Building bridges: Creating mutually beneficial Workplace Integrated Learning opportunities

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Make tomorrow better.

Building bridges: Creating mutually beneficial Workplace Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities in East Gippsland

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Executive summary

Australian students living in regional and remote areas including Indigenous Australian students suffer many disadvantages when receiving and utilising work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities. Several reasons – for instance the unpaid nature of WIL placements and lack of support strategies – explain proven roadblocks for regional and remote area (RRA) students. Another confounding factor is that the student population in the regional and remote regions is from different universities but requires similar WIL experiences. This project considers how the WIL experience can be improved for RRA students living within the Gippsland East region of Victoria in order to make them employment ready. We approach the study aim by understanding the strengths and the weaknesses of the current WIL programs based on the opinions/experiences of the most vital stakeholder in WIL (i.e., students). More specifically, this research focuses on obtaining a better understanding of regionally based students' views and opinions regarding their WIL and community engagement experience, how this relates to their course of study, and what improvements can be made to ensure that regional students effectively utilise this aspect of their course that in essence matches knowledge and practice. An assessment of the perspectives and experiences of students regarding WIL placements reveals the realised benefits from undertaking WIL, types of challenges and possible opportunities concerning WIL to broaden the pool of experiences for students. WIL experiences here are hypothesised not only to provide students with direct support, including career enhancement, but also to contribute to local resilience, economic recovery, and economic development with education being a major driver.

The three research questions that this research project answers are:

1. What is the current attitude towards WIL placements held by students?
2. What do students consider to be the primary barriers and constraints to undertaking WIL placements?
3. Do current WIL opportunities meet student needs including education program requirements?

This pilot project, commissioned by the National Centre for Equity in Higher Education (NCEHE), surveys a probability sample of nine regional and remote area students. The survey collected responses from students on a wide range of factors that influence their engagement, or lack of it, in WIL and community engagement. The data includes highly informative qualitative comments on critical contextual issues as well as the analysis performed on the qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews with four survey respondents.

Due to the limited data collection, we present this research study as a pilot study. Thus, this project's additional original aim to find a WIL framework that increases the participation of businesses functioning in the scoped region had to be dropped.

There were multiple factors contributing to the non-availability of data in the scoped region from the business organisations that are mostly small business enterprises (SMEs), with the average size of businesses in East Gippsland being five employees. These businesses are still recovering from the devastating consequences of economic recession, drought, bushfire, COVID-19, and natural disasters associated with climate change during the past two years. We thus recommend conducting another study that evaluates the results of our pilot study by including more students as well as businesses from East Gippsland and other related areas to add the missing dimension to this study's results.

The findings of this pilot study generally confirm the previously known challenges encountered by regional and remote area (RRA) students participating in WIL and the nature of their WIL experiences. Notwithstanding that, the findings point to some vital flaws in how

WIL programs are formulated and implemented in regional and remote areas and the challenges and opportunities in the WIL space that require intervention. Key findings include:

- A clear majority (88 per cent) of respondents participating in WIL felt financially constrained over the unpaid nature of WIL placements and losing their work hours due to these placements. They want to be paid for the work they perform doing their WIL placements.
- More than half of respondents felt unsettled at unfamiliar WIL placements due to ill-structured induction programs (by employers) and lack of pre-placement sessions by universities. They revealed that there was no dedicated industry mentor to guide them and the fact that their placement supervisors in the industry are too time- and resource-poor to help them with WIL related tasks. These students felt uncared for and ignored by their industry mentors and felt unwelcomed at their WIL workplaces.
- Although a clear majority of respondents (66 per cent) were allowed to shadow their WIL work colleagues still less than 50 per cent of respondents agreed that they used their WIL time doing meaningful work.
- Despite the above constraints in the way of having positive WIL experiences, an overwhelming majority (>80 per cent) of respondents realise the benefits WIL placements bring for them. They agree that WIL placements promote a better understanding of their academic curriculum, how the industry works and enhance their employability.
- The majority of the RRA respondents want WIL placements to be close to where they live and given that most are mature age learners (>26 years), they want flexibility regarding duration and WIL placements designed to suit their time and other commitments.
- Students living in remote and rural areas most likely to be satisfied with WIL experiences will be those who,

  1. would be paid for WIL placement work,
  2. have the flexibility to accommodate their professional and family commitments alongside the WIL placements,
  3. get a dedicated industry mentor to continuously guide them,
  4. receive proper induction at the WIL workplace aimed at providing them information about the focal industry, nature of WIL placement work and,
  5. have a WIL coordinator at their academic institute to contact should they encounter any challenge at their WIL workplace.

In light of the above findings, higher education institutes (HEIs) are called upon to remove structural deficiencies in how WIL placements are organised. For instance, when finalising WIL host organisations, HEIs can take previous WIL attendees' reviews of WIL hosts into consideration.

This pilot study, subject to further research, raises fundamental questions concerning the institutional strategies required to increase students' financial capacity, accommodate their professional and family obligations, and enhance their resilience in the wake of recent disruptions to WIL opportunities in regional and remote Australia such as the East Gippsland region. These questions are: Is there more to be gained for the RRA students by providing paid WIL placements closer to their homes and introducing flexible WIL placement arrangements? Or should governments step forward to fund smaller businesses in remote regions to appoint dedicated WIL mentors who can take the pressure off their regular staff to support WIL attendees? Such a response to the management of social and economic isolation of RRA students at WIL workplaces may provide to these students critical management and other workplace skills, valuable to employers within the region, elsewhere in Australia, and internationally.

