Supporting wellbeing: Perspectives of university work-integrated learning students

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The health of students engaging in work-integrated learning (WIL) should be a key focus of universities. WIL students encounter various personal, social, and financial pressures which impact their wellbeing, which are often different from those of an on-campus student or a workplace employee. The aim of the research was to explore student perspectives of the impact of WIL on their wellbeing, and strategies for supporting wellbeing. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected from 16 students across four disciplines and three New Zealand universities. Wellbeing is a visible construct, and this was illustrated in the participants' ability to articulate their understanding of wellbeing. Students also emphasized that WIL experiences impact wellbeing both positively and negatively. Multiple strategies contribute to enhancing their wellbeing and these are summarized as recommendations for students, host organizations, universities, and the government. Clearly, WIL wellbeing is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the WIL enterprise.

Keywords: Wellbeing, financial hardship, work-integrated learning, mental wellbeing, social wellbeing, economic wellbeing

INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a course requirement in many university programmes, with students undertaking authentic, meaningful learning tasks in host organizations, usually external to the university environment. While the positive benefits of WIL for students are widely reported (see review by Jackson & Cook, 2023), WIL experiences are often undertaken in unfamiliar environments, which can be daunting. WIL students can face significant challenges such as psychological and financial stress (particularly in unpaid placements), social isolation, work/life imbalance, or exposure to exploitation or unlawful practices (Bartley et al., 2024; Beddoe et al., 2023; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018; Zegwaard & Adams-Hutcheson, 2023).

Ensuring student wellbeing and safety is an aspect of the duty of care of universities, globally. It is widely known that wellbeing is important for influencing academic outcomes, career outcomes, and outcomes that benefit the community and wider society (Boon et al., 2017). Successful learning requires a culture that fosters wellbeing, where learners need to be well physically, but also feel well socially and emotionally (Zepke, 2013). In the context of WIL, to promote positive wellbeing, learners need to have clear goals, suitable WIL experiences to enable achievement of these goals, and a sense of personal control over their learning.

With many universities having a strategic focus on WIL (Aprile et al., 2023), participation for diverse groups, such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or those with additional caring responsibilities, has increased. As social, economic and other inequalities impact wellbeing, it is important universities suitably prepare students undertaking WIL with a toolkit of skills to be resilient

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and ready to adapt to the demands of their WIL experiences (Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2023). Further, universities also need to have in place strategies to safeguard students' emotional and physical wellbeing (Konstantinou et al., 2023).

While there is limited research focused on WIL student wellbeing from the student perspective, recent research has identified key stressors during WIL that may impact wellbeing. In a cross-disciplinary student survey, administered in a New Zealand (NZ) university, Zegwaard and Adams-Hutcheson (2023) found most WIL students encountered several stressors while on work-based placements. Common stressors included financial, physical health, and disrupted living arrangements. They also noted that, while on placement, students were making unhealthy lifestyle choices (such as increased smoking and alcohol consumption, less healthy food options), and many students reduced their participation in activities that could support positive wellbeing. Another key stressor was the impact of WIL on caring responsibilities. This is consistent with findings from both an Australian study by Hodge et al., (2021) and another New Zealand study (Bartley et al., 2024; Beddoe et al., 2023). These studies identified that students with multiple responsibilities found attending full-time unpaid placements to be problematic in terms of balancing their different roles, and this had an adverse impact on mental health, work-life balance, and personal relationships.

Recent research has identified significant risks facing WIL students in NZ (Fleming & Hay, 2021). Risks relate to the readiness and suitability of the student, the learning environment, and student safety (Fleming & Hay, 2021; Hay & Fleming, 2021). Within the NZ context, the *Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021* (the Code), requires universities to meet the wellbeing and safety needs of learners, both on campus and in workplace learning environments (New Zealand Government, 2021). While this is a valid goal, there has been little research across disciplines on the current state of the wellbeing of WIL students in NZ, or strategies that may be employed by universities to better support their wellbeing. The Code stresses that capturing student voices is important to inform decision-making for universities, providing a key justification for this research.

The aim of the research was to explore wellbeing from the perspective of NZ university students who had undertaken WIL as a requirement of their programme of study.

Specific objectives were to determine:

1) What WIL students understand wellbeing to mean.
2) How WIL has impacted wellbeing (positively and negatively).
3) What strategies WIL students use to support or manage their wellbeing.

