understanding.

His enthusiasm and energy encourages me too.”

**Student 2**

“His presentation of a topic is riveting and interesting which assists in learning about this topic.

His opinions always add interest and conversation to workshops.”

**Student 3**

“As this unit is work based all of the learning areas are relevant. Examples are current and relate to students of different ages. Class discussions are lively and everyone is encouraged to participate.”

**Student 4**

“And thank you for a good semester, by far the most refreshing unit I've done. I think I can relate it to "in advance of the Corporate Rambo", its all about the little things that can keep you alive in the wild! But i (sic) wasn't going to put that in my journals.”

It is clear from the results that students were engaged positively with the learning topics covered in this unit and that they found a significant degree of relevance between their workplace experiences and the learning in their business degrees.

**INTERVIEW RESULTS (2010 AND 2011)**

A human research ethics application was submitted because the project plan had as an objective the conducting of focus group and individual interviews with students who had completed the unit. The

two focus groups and the individual interviews were arranged and completed at the end of the semester. An independent research associate undertook the interviews. The University ethics committee stipulated this course of action to avoid any possibility of a conflict of interest (real or perceived) between the students and the unit coordinator. The list of focus group and individual questions that were asked is detailed in Appendix 1.

The student responses (focus groups and individual) in both 2010 and 2011 to questions one and two were positive. They reported that the weekly learning process of providing an academic overview of both the mainstream and critical theory literature and research findings in each topic area was a particularly useful insight in their overall learning within the unit. They also expressed a strong preference for the process of within-team discussions following the academic overview and then an overall plenary discussion in-depth of the different positions and arguments that they had encountered in the workplace as well as in the academic university environment. These discussions were often intense and (surprisingly) insightful at times which was a reflection of just how much students had already accumulated useful knowledge in the work environment. Questions three and four about what did not work for them as learners elicited little criticism or concern other than a request for additional in-class discussion time on specific topics of personal interest.

Questions five and six resulted in students expressing a preference for a continuation of the combination of individual and team based learning approaches. No student wanted an all individual nor all team based learning approaches to be used in future offerings of the unit. Question seven did not elicit any specific suggestions for changes to the learning approaches adopted in this unit. This might change when the students have had some time to reflect further on the unit.

The question about future class sizes led to students arguing quite strongly for the class size in future to remain small. A number of comments were made to the effect that they had enjoyed being in a small class size in which they had the opportunity to get to know all the other students in the class. This was a rare event in their experience of business school units. They did acknowledge that the class needed to be larger than the fourteen students that completed the first semester. The ideal class size was, in their collective opinion, to be no larger than thirty students. This would maintain what to them was perceived to be the optimum learning environment. Their final input was to assert also

strongly that the unit should have an enrolment quota but that it should not be a competitive entry process (only open effectively to elite students) but open to all students on a first-come, first-served enrolment process.

### **DISCUSSION**

The student responses to questions in the focus group and individual interviews as reported above were very positive. They reported that the weekly learning process of providing an academic overview of both the mainstream and critical theory literature and research findings in each topic area was a particularly useful insight in their overall learning within the unit. The in-class discussions were often intense and (surprisingly) insightful at times, which was a reflection of just how much students had already accumulated useful knowledge in their existing work environment—whatever the nature of the work in which they were engaged.

It is evident that this type of unit (BUS2011 WBL) is one effective way to provide a work integrated learning experience to business school students without the need to provide work placements for each of the students involved. The challenge that faces business schools in future is whether this can be expanded in an effective way to provide a similar experience to all students enrolled across business majors at the undergraduate level. One way to provide this could be through a capstone unit, which all students would be required to complete as part of their degree structure.

There are three outcomes from this MBS WIL unit. First, is an evidence-based set of curriculum, pedagogy and epistemological principles and practices for effectively designing and implementing WIL in a business school setting. The second outcome is building MBS faculty capacity for: (a) determining how best educational experiences can be structured during work placement experiences; (b) learning how particular kinds of knowledge (i.e. conceptual, procedural and dispositional) can be generated and (c) understanding how students' personal epistemologies can be developed. The third outcome is the incorporation of feedback from students (through interviews and teaching evaluations) about their specific experiences and learning achievements in BUS2011 Work Based Learning in future offerings of the unit.

