

Time to Start Planning Your WIL

The rise of work-integrated learning

Introducing WIL

The concepts behind work-integrated learning (WIL) are familiar to us all, but the terminology may be less so. For educators, the terms used most commonly are often specific to the programme of learning: *clinical placements, academic internship, work experience*.

One advantage of finding and defining a common umbrella term may be that it enables the creation of a framework at programme, institutional, or sectoral level. This can surface, value, and evaluate occurrences of WIL and also, accordingly, give opportunity to the evolution of our curricula and associated learner experiences. However, use of the term *WIL* should not be at the expense of current terminology that is often linked to disciplinary identity and may better describe the experience that a learner is about to encounter.

The rise of WIL

WIL as an overarching educational construct is relatively young, though the experience it attempts to define has been around for centuries. One of its earliest mentions is in the *Journal of Cooperative Education*, where Coll (1996) wrote that universities need to respond 'by providing the skills that employers require to university graduates, and providing training to them to find employment', then described a BSc (technology) degree programme that included 'cooperative education, involving work-integrated learning' (ibid., p.34).

Coll and colleagues (2008) later described WIL as 'an educational strategy in which students undergo conventional academic learning with an educational institution, and combine this with some time spent in a workplace relevant to their program of study and career aims' (p.38).



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The further and higher education sector is familiar with the importance of experiential learning, particularly in professional and STEM disciplines. This article explores the emergence of an umbrella term, *work-integrated learning*, that frames these pedagogical strategies for the purpose of enhancing the acquisition of graduate attributes.

A search of ERIC shows *work-integrated learning* appearing in the educational literature in 1995, initially in just one or two papers a year but rising steadily to a peak of 84 sources in 2020. While there are often attempts to distinguish between academic internships, work experience, and clinical placements in professional health degrees, WIL allows these experiences to be contrasted and compared, with learnings shared across an institution rather than being confined within disciplinary boundaries. Ebrall et al. (2008) wrote that the university had undergone a fundamental shift to view clinical education as work-integrated learning and described WIL as the most appropriate pedagogy to facilitate deeper learning.

WIL I am?

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There are many definitions of WIL in the literature. The one adopted by the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* (formerly *Asia-Pacific Journal of Co-operative Education*) comes from the *Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning* (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p.38):

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 . . .

The authors complete the definition by further explaining the learning theories underpinning WIL and its associated approaches. 'Integration' into the curriculum is key with this term, emphasising the importance of a seamless approach connecting to theory and practice. The roles of students, external stakeholders, and the higher education institute are also a key aspect.

To help contextualise all these and WIL-related forms of learning, University College Dublin (UCD) Teaching & Learning has created a graphic representation of WIL in UCD with an eye to future sectoral alignment (O'Neill, 2023, 2024). The table, adapted with permission from O'Neill (2023, 2024), attempts to summarise a complex paradigm. Many more examples of WIL could be included, but in each institution there will be variations in nomenclature, form and place of assessment, and the degree to which an overarching architecture guides and measures its presence.

	WIL - Off Campus		WIL - On Campus	
Accredited Curriculum	Type 1 Primarily Assessed by Host	Type 2 Primarily Assessed by HEI	Type 3 HEI Assessed Major Host Input	Type 4 HEI Facilitated Minor Host Input
	Clinical Placements	Academic Internships	Live Case-based Learning	Guest Speakers
	Professional Placements	Cooperative Learning	Live Work Projects	Interactive Simulations
	Apprenticeship	Community Work Experience	Entrepreneurship Projects with Partners	Enquiry or Problem Based Learning
	Work Placements		Field Trips	Laboratory Learning
Non-Accredited Curriculum	Volunteering Summer / Part-time Work		Conference Attendance Society, Club or Student-led Group Participation	

Summary of WIL at UCD

The table shows examples of the spectrum of authentic and experiential learning associated with WIL in UCD and its alignment with both curricular and co-curricular/extracurricular learning opportunities. Types 1, 2, and 3 are recognised as WIL experiences in the international literature; type 4 is an example of the broader spectrum of experiential learning. The term *host* is used to broadly represent industry, enterprise, and external stakeholders involved in WIL.

Final WIL

Academic internships in UCD have doubled over the last 10 years, notwithstanding a dip due to Covid-19. The reasons for this growth are many, but there is no doubt that domestic and international government strategies are supporting greater inclusion. Clinical and work placements are also increasing, due to growth in numbers of students and of modules and programmes that include these or similar experiences. Previously seen as the domain of professional, scientific, business, and engineering programmes, it is now becoming more challenging to find a programme that does *not* have a WIL experience at least as an option.

The presence of WIL does not guarantee success, however, with significant questions being asked of higher education about the application of universal design principles to enhance equity of access and experience (Rao et al., 2024). We also know that more could be made of these experiences, from pre-WIL preparation to post-WIL reflection, such that the opportunities optimally yield the desired outcomes, including those of career readiness and employability.

In preparation for the wave of Human Capital Initiatives from the Higher Education Authority in Ireland, each of our institutions went through a phase of preparation; in UCD, one of these was deep consultation with students, staff, and industry. In most of the conversations with industry employer

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representatives, when asked what the university could do to support the development of attributes in graduates, transversal skills were mentioned as often as industry-specific skills. Communication, presentation, teamwork, and leadership skills were keenly sought, along with a desire to instil resilience, digital literacy, empathy, self-care, and care for others. These are attributes that have long been associated with WIL.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), Ireland's state agency responsible for quality in further and higher education, is now also interested in WIL and has tendered for the development of statutory quality-assurance guidelines on work-integrated learning. This is a further sign that *WIL* as an umbrella term is finding traction in enabling improvement and enhancement in an increasingly prevalent and important component of higher education provision. Have you planned your WIL?

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