Employability and Career Development

A White Paper for Australian and Chinese Employability Professionals

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Executive Summary

This white paper is most suitable for educators, government officials, higher education teachers and industry practitioners who desire to learn more about the similarities and differences between Australian and Chinese business school students when they undertake work-integrated learning (WIL) programmes. Therefore, the white paper is best used as a discussion prompt only. Throughout the white paper, we share ideas about WIL practice and how to best support and improve Australian and Chinese business students’ WIL learning outcomes for job-readiness.
TO DATE, there is modest research on studies that compare and contrast Chinese and Australian business school students’ learning experiences for WIL programmes. This white paper is the result of a collaborative research partnership that focused on enhancing employability outcomes for Australian and Chinese business school students. Throughout the white paper, we highlight innovative ways to provide WIL activities for higher education students to achieve a more global outlook, taking into consideration the differences and similarities between Australian and Chinese business students.

Not all students will enter their chosen career. This is for several reasons, such as economic challenges, labour market requirements or simply taking multiple pathways to secure graduate employment. Due to the unknown future of the economy, it is important to focus on developing and measuring students’ transferable skills by re-imagining WIL assessments and providing high quality support options that is context relevant.

Upon entering the job market in a global VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) environment, graduates require not only technical skills, but also interdisciplinary and transferrable skills. These include problem solving, critical thinking and analytical skills. Employers value students’ ability to learn new knowledge, operate across diverse knowledge landscapes alongside being adaptable and flexible. To help substantiate this, we have conducted evidence-based research to uncover some of the differences and similarities between Australian and Chinese business students’ employability. Throughout the research, we discovered the main variances are often due to students being educated in different systems, and/or raised within diverse cultures. This result further highlights the need to develop WIL curriculum for culturally specific employment expectations and outcomes.

In this white paper, we begin by describing a brief background about WIL, its practice and its effect on graduate employment in an Australian and Chinese context. Next, we provide a detailed list of WIL programmes that are currently operating in our two institutions. In addition, we elaborate on the practicalities and benefits of our WIL programmes for graduate employment. Lastly, we raise some common issues that we encountered when incorporating WIL practice in higher education before presenting a set of key recommendations for the reader’s consideration.
Background

The current job market is experiencing a fundamental transformation under the forces of globalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the global COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of workers have seen their lives profoundly transformed in the world of work and beyond, affecting well-being and productivity. Unemployment and the need to upskill and reskill are spiking in nearly every industry, both domestically and internationally. This puts higher education institutions in a crucial position. They need to respond to the changing and dynamic labour market conditions in order to supply graduates who are equipped with the job-ready employment skills required. Consequently, it is more important than ever to innovate and to embed WIL programmes into higher education’s curriculum. WIL is a pedagogy that “integrate(s) theory with practice of work within a purposely designed curriculum” (Patrick, et al., 2008, p.iv). For example, internships, practicums, clinical rotations, industry-based learning, and cooperative education (Billet, 2001; Yorke, 2006; Eraut & Hirsch, 2007; McLeland & Keating, 2008; Orrell, 2011; Smith, et al., 2014; Australian Collaborative Education Network, 2015). This white paper focuses on presenting WIL practice from two leading universities in Australia and China, presenting benefits and challenges for implementing WIL at an educational level.

