Editorial: Wellbeing and work-integrated learning

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Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have important responsibilities for the duty of care of their students, and to ensure the wellbeing of students is kept front and center of curriculum and institutional developments. While the focus has primarily been on physical campuses, it is critical that these responsibilities extend to off campus activities, such as work-integrated learning (WIL). This special issue includes 11 articles focusing on the wellbeing of WIL students, with many authors drawing on empirical research. Key themes include students' understanding of WIL wellbeing; students' experiences of WIL and wellbeing; strategies for preparing WIL students to support wellbeing; understanding the wellbeing needs of diverse WIL students; and the important role of workplace supervisors in supporting WIL wellbeing. Several authors amplify the voices of students and all share thought-provoking teaching and curriculum strategies. All WIL stakeholders have a responsibility to support the learning success and wellbeing of students.

Keywords: Wellbeing, mental health, work-integrated learning, inclusion, risk, student voice, hardship

THE NEED FOR CONSIDERING THE WELLBEING OF WIL STUDENTS

There has been increasing attention on the important responsibilities of higher education institutions (HEIs) for the duty of care of their students (Fleming & Hay, 2021b). In some countries, such as New Zealand and Canada, government regulation now requires compliance from HEIs to evidence activity in ensuring the wellbeing and safety of their student population. This focus has, however, primarily been on students' experiences of health, safety and wellbeing on physical campuses rather than during off campus activities such as work-integrated learning (WIL) (Dodd et al., 2021; Khatri & Duggal, 2022).

WIL is "an inclusive term used to describe a range of work -focused learning models" (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 29), the most common being workplace-based placements. Globally, across the higher education sector, different terminology is used to describe placement experiences, including cooperative education (co-op);practicum, internships, work placements, sandwich years, and field education (Dean & Campbell, 2020). Non-placement WIL models, such as industry related projects and service learning, are regularly included in higher education curriculum. With advances in technology, virtual WIL and workplace simulations are also becoming more common (Wood et al., 2020). Clear criteria now exist outlining the key features needed for non-placement models to be considered as WIL (Ferns et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023).

Risk management of WIL has received considerable recent attention (Cameron et al., 2023; Fleming & Hay, 2021a, 2021b). While WIL presents opportunities for its key stakeholders, including students, HEIs and host organizations or industry partners, the potential challenges cannot be overlooked. Commonly cited risks for students include psychological or physical harm, exploitation, financial hardship, inadequate learning environments or opportunities, the readiness and suitability of the student, and discrimination (Cameron et al., 2023; Fleming & Hay, 2021b). Effective systems and quality assurance processes may mitigate these risks to some extent, however, as we see in this Special

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Issue, there is still considerable work required to ensure the wellbeing of WIL students is kept front and center of curriculum and institutional developments.

While the literature on the wellbeing of WIL students is limited, a small number of models have been developed and are drawn upon throughout this Special Issue. The WIL Wellbeing Framework developed by Australian academics Gillett-Swan and Grant-Smith (2018), conceptualizes WIL wellbeing as achieved through a combination of the following: personal coping strategies, institutional support, and community support. Konstantinou et al., (2023) designed a framework focusing on the wellbeing of students undertaking degree apprenticeships. Their framework provides a guide for educators and workplaces in providing wellbeing support for students who are regularly transitioning from the workplace to the higher education institution and back to the workplace. They based their model on key principles proposed by Jisc and Emerge Education, (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.

Enabling the wellbeing of WIL students in an intentional and comprehensive manner has significant benefits for all stakeholders. For HEIs, academic success and retention in programs are well-known positive impacts of student wellbeing and this has a long reaching impact on workforce development. Host organizations and industry partners will benefit from the work and learning activities being completed and their roles as educator, supporter, manager, and guardian of their profession will be more positively achieved (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2016). Most importantly, students who conclude their qualification in a positive state of mental and physical health are more likely to have stronger relationships with their loved ones, be effective employees, and positive contributors to local and global communities.

The focus of this Special Issue on the wellbeing of WIL students arose from our interest in the connections between these key areas: the duty of care HEIs have for the wellbeing of WIL students' recognition of the potential for negative risks and the impacts of these on WIL students' understanding and utilization of WIL wellbeing models and the benefits for all stakeholders when WIL students have a positive state of wellbeing. Our own research with students, WIL supervisors, and academics in New Zealand over the past few years has also afforded us opportunities to reflect on our own approaches to supporting WIL students and how we may strengthen existing curriculum, institutional processes and engagement with our industry partners.