For the purposes of this study, WIL was considered an immersive block placement of at least 100 days (Hay et al., 2023). The next section of this article discusses definitions of wellbeing, the importance of student wellbeing during university study, and models of wellbeing. Following this, the findings of the study are presented and discussed. Drawing on the participant perspectives, the final section will outline WIL wellbeing recommendations for consideration by host organizations and WIL university staff as they endeavor to support and enhance WIL student wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

This section will provide as a background, definitions of wellbeing, the importance of wellbeing for learning during university study, and different conceptual models of wellbeing.

Defining Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a ubiquitous concept, but with many different interpretations. Early definitions focused on wellbeing as happiness and pleasure, developing as a person, and feeling fulfilled (Scheyvens et al., 2023). Wellbeing has been described as relating to a range of dimensions, where it is "a state of harmony or balance between physical, mental, spiritual, cultural, community and ecological dimensions, extended through time" (Shakespeare et al., 2021, p. 677).

The World Health Organization (WHO) aligns wellbeing with quality of life and positive mental health. Several instruments have been developed by WHO as attempts to measure wellbeing. One of the more common tools is the WHO-5 wellbeing index. The questions that are ranked from 'all the time,' to 'at no time' are (WHO, 1998, p. 25):

1) I feel cheerful and in good spirits
2) I feel calm and relaxed
3) I feel active and vigorous
4) I wake up feeing fresh and rested
5) My daily life is filled with things that interest me.

This index, while developed for the primary health care setting as a generic scale without diagnostic specificity, is used widely in different contexts for measuring subjective psychological wellbeing (Topp et al., 2015).

Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith, (2018, p. 133) in the WIL context, define wellbeing as:

> An individual's capacity to manage the social, economic, personal, and physical factors that impact on the work-integrated learning experience, and how the work-integrated learning experience impacts on an individual's social, economic, personal, and physical wellbeing domains.

The authors also acknowledge that wellbeing, as a construct, is fluid and dynamic. They suggest the development and maintenance of wellbeing depends not only on fluidity in all the dimensions mentioned in their definition above, but also on their increasing integration over time. Given the direct correlation with WIL, this definition of wellbeing was adopted for this research.

Importance of Wellbeing for Learning at University

Student wellbeing, along with an increasing concern for mental health of students, has become a topical issue for universities globally, in part exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Donald & Jackson, 2022; Riva et al., 2020). The wellbeing of university students has been linked to student success and retention (Boon et al., 2017), and as noted above, in the NZ context, has received recent legislative attention through the implementation of the Pastoral Care Code.

Recognizing wellbeing, teaching, and learning as relational activities, Riva et al.'s (2020) UK research explored university student and staff perspectives to generate a whole-of-university voice. Their results signaled the importance of student-centred learning and assessment to enable wellbeing; and for staff to demonstrate emotional intelligence toward students through attributes such as care,

kindness, and compassion. Student stressors were seen to be reduced through staff utilising soft skills such as approachability, listening and effective communication, thus enhancing student wellbeing (Riva et al., 2020). While enhanced student-teacher relationships and a compassionate university were worthy recommendations from Riva et al.'s (2020) research, there are some paradoxes between student wellbeing and engagement in WIL. For instance, being in new learning situations may invoke anxiety and stress. Further, the disciplinary knowledge and skills learned in the classroom context may have been too abstract or generalized to easily transfer to the real-world environment thus causing confusion and a sense of inadequacy for the student. For many students, a lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes also leads to negative emotional responses (Bogo & Sewell, 2022). A supportive supervisor or mentor in the workplace can facilitate new learning, however, students may have less energy and focus for learning if they feel vulnerable or unprotected in their WIL experience (Bogo & Sewell, 2022). As Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith (2018) highlight, "the attitudes and behaviors of the people in the placement environment, all contribute to either enabling or hindering the individual's experience" (p.134). For WIL students then, wellbeing needs to be considered both in relation to their classroom or direct university experience, as well as in the workplace settings in which the WIL experience is occurring (Bartley et al., 2024).

Models of Wellbeing

Several models have been developed to conceptualize wellbeing. Many models have been developed in a Western context, however, two of the four models presented in this section are Indigenous or non-Western models of wellbeing (Te Whare Tapa Whā and the Frangipani Framework of Wellbeing).

Te Whare Tapa Whā is a Māori (NZ Indigenous) model of holistic wellbeing that is widely recognized as relevant in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts (Durie, 1985). This model is illustrated as a house with four walls, each representing a dimension of hauora or wellbeing: physical (taha tinana), mental and emotional (taha hinengaro), social (taha whānau) and spiritual (taha wairua). Each of these dimensions is needed (metaphorically) to hold up the roof of the house for overall wellbeing. This model is a useful framework in which to consider the wellbeing of WIL students and is commonly adopted within NZ health and education sectors.

