

Reciprocity: Finding the right balance in work-integrated learning

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The debate surrounding financial support in work-integrated learning (WIL) has intensified. This paper explores whether paying all placement students is both sustainable and equitable. Through duoethnographic narratives from WIL educators, it examines contemporary experiences and perceptions of payment and value. For WIL relationships to be meaningful, agreements between students and organizations must be mutually beneficial. The paper examines how this mutuality might be achieved by rethinking the notion of 'payment.' Drawing on indigenous Māori knowledge systems of value, it introduces concepts of utu and koha, to shift focus from transactional payment to relational value. Embracing reciprocity in WIL fosters a spirit of collaboration and unity, emphasising the significance of relationships and shared commitments. Further embracement of the foundational frameworks associated with utu challenge traditional transactional mindsets, advocating for a more holistic, culturally sensitive, values-based approach to financial support in the context of learning and professional development.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, utu, reciprocity, koha, payment, value, duoethnography

The debate of financial support vis-a-vis payment versus non-payment in work-integrated learning (WIL) has recently become more intense, largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a small number of legal proceedings, both in New Zealand (NZ) and in Australia. Arising from these is concern over the reputational risk for the university (Cameron, 2018), where students might be seen as exploited by employers either through lack of financial support or determination of learners in placements as inadvertent 'employees' and, therefore, subject to employment regulations around payment conditions. A recent article by Watson and Howells (2025) investigates the financial disadvantages faced by individuals training for essential service roles in healthcare and education in NZ due to university fees and compulsory unpaid placements. We acknowledge the question of whether to pay or not to pay is contentious, but it is more nuanced than a simple binary choice.

A model where all placement students receive monetary payment may not be realistic, sustainable, and equitable for all WIL stakeholders - students, universities, and organizations. We argue it is time to consider a shift away from an emphasis on finances, towards a wider appreciation of value. This conceptual paper seeks to extend conversations beyond the paid versus unpaid models of WIL by proposing an alternative perspective. The purpose is to encourage a rethink of payment within WIL through the consideration of an indigenous system of value (Hartendorp, 2018). By embracing the Māori concept of utu in WIL, which highlights reciprocity, we aim to shift the focus away from financial support as a primary factor to the WIL relationship, towards a wider understanding of the mutual exchange and gifting of value between stakeholders. This is not a token shift toward indigenous frameworks to satisfy diversity, equity, and inclusion advocates. Rather, it is a deliberate effort to acknowledge the merits of a values-based approach, where the integrity of a well-established system of reciprocity forms the foundation for a more holistic perspective among stakeholders. This is a

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perspective prioritising mutual benefit through relational connectivity over a Western economic framework of measurement.

Using an alternative perspective, this paper draws on the duoethnographic experiences of WIL educators to explore the contemporary realities of financial support and value perceptions in WIL. In the current NZ economic climate, there is anecdotal evidence that students are struggling financially while organizations remain under resourced. Can these challenges be managed better through an alternative appreciation of the value of WIL by key stakeholders? This paper aims to contribute, and introduce change, to this narrative.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

WIL has long been embedded in our university's approach to higher education (HE). Today, all universities in NZ have a focus on WIL. Coupled with this orientation, our changing society in NZ is pushing us to reframe and adopt multiculturalism to a greater extent than before. Recognition of *mātauranga* (wisdom derived from Māori) as *tangata whenua* (people of the land, the Indigenous people of NZ) has been part of the NZ higher education sector for 25 years. However, a previous Vice-Chancellor of Auckland University of Technology initiated a wider appreciation of shared Māori world values, through an adoption of *tika* (doing what is right), *pono* (being faithful to what is right) and *aroha* (showing compassion and empathy) as guiding operational principles. This move amped up the shift to acknowledge and incorporate an indigenous perspective, reflecting a broader societal shift. Now, our university's newly appointed Vice-Chancellor is placing an even stronger focus on *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Treaty of Waitangi, a treaty signed between Māori and the British Crown).