The call for expressions of interest for this Special Issue elicited a strong international response which we found both heartening and challenging. We were encouraged that others were similarly interested in this area and that myriad student-centered, strengths-focused activities were being implemented in diverse classrooms and WIL contexts. However, as we read the EOIs we also noted threads of dissonance and stories of hardship in the students' voices which were echoed by WIL staff and industry supervisors. The complexities of WIL as having both positive and negative impacts on wellbeing were apparent. The selection of articles in this Special Issue offers a cross-section of views on WIL wellbeing and suggest that diverse individual and collective responses to WIL wellbeing are necessary. The articles span the globe offering perspectives from Canada, France, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand through empirical research, case studies and scholarly discussions. They also provide diversity in the types of WIL with articles focused on cooperative education, service learning, workplace-based placements and project-based WIL. Each of the authors in this Special Issue make an important contribution to the literature on the wellbeing of WIL students by amplifying the voices of

students, sharing thought-provoking teaching and curriculum methods, and outlining future research agendas.

EXPLORING WELLBEING IN WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

The first five articles in the Special Issue amplify student voice in the context of exploring the wellbeing of WIL students (in the order they appear, Shalavin et al., 2025; Zegwaard & Adams-Hutcheson, 2025; Hay & Fleming, 2025; Tudor et al., 2025; Knapp & Drewery, 2025). All these articles draw on data generated through student interviews or surveys. While the focus of each article differs, several themes can be drawn:

- Student understanding of WIL wellbeing is of a holistic construct that supports their whole being;
- Student experiences of WIL and of wellbeing are individual but there are common exacerbating factors and impacts; and
- Strategies for supporting wellbeing may include personal, interpersonal, familial, community, and HEI measures that occur pre- and during the WIL experience.

The next three articles (in the order they appear, Ferguson, 2025; Pennaforte & Fannon, 2025; Dannenberg et al., 2025) focus on recognizing diversity in student populations, in particular students who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders, neurodivergent students, and students affected by trauma. While WIL wellbeing is often discussed in broad strokes, different cohorts of students have diverse experiences, impacts, and learning needs that should be considered by staff, supervisors and other WIL stakeholders. These articles highlight the importance of understanding our students and their specific learning needs.

Following on, two manuscripts (in the order they appear, Smeltzer & McCracken, 2025; Hauglid et al., 2025) consider the effectiveness of proactive wellbeing teaching and learning approaches both in pre-WIL courses and project-based WIL that may be operationalized on campus or online. Intentional activities in these spaces can provide wellbeing practice opportunities for students and strengthen understanding of their own preferences, strategies and learning styles.

To conclude the Special Issue, the final article (Sonaissy et al., 2025) offers a supervisory perspective on supporting WIL student wellbeing and presents a model of good practice for WIL supervisors. The messages in this article resonate with the previous articles suggesting that a whole-of-system approach is required to ensure students preparing for and engaging in WIL are well-supported and able to successfully complete their WIL requirements.

Considering the Student Voice

The Special Issue begins with Shalavin et al., (2025) from University of Wollongong, Australia who consider teacher education student wellbeing practices before and during WIL experiences. They emphasize the relational and holistic nature of wellbeing and utilize actor-network theory to consider the constellation of people and non-human materials that may affect student wellbeing. As with other authors in this Special Issue, they draw on Grant-Smith and Gillet-Swan's WIL Wellbeing Framework by considering interrelationships between institutional and community supports and students' personal coping strategies. The article highlights an extensive collection of wellbeing practices employed by the students both as they prepared for and engaged in WIL and, interestingly, demonstrates that students may both endeavor to affect a change in their circumstance or acquiesce to

a stressor. Shalavin et al.'s (2025) findings from their qualitative interviews with students offers a challenge to HEIs as they suggest that the institution's capacity to support student wellbeing may be limited with students seeking their primary wellbeing support from people, resources or services external to the university.

Zegwaard and Adams-Hutcheson's (2025) article reflected similar themes from the students engaged in their New Zealand-based cross-disciplinary research. WIL students may experience a multitude of stressors, with financial stress often being the most impactful, especially when WIL experiences are unpaid, or students are receiving inadequate financial reimbursement for personal costs associated with WIL. Stress, however, is individualized both in terms of experience and response and so while some students may engage in negative behaviors or proactively seek support mechanisms, others may not feel they need to respond in the same way. The authors discuss the harmful and protective mechanisms utilized by students to support their wellbeing and highlight the importance of ensuring students prioritize time with family and friends throughout the WIL experience. HEIs have a role in developing student resilience and self-confidence prior to WIL and ensuring relevant support systems that are known about and accessible if required.