Many Western models of wellbeing overlook the dimension of spiritual wellbeing, that encompasses not just religion, but the connection to ancestors and a sense of identity. Scheyvens et al., (2023) acknowledge that environmental factors are important to the wellbeing of Pacific people. In 2021, the authors developed the Frangipani Framework, illustrated by the overlapping petals of a frangipani flower, indicating the interrelated connections between physical, social, financial, mental, and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing. The original model was revised, and the trunk and roots of the frangipani tree were added to represent the importance of environmental wellbeing. The trunk and the roots "connect the multiple wellbeing of individuals (the flowers) and communities to nature, time, land, and external forces … and the upper part of the tree represents a complex socio-ecological system that connects individuals to each other through the branches" (Scheyvens et al., 2023, p. 63). The trunk and roots influence whether the flower flourishes or wilts, highlighting the importance of environmental factors for an individual's wellbeing.

Grant-Smith et al., (2017), in their model, conceptualize WIL wellbeing as achieved through a combination of the following: personal coping strategies, institutional support, and community

support. Examples of personal coping strategies may include self-care plans, self–regulation, and management (e.g. time management), and seeking assistance (e.g. accessing support services). The authors acknowledge that while an individual can implement their own coping strategies, it is the process of combining community and institutional support with these personal strategies, that will strengthen an individual's WIL wellbeing. Community support may include peers, friends and family. Examples of institutional support strategies include pastoral care and staff support from the university. Importantly, how to access these supports must be effectively communicated to students. Different cohorts, for example minority groups such as international students, may also require access to different types of institutional support.

Konstantinou et al., (2023) designed a framework focusing on the wellbeing of students undertaking degree apprenticeships. In the degree apprenticeship model of WIL, students spend 80% of their time in the workplace, and the remainder in the higher education institution (HEI). The authors acknowledged that HEI's had little control over the employer's support for student wellbeing. Therefore, they designed their framework to guide both educators and workplaces to provide wellbeing support for students who are regularly transitioning from the workplace to the HEI institution and back to the workplace. For the framework, the authors drew on four principles for wellbeing, adapted from Jisc (2021): wellbeing is for everybody; wellbeing is lifelong; wellbeing is embedded in all activities, where student health is not separated from learning; and wellbeing is a collective endeavor which involves the entire community, not just student health and mental support services. A key feature of the framework is that all aspects of the student journey are included: induction; module delivery and outcomes; and assessment practices and teaching. The framework also acknowledges communities that include the students and available student support systems. While this framework was designed for a specific WIL context, the wellbeing principles are transferable to most other WIL models.

The models presented in this section are not the only representations of wellbeing, but those selected do include key concepts that can be applied to the wellbeing of WIL students.

METHODS

The research employed a qualitative interpretive approach (Schram, 2006) to explore the views of university students who had completed a WIL placement as a requirement of their programme of study. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions, and to provide an opportunity for unexpected themes to emerge. Qualitative interviews assume, "that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Aligning with a constructivist approach, the significance of the subjective experiences of the participants, within different WIL and disciplinary contexts, was recognized as important to the study (Knapp, 2019). The qualitative data provided detailed contextualized narratives (Leitz & Zayas, 2010) that have been drawn upon in this article.

Ethics approval was granted by each of the authors' university ethics committees (Reference numbers: 22/256 and 22/39).

Participants

Participants were recruited from three NZ universities with representation from different disciplines (social work, nursing, sport and recreation, veterinary science), and level of study (i.e. 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th years; bachelor's and master's degrees). Participants had to have completed at least 100 hours of

placement-based WIL. An advertisement, with an invitation to participate in the research, was placed on university learning management systems in courses that included a WIL placement.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants by video call with a researcher who was not from the participant's discipline area or university. The same interview questions were asked of each participant. Questions included: how they describe wellbeing; what supports their wellbeing; the impact of WIL placements on their wellbeing (positive and negative impacts); strategies they use to support their wellbeing during WIL; advice and strategies for students, universities, and host organizations for supporting WIL student wellbeing. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Initial transcription was provided through the functions within the video software, and then checked for accuracy against the recording, by the interviewer. Participants were asked if they wished to check their own transcripts, and a few participants accepted this invitation. Numeric identifiers were assigned to each transcript to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

Analysis

A framework was developed from the interview schedule and the research objectives and used for initial coding and sorting of the data. Thematic analysis was then applied to elicit key themes. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 78) consider this a "foundational method of qualitative analysis … independent of theory and epistemology and can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological approaches". Representative quotes were identified and are presented in the findings; however, specific disciplines or universities are not identified to ensure confidentiality. Rigor and consistency were enabled by one researcher completing initial coding, which was then cross-checked by the other researcher.

