

## Intensive Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): The benefits and challenges of condensed and compressed WIL experiences

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## Intensive Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): The benefits and challenges of condensed and compressed WIL experiences

### Abstract

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a well-established educational strategy with acknowledged benefits for student learning and employability. This paper explores and documents Intensive WIL, where students undertake short or condensed WIL experiences, ranging from 35 to 400 hours. Four case studies from different universities, designed for different purposes, using either placement or project approaches, and with different student cohorts, showcase the flexibility and adaptability of this model of WIL. Drawing on existing quality frameworks developed for WIL, a new, dedicated set of quality indicators was developed to evaluate examples of intensive WIL, as demonstrated in the case studies. This new framework places greater emphasis on the WIL experience itself, which has had little previous attention. The study confirms that given the right conditions, and used for the right purposes, Intensive WIL delivers quality experiences for students. Unique challenges of Intensive WIL include: sourcing projects with appropriate scope and complexity that are achievable and from which students will learn; ensuring students have command of previous theoretical concepts, as there may be little time to get them up to speed during Intensive WIL; ensuring all stakeholders understand their roles and responsibilities for smooth operation; and effective communication between workplace and university staff, as there is less time to recover from any difficult situations that may arise.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Intensive WIL offers a viable, quality WIL model that can be tailored to meet the needs of students and partner organisations.
2. Intensive WIL can help overcome some of the issues students find difficult with longer WIL experiences and can thus help improve accessibility for different student groups. It may also provide access to a wider range of partner organisations who cannot support long WIL options.
3. It is essential to map course design and delivery against quality frameworks to identify gaps or problems in practice and inform improvement. Ascertain the purpose for which the framework was designed to confirm relevance to your specific context. Some degree of interpretation might be necessary for the particular cohort, context, and circumstances of the course being evaluated.
4. As Intensive WIL brings some challenges due to the short duration, ensure student preparation is carefully considered so they have all they need to undertake this shorter experience. Similarly, implement supporting activities after Intensive WIL (e.g., reflection, assessment, debriefing, etc.) to enable students to gain maximum benefit from their WIL experience.
5. Ensure clear, regular communication and close cooperation between workplace supervisors and university staff, including: negotiation of placement or project activities; clear scoping of any deliverables; and any day-to-day issues that arise, in particular any concerns about student progress or wellbeing. These are more acute in Intensive WIL, as there is less time to recover from a situation than experiences of longer duration.

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**Keywords**

work-integrated learning, Intensive WIL, quality indicators, student experience, WIL pedagogy

## Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an effective educational strategy comprising authentic work-focused experiences with well-documented benefits for students, including development of employability and transferable skills, greater self-awareness, and enhanced confidence (Zegwaard et al., 2023). However, long-term placements and other WIL experiences are not effective or suitable for all contexts, students, disciplines, workplaces, or partner organisations. Therefore, it is important to explore different options. Intensive WIL has been adopted over the past few decades in response to an increased demand for WIL (Rowe et al., 2023).

### What is Intensive WIL?

Intensive WIL refers to WIL experiences that are compressed or condensed when compared to more traditional semester or year-long placements or projects. Other terms that have been used in the literature to describe this form of learning include compressed, block, and accelerated learning. In practice, these WIL experiences are less than 400 hours (average full-time semester) and can be either full-time or part-time (Rowe et al., 2023).

Intensive WIL includes only the actual WIL experience, which differentiates it from all other kinds of intensive modes of delivery that are full courses or units. However, to gain full value from the experiences, students are supported through additional workshops or classes that scaffold the learning needed (e.g. reflection, authentic assessment). Examples of Intensive WIL include micro-placements and compressed industry/community projects or placements that can be undertaken within a physical workplace or online, and of varying hours and duration (although typically for not more than six months). This paper will focus specifically on placements and projects that are intensive/compressed.

### Benefits of Intensive WIL

As the number of students seeking WIL increases, and more disciplines engage, there has been a need to rethink and expand traditional notions of WIL experiences from an emphasis on placements in workplaces to other options such as industry-based and stakeholder-driven (e.g., government or community groups) projects (Brewer et al., 2020; Kay et al., 2022; Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020). Similarly, the length of time needed for students to benefit from WIL experiences has also been challenged, with research confirming that short and part-time experiences deliver high quality outcomes (Rowe et al., 2023).

Previous work (Rowe et al., 2023) has demonstrated the flexibility and value afforded by short and part-time WIL. Students can more easily accommodate competing demands, such as carer responsibilities or paid work obligations (Rowe et al., 2023). Short and part-time WIL can be designed to cater to the specific needs of diverse students, addressing issues of access and equity (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022). The more

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focused approach of short-term WIL scaffolds students' learning, builds confidence, strengthens resilience, and consolidates the integration of theory and practice (Orrell, 2011; Rowe, Jackson, & Fleming, 2023). Finally, short-term WIL is often favoured by industry, as it places less stress on resources, can accommodate the nuances of small organisations, and strengthens the outcomes for industry with students working on focused projects (Jackson et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2019).

WIL is a complex endeavour with great potential for improving student employability skills. With research showing that long placements do not suit the needs of all students or partner organisations (Rowe et al., 2023), there is a pressing need to understand how to best design and plan Intensive WIL experiences and supporting activities to meet the needs of all stakeholders, while still maintaining high quality outcomes. The versatility of WIL has been demonstrated by its success in all forms, from "micro-placements" of two to 10 days (Kay et al., 2019), to placements lasting for up to a full year (e.g., accredited degree programs). However, little attention has specifically focused on the benefits and challenges of Intensive WIL experiences.