Australia as a developed economy and China as an emerging market in the Asia-Pacific region represent a large variety of job market characteristics, yet they are equally dependent on labour force supply and demand. According to the 2020 World Economic Forum (2020), Australia has a relatively lower labour force participation rate (65.6%) compared to China (74%). However, the employment landscape in China (45.1%) is more than four times of that in Australia (10.6%). Many emerging employability skills, such as analytical thinking, innovation, active learning and learning strategies, technology use, and emotional intelligence are similarly required in both countries. However, there are several differences due to their respective labour forces’ needs for employees to reskill and upskill. For example, Australia tends to centre more on critical thinking and analytical skills, while China’s employment market demands more leadership and social influence from its future employees (World Economic Forum, 2020). Additionally, both countries exhibit tension when attempting to systematically implement graduate employability skills, at a curriculum level, for students. Additionally, education is the fourth largest export industry in Australia, having attracted 637,415 international students (as of June 2020) with 51% students (367,224) being enrolled in the higher education sector. Furthermore, Chinese students make up the biggest share of these international student markets. As of June 2020, there were 167,568 Chinese students enrolled in Australia’s higher education system (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020). Given the dominant role that Chinese students play in Australia’s education sector, it is reasonable to examine how WIL practice is best utilised in Australian and Chinese contexts, concurrently and for improving graduate employment opportunities. To achieve this, we summarise some of the WIL practices at the University of Sydney Business School and at the Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University International Business School in Suzhou, China. We do this in order to share knowledge and to create robust discussion in this area.
At the time of writing this white paper, the University of Sydney Business School had a total enrolment of 15,660 and over 72,600 alumni as of September 2019. In 2018, the University of Sydney’s DVC (Deputy Vice Chancellor, Education) office implemented a process to identify experiential learning (EL) within the student management system for all units of study (UOS) offered by each faculty member. EL is classified into Industry/Community Project, Entrepreneurship Project, Placement or Internship, Consequential Practical or Fieldwork, Research Project, Mobility (with experiential), and Standard Mobility (without experiential). By 2018, the Business School achieved 56% of its PG coursework units and 60% of the UG units to be identified as having students participating in EL. This continually increased throughout 2019 and 2020. Overall, the Consequential EL type represent a majority for most programmes in the Business school, which was closely followed by the Industry/Community Projects and Mobility with EL units. Such an emphasis on EL, as part of a Business School work-ready strategy, has significantly improved graduate placement and higher degree learning satisfaction rates. The proportion of students in full-time jobs or those who are accepting full-time jobs at the time of our research was 5% higher for those who did participate in WIL activities compared to those who did not. Furthermore, the proportion of students rating their satisfaction with their degree as ‘Excellent’ or ‘Outstanding’ was 8% higher for those who participated in WIL activities.
Chinese universities face several challenges that are different from Australia. Among these are a more competitive job market, rising demand for graduates with diverse skills, and a massive misalignment between conventional university learning, teaching approaches, and social and economic development. In the past decade, the world has seen a continuous increase in the number of Chinese university graduates studying overseas. For instance, by 2019 domestic graduate students had already passed 8 million, while the number of returned overseas Chinese graduates passed 500,000. These statistics indicate that competition for graduate employment in China is becoming tougher, showing that university degrees are only the first stepping stone towards meeting short- and long-term employment demands. In short, a university degree alone is not enough to make a graduate competitive in such a volatile employment landscape, especially considering COVID-19 disruption.

When assessing the current graduate employment landscape in China, several aspects contribute to this challenging situation. At a national, economic level, the Chinese economy is transitioning from low-level, labour intensive to technology/knowledge intensive production. Such a transition requires technological upgrades and an increase in productivity, which means heightened demand for graduate knowledge workers. Firms in China are being hit harder by such transitions. Consequently, their expectations for graduates who can start on the job with minimal training and can still meet multiple labour needs are heightened. Additionally, Chinese universities rarely provide employability development support that students in Western schools like the University of Sydney provide. For example, in many Chinese universities, teaching is conducted in a lecture format, using examination scores as a way to assess students’ job readiness. For example, traditional classroom teaching often overlooks students’ acquisition of transferrable skills. Some universities do not always provide comprehensive assessment and preparation for entering employment upon graduation. Consequently, there is a growing gap between the number of desired graduate employees and the overall ‘headcount’ of university graduates in China. This is being further driven by the demand, at a national level, as well as at an industrial level. It is prudent that universities in China review, reflect, and restructure how best to enhance students’ employability by focusing on career development for life-long growth and success. However, it is challenging for conventional Chinese universities to provide effective employability development, whereas, private and joint venture universities in China have greater advantages in this regard. The reason being is that private and joint venture universities have built-in elements for internationalisation and can introduce student activities and/or training. Currently, there are roughly 10 such universities registered with the Chinese Ministry of Education, and Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) is the largest. Subsequently, as a joint venture established by two leading universities in China (Xi’an Jiaotong University) and the UK (Liverpool University), XJTLU has developed much in this area. It has eight academic disciplines. ALAs and employability programmes across different academic areas. ALAs and employability enhancement enhance student activities and help students excel in their career development.