FINDINGS

The research findings presented in this section capture WIL students' voices on their understanding of wellbeing, and the impact of WIL (positively and negatively) on their wellbeing. In addition, participant views on the impact of WIL on wellbeing compared to other university activities are presented. Participants' advice for other students, along with their key priorities for universities and host organizations to support student wellbeing during WIL, are summarized.

Demographics

Sixteen WIL students from three NZ universities participated in the study. Disciplines included social work, sport and recreation, nursing, and veterinary science. Most participants were completing an undergraduate bachelor's degree, while two participants were studying social work at postgraduate level. Of the students at undergraduate level, one was second year, eight were third year, three were fourth year, and two were in the fifth year of study. The length of degree depended on discipline with nursing and sport and recreation being three-year degrees, social work (undergraduate) four years, and veterinary science five years in length. Most students were not paid during their placements (10/16), four students received payment for some of their placement hours, and two students had been fully employed throughout their placements.

Completing multiple placements was common in all disciplines, and the hours and structure varied across the years of their degree as well as the discipline. All students had completed a least 100 hours

of placement and most had completed at least 350 - 450 hours across a year or semester, or 10 - 12 weeks in a block. Eight of the participants had full-time placements, five were part-time, and the remaining were a mix of full-time and part-time. The host organizations were consistent with the range of disciplines in this study and included hospitals, veterinary clinics, farms, community sports organizations, schools, and other non-government and government organizations.

Six participants indicated they had responsibilities for 'caring for children' and one participant disclosed a physical disability. Nine participants identified as NZ European/ Pākehā, and the other ethnicities included: Tongan/Niuean; Iroquois, American, French, European, South African, British.

Work-Integrated Learning Students Understanding of Wellbeing

While 'wellbeing' is a commonly used term in education, health, and general conversation, gaining an appreciation of what students understood about wellbeing provided a useful context for further questions asked in the interviews. It is important to note the interpretations shared by the students were subjective and situation dependent. Background, age, social, and financial circumstances were all different, and this contributed to how wellbeing was understood and interpreted by each of them within their own personal contexts.

Overall, the themes identified in the narratives aligned with the definitions and models of wellbeing shared earlier in this article. Comments related to physical, emotional/mental, social, family, and spiritual wellbeing. For example, one student summarized wellbeing as:

> ... a very holistic term and there are many factors involved in one's overall wellbeing and that includes factors such as having adequate shelter, earning enough money or having access to enough money to eat and afford the power bill and things like that. And also, things like mental health and being in a safe environment and feeling like you're contributing to society in the community as well. (P6)

Another student commented that wellbeing is:

> ... a mixture of both physical and mental wellbeing ... making sure that you're physically able to do what you need to do throughout the day, to be able to look after yourself and the people around you and then mentally just being in the right frame of mind to be able to carry out as well what you need to do throughout the day and throughout the week. And still feel that, you know, that you can enjoy the life that you live. (P4)

Spirituality was acknowledged as part of wellbeing in daily life (P1) and described by a participant as "connecting to the environment … is a big thing along the spiritual sort of ground. So meditating and being close to the water and the trees is what helps" (P7).

The importance of balance was also a common theme, for example one student's understanding was "wellbeing is just being in a state of balance, having meaningful aspects throughout your life … and just having general work-life balance" (P13). Another commented, "it's got to be balanced across all areas of your life. It can't just be one or the other at a time" (P12).

Making time for looking after yourself, having time for physical activity and exercise, and ensuring you were eating well and staying connected with family and friends, were shared as important factors in wellbeing. For example:

> ... [wellbeing is] making sure that I have time for myself as well as fulfilling my training commitments, my competing commitments, my work commitments, my uni and it's still being able to see my friends and not just get stuck in that boom, boom, boom, work, work, work, work … well-being for me is actually learning to say no. (P5)

Having adequate financial resources was understood to be part of wellbeing, for example, "having the financial resource to make sure that I have a safe and healthy living environment for myself and my child" (P1), and "earning enough money or having access to enough money to eat and afford the power bill and things like that" (P6).

Impact of Work-Integrated Learning on Wellbeing

Students were invited to rank the impact of WIL on their wellbeing on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being no impact and 5 being significant impact). They were asked to rank positive impact and negative impact on wellbeing separately. Interestingly, students often ranked them the same on the scale, suggesting that students were aware that WIL impacted both positively and negatively on their wellbeing but in different ways. Overall, the mean for WIL having a positive impact on wellbeing was slightly higher (3.7) than for negative impact (3.4).