Assuring the quality of any form of WIL is particularly challenging, given the personalised outcomes and social contexts afforded through WIL. Despite acknowledgement of WIL as a pedagogy for strengthening graduate capabilities, quality standards "tend to be more narrowly defined" (Yorke & Vidovich, 2014, p. 229) and fail to "factor in the nuances and flexibility of a WIL curriculum" (Ferns & Arsenault, 2023, p. 362). With global expansion of WIL and the diversity of WIL models emerging, including Intensive WIL, the quest for quality to inform WIL practice has become more critical.

### **Aims and Research Questions**

This research aims to explore the nuances of Intensive WIL by examining detailed case studies against a quality framework developed specifically for Intensive WIL. The questions to be addressed are as follows:

1. What are the variations of Intensive WIL?
2. What are the indicators of high-quality Intensive WIL?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of Intensive WIL?
4. How can quality frameworks be applied to improve WIL practice?

Case studies are drawn from a range of universities and disciplinary contexts (Table 1) and are intended to highlight the possible variations of this mode of learning.

**Table 1***Case Study Overview*

	Case Study 1: Assessment and Reporting	Case Study 2: Multiple Subjects	Case Study 3: Bachelor of Sport and Recreation	Case Study 4: The Practice of Work
Type	Placement	Project	Placement	Project
Discipline	Teacher Education	Interdisciplinary	Sport and Recreation	Interdisciplinary
Student year group	2nd year undergrad	3rd year undergrad	2nd year undergrad	3rd year undergrad and postgrad
Hours/weeks	3 weeks full-time	60 hours over 12 weeks	35 hours over 6 weeks	80 hours over either 2 or 4 weeks (virtual or in person)
Activities on placements or projects	Placement focusing on assessment practices	Industry-based projects negotiated by student	Workplace activities negotiated by student	Partner-based projects negotiated between staff and partners
Delivery mode of scaffolding activities	In-person interactive workshop	Pre, mid and post workshops	In-person workshops	Virtual workshops
Individuals or teams	Individuals	Individual work on industry project with peer support	Individual working within workplace teams	Small student teams working virtually

## Methods

### Case Study Methodology

We have undertaken a case study methodology to examine Intensive WIL, as case studies are utilised in many areas of qualitative education research because of their flexibility. Case studies allow researchers to examine a particular phenomenon in depth within the context of interest to better understand how a phenomenon functions (Stake, 1995). Although the cases presented in this article are context specific, they focus on different forms of Intensive WIL to provide the reader

with a range of insights in four discipline areas across two countries. Typically, case studies are not intended for generalisation, but we invite the reader to identify characteristics aligning with their own context and experiences (Lucas et al., 2018).

Data is presented as four case studies that are representative of Intensive WIL in practice, situated in universities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Each case study was written by the authors who have significant WIL expertise and are directly involved in teaching these examples of Intensive WIL.

### **Development of Quality Indicators**

The case studies provide details of different permutations of Intensive WIL, which are then evaluated against existing quality frameworks (listed below). To facilitate this evaluation, a systematic approach was used to generate a set of quality indicators, which were extracted from the quality frameworks using a qualitative content analysis approach.

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) describe qualitative content analysis “as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). It involves coding and categorising text material in a methodical and replicable way (Cohen et al., 2011).

In recent years, there has been a plethora of quality frameworks, all focusing on different aspects of WIL and with different purposes in mind. For this study, five frameworks were selected:

1. Campbell et al. (2019), *A Framework to Support Assurance of Institution-Wide Quality in Work-Integrated Learning*;
2. Stirling et al. (2016), *A Practical Guide for Work-Integrated Learning*;
3. Piggott and Winchester-Seeto (2022), *Ready for Anything: Adaptive Curriculum Design for Interdisciplinary Team Projects in Work-Integrated Learning*;
4. Rowe et al. (2023), *The Practice of Short-Term and Part-Time Work Placements*; and
5. Winchester-Seeto (2019), *Quality and Standards for Work-Integrated Learning*.

Campbell et al. (2019) sought to provide an overarching framework taking all aspects of WIL into account, largely based on an Australian perspective. Stirling et al. (2016) took a similar approach for a Canadian context. Winchester-Seeto (2019) focused specifically on curriculum-based concerns, and Piggott and Winchester-Seeto (2022) targeted team projects in WIL. Lastly, Rowe et al. (2023) designed a framework to test the effectiveness of short-term and part-time WIL, of which Intensive WIL is one part. It should also be noted that each of these frameworks drew on other published work such that they represent a much wider, more comprehensive view of quality in the sector.

The intention behind the selection of quality indicators for this study was to target areas that are especially relevant to Intensive WIL – that is, those areas that focus on the actual experience of the various participants or stakeholders. Three areas – WIL experience, supporting activities, and relationships and sustainability – were chosen by the authors as having particular applicability to Intensive WIL. There is, inevitably, some overlap with other types of WIL experiences as many features are shared.

The steps used in the content analysis are outlined in Figure 1. Specifically, these steps include:

**Step 1:** Locate relevant published quality frameworks for WIL – as described above.

**Step 2:** Identify and extract relevant material from existing, published frameworks. After initial examination of the frameworks, three categories were established, and two researchers were assigned to each framework to independently extract relevant material. These were combined, sorted, and reviewed by all authors.

**Step 3:** Define and remove indicators related to background quality. Two researchers worked independently and then met to validate the material that was designated as background quality and removed from further analysis.