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At Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU), learning and teaching activities of MSc programmes largely resemble those in the UK universities particularly on preparing students for their graduate employment. As such, IBSS formally instituted a programme to develop student employability in 2018. This included compulsory programmes, like Additional Learning Activities (ALAs), such as ‘Personal and Employability Skills’, ‘Employability Enhancement’, ‘In-Company Projects’, ‘Career Development Workshops’, and ‘Graduate Work Placement’. IBSS has further collaborated with corporations and third-party training and consulting firms (e.g. Allegis China, PWC Shanghai, and CPS Australia Shanghai) to create employability development programmes across different academic disciplines. ALAs and employability training workshops at IBSS are tailored to the demands of employers’ needs at the local, regional and national level. Upon graduation, more than 95% of undergraduate students pursued further study abroad. MSc graduates, however, entered the job market immediately. Therefore, students’ employability development at IBSS places a focus on its MSc students and supports their career development needs. Furthermore, feedback from employers indicates that they prefer MSc level graduates because of their maturity, knowledge, and readiness for employment. For example, one of our surveys conducted with employers indicated that IBSS graduates excelled compared to their counterparts from other schools when it came to adaptability, effective communication, problem solving, resilience and having an international mindset.
It is therefore important to ensure that university students have access to quality employability and career development programmes through WIL. The following five components are worth considering:

**Preparing students to work within industry**

**Integrating theory with the practice of work via a purposely designed curriculum**

**Engaging students with meaningful work experience or work-like practices**

**Planning and implementing authentic assessment activities that allow students to reflect on what they have learned**

**Providing experiences that are tailored to relevant career development learning outcomes**

The following section lists several ideas that you may want to consider when implementing a WIL programme.

The examples shown provide ways to embed WIL into the curriculum as either face-to-face, online and/or as blended learning (formative and/or summative).

It is also important to note that there is a vast amount of knowledge sharing occurring online between WIL educators and researchers. These resources focus on improving students’ employability at the unit, programme, and School and university level.

The following list also highlights some of these activities.
Invite the community and local organisations to conduct research and analysis with students.

**Examples to consider**

1. Hackathons & competitions for problem solving and providing solutions to businesses.
2. Link entrepreneurship initiatives with students and start-ups to devise and potentially implement solutions.
3. Allow students to co-develop with the educator a project brief, an implementation plan, and then a final evaluative report for which the industry partner may also provide feedback.

**Type** | **Examples to consider** | **Benefit**
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**Action-based learning** | Invite the community and local organisations to conduct research and analysis with students. | Enables students to deepen their analytical understanding of the topic/project for industry clients and organisations. |