Positive impact

As anecdotal comments and conversations about wellbeing often only focus on negative elements, it was important to give the students the opportunity to talk about how WIL impacts wellbeing in a positive way. Key themes related to opportunity, personal growth, and developing relationships.

WIL was perceived as an 'opportunity,' that provided a sense of purpose, achievement, and fulfilment, and for many students a confirmation of future career path. These were seen as contributors to positive wellbeing:

> [Placement] helped with my wellbeing and the fact I was learning and my self-growth. I really loved my placements because I knew it was where I wanted to be, and I was kind of fulfilling my passion every day. So that was really fulfilling for me … from a personal growth perspective. (P12)

Positive contributors to WIL wellbeing also related to an overall theme of personal growth gained through WIL, such as development of confidence, and self-efficacy:

> I think it's had a massive impact on my confidence. I've definitely gained a lot of confidence through doing the WIL placement and a lot more self-efficacy … I've learned a lot and I feel really comfortable now in the in the area that I'm in and really, really confident taking on new roles and new experiences. (P4)

Relationships and connections were seen as important contributors to positive wellbeing as described by these participants: "I've made really meaningful connections with people that like in a sort of professional sense, connections that I can have for later working" (P13) and "I got to meet a whole lot of new people and they're the first friends that I had here … Enjoyed the people that I got to speak with and interact with on a daily basis at work "(P8).

For many students, relationships built with new workplace colleagues had a positive impact on their overall wellbeing during the WIL experience.

Negative impact

The negative impact of WIL yielded no surprises. Key themes related to lack of time for self, workload, and financial stress.

Due to balancing competing demands, WIL students reported less time available for themselves. For some, they experienced an increase in stress due to their overall workload, particularly those that were undertaking full-time placements.

> It can be very draining. Yeah, very draining and you are very busy all the time. You don't really have a lot of time to put into yourself, so it's hard to have good wellbeing when you're not putting any effort into yourself, just other people. After you come home, you don't have any energy for yourself. (P2)

Financial stress was a common issue that was raised frequently throughout the interviews, particularly for those in unpaid placements, many of which were full-time. Struggles for money to pay rent and eat well were not uncommon. Loss of income from being unable to work part-time while on a full-time unpaid placement was also raised as a major concern. As one student commented, "it really pushes me to the edge in terms of what I can provide financially and all like that, that sense of being able to keep myself safe financially" (P1). Additional costs related to WIL such as transport to get to placement (as opposed to university) were also raised as an issue.

Impact of Work-Integrated Learning Compared to Other University Activities

WIL was perceived by some to have more personal benefits and authentic learning opportunities, which contributed to positive wellbeing, compared to on-campus university learning activities. For example:

> ... the same stresses that I had handing in assessments I had doing the WIL placement, but I think the WIL placement was more beneficial towards my personal growth and professional growth, so it seemed like, it seemed more beneficial to me doing the WIL placement than it did submitting assignments. (P4)

A similar view was also shared:

> I get the point of assignments and exams and all that, but I think if we didn't have the placements, I think we'd lose quite a massive learning … I think placement gives you that sort of sniff into what you're you've signed up to do and if you can't hack it at placements, that's the time where you're going, actually, this isn't for me, you know? (P7)

Some students considered there was more flexibility at university with timetabling and attendance at classes, but this was not always seen as a positive.

> At uni, you don't necessarily have to be at lectures, you have the option to join in on Zoom, assignments you can procrastinate forever, and you can pick and choose when you're going, you know your own work schedule … But because placement was structured, I knew I had to be up at 6:30 to be out the door by just before 8:00 to start at 9:00. And then I knew I finished at 4:00 and I found it was better like in that sense that it was structured. (P10)

At university, what the students are expected to learn from a class was considered consistent, yet, on placement the participants said the learning can be variable depending on the context. As one student commented, "[at uni] the school has control over the curriculum and the instructors and what they're teaching us and how it's taught. They have no control over what goes on, on a farm" (P16).

The opportunity to connect and interact with peers was seen as different on campus compared to on placement. For some, they felt isolated from their peers while on placement and they missed regular interactions with classmates. This was more common for those that were on placement full-time for several months or had to live in a different location during placement. Emotional stress was often related to unfamiliar environments, particularly at the beginning of a new placement.

Workload stressors were also perceived as different. Even though university has deadlines for assessments and exams, participants indicated that WIL had different stressors to deal with depending on the context. A social work student described this difference, "in terms of what you're exposed to and probably the immediate stress in crisis situations that you're probably dealing with and just being on the frontline whereas assignments, that's kind of a different kind of stress" (P8).