Hay and Fleming (2025) continue the themes of understandings of wellbeing, stressors encountered in WIL, and strategies for supporting wellbeing. They note there is a diversity of wellbeing models developed from a Western as well as an indigenous or non-western perspective and discuss Te Whare Tapa Whā (a Māori model of hauora or health) with their participants. Their research highlights that students understand the concept of wellbeing as holistic and relating to achieving balance between physical, mental, spiritual, cultural, social and economic dimensions, domains or factors. WIL wellbeing therefore is not just an individual concern but involves wider family, university, friends, and community systems. Similarly, strategies for managing wellbeing also extend beyond the individual to ensuring positive learning environments where stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities, systemic risks such as financial hardship are addressed through policy and institutional change, and key support systems such as family are considered by WIL staff in their engagement and teaching of students.

Student experiences of experiencing distress during WIL in New Zealand are analyzed by Tudor et al., (2025), with difficult workplace interactions, financial hardship and feeling unsupported in the workplace identified as most impactful. These experiences led to a range of physical and emotional responses including loss of confidence, feelings of anxiety and upset. As financial pressures are well known to impact the wellbeing of higher education students, adding a WIL experience can clearly exacerbate this situation. WIL placements can be paid or unpaid and this is often discipline-specific or dependent of the government regulations within a specific country. As other authors in this special issue have mentioned, family and friends notably were key support structures. Mirroring Shalavin et al.'s (2025) article, other materials such as mindfulness techniques and journalling were also helpful. While recognition of student differences is important, Tudor et al., suggest that addressing systemic issues that may be affecting student wellbeing should be prioritized by HEIs. This may extend into the workplaces to ensure more inclusive, equitable and supportive learning environments, as well as within programmatic and regulatory structures that address disciplinary inequities and enable more flexible learning approaches.

Knapp and Drewery (2025) target one element of the WIL endeavor in the co-op program in their Canadian context; the job application process. The co-op program requires students to meet application demands and tight deadlines to ensure they are successful in the competitive job search process,

creating an array of stressors for students. Higher education students are juggling competing priorities and managing uncertainty and new experiences as they assemble resumes, cover letters and undertake job interviews. As reflected in the previous articles, a range of coping strategies may be employed as students notice impacts on their physical and emotional health as well as their social relationships. Knapp and Drewery (2025) offer insight into the importance of support networks and the timing of WIL processes thus emphasizing the need for interpersonal and systemic strategies to support student wellbeing.

Recognizing Diversity in Student Populations

Ferguson (2025) offers the reader her reflections on the wellbeing of Indigenous learners, which in her context are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are enrolled in a mental health program. Spiritual and cultural dimensions of wellbeing are important for these students, who may also find themselves in WIL contexts where they are, unreasonably, required to be cultural experts as well as learners. This cultural workload adds further complexity to their WIL experience and further impacts their personal wellbeing. Working in non-Indigenous workspaces can also present challenges and Ferguson (2025) notes that WIL staff need to actively engage with host organizations around Indigenous students' personal, cultural and professional needs. Institutional structures and expectations can also present challenges for Indigenous students carrying multiple professional, study and cultural responsibilities.

Relatedly, Pennaforte and Fannon (2025) identify that neurodivergent students involved in co-op may have different wellbeing needs to neurotypical students. The authors draw on Biétry and Creusier's (2013) definition of wellbeing at work as "a psychological state resulting from a positive relationship with others, oneself, time, and the physical work environment" (p. 34). Biétry and Creusier's consider wellbeing as a multidimensional concept, with four main dimensions: 1) positive rapport with colleagues; 2) one's manager; 3) work/life balance; and 4) a positive physical work environment. Pennaforte and Fannon recommend WIL staff engage in inclusive design of co-op curriculum so that the learning and wellbeing needs of neurodivergent students are accounted for. Liaising with workplaces around accommodating diverse students may support the development of inclusive environments, however, as the authors highlight, disclosure needs to be determined by the student. While individualized support as well as accommodations and adjustments may enhance student wellbeing, not all students may feel comfortable requesting these, especially if they do not feel included or safe within the workplace. Pennaforte and Fannon (2025) acknowledge that empirical research on neurodivergent students' involvement in WIL is in its infancy and outline a comprehensive research agenda to stimulate further activity in this area.