**Project-based learning**

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<td>Project-based learning</td>
<td>1. Hackathons &amp; competitions for problem solving and providing solutions to businesses. 2. Link entrepreneurship initiatives with students and start-ups to devise and potentially implement solutions. 3. Allow students to co-develop with the educator a project brief, an implementation plan, and then a final evaluative report for which the industry partner may also provide feedback.</td>
<td>Provides student-led projects across and within capstones, working with industry/clients.</td>
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<td>Service learning</td>
<td>Industry and/or community organisations and clients’ views are incorporated into the learning journey, focusing on the assessment tasks for solving a service issue or other authentic industry/professional problems.</td>
<td>Enables students to engage with the realities and complexities of work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-based learning</td>
<td>Students interview and observe industry practice and practitioners, and undertake organisation audits or group grant applications for a social, global financial problem. Website development for a client, concept development to launch, developing training manuals for clients and organisations to use.</td>
<td>Enables students to design and execute blogs, vlogs, wikis, websites, opinion pieces, and media releases. Places responsibility on the learner to solve real problems that mirror real work demands with strict deadlines.</td>
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<td>Public events, community outreach and engagement activities</td>
<td>Group collaboration with overseas institutions and organisations. Pre-recorded industry presentations and face-to-face or virtual field trips to prepare students for industry-engaged/focused learning. Mentoring by industry, industry input on student work/progress and industry/alumni Q&amp;A sessions.</td>
<td>Integrates leaders and experts from government to work with students on civil society initiatives with private sector, community members, or international experts.</td>
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<td>Local and international case studies</td>
<td>Presenting a complex business problem that gives students the opportunity to formulate policies and strategies that have no right or wrong answer.</td>
<td>Students’ critical thinking and problem solving is of a focus, which are key employability skills.</td>
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<td>Simulations</td>
<td>Theatre of the Board, role-playing leadership roles and working with others, conducting mini student-led conferences, or a series of presentations. Expose students to industry experts who can discuss theory and practice. Class lectures can become ‘workshops’. Tutorials can become ‘boot camps’ to mimic the business context as realistically and authentically as possible.</td>
<td>Students prepare and deliver speeches to demonstrate competency in topic development, technology use, and oral communications. Requires students to do the sorts of things they will do in the workplace, such as finding data, presenting information, formulating recommendations, and making decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internationalisation</td>
<td>Students work with groups (including other universities), companies, organisations, and overseas start-ups to analyse, critique, solve business-related problems, or develop innovative products.</td>
<td>Students benefit from the international exchange of ideas, design and learning experiences for improving competency and employability. Students increase their technical knowledge and skills through discipline-related professional practices worldwide.</td>
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<td>Mirroring industry practice</td>
<td>Assisted by their teachers, students set up an online not-for-profit business model (such as a ‘stop smoking’ campaign) or collaborate with government departments and research centres. The not-for-profit business could be eventually transformed into a for-profit business.</td>
<td>Students learn to understand how new business models work, how to compare established business models, and how to communicate with an audience in a digital environment, using social media networks.</td>
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It is challenging to measure students’ employability development and outcomes for WIL programmes, but we endeavoured to do this. The WIL programmes that we studied were based on the following criteria:

1) Large enrolment numbers
2) Representation of onshore and offshore, real and simulated, physical and virtual (online) programmes
3) Ethics approval for data collection

We implemented a case study methodology that employed a mixed-methods approach. We chose to incorporate a case study methodology, because this method is well suited to investigating new perspectives, real-life situations and to undergo evaluations of programmes (Eisenhardt, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 2004; Vishwanath & Mummery, 2019).

We collected participants’ responses about their employability skills development via online surveys pre- and post- students’ WIL experiences. In addition, we utilised several focus group interviews to complement the quantitative survey data, allowing us to explore different perspectives at different times (Cooper, 2009; Yin, 2003). From 2014-2020, we investigated and collected student (Australian and Chinese) focused data about their employability experiences for the following WIL programmes: industry placements (N=54), industry and community projects (N=23), study tours (N=44), theatre of the board (WIL simulation) (TOB, N=96), and online WIL offerings (N=163).

Table two reports on the employability skills that were rated by participants. The ratings were in terms of the most developed skills and those that required further development.
Results

Participants who took part in the industry placement programmes reported that they developed skills, such as responsibility, teamwork, and being more open-minded. However, they also stated that they hoped to develop better career aspirations to obtain jobs that best suited their personalities and career desires. Informants suggested that they would like to receive additional information about employment opportunities and career pathways as part of their WIL experiences, including what skills were required to secure desirable positions. Most students reported that they had gained relevant industry experience from the WIL programmes and that this was due to working closely with the industry and clients. However, reflecting on their experiences, students also indicated that more hands-on supervision and career guidance from industry partners would better help them to understand their roles and further develop their personal and career aspirations.