There is sufficient evidence from the teaching surveys, interview results and the above discussion that provides a clear answer to the first key question posed in the introduction to this paper. This

alternative approach to WIL has provided the two student cohorts in 2010 and 2011 with a sound and effective pedagogic experience and learning process that has helped to embed and effectively ‘reverse map’ their work-based experiences with their University based learning. Clearly the students had responded enthusiastically and supportively to the underlying educational principles and concepts that formed the basis for the learning and teaching in this unit. The combination of individual and collaborative learning in which, as adult learners, the students were exposed to a postgraduate seminar style learning approach which, in their opinion, was both a novel and innovative teaching option as well as effective in generating an engagement with, and positive results, for the learning outcomes that were proposed for this unit.

The second key question that was proposed at the beginning of the paper was whether this unit was a legitimate WIL educational activity (Orell, 2011; Billett, 2011). This is an issue that has been considered by Murdoch University’s Educational Development Unit (EDU). EDU has initially developed a draft standards framework for integrating work integrated learning in which the definition adopted is "... an intentional, organised, supervised and assessed educational activity that integrate theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace" (Cummings & Struthers 2012, 2). Following on from this there are four key elements in the standards that will be used at Murdoch University to assess whether a particular unit is a legitimate WIL unit that satisfies the current policy settings on this issue (Cummings & Struthers 2012, 5).

The first of these is ‘Purpose’ which is stated to be:

The student performs work that is relevant to their course of study and links theory to practice, and increases employability skills including graduate attributes. The real experience, where applicable, should meet externally prescribed professional or accreditation requirements

The second of these elements is ‘Integration’ which states:

The WIL activity must be integrated into the curriculum with explicitly stated learning outcomes. Assessment should reflect tasks undertaken in the work environment and should provide evidence of learning and reflection

The third element is ‘Supervision and Monitoring’:

The academic coordinator is responsible for the ongoing direction and monitoring of the student. In a placement, a workplace supervisor with responsibility for the student must be identified. In clinical settings workplace supervisors must have adequate clinical experience, training or recognition by their professional body.

The fourth element of the standards framework is 'Duty of Care':

Academic coordinators must ensure that students are placed in a safe environment. In placements, there should be a formal agreement which outlines legal obligations and indemnities between the University and the placement organisation, and the student should have a learning agreement outlining their role and responsibilities, and WIL learning outcomes.

Using these four elements as the decision criteria, then BUS2011 Work Based Learning does not satisfy the third element because it is not a work placement or practicum unit in which the student is formally allocated a workplace supervisor. Instead, the students in this unit were already in the workplace and the only component of this element that was required was for the Murdoch University unit coordinator, as the academic coordinator, to be held responsible for the ongoing direction and monitoring of the student in the learning environment rather than in the students' experiences in the workplace itself. Consequently this element is only partially met in relation to this unit. In the case of the fourth element 'duty of care', this was not applicable given again that this was not a work placement unit.

The two elements that do satisfy the standards framework are 'Purpose' and 'Integration'. The unit clearly had a sound pedagogical purpose which linked learning with practice but in a 'reverse mapping' process. This 'reverse mapping' approach meant that students were utilising their workplace experiences to assess the relevance of the business learning within each of the learning topics that they covered during the teaching period. This was an approach that the students embraced enthusiastically. The second element 'Integration' was evidently met by the assessment requirements within the unit being embedded within explicit learning outcomes and did provide evidence of effective learning and reflection. The conclusion is that this was a legitimate WIL unit

## CONCLUSION

Murdoch University has adopted within its current strategic plan (Murdoch University Strategic Plan—2010 to 2015) an emphasis on building opportunities for students to participate in work integrated learning experiences within their degree structures. As a result, this provides the Murdoch Business School with the strategic platform and justification for making future offerings of this particular unit a permanent feature of the different majors available within the business undergraduate degrees.

It is possible to provide an effective work integrated learning experience and at the same time minimise the resource implications for the discipline area involved. This experience is a process of a 'reverse mapping' of the usual approach to WIL. In other words, what students experience is a mapping of their current workplace experiences back to their business based learning across a number of discipline areas.

The learning outcomes in BUS2011 Work Based Learning were focussed on students evaluating and reflecting on the 'authenticity' and relevance of their University based learning when mapped against their current 'real world' work experiences. The students were asked to assess, question and integrate their individual (and collective) work-based experiences and acquired real-life knowledge with their business-based university learning.