Dannenberg et al. (2025) have engaged in an interdisciplinary exploration of the impact of students' lived experiences, notably trauma, on their wellbeing in WIL. Their conceptual paper presents the Proximity Trauma Impact Model for Work-Integrated Learning which has drawn on Konstantinou et al.'s (2023) WIL Wellbeing Model and a trauma-supporting model (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). The model incorporates the idea of proximity across time, space and relationships and recognizes ongoing impacts of prior experiences on students and their wellbeing. With the aim of the model to create a culture of care, they recommend future implementation and evaluation of the model to determine its efficacy across and within different disciplinary contexts.

Wellbeing Activities in the Classroom and Online

Strengthening student mental health and wellbeing in a WIL preparation course is the focus of Smeltzer and McCracken's (2025) valuable contribution. Their critique of a collaborative teaching approach that focuses on both academic and wellbeing preparation before WIL suggests that students can develop personal and interpersonal skills, such as self-reflection, in the classroom context which then act as protective measures during WIL. The concept of critical hope is woven into the course that recognizes student individuality, intersectionality and previous experiences such as trauma. They suggest that moving forward, decolonizing the curriculum and learning from Indigenous ways of knowing and learning will strengthen WIL preparation of students.

Hauglid et al., (2025) offer a unique contribution to the Special Issue in their evaluation of the implementation of a FUN model of WIL developed by Rachel Hains-Wesson, the second author. They recognize that wellbeing links to constructs such as happiness, fulfilment and quality of life. The aim of the model is to improve student experiences and enhance wellbeing in a project-based WIL (PBWIL) context. The first two authors engage in group ethnography with their students in a classroom setting in Norway and in Australia. While some students were reluctant to involve themselves fully in the intentional FUN approach, others reported it strengthening peer relationships, reducing stress, being more open to feedback and creating safe zones for dealing with challenges within the group setting. Hauglid and colleagues acknowledge the need for student autonomy in participation, and educators having well-developed facilitation skills. They suggest the FUN model offers a promising approach to strengthening WIL student wellbeing which could be adapted to other types of WIL and non-WIL contexts.

A Supervisory Perspective

The final paper in this Special Issue by Sonaissy et al., (2025) focuses on how the supervisory relationship within workplace-based placements can impact student wellbeing. The data is from a mixed-methods study with workplace supervisors in a nutrition and dietetics program in New Zealand. The authors acknowledge that not all supervisors are confident in identifying whether students are having mental health challenges or how to adequately support them, especially if they have not undertaken relevant training themselves. They also identify that supervisors may not be aware of what support mechanisms are accessible for the WIL student in the workplace and what their role is in supporting students. The reader is invited to consider the Good Practice Guide for supervisors which may enable them to better understand and support the wellbeing of WIL students. Sonaissy et al.'s (2025) final message resonates with many of the other articles in this Special Issue in that while WIL may impact students' wellbeing, it also provides an opportunity for them to build resilience and other strategies to manage their wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

The Editorial Team are encouraged by the excellent data, models, recommendations and strategies presented in the articles in this Special Issue on the wellbeing of WIL students. The work, however, is not yet done. While students benefit from WIL and may even experience positive outcomes from stress or distressing WIL experiences, the negative impacts can also be significant and enduring. Inclusive, equitable and safe WIL environments are not yet accessible for all students (Hay & Fleming, 2024), and we need to consider how we can proactively engage with workplaces and industry partners to educate, share good practice, and establish quality assurance systems that can better support the learning needs of all students, especially minority or underrepresented populations. Student voice should remain

central to our endeavors of implementing new ideas such as those peppered throughout this Special Issue, as they are the key stakeholder in the WIL endeavor, in that it is their learning success and wellbeing that we seek to support. Finally, while WIL student wellbeing is critical, the wellbeing of WIL staff and supervisors should also be explored in future research agendas as these stakeholders can significantly impact the experiences, learning and wellbeing of WIL students.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning
ISSN: 2538-1032
www.ijwil.org

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.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

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.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

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International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning
ISSN: 2538-1032
www.ijwil.org

Publisher: Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ)
www.wilnz.nz