The authors are experienced university academics, each specializing in a different field: marketing, Māori development, and sport and recreation. The two lead authors are regularly involved in WIL education and research, while the third author is more focused on culturally related teaching and university advisory commitments. The approaches to WIL placements vary from a 9-week full-time course, offered across five intakes per academic year with approximately 750 students, to two 35-hour (2nd year) and 350-hour part time placements scheduled over one final academic year, with about 300 students per year. In both courses, students have the flexibility of choosing their placements. The placement approval form, completed by the student and signed by the industry supervisor, includes a statement about payment. This statement can be analyzed for a conversation about the possibility of financial support. This is important to acknowledge in relation to payment, for it is the student who negotiates, determines, and accepts the conditions of the placement. Ultimately, students have the power to accept or decline placement opportunities based on their personal circumstances.

Utu, an Indigenous View of Reciprocity

Awareness of the importance of an indigenous worldview has recently grown, shaped by the authors' personal reflections - two as Pākehā (non-Māori) academics and the third a Māori academic. As well as through conversations with local and international colleagues, university leadership, and media exposure. Like many living in multicultural societies, there is a realization of the benefits to be gained from drawing upon indigenous wisdom, especially as alternatives to the capitalist viewpoints that dominate modern society (Hartendorp, 2018). Embracing indigenous perspectives can offer valuable insights, drawing on holistic approaches to decision making, prioritizing sustainability, emphasizing reciprocity and promoting enrichment (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2021). Through such an approach, WIL practitioners might be better positioned to navigate their roles in leading and developing WIL experiences for students. Drawing upon indigenous viewpoints are

critical in enacting Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) and guiding how HE aligns with society as it moves towards being more inclusive. The university's vision to understand and use matakā (Māori knowledge systems) more widely has prompted the question of how an indigenous wisdom of value could be embraced and incorporated within a WIL context. It is through this extension of agency towards a more inclusive understanding as WIL educators, in the nexus between students and industry, a more enriched program and experience overall can be envisaged. Such consideration has the potential to create stronger bonds with host organizations as they also move to similar recognition and inclusion of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WIL is premised on authentic work-focused experiences as part of an academic program (Zegwaard et al., 2023). WIL provides students with opportunities to gain first-hand learning experiences in their chosen discipline, establishing a sense of belonging within an industry they seek to connect with (Matook, 2022). It is an important pathway to bridge the gap between education and employability (Edwards et al., 2015), providing the opportunity for enabling learners to grow as individuals and develop competencies and prepare them for their careers through authentic practice-based settings, (Lucas et al., 2022; Martin & Rees, 2019). For international students, WIL is especially important in familiarizing them with work practices in the host country (Blackmore et al., 2014). Recently, there have been calls for organizations to move beyond requiring a desirable set of labor market needs towards accepting the shared responsibility in developing graduate talent (Jackson, 2024). Organizations play a valuable role in supporting student learners by providing exposure to and experience in fast-evolving environments, thereby enhancing their social and human capital (Jackson, 2018). The value of WIL to learners and organizations is clearly significant.

While WIL serves a clear purpose, providing a conduit between academia and workplace partners, stakeholders' expectations and experience of value can and do vary (Taylor & Geldenhuys, 2018). These differences might arise due to supervisory capabilities, level of duties performed, hours worked, or compensation received. According to Smith and Worsfold (2015), payment acknowledges the meaningfulness of the tasks to the profession, and students' contributions towards tangible outcomes for the placement organization. Based on this interpretation, it could be claimed nonpayment in some way acknowledges the redundancy of the tasks students complete. This further suggests that without financial payment attributed to the placement, meaningfulness of students' contributions and expectations of value cannot be established (Burke & Carton, 2013). This raises questions over the quality of student-workplace relationships (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Under a Western capitalist worldview, all students would receive fair and equitable payment for placement activities undertaken, and through this exchange clear perceptions of value and of being valued would be established. Students would be financially supported for their work and contribute to the business function. However, this is not, nor can it always be the case. Beyond this view of payment lies an indigenous wisdom challenging the expectation of financial compensation as the primary measure of value, instead emphasizing broader forms of reciprocity and contribution.

In NZ, financial support received by students varies, even though they may be working at different organizations, undertaking the same work-related activities. At one end of the spectrum student learners might receive full compensation, while at the other, some students have been known to pay for their placement 'to learn' (Hoskyn et al., 2020). Such ambiguity in decisions-to-pay fuels concerns over what is equitable, and what is valued. In some environments, such as non-profit or volunteer roles, the focus is less on an organizations' ability to pay or a student's expectation of payment, and

more on the opportunity to contribute and participate (Akingbola & Phaetthayanan, 2021). In further acknowledging that when completion of these WIL activities is a compulsory academic requirement associated with a student's chosen program or discipline, the importance of establishing a WIL experience of value is vital to students' engagement in learning and professional development (Drewery et al., 2016).