The students reported a universally positive assessment of this particular WIL unit. They concluded that the learning topics within the unit had provided them with critical and personally useful insights into their own and the wider work environment. It also led to a deeper questioning of the university learning that they had received to date within their Business majors.

All higher education institutions are currently under significant resource constraints with respect to their revenue inflows. There will always be resource constraints in the provision of any part of the learning process at the higher education level. Therefore, this particular approach to the provision of WIL to business school students is one (very) effective way of managing and meeting the expectations of students, tertiary education managers and business lobby groups.

## Appendix 1

## BUS2011 Work Based Business Learning

## Focus Group and Individual Questions

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**Assessment of Learning Experiences**

1. Please explain what were the positive aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
2. Can you describe what worked best for you as a learner?
3. Please explain what were the negative aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
4. Can you describe specifically what did not work for you as a learner?
5. What is your judgment of the value (or otherwise) of using team based learning approaches in a work integrated learning unit such as BUS2011?
6. Would you prefer to have **all** team-based or **all** individual-based learning assessment activities in this unit or a combination of the two approaches?
7. What elements of the learning process would you change, if you could, in the future teaching of this unit?
8. Should the class size on this unit be limited to a large seminar/workshop size (i.e. a maximum of 50 enrolments)?
9. If there is a maximum limit placed on unit enrolments should the unit be offered as a competitive-based entry or as a first-come, first-served enrolment approach?
10. Would you recommend that the unit teaching times be held early in the evening (from 4.30pm onwards) in future offerings of BUS2011?

**Table 1 – Teaching Evaluation Survey**

Appendix 2

**Rankings for each response has a maximum score of 4**

<b>Student Survey of Teaching (Murdoch University standard forms)</b>	<b>Murdoch University Overall Results 2009 Resp. 55%</b>	<b>Murdoch Business School Averages 2009 Resp. 54%</b>	<b>BUS2011 WBBL Semester 1, 2010 n=12/14 Resp. 86%</b>
Q1. Good understanding of concepts covered	<b>3.29</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.58</b>
Q2. Purpose of class explained	<b>3.32</b>	<b>3.32</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q3. Well prepared for class	<b>3.53</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>3.92</b>
Q4. Classes are well organised	<b>3.44</b>	<b>3.48</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q5. Communicates effectively with students	<b>3.40</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q6. Demonstrates enthusiasm for subject	<b>3.59</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>3.83</b>
Q7. Encourages student participation	<b>3.42</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q8. Opportunities to apply learning	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>3.42</b>
Q9. Be responsible for own learning	<b>3.37</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q10. Sympathetic to student differences	<b>3.31</b>	<b>3.25</b>	<b>3.64</b>
Q11. Helpful when having difficulties	<b>3.37</b>	<b>3.34</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q12. Clear expectations of learning	<b>3.25</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.42</b>
Q13. Provision of useful feedback	<b>3.24</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q14. Work returned promptly	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q15. Marks assigned work fairly	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>3.83</b>

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper investigates whether work integrated learning (WIL) can be effectively implemented by using students existing workplace experiences (full-time or part-time). Students had to be in a work placement as a precondition for unit enrolment. The learning outcomes focussed on mapping students 'real world' work experiences backwards to question the 'authenticity' and relevance of University based learning. Students were asked to reassess, question and integrate their individual (and collective) work-based experiences and acquired 'real life' knowledge against their business-based university learning. Students concluded that the learning topics had provided critical and personally useful insights into their own and the wider work environment. The learning experience(s) led to a deeper and more engaged, as well as critical questioning of, university learning.*

**Keywords:** Work integrated learning, placements, practicums, reverse mapping.

### INTRODUCTION

Work integrated learning (WIL) normally refers to a situation where students are provided with professional work placements in order to provide a practice based component as part of their higher education learning process (Ford, Bosworth & Wilson 1995; Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh & Knight 2001; Bailey, Hughes & Thorton Moore 2004; Alderman & Milne 2005; Billett 2009; Schon 2009). WIL is invariably embedded in those discipline areas where there is a professional accreditation requirement to provide all students with a practice based component of their learning, for example, in disciplines such as teaching, nursing and journalism. A critical element within this learning approach is the authenticity of the student learning experience (Kolb 1984; Boud, Keogh, & Walker 1985; Britzman, 2003; Fanning, 2006; Taylor 2008; Darling-Hammond 2010).