The report suggests a number of strategies that might be adopted to increase the more meaningful participation of RRA students in WIL activities. For example:

- Specifying a WIL approach that views regional and remote WIL students as a separate cohort; the new approach will depend on the specific needs of students living in regional and remote areas to increase the likelihood of their positive WIL placement experiences.
- Making available governmental financial resources to address identified barriers such as paying for WIL work and appointing a WIL mentor at organisations willing to participate in WIL.
- Creating a comprehensive WIL framework to increase understanding and structure for regional and remote area students required to undertake WIL placements as part of their academic curriculums. For example, embedding flexibility suiting equity students' work and family and organising WIL placements close to home.
- Educating RRA students through an advertising campaign about the importance of WIL for their future careers, targeting students who are not well informed about WIL.
- Getting universities to liaise with WIL hosts to understand how students can be supported to fulfil their WIL requirements, for instance by negotiating the appointment of a dedicated WIL mentor. Also, universities can investigate examples of effective university support strategies shared across the education sector.

The scope for WIL to increase in rural and regional areas is immense. This requires addressing some of the key barriers identified by students from remote and rural areas in this research. Once this happens, higher education providers will be providing these students with the ability to integrate theory and practice, taking the stress off their WIL work placements, and safeguarding their wellbeing.

Background

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is the term given to educational activities that integrate work placements into course curricula with academic supervision remaining available to students while they are completing the work experience (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TESQA), 2017; Higher Education Extension Act, 2015). WIL placements are believed to enhance students' employability outcomes by providing them with a situated learning context (Bell et al., 2021; McManus and Rook, 2021; Orrell, 2018). WIL attendees learn vital skills valued by employers through experiencing the workplace environment. Additionally, students undertaking WIL also develop metacognitive skills that are 'thinking about one's own thinking' (Flavell 1979). Equipped with metacognitive skills, students feel empowered to control their thinking processes and through that organise, manage, and adapt their learning (Tanner 2012). Active and experimental learning theorists state that learners engaged in WIL will attempt to 'do' what they learn in their class curriculum and this learning gets boosted when students participate in the community of practice (Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Realising the important contribution made by WIL placements to students' learning, academic institutions in several nations including Australia seek to build bridges between the WIL suppliers (i.e., businesses) and consumers (i.e., students). These initiatives aim to make WIL related processes, procedures and outcomes enriching and fruitful for the students. The Centre for Education and Training (CET, 2021) in Australia reports that three out of four Australian employers will employ either university or technical and further education (TAFE) students as interns, cadets, or higher apprentices. These employers offer work placements to students for variable periods, potentially increasing WIL students' pool of skill sets. Employers' increased engagement with WIL leads them to confidently hire fresh graduates exposed to WIL opportunities (Govender and Taylor, 2015; PhillipsKPA, 2014).

An in-depth assessment of WIL programs in the Australian higher education sector however shows a far from satisfactory situation. For instance, the WIL data provided by a Universities Australia report (2019) shows WIL participation among regional and remote area (RRA) students from low socio-economic backgrounds is 10 per cent less than metropolitan students from high socio-economic backgrounds. This is due to the many disadvantages suffered by the RRA and Indigenous Australian students in comparison to the metropolitan Australian students when receiving and utilising WIL opportunities (Ashman et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2015). Resolving the persistent inequity challenge thus remains an unresolved issue when making available WIL opportunities to the beneficiaries (i.e., students) (Beattie and Riley, 2015). Several reasons explain these roadblocks concerning RRA students in the WIL program.

Regional and remote area students' (RRA) lack of engagement with WIL opportunities constitutes the first major challenge. Education scholars posit that RRA students face commuting challenges to travel for WIL placements and are not sufficiently aware of the benefits of undertaking WIL placements (Ashman et al., 2021; Beattie and Riley, 2015; Jackson et al., 2015). Moreover, RRA students, mostly hailing from low socio-economic backgrounds, perceive unpaid WIL placements as unsustainable engagements. These students may thus disregard the importance of WIL in their educational and vocational development (Universities Australia, 2019). Secondly, research into this issue notes that skill shortages, workplace digitisation, economic recession, natural calamities, and COVID-19 impacts have led to the development of limited WIL opportunities by business organisations (McManus and Rook, 2021; Younger and Kay, 2021). Thus, regional area businesses' ability to make available WIL opportunities to the students studying at educational institutes in rural areas has become even more constrained (Universities Australia, 2019). Regional businesses face time scarcity (to making WIL mentors available for students) as well as resource constraints; these businesses are comparatively small when compared to businesses operating in metropolitan areas. Compounding this situation further, regional

businesses expect students undertaking WIL to have prior knowledge of workplace protocols and the federal government to support them (businesses) in lieu of providing WIL support to students (PhillipsKPA, 2014). Third, applied and area-specific knowledge are required to determine the best practice for the provision of quality WIL placements suitable for both students and organisations. Thus, criteria upon which to assess WIL placements should embed suitability for employers and meet student needs regarding learning, flexibility, and program integration (Ajjawi et al, 2020).