In terms of industry and community projects that allowed students to work with industry or community partners on real businesses, participants suggested that their interpersonal skills, time management, and communication skills improved with the WIL programmes. Several students even suggested that they would like to further develop their leadership, negotiation, and management skills by undertaking additional WIL programmes.

Those participants who took part in a study abroad programme reported that they learned about the importance of being responsible, attention to detail, and creativity as employability outcomes. They attributed this to the fact that their WIL programmes encouraged them to solve problems in unfamiliar and complex situations while abroad. Many students also stated that they became more open-minded and were more likely to seek help from others when needed.

Those who participated in work placements suggested that they desired further support about career destination requirements. We also found that simulation programmes, such as the Theatre of the Board, an exercise in which students learn how a company's board of directors works through role-play, provided students with a way to develop their teamwork and problem-solving skills that allowed for risk taking. Not surprisingly, participants also claimed that their teamwork and communication skills improved greatly. They found the experience highly rewarding and an asset to their future employment. Students suggested that understanding the team’s needs and perceived opportunities to contribute could have been better supported.

When we analysed participants’ viewpoints for online WIL activities, some students expressed concerns about adequately developing core employability skills because of the lack of in-person engagement with industry partners. However, students noted, via the post-experience surveys, positive results when it came to active learning, critical thinking, and communication skills. A majority of participants acknowledged that online WIL programmes might be the norm until the COVID-19 pandemic subsides and that they may need to be more open-minded and patient in the meantime. We also summarise the findings from our study in the following table.
To compare the employability skills developed between Australian and Chinese business students, we focused on the two international placement programmes that were delivered by the University of Sydney Business School in large corporations in Shanghai and Beijing, China. These two programs involved six weeks of full-time, unpaid placements. Both programmes had the same course structure. These WIL placement programs were delivered from 2018 to 2019, with all participants being at a similar stage in their studies. It is important to note that one cohort had 100% Chinese national students (N=42) and the other had 100% Australian national students (N=12). Therefore, this provided us with an opportunity to compare employability outcome data between two countries. With this in mind, Figure 1 below highlights the most developed employability skills among Australian and Chinese students. Interestingly, both cohorts gave high marks to several skills after the programme’s conclusion. However, when it came to skills such as professionalism and time management skills, we noticed some interesting differences.

Australian students, for instance, were more confident in their presentation and networking skills. They were more concerned about their cultural competence and speaking publicly. Chinese students, on the other hand, found that their communication and teamwork skills greatly improved but would have liked to improve their presentation and leadership skills. It is therefore interesting to note that students of both nationalities develop and prioritise skills differently. We suggest that this might be due to being educated in different systems, and/or being raised in different cultures. This then means WIL curriculum also needs to consider divergent career requirements and expectations. As previously discussed, Chinese and Australian business school graduates face different labour markets (see Figure 1).
Discussion and recommendations

WIL strategies for business schools are best designed to meet the different needs of students’ industry skill requirements that is country specific. WIL practitioners should focus on both domestic and international lenses for employability outcomes and graduation employment destinations. We therefore recommend that WIL curriculums be uniquely designed to assist students to seek global employment opportunities for the country that they study in as well as their home or future country/ies, especially if they are studying abroad. In the following sections, we will provide several examples of how a business school might go about implementing such a WIL curriculum.
Designing and delivering WIL curriculum

WIL curriculums are much more complex to design and deliver than a traditional programme. Based on our research, expertise and knowledge, we recommend the following:

**Area of skills for development**

As previously discussed, students may develop different skills and competencies when participating in different types of WIL models. A WIL programme is best designed to develop a particular area of skills, be initiated to focus on the careful construction of a well thought through WIL curriculum design that will assist students to enhance their employability outcomes. Some examples include employing teamwork assessments to develop collaboration skills; using real industry projects to practice application of theories, research skills, and problem solving skills; or using simulated leadership activities to practice management, negotiation, and organisational skills.