However, work integrated learning is a challenge, and an opportunity, for business education in Australia. One version, full-time work placements or practicums is a resource intensive approach, and difficult to manage educationally. This issue is exacerbated in business schools where the scale of large student numbers in business courses means that full-time work placements are not the norm. This paper details an alternative approach. Two key questions are involved: what are the educational parameters in the construction, and effectiveness, of such an alternative and, is such an approach a legitimate WIL experience.

This paper investigates whether work integrated learning can be effectively implemented by using students existing workplace experiences (full-time or part-time). The students involved in this study were enrolled in a relevant business school unit (BUS2011 Work Based Learning). This is an alternative approach to resolving one of the key problems for higher education institutions in this field. Is it possible to provide work integrated learning without the accompanying significant resource implications from the implementation of such a learning model? Work placements usually require significant amounts of organisational resources in terms of the provision of work placements, the supervision process both academic and in the workplace, and the management of the reputational risk involved with placing a wide range of students in the workplace.

This paper is structured as follows: the first section provides a brief background, the second section details the methodology that was used, the third and fourth sections provide the results of teaching surveys and interview data elicited from the students enrolled in this unit. This is followed by the discussion section and then the conclusion.

## **BACKGROUND**

It is possible to utilise students' current employment experiences, either full-time or part-time, as part of their learning experiences within their degree programs. Billett and Ovens (2007) do argue that students already in the workforce have access to a set of experiences which would help them to develop insights into their current workplace environments, and that it is possible to utilise this experience as an alternative approach in the WIL landscape. In other words, it is possible for this to act as an effective alternative to the usual resource intense approach involved with the provision and monitoring of student work placements in work integrated learning.

The particular goal for work integrated learning in the Murdoch Business School (MBS) will be as part of curriculum renewal, and a rethinking of the current pedagogical approach used across the school. The intention is to move away from the over focus on individual learning with some team based learning (which is used in a number of the discipline based units at first, second and third year levels) towards an enhanced combination of individual and team based learning approaches with deeper engagement in the learning process by the students themselves.

This WIL unit is aimed at providing an innovative work experience unit which enhances the preparation of business students in both understanding and performing to expectations (their own and their future employers) in their chosen career paths. There has been increasing emphasis across the professional areas within business to promote generic learning skills and learning outcomes that are not limited to the acquisition, and mastery, of pedagogical content or the professional body of knowledge. In particular, the professional accounting bodies, as well as other professional business associations, have placed increasing importance on generic skills such as communication, problem solving, innovative thinking, team based skills, and the ability to think creatively and laterally. The result is they are looking to recruit well rounded individuals: who are capable of both operating independently and collaboratively within teams to further the tactical and strategic goals of the organisations for whom they work. In addition, they are looking for graduates who are also work ready and capable within a short time of joining the organisation.

Currently, there are no specific work integrated elements in the Murdoch University business curriculum that are specifically focussed on developing student skills in preparation for working within organisations across the private, public and non profit sectors. The aim of this unit (BUS2011) is to utilise students existing experiences in the workplace while they are still studying full-time or part-time during their undergraduate degree programs. The intention is to enable students to embed, and reflect on, the applicability of their work experiences back to the curriculum content within their business programs.

A key element of this initiative is that there was no need to provide students with either internship or work placement processes, because they were already working in a part-time or full-time mode. Currently, a significant majority of students in the higher education sector are working (often more than twelve hours a week) whilst they are pursuing their further higher education studies. The resource implications for the University are minimal in this respect. The necessity to find work placement positions for students is a barrier that this initiative is not required to overcome.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is a micro-level investigation of the issues surrounding the implementation of a work integrated learning unit in the Murdoch Business School for the first time. The research approach utilised semi-structured interviews which were held in 2010 and 2011 with participants from successive domestic student cohorts in the Perth metropolitan area. Interviewees were asked about their experiences and perceptions about the learning process and approach in this WIL unit and what worked and did not work in their judgement of the learning outcomes that were achieved.