Advice from Students for Students

The participants were forthcoming in their advice for other students and their comments aligned with their understanding of the importance of a holistic approach to wellbeing. Insightful comments from the participants included:

> Make sure that you have people that you can speak to. Whether it's on a, ideally on both a personal and professional level, make sure you're looking after yourself and exercising and eating well, and make sure you're taking, taking time out. Just taking some time for yourself. (P6)

> You know that self-care is super important, and I think if we listen to what's going on for us inside our hearts or inside, you know, for us and deal with that, that needs to be part of that self-care. Because I think that can unravel us quicker than forgetting to go for a walk or, you know, not eating a salad or whatever part of the eating is I think that is gonna be a really important thing and don't be afraid to reach out and ask for some help. (P7)

> Although it feels like maybe it's sometimes you don't have time to have a break, that you do need to have a break ... you may feel like if you just need to keep going and make the most of your every minute of the day, but actually if you stop and take some time to fill your cup up again, you're gonna be much better off to kind of carry on. (P12)

Another key piece of advice was related to placement selection (for those that self-select their host organizations):

> Choose an organization that you're really interested in, I think that makes it a lot more comfortable and a lot more interesting. It's probably if you love the work that you're doing, you're probably not going to be as stressed about doing it and the whole process is going to be a lot more enjoyable. Choose something that you're passionate about. (P4)

Awareness of the pressures associated with WIL facilitated student's actioning a range of self-care and wellbeing strategies. Giving themselves permission to engage in activities that would be personally

fulfilling was encouraged alongside seeking support from people both inside and outside of the WIL context.

Wellbeing Strategies for Host Organizations to Prioritize

While participants were asked about wellbeing strategies for hosts to prioritize, many of the suggestions were related to creating a positive environment for learning, thereby contributing to their wellbeing. One student stressed the importance of inclusion, collaboration, empathy and patience, along with appropriate challenges:

> Make sure to include the students even when they're busy, like even in the smallest ways so that they don't feel alienated ... important that they do take an interest in their learning goals and work collaboratively with the student. … I think just show empathy and patience and give that person appropriate challenges and allow them to pace themselves, but also challenge them too, you know. (P1)

Feeling welcome and being treated appropriately by staff within the organization was important for wellbeing: "so they welcomed me and from day dot as a student and I was part of it and treated just like any other staff member there. Well, mine was amazing" (P8). Other participants had different experiences: "… you are kind of thrown into the deep end on a placement as a student and lots of the people that work there can treat you in a way that like, makes you feel quite undervalued. So, I guess just the way that they treat you. Look after you" (P2). Another participant shared how they initially felt, "I didn't know anything', like you can feel very small, very useless. [Staff need to] empathize and reassure you that we know you're a student, like we're happy to have you on board" (P5).

As expected, providing appropriate support was also seen as a priority to ensure student wellbeing. Suggestions for host supervisors included regular 'check-ins' or meetings with the student to see how they are going, for example, "just making sure that support is available and asking if I need help with anything. Just regular, regular check-ins" (P6), and "always checking in and making sure that I was getting what I needed as a student" (P7). One student shared about their support being more than just about what was happening on placement and was more holistic:

> I have a meeting every month with my [placement] supervisor where we talk about KPIs and stuff like that. But we also talk about how I'm doing in my personal life as well as at work, how things are going at work, everything's going well and the same for at home as well. And I get the opportunity and the chance to talk to my supervisor about that stuff if I want to. And then sort of make plans with them about how to how to improve that, but it's more of a personal chat. (P4)

Communication with the university was also seen to be beneficial, so that the host was clear on the expectations and their responsibilities:

> Understand what is expected of them as an organization to provide and cater for the student that's on placement because it's probably a lot of placements or a lot of industry supervisors probably don't know exactly what's required of them or what's expected of the student or yeah what's expected of the WIL placement as a whole, they sort of potentially might just see it as a person coming in for a bit of free labor. (P4)

Financial support or payment was also raised as a concern by some participants on unpaid placements, who felt that this was a priority for hosts to help support student wellbeing:

> I think being paid as a student is so important and people are like oh, but you're a student. You don't know what you're doing, but it's like we're still giving up our time and our energy and actually, like, we should be paid for our learning efforts because eventually we're gonna get in the industry and we will be helpful. And if we're not taught how to do that, which is what placements is part of doing, then we won't be helpful. (P15)

Wellbeing Strategies for Universities to Prioritize

Participants were asked to consider strategies for universities to help support the wellbeing of WIL students. Key themes related to preparation for placement, support, and flexibility.