Effective and sustainable WIL relies heavily on reciprocity because it involves a mutually beneficial relationship between the educational institution, students, and employers (Fleming et al., 2018). In addition to valuing student knowledge, reciprocity has been identified as critical to student agency, and balancing power dynamics between novice and expert (Baumber et al., 2024). Factors influencing reciprocity include appropriateness and alignment of key activities with students' career goals; an awareness of how assigned activities may contribute towards organizational success; the contribution made by student learners towards mastering those activities; and acknowledgement of achievements attained. Payment is not critical for learning (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2023); however, it does contribute towards payments of students' daily living expenses. For some, payment contributes towards many of the unexpected and hidden costs associated with learning (Howells, 2024). Beyond this, payment may also provide the basis for developing agency, equipping students with confidence in their abilities, a sense of being valued, and confidence in dealing with feelings of imposter syndrome (Howells, 2024). In contrast, payment may create anxiety due to feeling there is more pressure to perform to a higher standard (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Importantly, paid placements have been found to influence relationships, expectations, motivations, and meaningfulness in WIL experiences (Hoskyn et al., 2020).

In the realm of WIL, it is acknowledged the concept of payment traditionally conjures thoughts of monetary transactions. Indeed, in many cases, payment has been established as the primary currency for acknowledging student contributions. This emphasis is questionable. We suggest a new perspective is needed – moving beyond payment as the primary basis for reciprocity in today's VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world and instead embracing alternative models for generating mutual value.

Within the rich tapestry of Māori culture, an alternative perspective may exist through an understanding of *utu*. The term *utu* is described by Sidney Mead as reciprocity in the form of compensation and serves as a principle to maintaining harmonious relationships (Mead, 2016). Firth (1929) considered *utu* as the foundation of all Māori exchange, with the understanding that for every exchange a *koha* (gift) of at least equal value should be returned (Metge, 2002). Anne Salmond (1997) also speaks of *utu* as equal return but adds that *utu* moves in parallel with *tapu* and *mana*. Collectively, these are complex dimensions, compounded by the fact that when translating Māori into English, there is an inherent transformation away from the original meaning, especially with Māori terms often having multiple meanings. *Utu* can also be understood as revenge in NZ; it more broadly refers to reciprocity – both positive and negative – highlighting that not all exchanges of value are constructive.

For this article, *tapu* is defined as the cosmic power imbued in all things at the time of its creation, this power remains for the duration of the thing's entire existence (Henare, 2001), often contextualized as places or items positing this cosmic power and, therefore, being *tapu*. *Mana* can be described as authority or prestige, derived from power dimensions associated with the Gods, the ancestors, the land, and individuals (Jones et al., 2006). The connection between *tapu* and *mana* can be situated from an ecological position; where an environment must be protected, strengthened, and consistently confirmed so balance, harmony, and potentiality of the sub-systems can be fulfilled (Pearson, 1999).

Acknowledging the importance of balance through reciprocity and the need for enduring relationships of mutual benefit, *utu* and *koha* present the basis for valuable insights for extending an understanding of financial support in WIL. This understanding transcends the idea of payment as more than a mere exchange of currency; it embodies a deeper philosophy of reciprocity, interconnectedness, and generosity (Durie, 1999).

Derived from the Māori worldview of NZ, *utu* has been interpreted incorrectly as the act of giving without necessarily expecting anything directly in return, that is, a contribution, yet which acts to strengthen ties and create a basis for reciprocity (Durie, 1999). *Koha* has been likened to the 'gift economy', where it aims to create structures of exchange emphasizing enduring relationships (G. Cameron, 2016). These concepts are relevant to the wider discussion of financial support, moving understanding away from payment as a transactional foundation towards a more holistic appreciation of the interconnectedness binding stakeholders in the WIL partnership. Embracing the principles underpinning *utu* and *koha* in WIL, encourages a view of recognition beyond the financial transaction, to alternative authentic gestures of connection, appreciation, recognition, and goodwill. It moves us away from a transactional one-off focus, towards one based on a longer-term relational benefit, towards creating *kotahitanga* (unity) amongst parties to the WIL relationship. Shifting the focus may extend to a wider conceptualization of the sustainable value of WIL for learners and their WIL partners. It's not just about the money.

