

ACEN Conference: Beyond 2022: Creating the future with WIL

25 October 2022, 9.30 am – 10.15am

Keynote presentation: Megan Lilly, Executive Director, Ai Group Centre for Education & Training

WIL – essential to industry's future

I am conscious of my heavy load today for I realise I am here as a representative of industry in a community made up of WIL practitioners representing universities.

I am also conscious that you will be keen for me to summarise and/or tell you the answers to:

- ❖ Are more companies becoming more engaged with WIL?
- ❖ Do more companies know about it as a beneficial activity?
- ❖ What are they needing in terms of generic/transferable skills and how are those skills changing?
- ❖ What are their current comments/feedback about the fit and employability of students who undertake WIL in workplaces?
- ❖ Are more employers taking up different & innovative forms of WIL?
- ❖ Do barriers continue?
- ❖ How do we do it better?

Well, I can't provide definitive answers to all of these questions. However I will address what I can around the industry perspective. And indeed its important to stress that *my* industry perspective refers to small, medium and large businesses only, even though I know other parties are often included in a definition of industry for WIL, such as non-government organisations, community organisations and levels of government.

Ai Group has long been a champion of WIL. As some here will know we committed to a unique statement of intent on WIL in 2015, collaborating with UA, ACEN, ACCI and the BCA. As partners, we then developed the 2016 National Strategy for WIL in University Education – without government involvement or support – and have continued to meet as a group since. As a group, we are currently exploring how to refresh the Strategy so that it is a useful driver moving forward.

In Ai Group's case our commitment has remained consistent: we have continued to be involved with individual university contacts, remained abreast of WIL projects and research, and of innovations around WIL. We have continued to promote WIL to our member companies and others in industry as a practice and involvement that enriches companies, and is beneficial to their success, as well as the students. During COVID we promoted virtual WIL to companies. Just recently we let members know about WIL initiatives across the country involving members Boeing, Stoddart and TEi Services, as well as CSIRO programs. We also periodically push the benefits of engaging graduate research students in placements, emphasising the advanced level of knowledge and reasoning they can bring.

Importantly our policy submissions and representations to government have consistently advocated support (in a number of ways) for WIL. **Ai Group sees WIL as one driver for a much bigger change around tertiary education and training.** Ai Group has maintained its advocacy to government, recommending the introduction of national WIL infrastructure that further integrates and embeds this model of learning.

We were asked recently in our team why wasn't WIL being taken up? The question stopped me in my tracks because from my perspective WIL, in the years since that Statement of Intent, has *evolved, grown in breadth and volume, matured and innovated*. Commitments from all partners, including many companies, have *deepened and broadened*. You, its dedicated community, have surely become more experienced, developed better understandings and strategies through research and practice, and worked with industry representatives more expertly.....

However that question, and perspective, that WIL isn't being taken up demonstrated that, for some, the deep involvement we see here is not as widely known or understood. Does Ai Group's commitment and involvement skew our perception that WIL is more widespread than it actually is? Afterall, WIL as a core component to all qualifications isn't yet supported from both ends – practitioners at one end, and a system that involves the right funding, programs, the right structures and incentives for industry at the other end.

Taking a quick glance at the program for this conference proved to me that WIL *is* alive and kicking, if not yet embedded to the extent that we would like across the tertiary education system. The conference program reveals a dedicated community having discussions around quality, stakeholder expectations and engagement, co-creation and co-design, employability. The conference explores different WIL frameworks and models, principles and leadership; virtual WIL, simulated WIL, interdisciplinary and global WIL.

It addresses the learning-work nexus, student reflection, assessment and communication and how students learn in the workplace. It discusses support for diverse learners doing WIL, as well as WIL in rural

and remote regions. And the discussions cover a huge range of disciplines.

This is a very deep and rich community of practice but it seems it is yet to be universally regarded by all as a core activity for students within their university education.

Ai Group believes industry needs a system in which WIL is seen as fundamental to qualifications. You will all be well aware of the rapid technological changes over recent years, correspondingly leading to more frequent changes to knowledge and skills needed by industry. So it is ever more important for universities and students to be closely engaged, experiencing and being aware of the changes. Fluid, agile structures are emerging and existing in some companies (and this is something that multi-disciplinary WIL importantly mirrors). In any case the major disruption in industry should trigger major disruption in universities.

We need wholesale change. There is a quote I love that is from a Canadian report from 2019, (and we know that the Canadians have been leaders in cooperative education). The quote is '*businesses are the classrooms of tomorrow*'. To me it is not suggesting universities won't exist. On the contrary it backs up the issue that industry, technology and work environment changes are increasing quickly meaning knowledge and skills are too, so they *have* to be *intertwined*. Certainly to a much greater extent than the sectors are connected now. I know there are vanguard partnerships with industry/companies embedded in

universities (often for deep research) but I suggest they should be the norm.