Table 1. A comparison of various WIL models for Australian students

WIL Models	Micro-internships	Consulting	Online project / placement	Competition and events	Incubator / start-ups
Duration	Two to five days	Two months to one year	One to three months	One to five days	One to three months
Subject specific	No	No	No	No	No
Benefits to students	Pre-readiness of students embedded in this model Students perform WIL tasks and know what to deliver	Develop understanding of industry issues through providing consulting, researching, and reporting	Geographically dispersed students to learn cultural and language adaptation skills as well mimic real-world global business operations	Soft skills such as communicating, teamwork and leadership, subject related learning	Expose students to non-traditional career paths and interesting work Develop modern day Skill development among students
Where are they available?	Wide range of Australian industries	Wide range of Australian industries	Virtually across different national geographies	Small and medium Australian enterprises (SMEs)	Australia's most innovative businesses and start-ups

Source: Australian Collaborative Education Network (2015)

Fourth, the most appropriate model for WIL and community engagement for students still needs to be developed. As of now, five models have been identified by the Australian Technology Network (ATN) Project in partnership with the Australian Industry Group and the Australian Chamber of Commerce. These models highlight the best practices adopted and implemented to make the WIL placements fruitful both in terms of learning and employment for students (Table 1). A comparison of these models shows that while these models inculcate soft skills such as communicating, teamwork and leadership, as well as obtaining more in-depth subject-related learning, they also provide useful insights and experience through working on live industry projects.

Surprisingly however, none relate to regional areas and in particular, to socially and economically disadvantaged regions such as the East Gippsland region of Victoria – the scope for the present project. Last, a recent shift has seen WIL being undertaken online yet it is unclear whether this represents an opportunity for students in regional areas or widens the equity gap further. Such requirements present challenges for implementing effective WIL opportunities, particularly for the RRA students from low socio-economic backgrounds who are disadvantaged in this space (Universities Australia, 2019).
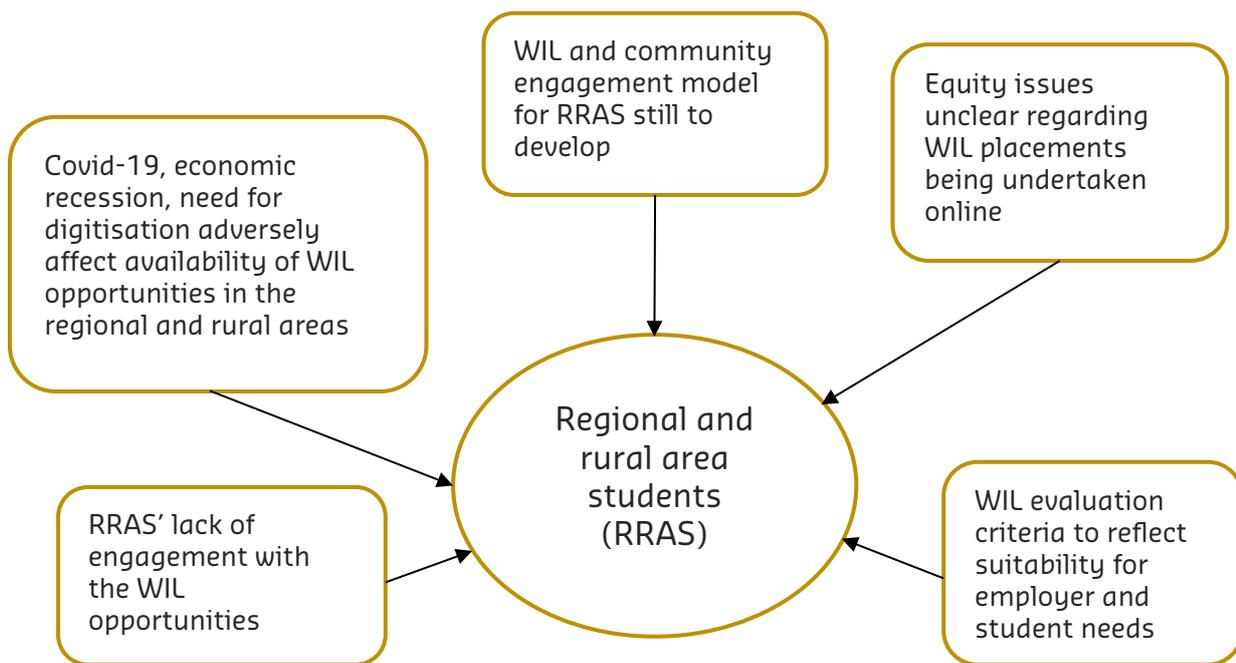
Figure 1. Equity challenges for implementing effective WIL opportunities for RRA students

Failure to overcome the challenges described above (Figure 1) and reported gaps in availing the WIL opportunities by RRA and Indigenous students prompted this research project in the scoped region. Furthermore, the student population in this region is from different universities but requires similar WIL experiences. This confounding factor requires formulating a new model that is essentially neutral in terms of university allegiance. Towards meeting this requirement, this pilot project aims to understand the barriers, constraints, and challenges to the implementation of effective WIL opportunities for the RRA and Indigenous students. WIL research positioned in regional areas emphasises making rural-centric WIL programs contextual and realistic through cooperative learning and a strong relationship approach between the student, industry mentor and the university (Beattie and Riley, 2015). We thus respond to the scholarly call of Beattie and Riley to continue expanding WIL models to rural and regional higher education institutes across Australia. Key research questions are:

1. What is the current attitude towards WIL placements held by students?
2. What do students consider to be the primary barriers and constraints to undertaking WIL placements?
3. Do current WIL opportunities meet student needs including education program requirements?