**Step 4:** Paraphrase indicators to capture the main ideas. Two researchers produced summary statements as a draft list of indicators of quality for Intensive WIL.

**Step 5:** Review by all authors to ensure comprehensibility and accuracy, and to finalise the list of indicators of quality.

This process used a deductive approach to determine a final list of indicators and to examine the case studies. In all, 13 quality indicators for Intensive WIL were produced (Figure 1). These indicators enabled case studies to be examined within, across, and between each case study, leading to the characteristics highlighted in the Findings and Discussion.

The broad and deep experience of the researchers across different countries, disciplines, institutions, and modes of WIL led to robust conversations and enabled a degree of generalisability of the indicators (e.g., language and terms used). This was a highly collaborative process, during which all steps involved cross-checking and validation.

### **Data Analysis**

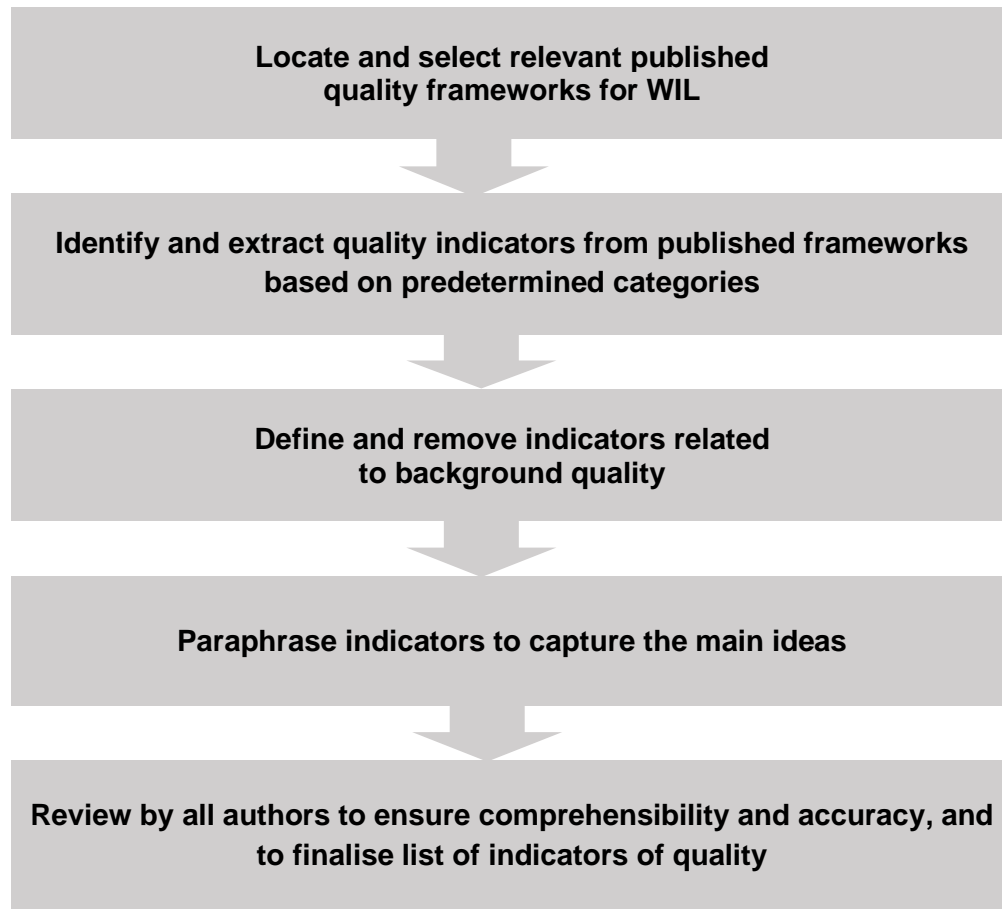
Analysis of case studies was undertaken in iterative stages. The indicators, derived from existing quality frameworks, guided the thematic analysis. Using a deductive approach, two researchers worked independently to code themes in case studies that aligned to the quality indicators. This was followed by a meeting where researchers shared coding allocations, discussed differences and similarities in coding, and arrived at a consensus on the final coding distribution.

Benefits and challenges of Intensive WIL that were explicitly reported in the case studies were also compared. Anything that was not explicitly reported and only indirectly inferred from the case studies were not included in this analysis. Analysis aimed to capture the range of benefits and challenges cited across the case studies.



**Figure 1**

*Steps in the Process of Generating Quality Indicators for Intensive Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)*



### Case Studies

<b>Case Study 1: Assessment and Reporting</b>	<b>Context:</b> <i>Urban university in Western Australia</i>
<b>Type:</b> <i>Placement</i>	<b>Discipline:</b> <i>Teacher Education</i>
<b>Student level:</b> <i>Second-year undergraduate</i>	<b>WIL experience time:</b> <i>Three weeks full-time</i>
<b>WIL experience:</b> <i>Three-week full-time placement in an educational setting</i>	
<b>Supporting activities:</b> <i>Weekly two-hour workshops</i>	

Assessment and Reporting, a second-year subject in the Bachelor of Education, is offered face-to-face or online. Students have previously studied technology and theories related to learning and teaching, and creating and managing effective learning environments. Students attend two-hour interactive workshops for six weeks prior to a three-week full-time placement. Five two-hour workshops are conducted post-placement. A weekly 45-minute online lecture provides the theoretical foundations of assessment and reporting prior to workshops.