WIL is all about partnering. If there is one practice that *has* to bring together different sectors of the economy it is WIL. Students, universities and industry all have to be partners in some form. Back in 2011 Watson, in 'The Engaged University' recognised that partnering is a key success factor in securing a university's future as an 'engaged' university. Having a partnership culture is always going to provide students with opportunities to recognise and experience complex future work environments and remain critically engaged with emerging social and environmental challenges. Indeed '*partnerships are the key to promoting a borderless education and reinventing the learning economy.*' – which is a quote from a Ferns, Dawson and Howitt journal article from 2019 – and I know Sonia is at this conference.

However, Dawkins and Bean in their 2021 review found that Australian university-industry links are *underdeveloped* by international standards. In Ai Group's skills survey this year, 17% of businesses said they intend to increase the existing links they had with universities and 11% said they intend to establish new links. Of those increasing links, 32% said it would be to provide internships, project work or work experience; 13% on research projects; 8% around talks, tours or competitions; and just 3% to input to the design of programs. Those figures could be higher.....

But, as you know, good partnerships do not happen easily or quickly. Strong and successful partnerships are established over time and based on mutual trust, benefit and communication. Perceived barriers to

industry need to be worked through – they can be lack of information about what is on offer from universities; hesitancy to approach universities about becoming involved without some understanding of what this may entail; ability of university to be flexible to accommodate industry needs and the business cycle; and confusing university bureaucracies.

One company, which is a champion for collaboration, is BAE Systems Australia, an Ai Group member. In 2020 it released an innovative call for partners to collaborate – aimed at both education and training providers and other companies.

Its *Request for Information* was circulated broadly to seek interest in creating new initiatives that provide students at all levels with greater opportunities to understand their business, to gain opportunities for quality work experience, and to grow the national talent pool.

BAE Systems Australia believes that taking a new approach to partnerships is critical to delivering current and future program commitments. They seek to play a greater role in shaping industry-relevant curriculum and providing diverse job and work experience opportunities for young people to learn and grow.

To ensure they have the right capability and skills in the right place at the right time, BAE Systems Australia intend to take a more systemic approach to engagement with the education sector. Moving forward, they want to build strategic long-term alliances with universities who are willing to collaborate vertically and horizontally across the education and tertiary sector to create new and digitally-enabled educational programs and research expertise that align with future business requirements.

Further to this, BAE over the last year has been working with Ai Group to introduce a Degree Apprenticeship in Systems Engineering to Australia. It will adapt learnings from the 10 years of BAE running it in the UK. *Here is an example of WIL morphing into employment-based learning at the university level*, where the learners have a contract, similar to a traditional apprenticeship. It is a practical example of that quote I used earlier ‘businesses are the campuses of the future’.

Ai Group is coordinating the process and assisting in gaining interest from other companies, speaking with governments about system changes, and working with a university on course development.

As for other companies, do more need to be involved? Definitely.

We’ve seen a greater awareness and willingness by businesses to take on students as the years have passed. But engagement and uptake is as complex as the nature and complexity of industry. The WIL colleagues we know in the room will be aware of this message we have consistently provided, but industry can never be ‘one thing’.

Large, medium and small sized businesses all have different capacities and motivations to be involved. As you would know, large companies can have whole departments geared around their annual WIL programs. At the other end of the scale, small businesses’ reactions are often ‘we just don’t have the time’. A few years ago, Ai Group, as a direct action from the National Strategy for WIL, developed and circulated a basic guide – ‘An employers guide to taking on university students’, including contact details at all universities supplied and updated by ACEN. We are

also aware of, and promote, the excellent ACEN material and guides aimed at employers.

But many small sized company employers are unlikely to go looking for materials such as this. Another message we have always conveyed is that the best approach for small companies can be very localised. Of course there *are* companies these days who are happy to search and engage students through online platforms, and so these are an important channel. Some small companies can respond to an individual approach but need to develop trust; need to hear about the opportunities and benefits before getting involved.

Research back at the time of the National Strategy development (by PhillipsKPA) had shown that WIL engagements most often occurred through approaches by a university or student. At the time companies said they did not know how to approach universities or who to approach. My perception is that more streamlined communication pathways have developed at universities since then, however one of our larger members (Varley) said to us last year that they had needed '*dogged persistence*' to reach and talk to the right person or someone who could lead them to the right person.

One message from smaller businesses has been clear over the years, and that their involvement in WIL (and to provide a quality experience) takes time and resources. That is not to say university support is not there. We have seen the coordinated support , guided by ACEN, around student selection, preparation, placement and assessment be bolstered in recent years. But there will always be time needed by company staff to spend with students, supervise, spend time on reviewing and assessing, as well as some regulatory checks and paperwork.