This paper adopts a qualitative approach to the research process (Yin 2008). Fourteen students in semester 1, 2010, and the eighteen in semester 2, 2011, were interviewed about their experiences within BUS2011 Work Based Learning. The students completed a teaching survey just prior to the end of semester one, 2010, and then participated in two focus group as well as individual interviews at the end of semester one, 2010 and also semester 2, 2011.

The semi structured interview approach gives the researcher and interviewee some degree of direction while, at the same time, empowering the interviewee to pursue their own agendas. These include other topics of special interest and/or concern to the interviewee (but related to the topic at hand) which are unanticipated by the researcher (Holloway, 2009). Therefore, even though semi-structured questions were used the content was sufficiently wide-ranging with unanticipated issues surfacing. This ‘...‘conversational’ context of the qualitative interviews also underlies the manner in which the contributions of interviewees are integrated within the research. It empowers the participant to set a wider agenda within which the ethnographic research is subsumed’ (Green, 2003: 139).

The interviews were conducted by a research associate employed in another research project (who had not been involved in any of the teaching during the semester) to ensure that there was no conflict of interest, and to minimise any likelihood of the unit coordinator being able to identify and/or penalise any of the students involved in this research. The semi structured interviews were held on campus. The interviews lasted from approximately forty-five minutes up to one hour in length and the questions that were used are detailed in Appendix 1.

### LEARNING APPROACHES

The unit was one that used students existing work placements (existing part-time or full-time jobs). Students were required to reflect on the synthesis between their workplace experiences and learnings, and integrate those with their MBS based formal in class learning in their respective Business majors. There were twelve three hour seminars during the semester with learning activities that included a reflective learning journal, a major individual essay assignment, and a major teamwork based assignment. There was no final exam.

The reflective business experience unit focussed on learning topics and student experiences around the following eight themes: occupational health and safety, training and professional development regimes, management theories and supervision roles and practices, leadership in the workplace, professional ethics and values, corporate social responsibility, change management practices, and, sustainable business.

The unit was planned to give students the opportunity to consolidate their theoretical knowledge, and develop their professional competence in the workplace. The learning experience took place inside and outside the classroom with students having the opportunity to participate in real world business experiences, and integrating those with their formal business studies.

The first teaching period (semester one, 2010) started with an initial enrolment during December 2009 and January 2010 of thirty four students who were interested and initially enrolled in the unit. They had been recruited via a series of emails sent out to Business student cohorts over a two week period at the end of 2009 whilst they were reenrolling for first semester in 2010. However, the initial teaching period was changed from a Tuesday to a Wednesday evening, and a number of students withdrew because of this late change just prior to the start of semester. A number of other students also changed their minds about being involved in a new unit and withdrew. The semester commenced with eighteen students enrolled, and a further four withdrew during the semester because they felt (when giving feedback about the reasons they were withdrawing) that the work involved in the learning tasks and assessment was more than they anticipated. In semester 2, 2011 eighteen students completed the semester with an initial enrolment of twenty-four students.

Students were placed into collaborative learning teams by the unit coordinator at the beginning of the semester, and stayed within those allocated teams for the entire semester. They were asked to sit with other teams members for each of the twelve weeks of lecture/seminar sessions. This approach worked well, and the level of team bonding early on was then sustained and effective, and lasted through the entire teaching period. What this also meant was that for the team based learning tasks, as well as the individual learning tasks, they acted as a learning resource for each other in terms of learning support, and clarification of the requirements of the different assessment tasks. Effectively, they managed regularly to interact with each other, and to 'teach' others in class as the semester progressed.

The teaching topics were selected because it was expected that all part-time and full-time work based students would be exposed to the work practices of these significant elements of work life and work cycles within their organisations. The approach taken at each lecture/seminar was to cover the academic material and research findings (from both mainstream and critical literatures) in each of the topic areas in the first part of each teaching session. The students within each one of their teams then discussed the teaching material, and the 'actual' work experiences that they had personal knowledge of in each of these areas. Having discussed each area in depth within the teams, there would be an overall whole class (plenary) discussion of the week's allocated topic.