Answers to these questions are derived from the current, past, and potential university students enrolled or seeking enrolment in the scoped region who are engaged in any WIL or related community programs. Some of these students would have done so in the past or will do so in the near future. The students belong to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as well as those from low socio-economic backgrounds and live in the regional and remote areas of Australia. The study assesses these students' appreciation of the current WIL frameworks and whether these opportunities adequately prepare them for employment as well as what students would like to see in any future WIL program.

This study's outcome will be laying down the pathway for future researchers to identify an improved model and process for engaging students and organisations in WIL. To achieve this research project outcome, various WIL models will require to be tested to assess effective engagement with industry for instance by including both RRA students and

businesses from the scoped region into the gambit of research scope. These models may vary according to duration, forms of interactions, types of learning contracts and level of assigned responsibility. This will provide continuing RRA students with direct benefit through enhanced WIL opportunities and result in a wider array of organisations gaining benefit from student contributions to their workplace and possible assessment as future employees. Indirectly, improved WIL connections will assist local regional development, socially and economically, through retaining local talent in the Gippsland region of Melbourne, Australia. This pilot project's outcomes will provide an initial understanding of regional undergraduate and postgraduate students' specific needs and skill requirements consistent with a dynamic and uncertain post-COVID-19 employment landscape, both for this region and nationally.

Our report is structured as follows. First, we provide contextual information on the East Gippsland region and the research partners involved in this study. Then we undertake a background literature review on WIL, associated barriers, and opportunities for equity students in the WIL space. We then detail our methods, including ethical considerations and how we analysed the questionnaire and interview data. In the findings section, we present the analysis of the survey responses (i.e., quantitative) and interview (i.e., qualitative) data. We then provide a discussion, where we explore the findings and how they relate to the literature. We conclude with suggestions for future research and recommendations.

Study's context- The region of East Gippsland in Victoria, Australia

The region of East Gippsland suffers both social and economic disadvantages compared to other Australian regions. As shown in Table 2, Gippsland falls into the most remote Australian regions with an accessibility remoteness index exceeding 5.92. Remoteness and lack of educational facilities, plus a combination of other significant factors reduce severely local opportunities for the East Gippsland students to engage in WIL and community-based activities. These educational barriers have been exacerbated by recent devastating bushfires across East Gippsland, ongoing drought conditions and, most recently, effects of Covid-19 on the local economy, much of which is visitor and hospitality based. Since many regional businesses have faced considerable turmoil over the last 6-8 months (data collection was to take place during this time), and several have closed, the State Government is considering a range of initiatives for economic recovery for instance via the Bush Fire Recovery Program. However, until the businesses in this region recover completely, WIL placement offers for RRA students might be curtailed with this resulting in the students experiencing more barriers concerning WIL. In this context, education remains an important driver for economic recovery, but to address East Gippsland's needs in this space, different or new models of scholarship and training are now required. Australian businesses including those operating in the East Gippsland region are keen to work with students on WIL programs, but they typically lack sufficient understanding of how these programs work. Uncertain aspects include essential economic and managerial resources to support a WIL student and, in particular, how students might be best optimised through an experiential learning framework to assist these businesses. These challenges confronting businesses in the scoped region present barriers to the WIL placements for the RRA students (PhillipsKPA, 2014).

Table 2. East Gippsland's classification as the Rural, Remote and Metropolitan Areas (2006)

Population	Accessibility Remoteness index	Zone	Ensuing impacts on lifestyle and amenities' availability for people
Capital cities and other cities with a population of ≥ 100,000	0-0.20	Metropolitan zone	Relatively unrestricted accessibility of goods, services, and opportunities for social interaction
Inner and outer regional areas with a population of less than 100,000	0.20-5.92	Inner and outer regional areas	Significantly restricted accessibility of goods, services, and opportunities for social interaction
Remote areas with a population of ≥ 5000 but less than 10,000	5.92-15.00	Remote areas	Very little accessibility to goods, services, and opportunities for social interaction

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016); Information and Research Branch, Department of Health and Aged Care (2001)

Research partner organisations of this pilot study

1. *Gippsland East Local Learning and Employment Network (GELLEN)*: GELLEN is a not-for-profit community-based association working across the East Gippsland and Wellington Shires and dedicated to increasing local pathways for education and employment. Their role is to provide leadership in building place-based networks that catalyse change so people in Gippsland East can develop the knowledge, skills and experience needed to fulfil their aspirations and succeed in their pathways through education to work. The GELLEN delivers a range of place-based initiatives co-designed with the community and beyond the scope or capacity of individual stakeholders. The GELLEN also provided the infrastructure necessary to conduct the study, as the students work with the network. Gippsland East Higher Education Study Hub (HESH) commenced student registrations in January 2020 intending to support regionally based university students in Victoria's far east. The HESH's establishment aligns with Government policy regarding students who are based in socially or economically disadvantaged areas. The centre currently hosts 83 students who have made a conscious choice to undertake both UG and PG studies in either online or blended modes of delivery. The students attend a variety of different universities in Victoria and interstate.

2. *Federation University Australia*: The second participating organisation, Federation University, has a history of 145 years of providing tertiary education within and outside Australia. Quality assurance was initially ensured through the Federation University Ethics application process, which also requires the completion of regular reports and updates. This also coincides with NCSEHE's (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education) own interim review and reporting processes. All identifying information (e.g., names of people, organisations, and places) is removed from the data, and an alphanumeric acronym is assigned to each participant for instance S1 for respondent one and so on. There is no intention to generalise the results of this pilot study beyond the sample of respondents, as the objective of the study is to assess the experiences/perspectives of the students participating in the WIL program.