Contribution of this Article

The impact of financial support on placements remains an understudied area, particularly when examined from alternative perspectives (Hurst et al., 2023). Our contribution to the discussion on remuneration in WIL centers on the indigenous Māori concepts of *utu* and *koha*, offering a framework for striking a balance that considers the interests of all stakeholders. Additionally, we aim to foster dialogue grounded in these principles.

Statement of Positionality

Three authors were involved in this conceptual paper. The two WIL lead-authors are both pakeha women (born in NZ of European descent), who have been involved in WIL for many years. They are both experienced in autoethnographic research and have been fueled by their curiosity in how to address the challenge in finding the right balance in WIL, particularly in relation to financial support and reciprocity. The third author provided cultural advice for the Māori concepts explored in this paper. This ensured (and states) the authorship team followed culturally appropriate processes.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual article was firstly approached using a duoethnographic narrative between the first two lead-authors, two non-Māori female WIL practitioners. In examining their relative experiences in WIL and shared understanding of reciprocity, the two lead-authors considered alternative views of value and reciprocity. To ensure the accuracy of interpretations made in introducing an alternative worldview different from the WIL practitioners, a dialogic process of reflection involving the third author, a Māori colleague, was adopted when examining the concept. This iterative process between the three authors strengthened a broader understanding of the contribution of an alternative worldview to the development of quality WIL experiences.

Duoethnographers “use themselves to assist themselves and others to better understand the phenomenon under investigation” (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p.13). The duoethnography was a collaborative research process and approved by the university ethics committee (reference number: 24/372). According to Norris and Sawyer (2012), trust and openness between researchers are crucial to ensure the environment is safe and comfortable for a reflective conversation. Researchers from different disciplines may have opposing experiences and interpretations of the situations being examined, thus adding multiple dimensions to the conversation. Although duoethnography is not commonly used within WIL research, we considered this methodology aligned well with the purposes of our writing and thinking. In fact, we naturally adopted this approach while shaping our research purpose, drawing on perspectives from different disciplines, our own lived experiences, and our backgrounds in HE.

Prior to the reflective conversations by the two non-Māori WIL practitioners (data collection), an ‘ethics of care’ (relational ethics) was discussed. By prioritizing transparency, confidentiality, power dynamics, and reflexivity (Tolich, 2010), researchers can conduct duoethnographic research that is both ethically sound and methodologically rigorous. This ethics conversation ensured commitment and respect for one another’s views and established permission to opt out of the conversation at any time, for any reason. Maintaining confidentiality and respecting each other's privacy was crucial to good research practice. As collaborators and participants, reflexivity and open dialogues were used to mitigate potential ethical concerns, ensuring the research was conducted with integrity and sensitivity.

Rather than retain isolated perspectives, this collaboration unpacked and wove together stories to make sense of reciprocity. This immersive duoethnography emphasizes knowledge and experiences in WIL to identify rich insights, shifting the focus from individual narratives towards higher order understanding. Reflective conversations between the two WIL authors took place online via several Teams meetings where a shared Word document was populated with thoughts and experiences. A collaborative reflective conversation developed deeper insights and identified missing details on student recognition during WIL placements. Beginning with the open question of ‘what are the issues around unpaid placements?’ conversations continued until a point of saturation was reached (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once ideas were generated, they were further examined and refined to ensure both WIL authors agreed with the ideas and sentiment. Pattern-based analysis was used to examine the key insights and establish an understanding of both WIL authors’ observations leading to the conceptualization of a values-based matrix acknowledging reciprocity in WIL (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In drawing on an indigenous system of value, it was important *te reo* (Māori language) was used respectfully. This was done in consultation with a Māori colleague who shared their worldview and experiences of that world. This consultative process ensured terms were used correctly and appropriate *tikanga* (protocol) was followed, especially given two of the authors acknowledged as not being Māori. During this time, a connection was made with the conceptual visualization of reciprocity in WIL.