For this reason, Ai Group has been very consistent in its advocacy to governments that incentives and support is needed for companies. This has been picked up by some specific state government programs under which a payment is made to companies involved. It should be applied more broadly.

And certainly the worsening skill shortages over the last two years have meant that some companies have newly considered WIL – and this should not be a way to exploit students because students are there to learn and experience the environment as well as providing some new knowledge and fresh ideas. But it *is* an opportunity for companies to re-design roles and organisational structures to incorporate the students as part of a strategy to have the skills they need across the business.

One reflection I do wish to make is that WIL is working – WIL works.

And this is notwithstanding the myriad frustrations you must go through as practitioners and the things that still need to improve. At the macro level there's been research that's found students who've had WIL involvement have better employment outcomes. Across this room I'm sure you will have much positive feedback from students and employers that demonstrates success, but I'll add to this by relaying recent feedback from government funded WIL projects with which we are directly involved in the defence industry. In the first we source students from SA universities (working with WIL coordinators), to be placed in defence related companies in South Australia. Having run for three years and continuing, feedback has found:

- most companies were first time users of WIL and they use the program to introduce, develop and embed WIL practices in their workplaces
- small, medium and large companies are all involved – (they receive funding support as do students)
- a number of them come back for more in subsequent rounds once they have taken on a student
- 98% of students reported excellent experiences and 98% favourably rated the support of their host organisation. 89% reported a positive view of their host's onboarding process
- 77% of students secured employment with their host (either during or after completing their degree)
- 94% said placement allowed them to demonstrate or practice the knowledge and skills attained through their course
- The skills students said they were most able to develop during their placements were *problem solving and critical and creative thinking*, followed by technical skills applied in defence settings and then teamwork.

In a similar funded defence project we run in Victoria, results are equally as pleasing.

This feedback highlighted transferable skills as the most developed.

WIL is the champion of employability skills – it develops them.

It is not new to you that the jobs experiencing growth in the economy require higher level thought and judgement. The concept of teamwork and social skills, real and virtual, will increasingly broaden within and across workplaces and across countries. Changes to the way work is

organised and tasks within roles are shifting. As *The Factory of the Future* report (Microsoft, 2019) pointed out a company can generate enormous amounts of data, but must rely on people to make decisions. As we move on it will be the characteristics of agility, resilience and flexibility in professional graduates that will be key to their success in organisations. This will allow organisations to be adaptable, innovative and thrive in complex, unpredictable digital environments.

I think DeakinCo in 2018 put it clearly when it stated: 'people need to be armed with the mindset, behaviours and techniques to adequately learn to learn'.

In Ai Group's skills survey this year 28% of companies said that when employing graduates the most important factors in recruiting are generic capabilities and a positive attitude.

WIL now needs public policy champions. Major disruption in industry (as we are seeing through digital transformation) should mean major disruption in education and training. Education and training needs to reflect the emerging workplace: fluid settings, digital and offline platforms, collaborative spaces and project-based activities. The necessary disruption and change in universities, which would support WIL, is something that must be *supported by better public policy and funding*.

The Australian Government has funded some limited pilots and programs that further a connected model, including the Diploma of

Digital technologies, Women in STEM Cadetships and Advanced Apprenticeships in Industry 4.0.

An example of other government activity is the NSW Government's Institutes of Advanced Technologies which integrate students with industry. Encouragingly, the September Victorian Parliamentary Report of its inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills, included a whole raft of WIL-focussed recommendations. They covered introducing incentives to encourage industry participation in WIL; supporting Victorian universities on collaborative network approaches; supporting universities to explore new and flexible models of WIL to incorporate opportunities; expanding WIL in the public sector; the government supporting host organisations and supervisors to undertake mandatory placements; the government to consider ways to expand available uptake of regional and rural placements; to offer financial support to students undertaking regional and rural placements; and investigating ways to support host organisations in regional and rural areas to enable them to offer placements in priority areas.

I'm also aware that NPILF has focused a number of metrics on WIL. But policy change is promised through the Universities Accord, beginning with a review of the higher education system, and also through the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia. More broadly the future of WIL is also *integrally linked with approaching AQF changes, lifelong learning supports, coherence between vocational and higher education, and broader acceptance of a culture of employment-based learning*. All of these are included on the agendas of the new bodies. And we hope our collaborative refreshed National Strategy for WIL aimed for early next year will help to shake up the conversation.

So, did I end up answering any of those questions I posed at the beginning of my presentation? In parts I did, but the key is to acknowledge the quest is a long-term one: it is evolving, increasing. And it is important to note that, along with you, there are industry agents, and company champions who are driving the vision - that the future can be created with WIL.