Literature review

Recent literature claims that rural and regional students' socio-economic and cultural situations and thus requirements, expectations and performance in WIL placements are different from those of the metropolitan students and these differences should be considered when planning and implementing WIL initiatives in a rural setting. Issues that confront RRA students include lack of or lesser income-generating avenues for their families, lack of resources and the added expenses related to commuting to and from their placement workplace and educational institute. These challenges, therefore, confront students studying and living in a rural environment and undertaking WIL as part of their academic program.

Meaning, importance and aim of WIL

Work-integrated learning encompasses a scaffolded pathway for students through deploying a cooperative learning approach (Paull et al., 2019). "Through collaborative industry-academia partnership, WIL integrates formal learning with the practical application of acquired skills and knowledge in an industry-infused environment" (Jackson, 2018, p. 24). WIL placements are the opportunities that students undertake outside of their academic learning environment yet as a part of their course of study (Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN), 2015; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), 2017). These work placements are specific to students' chosen study field and spread over shorter timeframes over the course duration. Also abbreviated WIL, work-integrated learning or work placements are usually unpaid yet mandatory work experience for students. The principal aim of WIL thus is to inculcate work-ready skills in students who form the future workforce. Closely related to WIL are other programs such as internships, field work, sandwich year degree, job shadowing, service learning and cooperative education (Clinton and Thomas, 2011; Von Treuer et al., 2012). These programs require students to undertake work placements as part of their academic degree/diploma. Still, it is WIL that has been developing the most as part of university education and receiving maximum support from national governments across the globe. For instance, governments of developed countries such as Canada, the UK, and the USA are investing in WIL programs to produce job-ready graduates (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2020). Research suggests that students undertaking WIL will go outside of the university to a workplace where they would be mentored by professionals from working life (Paull et al., 2019). Students can thus learn how theories (ideas, principles, etc.) apply to real-life work situations (Anderson and Freebody 2012).

The bridging of the gap between theory (learned at university course) and practice (at the workplace) needs to be indeed the motive of WIL placements (Björck, 2018). The co-existence of theory and practice can make students realise the embedding of theories into the work placements rather than presenting theories as being disjointed from the 'real world' (Álvarez 2015; Björck, 2018; Gellerstedt et al., 2015). Björck (2018) cautions against the prevalence of a deficit view towards academic learning and devaluing on-campus training for being 'unrealistic' and incomplete. Doing so risks presenting academia and the real world as two separate ends that never meet (Álvarez 2015). Situating the WIL discourse in a disjointed territory results in asymmetrical ranking order and idealising work placements for being 'realistic'. The notion that working life rather than university is the best place for learning a profession can get promoted, albeit wrongly (Raelin, 2016). Thus, the very gap between industry and academia that WIL seems to fill is only widened by considering academic learning as unimportant and secondary to creating careers for students (Björck, 2018).

Benefits to stakeholders from engaging in WIL

WIL denotes the tripartite arrangement among students, employers, and universities; the three most actively participating stakeholders in WIL along with many others such as government, industry, careers advisors, professional and community associations (Jackson and Collings, 2016; Mcmanus and Rook, 2021). Stakeholder theory emphasises recognising the perspectives and needs of stakeholders when designing and implementing WIL programs to facilitate a collaborative approach. Such an approach improves the WIL experience and outcomes for students, employers, and universities (Jackson and Collings, 2016; Patrick et al. 2008).

Students engaged in WIL are found to strengthen their disciplinary knowledge, self-efficacy, leadership skills, self-management, analytical ability and critical thinking, self-awareness, self-confidence, effective communication, time management, networking, project management skills and teamwork (Jackson, 2018). They develop workplace understanding along with improvement in academic outcomes. Confidence in setting and attaining career-related goals also increases through the maturation of their theoretical skills and knowledge (Jackson, 2018, p. 28; Purdie et al., 2013). These skills are believed to enable university graduates' ability to smoothly transfer to the world of work. However, not only is there inadequate empirical evidence of graduate skill transfer in this space but also assertions about the learned skills at the WIL workplace increasing employability among students remain contested. Some researchers find university students' participation in WIL does not increase students' full-time employment (Jackson and Collings, 2018) whereas other research notes WIL results in better employability among university students (McCarthy and Swayn, 2019; Oliver and Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). In line with this reported mixed evidence regarding WIL outcomes, research also presents conflicting evidence about students' perspectives on the usefulness of WIL placements. While some studies report evidence of limited perceived usefulness of WIL among students (Rae, 2007; Tymon, 2013) others have discovered students value WIL placements (Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Tomlinson, 2008).

From universities' perspective, WIL is a deliberate pedagogy for bringing together theoretical and practical knowledge aimed at solving the potential dichotomy of theory and practice, idea and reality, and thinking and doing (Effeney, 2020). However, university staff responsible for implementing WIL among students might be ignorant about the vocational placement criteria set by the local law, for instance the Fair Work Act 2009 in Australia concerning WIL. This ignorance may affect the development of WIL policy at the university level. Compounding this, the consistent and uniform conceptualisation of WIL is lacking across universities. While some universities require students to solve real-world problems of the chosen employer as students' WIL project, other universities send students to the employing organisation to undertake an internship. Related to this, some students are required to undertake fieldwork or simulation activities to fulfil their WIL requirements. These different patterns of WIL engagement present challenges in laying a uniform WIL model for students enrolled in university level educational programs. Moreover, the implementation of WIL at the university level also has associated risks (Cameron, 2017). For instance, from 1998 to 2016, Australian universities were involved in several litigation suits arising out of WIL placements that resulted in huge legal costs for the universities (Cameron, 2017). Therefore, despite the recognised benefits of WIL enriching the university curriculum learning, practical challenges in implementing WIL particularly focused on design, structure and management need to be addressed.