The course is intended to build students' assessment and reporting literacy and facilitate reflective practice through monitoring the impact of assessment approaches and ascertaining personal professional learning afforded from diverse assessment strategies. Learning outcomes require students to design, critique, and reflect on different assessment methodologies with reference to personal teaching philosophies, and collect, interpret, and report on assessment data to multiple stakeholders (parents, students, and school leaders). Learning outcomes are aligned to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

Students are provided details of the placement early in the semester. A conversation with the mentor teacher in the workplace enables students to shape assessment through peer feedback during workshops. Students conduct three lessons per day with close supervision and guidance from the mentor teacher. Throughout the professional placement, students gather assessment samples, observe assessment practices, monitor student engagement with assessment, and interview the classroom teacher in preparation for Assessment 3. In addition to regular contact with the workplace mentor, students liaise with the academic coordinator via email. A face-to-face or online meeting with the academic coordinator is conducted should students experience challenges and require a conversation to explore strategies and receive advice. Students are visited in situ by a university staff member at least once during their professional placement.

Workshops address weekly topics, enabling progressive development of assessment practices with increasing conceptual and practical complexity. Activities include role-plays, self-assessment, peer feedback and assessment, brainstorming, exploring preconceived ideas about assessment, mind-maps, and problem-solving/assessment design based on real-life scenarios. Workshops are conducted by an experienced teaching practitioner and complemented with synchronous presentations by school leaders.

Students complete three assessments. Assessment 1 is an essay format where students address five key questions that explore understanding of effective assessment, purposes of assessment (assessment for, of, and as learning), personal philosophies and theoretical underpinnings of learning, the impact of assessment on students' learning, and how personal philosophies on learning inform assessment approaches. In Assessment 2, students identify a learner, design and administer a series of learning and assessment tasks, and undertake a critical evaluation of the impact of these tasks on the learner. The final assessment involves interviewing the mentor teacher to explore communication strategies with parents when reporting on children's progress and how teachers adapt approaches according to specific needs. Following the interview, students produce a videoed role-play of a parent-teacher interview.

A central unit organises placements and provides schools with information about student expectations and responsibilities. Other practising teachers and school leaders engage with students throughout delivery of the subject.

Replicating the collaborative and interactive learning activities online proved challenging, especially with low student attendance in the online classroom. While assessments comprised authentic learning, instructions lacked clarity.

"Interactive workshops and collaboration" (student, 2021) were deemed the most positive aspects as they built student confidence, established a proactive community of practice, and enabled

students to prepare effectively for the placement. The post-placement workshops prompted students to reflect on the placement and strengths and gaps in their professional development.

<b>Case Study 2:</b> <i>Multiple subjects</i>	<b>Context:</b> <i>Urban university in Western Australia</i>
<b>Type:</b> <i>Project</i>	<b>Discipline:</b> <i>Interdisciplinary</i>
<b>Student level:</b> <i>Third-year undergraduate</i>	<b>WIL experience time:</b> <i>60 hours over 12 weeks</i>
<b>WIL experience:</b> <i>Students were guided by industry supervisors both on campus and in the workplace to scope and propose solutions to industry-focused issues</i>	
<b>Supporting activities:</b> <i>Preparatory workshops with industry and academic staff, regular support meetings and feedback</i>	

This WIL project involves data science, marketing, management and media, and graphic design students enrolled in capstone courses specific to their discipline. A designated academic coordinator brokered partnerships with discipline-specific academic staff and industry partners. Industry partners outlined projects addressing strategic priorities. Three workshops involving students, academic staff, and industry personnel were conducted. In the first workshop, projects were selected and scoped in discussion with industry and academic staff. An interim workshop with stakeholders monitored progress and provided collective feedback. Students presented outcomes, discussed enablers and challenges, and received feedback in a final workshop. The academic coordinator conducted fortnightly meetings with students to provide ongoing support, supervision, and feedback. Discipline-specific academic staff were also available for students for additional advice and support, particularly related to their discipline of study. Students attended weekly disciplinary classes that varied in format.

While students were enrolled in various discipline-specific subjects, outcomes focused on complex problem-solving drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives, communication with diverse stakeholders, collaboration and teamwork, evidence-based decision-making, and project planning. Enhancing employability capabilities for a complex workplace was the overarching construct.

Students engaged with the industry partner regularly as projects progressed. Connections with industry occurred via on-campus meetings and in situ at the workplace. Across the 12-week duration of the projects, students spent approximately 60 hours in collaboration with industry partners. Industry partners guided students through the stages of project scoping, planning, and execution. They met with students as a collective group and with individual students as required.

While conversations and workshops were facilitated with the intent to address targeted student outcomes, students were the key drivers of their learning, thereby affording personalised outcomes and varied learning progressions. Scaffolded learning was dependent on group dynamics, student motivation, and the focus of the industry-based problem.

Discipline-specific academic staff were required to modify assessments to enable students to evidence the capabilities garnered from the interdisciplinary projects. Students were required to complete three assessments: a project plan (group), portfolio (individual), and project report and

presentation (group). Assessments were co-marked with industry representatives, discipline-specific academic staff, and facilitator.

Aligning outcomes and assessments from diverse disciplines presented challenges. In addition, academic staff were challenged by the integration of disciplines and the flexibility required. Accommodating the logistics of timetabling and administrative requirements proved difficult. Tension between industry needs and academic protocols required careful management.