FINDINGS

The following sections are the outcome of the duoethnographic reflection between the active WIL practitioners, as shown above. The voices of these two lead-authors are introduced through quotes allocated to author one (A1), or author two (A2). In an advisory role, the third author's voice can be heard throughout the discussion and interpretation of the findings, drawing on their expertise as a Māori academic.

Reflections

From our experiences in the context of WIL, we acknowledge and recognize there are considerable payment issues related to the agreement made between students and host organizations for WIL placements. Volunteer positions, minimum wage, contracted term, stipend, scholarships, petrol vouchers, etc., have all been offered by organizations in exchange for activities completed during a placement. In the context of sport and recreation, despite a noticeable industry shift towards professionalization, WIL placements often remain unpaid. In business, there has been a slow but obvious shift from predominantly paid to unpaid placements. The following reflective sections offer insights into experiences and observations of student and host organizations, focusing on four themes in relation to nonpayment: financial pressures, free labor, perceptions of being valued, and the changing nature of work.

Financial Pressures

Financial pressures experienced by students on placement can be considerable and include personal vehicle costs, public transportation costs (bus, train, etc.), special clothing, accommodation, parking, and limited capacity for paid work. This can be stressful for students and impact their wellbeing. For example, we noticed:

There are a lot of students juggling existing part-time jobs that have financially supported them throughout their studies, with the need to complete a relevant WIL placement to meet their academic requirements. Many do both, even though the pressure is significant. But given the WIL placement is full-time for nine weeks, this juggle is short-term. The flipside is that sometimes they give up their part-time job for placements, shifting the financial pressure to the end of the placement period. (A1)

Sport students are on their co-op placement part-time for one academic year. This longer-term commitment despite its benefits (networking, gaining experiences in an industry where seasonal variation is common), may have a greater financial impact on some students who are unable to get simultaneous part time work and study. (A2)

Smaller organizations may be financially constrained by limited income, but may be able to, for example, provide vouchers. Larger corporates are more likely to support a student with a paid role. A further barrier to paying students for short-term placements (<35 hours) may be in meeting New Zealand employment regulations, that is, employment agreements and tax forms. These regulations may be less of a barrier for larger organizations who routinely provide student placements and/or who have well-established human resource departments. A notable example is:

The sport industry is incredibly diverse and includes many SMEs who rely on volunteers for their operations e.g. events, coaching etc. Students on placement in these organizations are less likely to be offered payment due to the funding models these SMEs operate within. (A2)

Free Labor – Real or Perceived?

Some organizations are benefiting from labor at a lower cost, which may be viewed by some as ‘free labor.’ Students undertake work-related tasks, menial or significant, that would otherwise be performed by paid staff, freeing them up to focus on other responsibilities. For example, we noticed:

I really feel for those students who find themselves in a situation where they are not well supported in the role, and don't have the opportunity to develop. Some students are making enormous concessions (giving up paid part-time work, travelling long hours, and having reduced family time). It frustrates me that organizations don't always comprehend the value or the opportunity of having a student on board. I know it requires time and effort to make WIL work, but we all need to look at the big picture. (A1)

However, not all perspectives on 'free labor' are negatively derived. Some of the business students are placed in not-for-profit organizations, where volunteer work is common, and the reality of payment is not an option. In some cases, these students are more intrinsically motivated to contribute their time to a social purpose, and they benefit from this connection in making a social impact. But there are still those who simply accept the role because nothing else is available, and they need the WIL course to complete their qualifications. These students undertake the placement somewhat begrudgingly – which really does not benefit any party, for example:

University courses state the hours of learning required for the course (15-point course = 150 hours of learning). This time allocation is easy for the student to disregard, especially when their goal is to tick the box to gain the qualification. However, these placements are factored in as part of university learning time, not extra time, and students should have capacity for the placement if they are genuinely studying full time. (A2)

Some students view being placed in a (prestigious) organization as sufficient value and are content to work unpaid for career and professional development. The students who accept unpaid situations are likely to do so because they have existing support networks (family), income streams (part time jobs), can see future benefits arising from the opportunity, or have no other choice if they wish to graduate as planned.