The focus each time was a reversal of what normally occurs in work integrated learning units. The usual approach is to assess the authenticity of the workplace experiences, and the degree of integration between the University based in class elements of work integrated learning compared to the students' actual experiences in the work placement itself. However, in this unit students were expected to analyse what they had personally experienced in the workplace, and whether this could be 'mapped' backwards to what they were learning at university within the respective business majors. What therefore is being questioned, and evaluated in this unit, is the 'authenticity' of their University learning experiences in Business school majors when compared to their current 'real world' organisational experiences.

### **TEACHING SURVEY RESULTS (2010)**

The feedback from a teaching evaluation survey, which students filled in during the week nine teaching session (there are twelve teaching weeks in the Murdoch semester) of the semester, was very positive. Appendix 2 details the tabulated results from the completed student teaching evaluation forms. These results were well above both the Business School averages, and the Murdoch University averages for these types of surveys. These results meant that the unit coordinator was being placed amongst the top 10% of teaching survey results across the University.

In addition, two of the student written comments received (amongst others) as part of the evaluation process were as follows:

#### **Student 1**

‘As this unit is work based all of the learning areas are relevant. Examples are current and relate to students of different ages. Class discussions are lively and everyone is encouraged to participate.’

#### **Student 2**

‘And thank you for a good semester, by far the most refreshing unit I've done. I think I can relate it to ‘in advance of the Corporate Rambo’, its all about the little things that can keep you alive in the wild! But i (sic) wasn't going to put that in my journals.’

The results show that students were engaged positively with the learning topics covered in this unit, and that they found a significant degree of relevance between their workplace experiences, and the learning in their business degrees.

### **INTERVIEW RESULTS (2010 AND 2011)**

The two focus groups, and the individual interviews, were arranged and completed at the end of each of the two semesters. An independent research associate undertook the interviews. This course of action was taken to avoid any possibility of a conflict of interest (real or perceived) between the students and the unit coordinator. The list of focus group and individual questions that were asked is detailed in Appendix 1.

The student responses (focus groups and individual) in both 2010 and 2011 to questions one and two were positive. They reported that the weekly learning process of providing an academic overview of

both the mainstream, and critical theory literature and research findings in each topic area, was a particularly useful insight in their overall learning within the unit. They also expressed a strong preference for the process of within team discussions following the academic overview, and then an overall plenary discussion in-depth of the different positions and arguments that they had encountered in the workplace as well as in the academic university environment. Questions three and four about what did not work for them as learners elicited little criticism or concern: there was instead a request for additional in class discussion time on specific topics of personal interest.

Questions five and six resulted in students expressing a preference for a continuation of the combination of individual and team based learning approaches. No student wanted an all individual nor all team based learning approaches to be used in future offerings of the unit. Question seven did not elicit any specific suggestions for changes to the learning approaches adopted in this unit. This might change when the students have had some time to reflect further on the unit.

The question about future class sizes led to students arguing quite strongly for the class size in future to remain small. A number of comments were made to the effect that they had enjoyed being in a small class size in which they had the opportunity to get to know all the other students in the class. This was a rare event in their experience of business school units. They did acknowledge that the class needed to be larger than the fourteen students that completed the first semester. The ideal class size was, in their collective opinion, to be no larger than thirty students. This would maintain what to them was perceived to be the optimum learning environment. Their final input was to assert, also strongly, that the unit should have an enrolment quota, but that it should not be a competitive entry process (only open effectively to elite students): instead, the unit should be open to all students on a first-come, first-served enrolment process.

## **DISCUSSION**

The student responses to questions in the focus group and individual interviews as reported above were overall very positive. They reported that the weekly learning process of providing an academic overview of both the mainstream, and critical theory literature and research findings in each topic area, was a constructive approach in their overall learning within the unit. The in-class discussions

were often intense and (surprisingly) perceptive and insightful, which was a reflection of just how much students had already accumulated useful knowledge in their existing work environment—whatever the nature of the work in which they were engaged.

This type of unit (BUS2011 WBL) is one way of providing a work integrated learning experience to business school students without the need to find work placements for each of the students involved. The challenge that faces business schools in future is whether this can be expanded in an effective way to provide a similar experience to all students enrolled across business majors at the undergraduate level. One way to provide this could be through a capstone unit, which all students would be required to complete as part of their degree structure.