The third party in the WIL partnership (i.e., the business organisations) instils work-readiness skills in their future workforce (Hodges and Martin, 2020). Thus, business organisations can experience enhanced faith in offering employment to those students who have undertaken WIL placement as part of their course curriculum. In a snapshot survey of Western Australian employers and industry focus groups in 2015, employers were found to believe

that work placements for students were useful for their industry sectors (Jackson et al., 2015). Employability among graduates in this space gets boosted as an outcome of the accumulation and deployment of educational, social, cultural, and psycho-social resources acquired by the students through formal and informal work experiences (Tomlinson, 2017).

However, challenges remain for businesses to effectively contribute to the WIL programs. PhillipsKPA (2014) reports that Australian employers offering WIL opportunities are small businesses who make up over 90 per cent of employing businesses. Jackson et al (2015) discuss the WIL related bottlenecks facing Western Australia's business organisations, such as identifying suitable projects and work for students to undertake, allocating suitable students to the work, and assessing the quality of student performance and/or outcomes. These businesses have constrained resources and cannot offer time for mentoring students undertaking WIL placements. To work within the confines of the Fair Work Act, 2009 students must be supervised by an expert in their discipline area to ensure a quality learning experience with appropriate levels of feedback and guidance. However, arranging effective mentoring support for students may prove difficult for smaller firms as these firms are inclined to outsource support services such as human resource management and marketing (Jackson et al., 2015). The PhillipsKPA report recommends providing pre-placement training to students before the WIL placement, for instance completing a project as on-campus learning related to the employer's specialisation area.

In brief, WIL is described as testing conceptual learning at the workplace and in turn, taking practical work experience back to academia; this process is believed to enhance employability among students. The three important stakeholders which are universities, students, and business report mixed perspectives about the engagement of students and beneficial outcomes in the WIL context. This also means WIL programs face threefold bottlenecks; on the supply side (from businesses), on the demand side (from students), and the mediating side (from higher education institutes). Hence there is a need to address these challenges in the WIL space.

Theoretical frameworks informing WIL

Four theories inform WIL placements. Rooted in the concept of experiential learning, these theories are (1) adult learning theory, or andragogy, (2) experiential learning theory, (3) workplace learning theory, and (4) transformative, or transformational, learning theory. These theories are the constantly applied lenses to examine the learning practices among WIL practitioners. Experiential learning theorists argue that to better internalise the course curriculum, the dynamic environment in which businesses work needs to be experienced first-hand by students so as to develop new skills and improve their ability to solve practical problems (Clem et al. 2014; Sharp et al. 2020). The adult learning theory posits that students undertaking work placements bring abundant life experience, including knowledge and skills, to their learning endeavour. The proponents of the two closely related theories argue that adult learners abhor the imposition of learning and learn best through drawing on their life experiences, acquired observational skills and experiencing learning. The third theory that is the workplace learning theory builds upon the above two theories and expands them by including the concepts of formal/informal training and learning to work as well as working to learn. While formal training is directive, structured and goal-oriented, informal learning incorporates the notions of situated learning and communities of practice and occurs through interaction with others (Ng, 2020). Only then does the incremental accumulation of knowledge or improvement in skill levels result in personality and perceptual change of learners as stated in the transformational learning theory.

Close examination of these theories reveals overlap in the four learning theory streams. Rather than being distinct, the common thread running through these theories is the prevalence of intentions among adult students to not learn in isolation from their life experiences and see education and WIL placements as an expansion of their already

acquired knowledge and skills. Questions relating to whether and how students' socio-economic backgrounds and WIL participating organisations' situational contexts impact these perceptions and experiences of WIL practitioners are however not answered by these theories. Without incorporating these answers into their WIL models and theories, existing research risks providing generalist WIL models and theories. These frameworks assume wrongly that the characteristics and challenges of WIL participating businesses, as well as the students' WIL participation outcomes in rural and non-rural areas, are similar. Only new research focusing on regional and rural areas such as the present research project can build a new model for WIL implementation for students, businesses, and higher education institutes in these areas.

Australia, WIL programs and Equity issues

Australia's involvement with WIL

The Federal government of Australia has increasingly focused on providing employment opportunities to all Australians amidst the concerns that some generalist university degrees such as law are producing more graduates than the Australian job market can absorb (Stewart & Owens 2013; Tadros 2014). In this scenario of excess supply of graduates holding generalist educational degrees, employing businesses tighten their selection criteria and processes and place a premium on teamwork skills, the ability to align with organisational and cultural values, cultural interconnectedness, being able to work in real and virtual ways, and work experience, all of which is seen to add up to more than just the academic degree of university graduates (Govender and Taylor, 2015; PhillipsKPA, 2014; Younger and Kay, 2021). Sensing this, the Australian government has actively promoted WIL related initiatives by higher education institutes such as universities. The prevalent understanding is that WIL engagement contributes to engaged students securing employment upon completing education generally and in the regional and rural areas particularly.