All stakeholders perceived the authenticity of projects and intense industry connections as beneficial for developing students' ability to solve complex problems. Projects culminated in solutions to real-world problems for industry partners, who perceived their role as "lighting the fire" for students and integral to their learning experience. Students were highly motivated and engaged in the learning, believing the experience empowered them to take ownership of their learning and develop agency. Academic staff considered that involvement in the project prompted rethinking traditional teaching and learning approaches. All stakeholders benefited from the reflective components of the experience.

<b>Case Study 3:</b> <i>Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR)</i>	<b>Context:</b> <i>Urban university in Aotearoa New Zealand</i>
<b>Type:</b> <i>Placement</i>	<b>Discipline:</b> <i>Sport and Recreation</i>
<b>Student level:</b> <i>Second-year undergraduate</i>	<b>WIL experience time:</b> <i>35 hours over 6 weeks</i>
<b>WIL experience:</b> <i>Industry exploration, career insights, identify co-op placement for third year</i>	
<b>Supporting activities:</b> <i>Preparatory workshops, video recordings, WIL coordinator meetings, industry supervisor, e-portfolio</i>	

Within the second year, BSR students undertake two core courses containing a compulsory WIL placement of 35 hours, and related assessment(s). These two core courses provide foundation blocks for theoretical learning relevant to the sport and recreation industry (non-major specific), enhance academic and reflective writing skills, afford opportunities to integrate theory and practice, and provide industry insights into preparation of a year-long part-time placement in third year. This placement is an opportunity to explore the diverse sport and recreation industry by spending time with an organisation of interest to the student. The chronological order of taking these two courses is not restricted, as one does not transition into the other, however both are prerequisites for the BSR cooperative education course in final year. These two courses are offered every semester. However, students typically transition from Course 1 (Group and Individual Behaviour) to Course 2 (Evidence Based Practice). The first four weeks of both courses include a placement preparation phase while students simultaneously engage with the course theoretical content.

During the first four weeks of classes, the overall process of the WIL placement is clarified and supported with recordings and documents in Canvas (learning management system). Initial classroom conversations revolve around career plans as living documents, and students are given time to focus on the development or advancement (depending on if this is their first or second placement) of these plans. The WIL coordinator and a course academic specialising in

WIL are available during class and other times to give students guidance and support to find and secure a placement. Expectations of being on placement from a university and organisational perspective are discussed with students, including communication, contributions, and collaboration. Conversely, students can expect to gain industry insights for career progression and constructive mentorship or supervision from workplace supervisors. The School of Sport and Recreation provides a platform for organisations to advertise a placement opportunity and have access to the WIL coordinator, who has strong industry connections and manages all placement information. Regular communication with all industry supervisors is managed by the WIL coordinator to maintain quality supervision and support of the students.

The placement process is student driven to ensure their individual needs are met. Students approach organisations of their choice based on sporting interests, logistics, and potential for their third-year placement. Overall student motivation is high as placements are chosen by the student, and organisations have the capacity to choose a student who best fits their team. Organisations can offer third-year placements to students who impress them. Conversely, students discover if organisations are suited to their aspirations and/or academic majors.

Prior to placements beginning, students complete a WIL placement approval form in consultation with their workplace supervisor. This process includes a simplified online version and a more detailed form with student and organisational details, terms of placement (activities, hours, days, etc.), three learning goals (one generic or course specific and two created by the student), and signatures. Typically, students are interviewed and conditions of the placement are negotiated to suit the student and workplace as much as possible. The students have six weeks to complete their hours, either in a condensed manner (one week) or spread out over the full period. This flexibility enables students and organisations to find a mutually agreeable arrangement. Given their age and maturity, some students may not have the confidence to adequately negotiate hours.

Assessments are initially compulsory elements – that is, a placement approval form to ensure placements are suitable and student learning goals are appropriate. Students gain feedback early to ensure they are developing professional skills. At completion of the semester students complete a templated e-portfolio, using the Mahara platform, for presenting evidence of hours, industry feedback, and reflection on key aspects of their learning.

<b>Case Study 4:</b> <i>The Practice of Work</i>	<b>Context:</b> <i>Large, urban, research-intensive university in New South Wales</i>
<b>Type:</b> <i>Project-based WIL</i>	<b>Discipline:</b> <i>Interdisciplinary</i>
<b>Student level:</b> <i>Third and fourth-year undergraduate, and postgraduate</i>	<b>WIL experience time:</b> <i>80 hours spread over either two or four weeks</i>
<b>WIL experience:</b> <i>Small interdisciplinary student teams work on projects negotiated with partners</i>	
<b>Supporting activities:</b> <i>Workshops to support learning held throughout the course</i>	

The Practice of Work is a project-based WIL course that can be undertaken in many modes, including in person and virtual, over a 10-week term or as a four-week intensive (Piggott & Winchester-Seeto, 2022). In this course students work in small interdisciplinary teams (4–6 students) on a project brief from a partner organisation. The in-person intensive involves two weeks on campus and two onsite. The virtual option has students working on projects for part of each day over the four weeks.

The core of the course is the project, which is negotiated with the partner organisation (e.g., business, community organisations) to ensure that it has appropriate complexity and scope, has the potential for multiple solutions, and the outcomes have significance for the partner. Projects are authentic, often ambiguous, and ill-structured or ill-defined – reflecting real-world work challenges.

The student teams work autonomously, with an emphasis on working collaboratively. Each team has an academic project advisor who acts as a mentor, advisor, or critical friend and assists with team dynamics. Assessment is designed to enhance and reward teamwork, not work against it, with regular reflective exercises and debriefing to assist students develop the necessary skills.