Being Valued

Perceptions of being valued can influence student engagement, work quality, and understanding of self-worth. If they believe their efforts have no 'real' value (tangible or monetary) to the organization, the WIL placement becomes functional at the most basic level – a 'tick in the box' as opposed to an enriched learning experience contributing towards career development. For example:

I get a sense that the value of WIL is not fully understood by many students. I think they see it more as a function of the course requirement than an extension or opportunity for deeper learning. I think nonpayment contributes to this perspective. (A1)

Although being recognized through payment is a motivator, it can also be viewed as pressure to perform to an expected standard. While nonpayment reduces pressure to perform, it may also lower productivity and quality of work. These are paradoxes associated with paid or unpaid work. Alternatively, through non-payment, the organization may minimize the opportunity for students to be valued by other staff in the workplace through identification as free labor/student learner/novice and not worthy of payment. As an example:

I recall a time when our advertising students were literally doing photocopying and making coffee for everyone in the office. That was their WIL experience. I think times have changed from what an 'intern' is expected to do. Or at least I like to think they have. (A1)

The conflicting views of what a volunteer means can create disharmony in how stakeholders perceive the benefits of WIL. Variances in how different communities see WIL, according to their structure, culture, purpose or size, etc. may distort perceptions of the value of work being done. For example:

In one case, two placement students were helping at a large evening event alongside employees who were being paid to be present. It was a late finish and parking in the city can be expensive. Before they left for the night, they asked if their parking would be paid for. This declined, leaving them feeling undervalued. (A2)

There appears to be a misalignment between the concept of volunteering and the perceived value of tasks undertaken during placements. When placement activities are highly valued by host organizations, this may raise expectations for some form of compensation or acknowledgment. A lack of recognition can create a divisive relationship between students and the workplace, leading students to see placements as an obligation rather than a learning opportunity. An alternative perspective emphasizes the importance of the relational aspects of WIL, where mutual understanding and trust are prioritized—though this often requires time and ongoing effort to develop.

Changing Nature of Work

The changing nature of work is creating pressure on employers through continually transforming workforces, work location (working from home), availability of employees, resourcing of health, safety and wellbeing needs, attitudes towards work, responses to artificial intelligence (AI) in and on the workplace, and systems to support additional roles at a novice level. These pressures affect both the ability to offer or receive payment and the perceived value of the placement. When organizations are unprepared, the placement experience can suffer – often increasing the cost of hosting a student. This may occur when the organization prioritizes the practical benefit of having an extra person to complete tasks, rather than considering how individuals can contribute to and learn from the broader organizational environment. Insufficient preparation for placements impacts attitude towards work and disrupts the working environment. This includes consideration of working from home, and expectations for how WIL students work remotely. These experiences can result in organizations choosing not to offer future placements. Such pressures translate into difficulties in how WIL can be accommodated by the organization and drive the need for WIL to be a strategic choice benefiting the organization while simultaneously retaining flexibility in how it is implemented. For example:

One student I supervised while working between COVID-19 lockdowns was literally waiting by his computer every morning waiting for emails to come through for work assignments. He was completely demotivated and in quite a bad place emotionally. The last straw was when his employer went on a holiday for 10 days without any communication at all. There was no planning or consideration of how this student could be of value to the organization. It was challenging for both of us as we worked to get him through the experience to graduate. Maybe if he was being paid, the organization might have invested more in his development. (A1)

Reliability of students to complete tasks allocated and to be available when arranged can influence the sustainability of student placements. In some cases, students are involved in activities where simply not turning up can be very stressful for the organization mentors. Irrespective of the nature of the activities, timely communication from a student in these cases is important as the unreliable student soon becomes a burden so gets left out of future planning and may miss valuable learning experiences. Contrary to this, it is the student who turns up early and shows initiative by going above and beyond. Is this more to do with a person's work

ethic or would payment have changed the first students' attitude to their placement activities?
(A2)

DISCUSSION

The reflections presented in the findings reveal a complex interplay between financial realities, perceptions of value, and the evolving nature of WIL. While students have the power to accept or decline placement offers, their choice is rarely an easy one. The forefront of students' thinking should be about a placement providing opportunities to be involved in professional development activities supporting attainment of academic requirements. However, the financial offer may hold higher importance due to challenges students face, arising from but not limited to current economic conditions. While the perceived importance of payment might be reduced if the value of the experience outweighs the lack of compensation, this is only likely when other financial pressures are alleviated, and when students recognize this value (Hoskyn et al., 2023; Hurst et al., 2023).