There are three outcomes from this MBS WIL unit. First, is an evidence-based set of curriculum, pedagogical and epistemological principles and practices for effectively designing and implementing WIL in a business school setting. The second outcome is building MBS faculty capacity for: determining how best educational experiences can be structured during work placement experiences, learning how particular kinds of knowledge (i.e. conceptual, procedural and dispositional) can be generated, and understanding how students' personal epistemologies can be developed. The third outcome is the incorporation of feedback from students (through interviews and teaching evaluations) about their specific experiences, and learning achievements in BUS2011 Work Based Learning in future offerings of the unit.

There is sufficient evidence from the teaching surveys, interview results and the above discussion that provides a clear answer to the first key question posed in the introduction to this paper. This alternative approach to WIL has provided the two student cohorts in 2010 and 2011 with a sound and effective pedagogic experience, and learning process that has helped to embed and effectively 'reverse map' their work-based experiences with their University based learning. Clearly, the students had responded enthusiastically, and supportively, to the underlying educational principles and concepts that formed the basis for the learning and teaching in this unit. The combination of individual and collaborative learning in which, as adult learners, the students were exposed to a postgraduate seminar style learning approach which, in their opinion, was both a novel and innovative

teaching option. This approach was effective in generating an engagement with, and positive results, for the learning outcomes that were proposed for this unit.

The second key question that was proposed at the beginning of the paper was whether this unit was a legitimate WIL educational activity (Orell, 2011; Billett, 2011). This is an issue that has been considered by Murdoch University's Educational Development Unit (EDU). EDU has initially developed a draft standards framework for integrating work integrated learning in which the definition adopted is "... an intentional, organised, supervised and assessed educational activity that integrate theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace" (Cummings & Struthers 2012, 2). These were developed by EDU because no such set of 'standards' have been developed elsewhere in the WIL literature. Following on from this, there are four key elements in the standards that will be used at Murdoch University to assess whether a particular unit is a legitimate WIL unit that satisfies the current policy settings on this issue (Cummings & Struthers 2012, 5).

The first of these is 'Purpose' which is stated to be:

The student performs work that is relevant to their course of study and links theory to practice, and increases employability skills including graduate attributes. The real experience, where applicable, should meet externally prescribed professional or accreditation requirements

The second of these elements is 'Integration' which states:

The WIL activity must be integrated into the curriculum with explicitly stated learning outcomes. Assessment should reflect tasks undertaken in the work environment and should provide evidence of learning and reflection

The third element is 'Supervision and Monitoring':

The academic coordinator is responsible for the ongoing direction and monitoring of the student. In a placement, a workplace supervisor with responsibility for the student must be identified. In clinical settings workplace supervisors must have adequate clinical experience, training or recognition by their professional body.

The fourth element of the standards framework is 'Duty of Care':

Academic coordinators must ensure that students are placed in a safe environment. In placements, there should be a formal agreement which outlines legal obligations and indemnities between the University and the placement organisation, and the student should

have a learning agreement outlining their role and responsibilities, and WIL learning outcomes.

Using these four elements as the decision criteria, then BUS2011 Work Based Learning does not satisfy the third element because it is not a work placement or practicum unit in which the student is formally allocated a workplace supervisor. Instead, the students in this unit were already in the workplace, and the only component of this element that was required was for the Murdoch University unit coordinator, as the academic coordinator, to be held responsible for the ongoing direction, and monitoring of the student in the learning environment rather than in the students' experiences in the workplace itself. Consequently, this element is only partially met in relation to this unit. In the case of the fourth element 'duty of care', this was not applicable given again that this was not a work placement unit.

The two elements that do satisfy the standards framework are 'Purpose' and 'Integration'. The unit clearly had a sound pedagogical purpose, which linked learning with practice but in a 'reverse mapping' process. This 'reverse mapping' approach meant that students were utilising their workplace experiences to assess the relevance of the business learning: this occurred within each of the learning topics that they covered during the teaching period. This was an approach that the students embraced enthusiastically. The second element 'Integration' was evidently met by the assessment requirements within the unit being embedded within explicit learning outcomes, and did provide evidence of effective learning and reflection. The conclusion is that this was a legitimate WIL unit.

## CONCLUSION

Murdoch University has adopted within its current strategic plan (Murdoch University Strategic Plan—2010 to 2015) an emphasis on building opportunities for students to participate in work integrated learning experiences within their degree structures. As a result, this provides the Murdoch Business School with the strategic platform and justification for making future offerings, of this particular unit, a permanent feature of the different majors available within the business undergraduate degrees.