**Appropriate timing**

It is recommended that more complex WIL programmes be made available, but only to students who are at a later stage of their career path to ensure certain baseline of relevant knowledge and skills. Otherwise, specific courses and modules will be required to help students prepare for the workplace.

**Responsibilities of industry partners need to be clearly defined**

Most WIL programmes engage industry or community partners or third parties to provide students with authentic workplace experience. However, the responsibilities of partners can sometimes be ambiguous. WIL industry partners must commit to supervising and mentoring students. Feedback mechanisms are also recommended to ensure accountability.

**Authentic assessments to enhance employability outcomes**

WIL programmes designed to provide experiential, discipline-centred learning frameworks — in the classroom or in the workplace — can often be termed ‘authentic work-related experiences’ (Kaider, Hains-Wesson and Young, 2017). The term ‘authentic’ in this white paper relates to WIL opportunities in which the learning activities and assessments require students to work on real-world problems, industry-related outcomes/processes, community projects, and the production of materials that students would encounter in their chosen profession. For a learning activity and/or assessment item to be classified as ‘authentic’, it must:

1. **(allow) students to use the same competencies, or combinations of knowledge, skills and attitudes that they would need to apply in professional working life** (Guiliers, Bastiaens & Kirschner, 2004, p. 69). In other words, it needs to be proximal to the workplace and allows for the following:
   1. Allow students to be introduced to the workplace to gain practical and professional workplace experience
   2. Provide students with learning and support materials before, during and after the WIL programme via face-to-face, online or blended, such as prep-and post-learning frameworks and activities
   3. Provide industry partners and students with support and clear expectations
   4. Implement workplace safety standards that comply with all relevant policies and regulations

**Student knowledge, skills and career readiness**

Our research found that students perceived the value of participating in WIL programmes and differently. Overall, students who had experienced extracurricular activities or work-related experiences tended to value employability skills more and were motivated to seek additional employability activities and opportunities. Whereas, students with some employment experience were more inclined to secure their next employment by participating in WIL programmes that allowed them to work closely with industry practitioners and organisations. For example, students found that being able to put theory into practice — as opposed to simulated role-play, for instance — compelled them to practice more communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills. On the other hand, a study tour exposed students to diverse cultural and working environments, while a placement expected students to be more job-ready and equipped them with more comprehensive employability skill development.

**International job readiness**

Graduates face different employability requirements in different industries, countries, and cultures. Higher education institutions need to better prepare their graduates to be global citizens and to be internationally employable. Therefore, when designing WIL curriculums, the requirements of potential job market destination/s should also be taken into consideration.

**Preparation and supporting mechanisms for programme participants**

Students can often be ill prepared for WIL programmes or have unrealistic expectations. This can negatively affect their learning experience and outcomes. It is therefore recommended that appropriate information sessions and orientation programmes are available prior to the programme’s commencement. Participants must be informed about any prerequisite knowledge or skills for the programme and should be advised on the programme’s expectations. They should also be clearly informed about what recourse they have, especially if the programme fails to meet their expectations or when they are not meeting industry expectations around professionalism.

**Authenticity**

Activities and assessments require students to work on problems, processes, and projects that they will encounter in their profession/s and/or when producing artefacts for reflecting on professional practice.
In conclusion, offering students a selection of WIL programmes will increase their chances of becoming job-ready graduates. However, WIL programmes are not easy to design nor deliver because they require regular evaluation and improvement. This is due to the uniqueness of the model because it includes three key stakeholders:

Students
Educators
Industry

Your feedback will be greatly appreciated, please click this link to let us know how we can improve this guide: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PDFT3D2
References


Glossary of Terms, Abbreviations, and Acronyms

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<td>Action-based learning</td>
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<td>Deputy Vice Chancellor</td>
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<td>Experiential Learning</td>
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