As implied by the reflections, students' financial needs should not be at the forefront of their decision-making in seeking and choosing placements to fulfil their academic requirements. A Māori-world view would support this perspective. Acknowledgement must be made, however, if the students' financial need is too great, only paid placement offers are likely to be considered. The trade-off lies in potentially overlooking placements offering greater professional and personal benefits, again highlighting the need for a more holistic worldview. An emphasis on finances presents difficulties depending on whether the chosen placement is a good fit (e.g., location, industry, support), and a quality learning experience. In contrast, a paid placement resulting in menial tasks and little professional development may limit skill development, also negatively impacting (graduate) employment opportunities. The key is finding balance through a broader, deeper consideration of reciprocity and ways to achieve mutual benefit is needed.

Decisions to offer some form of payment for WIL lie with the organization hosting the student. Consideration and awareness of some of the issues around payment and value may not be as strongly acknowledged by host organizations as might be expected. There is an onus on the organization to act ethically, be familiar and current with payment-related issues, and mindful of activities required of students.

The volatile and unpredictable developments occurring in business have reshaped how organizations engage with WIL. This presents an opportunity to explore the foundations of the relationship, benefiting all stakeholders. For the WIL relationship to be valued, the basis of the agreement between student and organization should be mutually beneficial. This involves exploring how mutuality can be achieved and how a realignment of 'payment' might be reconceptualized within this relationship.

In Western capitalistic societies, reciprocity would favor some form of payment, ideally monetary, as the currency of exchange in relation to work-related activities. However, it may be useful to look at reciprocity through another lens, for example, Māori see reciprocity differently. According to Wharepouri (1994), the phenomenon of an agreement draws together two concepts, *utu* (reciprocity) and *tikanga* Māori (etiquette). This view of exchange aligns with the Māori concept of *koha* or as explained by Pakeha (non-Māori), a "gift exchange process" (Wharepouri, 1994, p. 604). Under *utu*, benefit or balance evolves through reciprocal exchanges of *koha* over time, and it is this unstated expectation that Durie (2003) asserts is central to the forming of enduring relationships. The emphasis of *koha* (the gift) is not a focus on the terms of its value but of the agreement to the relationship for mutual benefit (Durie, 1999). Beyond this, the exchange (*utu*) is acknowledged as a bonding or unity

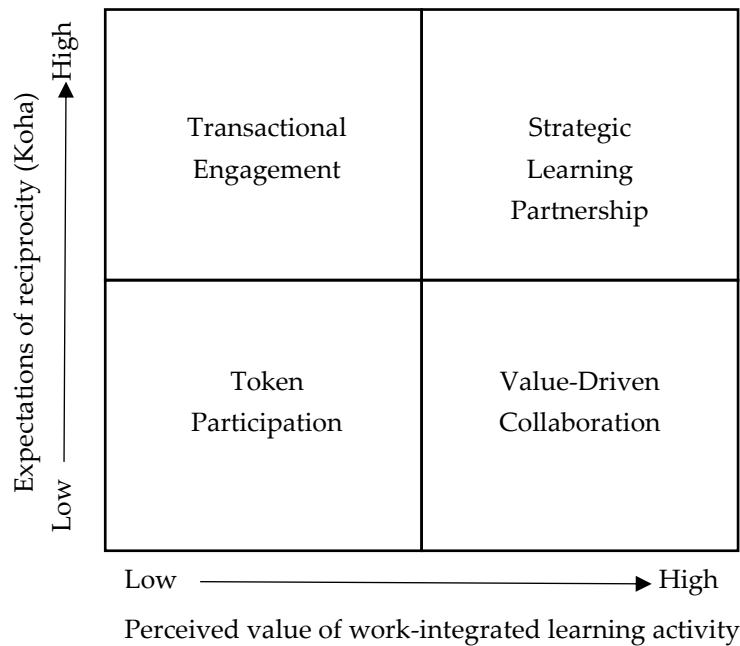
(kotahitanga) between the parties. A WIL relationship authentically established on the premise of mutual benefit and enduring value could shift overreliance on payment towards a circle of reciprocity (utu) that truly respects the opportunity for the partnerships being created. Under this appreciation of utu, the foundational principles are in individuals' understanding and recognition of their contribution, in the value of their input to the WIL strategic learning partnership. We introduce the WIL Reciprocity Value Framework (RVF) (Figure 1), to help interpret the diverse experiences captured in the findings.