Still, Australia lags behind other developed countries such as Canada, the UK, and the USA in producing job-ready graduates. For instance, the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020) rates Australia as one of the less-prepared countries to deliver to the needs of employers. Realising the need for disruption in the ways the education policy worked in the wake of increased digitisation, the Australian government has launched a growing range of initiatives around providing tax-based incentives, wage subsidies, a government matching platform and promotional campaign and introducing the digitisation of the WIL programs wherever possible (CET, 2020; National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF), 2020). As a result, the number of Australian university graduates availing themselves of WIL opportunities has increased in the last decade (Radloff and Coates, 2009; Haddara and Skanes 2007). For instance, Universities Australia (2019) reports 33 per cent of students enrolled in Australian higher education have WIL experience. Two WIL outcomes among students explain the WIL engagement of university students. Firstly, through engaging with work situations as part of their learning curriculum, graduates develop work ready characteristics and traits such as an agile mindset and the ability to handle uncertain work situations (Younger and Kay, 2021). Secondly, WIL presents university students often with their first experience of workplace rigours and pleasures whereas classroom-based (face-to-face or online) instruction alone fails to produce graduates adequately equipped for the workplace (Govender and Taylor, 2015). Thus, WIL which seeks to increase the workplace and work readiness of university students is being increasingly valued by both students and employers.

Equity issues concerning WIL opportunities for RRA students

An inequitable WIL engagement among regional and remote area (RRA) students who hail from low socioeconomic backgrounds remains an unresolved issue (Universities Australia, 2019). Socioeconomic status (SES) in Australian higher education is proxied by the SES of the area in which students reside, known as Statistical Area 1, which is typically smaller than a postcode (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE, n.d.).

Low SES students are defined as those students who live in the bottom 25 per cent of Statistical Area 1 area in this ranking. A higher proportion of low SES students live in regions with a very high accessibility remoteness index and thus, have very little access to goods, services, and socialising opportunities (Table 2). This means that the participation of RRA students in WIL related programs will not be equal to the non-RRA students who live and study in metro areas (Information and Research Branch, Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001; Universities Australia, 2019). Thus, both the quality of work experience and the participation rates of RRA students will likely be adversely impacted due to factors beyond their capability, talent, and potential. Therefore, although there is an overall double-digit growth Australia-wide in the number of low socio-economic background and Indigenous student enrolments in higher education, the ratio shrinks to a single digit in the far-flung regional areas in the nation (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2020) (Table 3).

Table 3. Enrolments in Higher Education of Equity Groups (2013-19)

	2013	2019	Growth %
Low SES	107,219	128,839	20
Indigenous	10,018	14,892	48
Regional	140,510	150,100	7
Remote	5,682	6,107	7

Source: https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/national-data/

For instance, Jackson et al. (2015) find from their research on WIL participation of Western Australia businesses, that even the institutional framework favours the businesses operating in the Metropolitan areas. The authors find that the WIL Advisory Service founded by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia (CCIWA) to broker relationships between employers and universities and provide support to improve WIL outcomes predominantly supported employers from the Perth metropolitan area, with support for non-metropolitan businesses limited to advice by telephone. Furthermore, the business schools in Western Australia predominantly offered WIL opportunities to businesses in the metropolitan areas.

The differences in the cultural, social, and economic capital of RRA students from those of the non-RRA students' backgrounds lead to the RRA students experiencing disadvantage within the sphere of higher education (Bourdieu 1986). The cultural capital of a particular student community denotes their language, values, experiences, and ways of knowing in congruence with the expectations of the university they attend. Thus, the minority students (e.g., RRA students) would often be viewed as occupying cultural capital that is dissimilar to the cultural capital of the majority student community. Experiencing cultural incongruence, RRA students report increased mental stress which often manifests in their suboptimal academic performance (Bourdieu 1986). Burnheim and Harvey (2016) find that lower academic grades of RRA students adversely affect their chances two-fold. Firstly, RRA students get limited subject selection opportunities; RRA students mostly do not obtain entry to law, medicine and business degree that have high cut-off score requirements (Wirihana et al., 2017). Resultantly, RRA students mostly secure admission to lower-prestige universities' regional campuses and their motivation levels to participate in higher education are likely to

be lower. Research has shown that academic performance, interest, aptitude, and exposure to professional practice significantly impact student motivation to engage and learn in educational opportunities (Ashman et al., 2021; Lustbadel, 1998).

Secondly, a lack of English language proficiency on par with native English-speaking students often leads to lower academic grades among RRA students that appear as prerequisites to competing for WIL opportunities (Fleckenstein et al. 2016). Both these issues present inequity challenges in this space. As a fallout of this inequity, institutionalised discrimination practised through omitting the cultural context of students from low socio-economic minority backgrounds in the school and university curriculum is prevalent in Australia's higher education sector (Andrew, 2020; MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003, p. 132). It is possible for this discrimination to adversely affect equity students' effective participation in WIL programs (Bell et al., 2021). As a double disadvantage, equity students face barriers to learning in the 'real' workplace thus diminishing the sense of cultural fit and possibly reducing their potential for success in studies (Bell et al., 2021; Bonnor et al., 2021; Fleckenstein, 2016).