As mentioned earlier, most students had a good understanding of what contributes to positive wellbeing. Yet, while some disciplines already included 'managing wellbeing' as part of their placement preparation, it was evident in the participants' responses that a stronger focus on potential stressors they may encounter and strategies they could use to support their wellbeing is clearly needed.

Regular, accessible supervision and support was identified as a priority for universities. The type of supervision varied across disciplines, with some students requiring regular professional supervision and others meeting regularly with university staff. Some students however, only contacted a university staff member if there was an issue. Site visits, while a student was on placement, was also variable and this depended on discipline, locations of host organizations and length of placements. It was however, seen to be a critical way to support students:

> I so strongly believe that there should be someone who visits you or even just calls you up on your placement to be like, hey, how's it going? Are they ticking off this and this and this? Are they doing any of these behaviors? Like how you are feeling, and it needs to be a staff member that students can trust, and they can talk to like they're not going to feel judged if they're having a terrible time. (P15)

Providing opportunities for debriefing, during and/or at the end of placement was also identified as an important part of the supervision and support strategies provided by the university.

Participants considered it was important for universities to understand their needs. Consistent with the financial concerns raised by some participants on unpaid placements, participants suggested that universities need to investigate different ways that students can be supported financially during their placements. In addition, flexibility in the placement structure, with a choice to be full-time or part-time, was suggested to better address students' needs. Flexibility would allow students to continue with other paid employment if needed, or to meet their caring and other responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

The overall health of students engaging in WIL should be a key focus of universities who have a duty of care to ensure student wellbeing and safety. Further, the effects may ripple beyond the individual student and their successful completion of coursework. Supporting the wellbeing of WIL students requires collective and proactive efforts. As noted by Konstantinou et al., (2023), wellbeing should not be seen as an individual's responsibility but that of all stakeholders in the WIL enterprise.

Wellbeing is a visible construct in contemporary society including in the higher education sector (Boon et al., 2017; Donald & Jackson, 2022; Riva et al., 2020), and this was illustrated in the participants' ability to articulate their understanding of wellbeing. Their definitions reflected the models of wellbeing discussed earlier in this article (Durie, 1985; Grant-Smith et al., 2017; Konstantinou et al., 2023; Scheyvens et al., 2023) and participants agreed all facets of health were important for overall wellbeing. A balance in life contributed to a state of wellbeing. In this study, attending to one's physical health by, for example, exercising, eating well, having sufficient sleep, alongside maintaining positive personal and professional relationships was highlighted as important for wellbeing. Spirituality or awareness of the world beyond the corporal self also supported wellbeing.

The research findings have further emphasized that WIL experiences can impact wellbeing both positively and negatively. WIL, for instance, can contribute to the development of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and professional identity; expansion of professional knowledge and skills; and cementing a passion for the discipline area. This aligns with the works of Drysdale et al., (2022) and Jackson and Cook (2023). WIL can enhance a sense of wellbeing and motivation. Students experiencing these positive impacts may rate highly on the WHO wellbeing index, feeling calm, positive, and invigorated by the WIL experience (WHO, 1998). Conversely, negative impacts of WIL on wellbeing have received considerable recent attention (e.g. Bartley et al., 2024; Hodge et al., 2021) and were reiterated by the participants. Limited leisure time to spend with family and friends due to the considerable time requirements of WIL, especially in lengthy block placements, may tip the balance for student wellbeing (Hemy et al., 2016). Additional assignment workloads from other courses also exacerbates student stress as noted by some of the participants in this study. Economic wellbeing (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018) is particularly precarious with many professional qualifications requiring students to engage in compulsory unpaid placements (Gair & Baglow, 2018; Hodge et al., 2021). In the feminized professions, such as nursing, midwifery, teaching, and social work, students are more likely to be burdened with caring responsibilities that limit flexibility for paid employment and contribute to what has become known as placement poverty (Bartley et al., 2024; Hodge et al., 2021). Funding for WIL is limited, inconsistent, and varies markedly across disciplines (Hay et al., 2023), thus creating inequities and negatively affecting some students' WIL wellbeing more significantly than others. The emphasis in this research on financial hardship negatively impacting wellbeing is also corroborated in Bartley et al.'s (2024) research although, in contrast, the participants did not focus on their student debt, perhaps due to being current students, rather than graduates.