While the concept of koha emphasizes relational value over monetary exchange, the reflections reveal students often equate payment with recognition and respect – highlighting a tension between cultural ideas and practical realities. An effective WIL relationship based on high expectations of reciprocity and perceived value of WIL activities, results in mutually beneficial relationships enabling the development of a strategic learning partnership highly valued by all stakeholders. Both student and employer are highly invested, expecting mutual benefits and significant acknowledgement. This elevated relationship may foster a shift in students' focus away from money as a key factor in securing a placement towards embracing utu. This ideal WIL experience – where students are mentored, acknowledged and contribute meaningfully – requires intentional design and shared investment. In contrast, when expectations of reciprocity and perceived value of WIL activities are both low, then the benefit for all stakeholders is constrained as in the case where students are completing low level administrative duties, and the experience is a mere obligation. Although payment may be central to students' decision to accept a placement, their perceptions of the value can be overshadowed by this prioritization. Alternatively, if the placement organization insufficiently prepares WIL activities to add value, mutual benefit will remain unrealized. Here, engagement in the placement is superficial and driven by necessity (or beliefs of doing good) rather than genuine interest, resulting in tokenistic participation.

When students and employers perceive high value in the WIL activity, but the reciprocity remains low (low expectation of direct rewards or acknowledgment), a value-driven collaboration exists (high/low quadrant in Figure 1), that is, when working for non-profit organizations. Both parties are motivated by intrinsic benefits such as personal growth for the student and innovation or fresh ideas for the employer. Either can be highly engaged, but the strategic learning opportunity remains unrealized because expectations of reciprocity are low.

In the low/high quadrant, the focus is on fulfilling obligations with high expectations of acknowledgement (payment or gift) but low intrinsic value. This results in a transactional engagement where genuine interest or long-term value is lacking; tasks may be menial preventing stakeholders from achieving the optimal strategic learning partnership.

FIGURE 1: Work-integrated learning reciprocity value framework (RVF).



CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The WIL Reciprocity Value Framework (RVF) developed by the authors offers a valuable structure for understanding the dynamic interplay between reciprocity and perceived value among the three WIL stakeholders. It provides a practical tool for WIL practitioners to reflect on and enhance their own practice. While the gold standard is for all WIL stakeholders to align within the strategic learning partnership quadrant (high/high), this may not always apply due to the complexity of human relationships and organizational contexts. Stakeholders may shift between the quadrants throughout the placement experience, reflecting evolving perceptions, expectations, and realities. Future research could explore both the flexible and dynamic nature of the proposed RVF.

By drawing upon Indigenous concepts of value, *utu* (reciprocity) and *koha* (gift exchange), there is an alternative way to conceptualize financial support in WIL. By weaving these foundational Māori principles into the fabric of WIL, perspectives of payment can be transformed by placing a greater emphasis on mutual benefits, relational depth, and enduring connection rather than financial exchange. WIL stakeholders can engage in more meaningful exchange, recognizing the intrinsic value each brings to the table.

This culturally grounded approach encourages stakeholders to engage in more meaningful exchange recognizing the intrinsic value each party brings. It expands the notion of value beyond monetary terms, fostering a spirit of collaboration, unity, and mutual respect. It is time to challenge the traditional transactional mindset and embrace a more holistic, culturally sensitive approach to payment and financial support in the context of learning and professional development. Adoption of this view may be contingent on the values orientation of stakeholders, and for some the challenge in shifting perspectives may remain unachievable. However, foundations of reciprocity need to be first and foremost in the minds of all stakeholders to ensure the cycle of WIL is maintained and sustained for

long term benefit. The whakatauki (proverb) below, embraces this relational approach in addressing the transactional mindset of value in WIL.

“Naku te rourou, nau te rourou, ka ora ai te tangata.”
 “With your contribution and my contribution, the people will live.”

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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), WACE (www.waceinc.org), WIL Australia (www.acen.edu.au), and the University of Waikato (www.waikato.ac.nz).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL 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 including recommendations.

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 into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, IJWIL seeks manuscripts describing 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.

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