An important aspect of the course is the input, ongoing feedback, coaching, and mentoring by the workplace supervisors. The in-person offering has students interacting fully for two weeks. For the virtual offering, student–partner meetings are timetabled via Teams throughout the course. The partner organisation acts as the client, and students present their work in presentations and a final report. Supporting this process is ongoing communication between university staff and the workplace supervisors, including formal and informal evaluation throughout the course.

Scaffolded learning activities are built in and around the actual WIL experience, including: teamwork; problem solving; project management; design thinking; dealing with feedback; communication; and professional expectations. Regular debriefing and reflection aims to help in deepening understanding, and in processing and integrating student experiences.

Assessment is iterative, so that students can use feedback directly in the next task:

- Task 1: presentation of a project plan to partners, followed by feedback from academics and workplace supervisors, with peer assessment of teamwork;
- Task 2: a second presentation with feedback from academics and workplace supervisors;
- Task 3: final report in the form of a slide-deck, with a peer assessment component;
- Task 4: a reflective report, such as Critical Incident Analysis or a Skills Audit.

Finding appropriate projects with the right scope and complexity for students and over the short time frame can be challenging but is generally accomplished through negotiation. Also challenging, but very important, is helping students understand the difference between teamwork and group work. Working virtually can bring additional issues and students need to be trained in effective online communication and learning.

The benefits to students from this course include the development of many new skills and access to projects that motivate them because they matter. Ongoing feedback from the partner and academic advisor is something new for many students, and enables the development of flexibility, adaptability, and resilience, as many ideas are sent back to the drawing board. But most of all,

this course provides a safe, supportive environment that encourages students to experiment with new and creative ideas.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This sample of four case studies demonstrates that Intensive WIL is highly adaptable and can be tailored to different formats and to suit different contexts. The case studies cover a range of disciplines and industries, can be modified for students attending workplaces or doing on-campus projects, and can be used in face-to-face and online formats. The length of the WIL experience in these case studies varies from two to nine weeks and is undertaken either full-time or part-time, although other options are possible.

The value of Intensive WIL is the flexibility to cater for different student needs and/or circumstances, diverse needs of partner organisations, disciplinary nuances, and institutional and national contexts. In Case Study 3, for example, students and partner organisations negotiate the best options and can undertake either 35 hours over one week or spread over six weeks. Some partner organisations prefer short, compressed WIL experiences to make the best use of their staff who can plan to dedicate a specific short period to supervise the students, which is particularly important in Case Study 4. However, for some degree programs there may be practical and/or curriculum requirements that affect the way the WIL experience is designed. For example, Case Study 1 highlights an interactive approach that engaged students in authentic activities to prepare for Intensive WIL, but the teaching academic did not liaise with the industry partner as negotiation with the partner was administered by a central unit.

### **Essential Background Quality of Intensive WIL**

Existing quality frameworks have defined and described quality WIL over the last decade, covering a wide range of features. Scaffolded learning outcomes, developmental assessment, constructive feedback, reflective practice, and an emphasis on employability and career development are central to quality WIL curriculum, given that student agency, personalised learning outcomes, and meaningful learning experiences are core to student outcomes (Rowe et al., 2023). Reorienting from instructional delivery of content to providing guidance and support within a structured framework of exploratory learning experiences is pivotal to realising the benefits of a WIL curriculum. Furthermore, co-designing curriculum for relevance and student engagement is a defining feature of quality WIL course design.

Irrespective of the type of WIL activity (placement or project) and the mode of delivery (in person/virtual, intensive/non-intensive), specific protocols are required to mitigate risks to students, the institution, and partner organisations, and to ensure compliance with relevant legislation and professional accreditation requirements. These should include: WIL agreements; work, health, and safety training and induction for students (Campbell et al., 2019); students being aware of available support and how to access it (Winchester-Seeto, 2019); clarity and awareness of the roles, expectations, and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including how to manage risk if required (Rowe et al., 2023; Stirling et al., 2016; Winchester-Seeto, 2019); and an evaluation and reporting process for regular quality assurance and improvement (Campbell et al., 2019).

The resource-intensive nature of WIL and reliance on external partnerships to actuate real-world learning experiences requires institutional financial investment, a policy environment that

supports flexibility, and prioritising relationship building. Targeted professional development to build staff capacity in designing and enacting WIL pedagogy and negotiating and maintaining partnerships with industry/community (Campbell et al., 2019; Stirling et al., 2016) are at the heart of successful WIL.

These factors are all deemed to be essential “background quality” and are of fundamental importance to all varieties of WIL, including Intensive WIL. Background quality will not be included in this study. All authors of case studies acknowledge that they are present in the background, but not explicitly articulated in the case studies.

### **Quality Indicators for Intensive WIL**

Examination of the existing quality frameworks, however, highlighted the absence of reference to the actual WIL experience (e.g., what the students, academics/university staff and workplace supervisors actually do). Whereas the emphasis in this study was to concentrate on immediate, “on-the-ground” experience for all stakeholders, as well as on aspects likely to have a major effect on Intensive WIL, and on students. In particular, there was an emphasis on those high-impact, time-consuming actions, such as the work of academic/university staff and workplace supervisors in solving problems and dealing with acute situations.

As Intensive WIL is directly focused on the actual experience, a new set of indicators was required that did not include those for background quality. Thirteen indicators of quality falling within three broad categories were extracted and distilled from existing quality frameworks to provide a way of more objectively appraising Intensive WIL, shown in Table 2.