A consistent finding in this study was that students value the support from personal and professional networks, and multiple strategies may contribute to enhancing their wellbeing during WIL. Implementation of these strategies may also mitigate some of the negative impacts of WIL on wellbeing raised by the participants in this study. These strategies are summarized in the Tables 1, 2 and 3 as recommendations for students, host organizations, and universities.

TABLE 1: Work-integrated learning wellbeing recommendations to students.

Eat well	Gain support from friends and family
Make time for exercise and physical activities	Have a self-care plan and prioritize 'me-time'
Remember the importance of relationships	Utilize professional support

TABLE 2: Work-integrated learning wellbeing recommendations to host organizations.

Create a positive learning environment	Be empathetic and patient
Appropriately challenge student learning	Have an inclusive workplace
Check-in and provide feedback to the student	Understand and meet university requirements

TABLE 3: Work-integrated learning wellbeing recommendations to universities.

Pre-placement teaching on wellbeing strategies	Regular, easily accessible supervision during WIL
Financial support for students on unpaid WIL	Flexible WIL structure, e.g. part-time
Structured peer support during the WIL experience	Debriefing opportunities following WIL

We recommend the inclusion of these tables in pre-placement training and documentation for students and host organizations and for WIL staff to consider how to operationalize the recommendations made by the participants to universities.

Implications

While the WIL wellbeing recommendations presented above offer valuable strategies from the participants, it could be argued that, by and large, these are already being encouraged or implemented in WIL programs. Of concern then, is that students in this study did not believe their wellbeing was always being adequately supported during WIL. While WIL university staff are encouraged to consider the tables above and how the recommendations are evident in their programs, these need to be evaluated within the broader policy and legislative higher education framework. A focus only on individual student wellbeing strategies, while important, is limiting.

Interestingly, many of the strategies identified above to support student wellbeing, have also been noted as strategies for managing or mitigating risk in WIL (Fleming & Hay, 2021), and enabling inclusive learning environments (Hay & Fleming, 2024; Hay & Mafile'o, 2022). This provides a strong rationale to move from considering WIL wellbeing as being an individual concern to a wider university and community concern (Grant-Smith et al., 2017). Positive learning environments contribute to positive student wellbeing (Zepke, 2013), and WIL policy and practice should support this outcome. We suggest that the current placement-based WIL structure may be inhibiting student wellbeing, thus creating risks for all WIL stakeholders.

We support previous recommendations that WIL student wellbeing would be enhanced by flexibility in placement structure, receiving an income during placement, a reduction in the costs arising from placement, and consideration of the design and delivery of curriculum so that students have a manageable workload during their placement (Hodge et al., 2021). A collaborative and coordinated approach across the university sector, and alongside regulatory and accreditation bodies, to explore, implement and evaluate alternative models of WIL, may enhance student wellbeing. Retention and completion of university qualifications has long been a catalyst for change in higher education policies (Zepke, 2013), and, given the identified and additional pressures on WIL students (e.g. Bartley et al., 2024), embedding wellbeing frameworks that support this endeavor should be given urgency in university settings.

Limitations

Age demographics were not gathered in this study. However, Bartley et al. (2024) identified that higher education students under 25 years were better at socializing and engaging in cultural activities during their study which supported their wellbeing. Further study of the wellbeing of specific student populations, including mature, Indigenous, and straight-from-school students, as well as students who are on paid or unpaid WIL, may offer nuanced understanding of WIL wellbeing. The recruitment of participants is recognized as an additional limitation, with only some disciplines targeted across three New Zealand universities. A broader disciplinary focus with a larger number of participants in similar future research would strengthen current wellbeing research.

CONCLUSION

As Konstantinou et al. (2023) has noted, student health cannot be separated from learning and this study has demonstrated how wellbeing and WIL are entwined – sometimes positively, but often negatively. While the impacts of WIL on student wellbeing are now well-understood (e.g. Bartley et al., 2024; Beddoe et al., 2023; Hodge et al., 2021), effectively addressing the associated issues requires concerted and coordinated effort from universities, host organizations and regulatory or accrediting bodies. Government recognition of the specific impact of WIL on student wellbeing is also required

for changes to current policy and funding settings. We recommend the New Zealand Government take heed of the recent legislative changes in Australia regarding student wellbeing during WIL, thus strengthening their commitment to student learning, retention, and completion of university study. Bluntly, graduates are essential for workforce development; poor investment in their wellbeing, especially in relation to WIL, compromises a healthy and effective future labor market. From a more personal and less neo-liberal perspective, supporting WIL wellbeing enables students to thrive in their learning, and to be positive members of and contributors to their personal and professional relationships, communities, and wider society.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

> *An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development* (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38*).

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurships, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

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