It is evident from the outcomes reported above and the participants' responses elicited during the research process that it is possible to provide an effective work integrated learning experience and, at the same time, minimise the significant resource cost implications for the discipline area involved. This experience is a process of a 'reverse mapping' of the usual approach to WIL. In other words, what students experienced in this particular type of WIL unit is a mapping of their current workplace experiences back to their business based learning across a number of discipline areas.

The learning outcomes in BUS2011 Work Based Learning were focussed on students evaluating, and reflecting on, the 'authenticity' and relevance of their University based learning when mapped against their current 'real world' work experiences. The students were asked to assess, question and integrate their individual (and collective) work-based experiences, and acquired real-life knowledge, with their business-based university learning. The students reported a universally positive assessment of this particular WIL unit. They concluded that the learning topics within the unit had provided them with critical, and personally useful, insights into their own and the wider work environment. It also led to a deeper questioning of the university learning that they had received to date within their Business majors.

One possible outcome from these research results is that further curriculum reviews of the Business based majors could benefit from the critiques and feedback from the direct student experiences garnered through a unit of this type. In addition, major curriculum reviews will be necessary across the country because of the additional requirements to respond effectively to the new regulatory regime imposed by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA). Furthermore, the identification, and often criticism levied, by various business lobby groups of the need for a stronger connection between university learning and the workplace could be resolved by a greater deployment of such units across business schools in the Australian higher education context.

There will always be resource constraints in the provision of any part of the learning process at the higher education level. Therefore, this particular approach to the provision of WIL to business school students is one (very) effective way of managing, and meeting the expectations of students, tertiary education managers, and business lobby groups without serious and negative budget implications.

**BUS2011 Work Based Learning****Focus Group and Individual Questions**

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**Assessment of Learning Experiences**

1. Please explain what were the positive aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
2. Can you describe what worked best for you as a learner?
3. Please explain what were the negative aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
4. Can you describe specifically what did not work for you as a learner?
5. What is your judgment of the value (or otherwise) of using team based learning approaches in a work integrated learning unit such as BUS2011?
6. Would you prefer to have **all** team-based or **all** individual-based learning assessment activities in this unit or a combination of the two approaches?
7. What elements of the learning process would you change, if you could, in the future teaching of this unit?
8. Should the class size on this unit be limited to a large seminar/workshop size (i.e. a maximum of 50 enrolments)?
9. If there is a maximum limit placed on unit enrolments should the unit be offered as a competitive-based entry or as a first-come, first-served enrolment approach?
10. Would you recommend that the unit teaching times be held early in the evening (from 4.30pm onwards) in future offerings of BUS2011?

**Table 1 – Teaching Evaluation Survey**

Appendix 2

**Rankings for each response has a maximum score of 4**

<b>Student Survey of Teaching (Murdoch University standard forms)</b>	<b>Murdoch University Overall Results 2009 Resp. 55%</b>	<b>Murdoch Business School Averages 2009 Resp. 54%</b>	<b>BUS2011 WBL Semester 1, 2010 n=12/14 Resp. 86%</b>
Q1. Good understanding of concepts covered	<b>3.29</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.58</b>
Q2. Purpose of class explained	<b>3.32</b>	<b>3.32</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q3. Well prepared for class	<b>3.53</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>3.92</b>
Q4. Classes are well organised	<b>3.44</b>	<b>3.48</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q5. Communicates effectively with students	<b>3.40</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q6. Demonstrates enthusiasm for subject	<b>3.59</b>	<b>3.45</b>	<b>3.83</b>
Q7. Encourages student participation	<b>3.42</b>	<b>3.33</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q8. Opportunities to apply learning	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>3.42</b>
Q9. Be responsible for own learning	<b>3.37</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q10. Sympathetic to student differences	<b>3.31</b>	<b>3.25</b>	<b>3.64</b>
Q11. Helpful when having difficulties	<b>3.37</b>	<b>3.34</b>	<b>3.67</b>
Q12. Clear expectations of learning	<b>3.25</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>3.42</b>
Q13. Provision of useful feedback	<b>3.24</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q14. Work returned promptly	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.75</b>
Q15. Marks assigned work fairly	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>3.83</b>

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