Evaluation against the quality indicators reveals the Intensive WIL described in the case studies delivers quality experiences for students, with most indicators present in the design and delivery (Table 3). One of the strengths of Intensive WIL is the flexibility of design to accommodate student needs, and this is borne out in these results where there are different modes of delivery available in the same course. The indicator least included was “Collaborative evaluation of the WIL experience”, although this is likely lacking in other forms of WIL as well.

Students’ foundational knowledge and conceptual understanding emerged as fundamental to successful Intensive WIL, with explicit reference to this in all case studies. However, this important aspect does not feature in the indicators. There are implications for practice if such knowledge is lacking.

Finally, the case studies indicate there are additional challenges when Intensive WIL is delivered online. In Case Study 1, student engagement online was patchy, while students in the face-to-face delivery mode were highly engaged. This is echoed in Case Study 4, where diminished student engagement was due to issues related to “internet reliability and degree of connectivity; a more formal atmosphere; and difficulties with online communication” (Piggott & Winchester-Seeto, 2022, p. 220). These factors compromised student interaction with each other, academic staff, and workplace supervisors.



**Table 2**

*Quality Indicators for Intensive Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)*

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***WIL experience***

1. WIL experience is intentionally designed to promote student learning;
2. Meaningful student engagement is realised in project or workplace activity, and with their own learning (promoted/enabled by WIL experience design and teaching practices);
3. Workplace supervisors provide quality supervision, coaching, and mentoring of students;
4. Academic/university staff provide quality supervision, support and guidance, and feedback to students throughout the WIL experience (as appropriate);
5. Workplace supervisors and university staff engage in regular communication and liaison throughout the WIL experiences as needed.

***Supporting activities***

6. Preparation for learning in the workplace is scaffolded for capability and knowledge development;
7. Students develop the means to make sense of their experience through reflection, debriefing, and shared experiences;
8. Flexible and authentic assessment opportunities support students to identify, evidence, and articulate professional capabilities and personal attributes (e.g., practice e-portfolios).

***Relationships and sustainability***

9. Effective and sustainable relationships are established between university staff and partner organisations;
  10. Close cooperation is evident when negotiating project and placement activities between academics, workplace staff, and, where appropriate, students;
  11. Streamlined and flexible processes and practices promote efficient and effective interactions and to cater for student diversity;
  12. Needs of all students are accommodated;
  13. Collaborative evaluation of the WIL experience is undertaken.
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**Table 3***Compare and Contrast Analysis of Case Studies Matrix*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Case study 1: Teacher Education</b>	<b>Case study 2: Inter-disciplinary</b>	<b>Case study 3: Sport and Recreation</b>	<b>Case study 4: Practice of Work</b>	
<b>Work-integrated learning (WIL) experience</b>	Intentional design	X	X	X	X
	Meaningful student engagement	Variable	X	X	X
	Workplace supervisors provide mentoring, coaching, and quality supervision	X	X	X	X
	University staff provide quality supervision, support, and feedback	X	X	X	X
	Regular communication and liaison – university staff and workplace supervisors	—	X	X	X
<b>Supporting activities</b>	Preparation for learning in the workplace is scaffolded for capability and knowledge development	X	X	X	X
	Students make sense through reflection, debriefing, and shared experiences	X	X	X	X
	Flexible and authentic assessment to identify, evidence, and articulate professional capabilities	X	X	X	X
<b>Relationships and sustainability</b>	Effective and sustainable relationships – university and partner	X	X	X	X
	Negotiation of project/learning goals – academics, workplace staff, and students	—	X	X	X
	Streamlined and flexible processes and practices	Unknown	X	X	X
	All students' needs accommodated	X	—	X	X
	Collaborative evaluation of WIL experience	—	—	—	X

## Benefits and Challenges of Intensive WIL

Benefits and challenges of Intensive WIL are outlined in the case studies (Table 4). Whilst many resonate similar trends in WIL more broadly, benefits considered unique to Intensive WIL are:

- Learners can explore diverse employment options within an industry by undertaking multiple WIL experiences;
- Flexibility in format (condensed or spread out) enables tailoring of the WIL experience for students and the partner organisation; and
- Prompts rethinking of traditional teaching and learning approaches by academic staff.

The challenge of sourcing projects with the appropriate scope and complexity, and achievable within the short time frame, was considered potentially unique to Intensive WIL. This necessitates close cooperation between university staff and workplace supervisors and highlights the need for clarity in the design and scope of the WIL experience and deliverables (where applicable).

**Table 4**

*Summary of Benefits and Challenges*

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authentic projects and work-related tasks/assessments</li> <li>• Opportunities for interaction and collaboration</li> <li>• Learners can reflect on professional development gaps</li> <li>• Learners can explore diverse employment options within an industry</li> <li>• Flexibility in format (condensed or spread out)</li> <li>• Outcomes include solutions for real-world problems for partners and e-portfolios for students</li> <li>• High student motivation and engagement</li> <li>• Prompts rethinking of traditional teaching and learning approaches by academic staff</li> <li>• Development of new skills, confidence, and agency informed by partner input</li> <li>• Provision of safe, supportive environment for students to experiment with new ideas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translation of collaborative and interactive learning activities to online format</li> <li>• Engaging students in online environments</li> <li>• Ensuring assessment instructions are clear</li> <li>• Student confidence to negotiate effectively with partners</li> <li>• Flexibility required by academic staff to integrate teaching and assessment methods from diverse disciplines</li> <li>• Logistics of timetabling and administrative requirements</li> <li>• Tension between industry needs and academic protocols</li> <li>• Finding appropriate projects with the right scope and complexity for students over the short time frame</li> <li>• Ensuring students have the required skills (e.g., to work effectively in virtual environments) to collaborate</li> </ul>

## Implications for Practice

The short duration of the WIL experience requires adjustment in teaching practice and organisation to ensure optimal outcomes. As students have less time to learn new concepts during the actual WIL experience, command of previous theoretical concepts is particularly important. This suggests that preparing students for Intensive WIL requires a different approach to that taken in other forms of WIL. In particular, academics and students need to be aware of students' knowledge and capabilities prior to commencement of Intensive WIL. This may require students to undertake a gap analysis of their knowledge and skills to ensure their WIL experiences

can build on existing conceptual schema. Students without adequate theoretical foundations may need to take responsibility for addressing the gaps in their knowledge. When effectively executed, this develops students' agency and ownership of their WIL experience and reinforces the need for future professional learning upon entering the workforce. Alternatively, establishing student teams for the WIL experience can strengthen individual competencies as students bring different knowledge and skills and learn from each other (Piggott & Winchester-Seeto, 2022).

Intensive WIL also accentuates some aspects that, while important for all WIL, are particularly significant when the WIL experience is condensed. Clarity around the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of all parties is crucial to the smooth operation of the WIL experience and can circumvent misunderstandings (Fleming et al., 2023), which is particularly important when time is short. Swift, regular, and responsive communication and liaison between university staff and workplace supervisors is necessary to respond to and manage issues in a timely manner. This is more acute in short WIL experiences, as there is less time to intervene to enable positive outcomes for students and workplaces. Allied with this is the value of sustained relationships and close cooperation between university staff and workplace staff that enable trust, which is crucial to ongoing partnership (Fleming et al., 2018). Due to limited time while undertaking the WIL experience, it is especially important to plan appropriate supporting activities after the experience to ensure students gain maximum benefit from Intensive WIL through relevant assessment and debriefing and reflective practice.

One important, recurring theme in all quality frameworks and WIL literature is the need to accommodate the diverse needs of students (Indicator 12; Rowe et al., 2023). Diversity in this context refers not only to those students with known or visible barriers to participation, such as disability or illness, but also to those with carer responsibilities, competing paid employment, or other commitments (Hoskyn et al., 2020, Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022). Intensive WIL through the shorter WIL experience can be particularly useful where students struggle to find sufficient time for WIL (Rowe et al., 2023; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015), enabling a more equitable outcome.

Similarly, there are benefits of the Intensive WIL approach for some partner organisations, particularly small and medium sized businesses and community groups (Kay et al., 2022). Many such organisations face difficulties in the long-term commitment of resources and staff supervision for lengthy WIL experiences. Some larger organisations also prefer a shorter timeframe so that staff are better able to cater for students concurrently with their normal duties, and short projects can be efficiently completed (Jackson et al., 2017).

Mapping the Intensive WIL quality indicators against the case studies in this paper was useful in revealing gaps, prompting reflection about practice, and clarifying how quality standards manifest in practice. However, it also became clear during the process that some quality standards are implicit or assumed and therefore not explicitly evident, such as those related to the WIL experience. Quality frameworks are developed with different purposes and aims in mind, and it is important to interpret quality frameworks in relation to the particular context or purpose of WIL. Clarity about what might be overtly captured in the framework and what is important, but implied rather than explicit, enhances the value of using frameworks to validate quality and improve practice.

## **Summary of Implications for Practice of Intensive WIL**

- Gaps in student knowledge and/or capabilities need to be identified and remedied prior to starting the WIL experience;
- Regular communication and liaison between university staff and workplace supervisors is needed to enable issues to be managed quickly;
- Sustained, responsive relationships between university and workplace staff are vital for managing short placements;
- Supporting activities help students gain maximum benefit from their experience;
- Intensive WIL can benefit students with time pressures and other constraints, and better accommodate the needs of some partner organisations.

## **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

A key strength of this research is derived from the authors' collective contributions. They are WIL practitioners with expertise and an in-depth understanding of the intricacies of WIL, including the particularities of their own case study. Although this research is an example of practitioner research in which bias is likely, this bias is reduced by the cross-disciplinary, university, and country nature of the case studies and highly collaborative approach to the data analysis. Typically, the small sample size of four case studies might be deemed a limitation of this research. Instead, we invite readers to compare these four case studies to their own contexts and apply these learnings to their own practice.

## **Conclusions**

WIL is fast becoming an essential and valued part of higher education, but it must meet the varying needs and purposes of different students, disciplines, professions, and partner organisations. It is therefore crucial to explore different approaches, especially in an era of rapid change both in higher education and in work. Making active choices about the most effective model of WIL for a particular set of students and circumstances is becoming more important than ever. While lengthy WIL experiences are necessary for some professions and students, for many others there are distinct advantages in more condensed experiences. The diversity and flexibility afforded by Intensive WIL enables purpose-built models that can be adapted to accommodate the needs of all stakeholders, as illustrated by the four case studies.

While there are many advantages of the more nuanced approach that is afforded by Intensive WIL, validating the quality of the experience is necessary to substantiate the educative benefits of this mode of WIL. To this end, a set of quality indicators was developed in this study, providing a new, dedicated framework for evaluating Intensive WIL, thus focusing more attention on the WIL experience than has previously been accomplished with quality frameworks in WIL.

It is to the advantage of everyone involved, be they students, staff, workplaces, professions, government, and community at large to enhance the future employability of students. It is essential to understand that no single WIL model will suit all students, as they have different needs and aspirations. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance to have a variety of models able to afford high quality outcomes, available to students.

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