Even the social capital described by Bourdieu as resulting from a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition is disparate among students from regional rural areas compared to metropolitan urban students. Resultantly, RRA students have comparatively fewer reciprocal networks and shared knowledge meaning they have less social capital to draw on (Bourdieu 1986; Fleckenstein, 2016). Social capital becomes available through privileged knowledge, resources, and information attained through social networks and results in informed decision-making relating to higher education (Soria and Stebbleton, 2012). Norton (2018) notes that in Australia, children of managers are three times more likely to enrol in university than those whose parents work as labourers or machinery operators. Another related issue is the low sense of belonging among RRA students resulting from their belief in their academic aptitude and success to obtain admission in a high-prestige domain such as law in the first place (Ashman et al., 2021; Soria and Stebleton, 2012). Thus, inadequate social capital and an incongruent cultural capital likely result in the lower achievement of RRA students at university and beyond.

The economic capital represents the finances of students and their families; the Australian education system indirectly promotes societal inequity, with the financial and social benefits of education being restricted to those already in positions of privilege (Bonnor et al., 2021). For instance, the lower participation of RRA students in higher education is well documented due to costs arising from travel and accommodation, and students' perceptions that incurring costs for higher education would pay back in the form of post-university wages (Burnheim & Harvey, 2016). Additionally, the unpaid nature of WIL placements ignores the economic capital concerning WIL (Paull et al., 2019). Paull et al. argue that by allowing unpaid WIL placements, there is a risk of promoting inequity in higher education. This may happen because economically disadvantaged students would need to commit the same amount of time in WIL placements as other students. Thus, an unpaid mandatory placement for RRA students results in higher levels of financial stress for low SES than non-low SES students (Universities Australia, 2019) due to loss of opportunity to take more paid work. The report cites anecdotal evidence to suggest that low-SES students would be less likely to participate in unpaid WIL placement if that means sacrificing paid employment hours.

While the above-described disadvantaged status of RRA students concerning the WIL context remains at the forefront of Australian higher education policy making, still the approach to implementing WIL remains elitist and as Bourdieu points out has led to the reinforcement of social inequities in education.

Research Methodology

This is a mixed method design study. The intention is to survey the equity students attending GELLEN who are already involved with WIL and community engagement activities. The state of prior research into the WIL participation of the university equity students can be classified as intermediate (Beattie and Riley, 2015) as there are some areas where research has been significant and other areas where little research has been conducted.

Given the state of current research, it is most appropriate to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, which enables patterns to be recognised in those areas where there has been little theory or research while at the same time building on areas with the most established theories and drawing connections, introducing new constructs, and identifying new relationships (Aspers and Corte, 2019). The use of quantitative and qualitative studies and a variety of data sources to view the issue from a range of perspectives assists in providing both broad-brush and fine-grained analysis, both of which are useful to understand the issue of WIL participation in the regional and remote areas of Australia (Beattie and Riley, 2015). This was the reason behind using a mixed method approach to conduct this study. Suffice to say that using a mix of methods can offset the weaknesses of a single design approach (Creswell, 2003). A mixed method approach is also appropriate where the research questions cover a multi-disciplinary area such as WIL programs as it allows diverse views on the identified issues and questions to be incorporated. This research draws on aspects of education, management, and social justice. These three areas may be most effectively combined by using a mixed method approach. The following methodology was applied in this pilot study:

1. Desktop research – An examination of the literature regarding WIL and Community engagement
2. Survey of higher education (HE) students based at Gippsland East HESH – Quantitative survey
3. Interviews with HE students based at Gippsland East HESH – Qualitative in-depth interviews

The methodology was designed in this way, so as to understand what is and what is not happening concerning WIL opportunities within regional areas, as well as to look at how the WIL and community engagement programs might be improved.

Data collection methods

The data for this project were collected from the higher education students living and studying in the East Gippsland region of Victoria in Australia. An anonymous voluntary online questionnaire was prepared to collect data from the current Gippsland East Study Hub students, numbering approximately 83. Out of the 83 students, random recruitment was planned of 30 students who were to respond to a voluntary online questionnaire survey (Appendix A) as a part of this research project, with a provision for supplementary interviews (Appendix B) with the respondents in order to seek further insights and clarifications on their survey responses. Also planned but not achieved was the survey participation of 30 businesses in the region that are not participating in the WIL programs. As well, the original plan to interview 20 businesses offering WIL placements to students had to be shelved. Consequently, the project outcomes do not reflect the WIL related experiences/opinions and perspectives of the business organisations in the Gippsland region.

Survey data from students

The survey questionnaire was designed for completion in under 10 minutes. Questions include close-ended responses and longer open-ended answers. Surveys were utilised because they are able to provide standardised, quantifiable data. As well as producing

credible empirical, numerical data, the surveys were also used as a way to elicit qualitative data through the use of open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007).

Participating students were requested to provide standard demographic information (gender, age grouping, resident postcode, education, current educational enrolment), attitudes to WIL placements (using scale measures) plus details for current WIL requirements and previous WIL engagements. Students were asked also to rate the importance of WIL criteria and their desired WIL experience (including industry or sector) while giving qualitative explanations for their responses. The survey questionnaire was posted on SurveyMonkey, a cloud-based survey data collection tool with links provided to all the contacted students. A follow up email, where necessary, was sent one week following the initial emails (draft communications available upon request from first author).

Gippsland East Study Hub advised students of this study (undertaken by Federation University) via direct email that included the Plain Language Information Statement (PLIS) and noted the participation to be both anonymous and voluntary; a written consent form was provided to each participant. A sample of up to nine student respondents was deemed sufficient to address the research questions and consistent with the grant funding amount provided for this pilot project. Answering the survey questions by students was not anticipated to present students with any foreseeable risk. Regardless, the PLIS included contact details of support services (*Lifeline and Beyondblue*) where any issues raised may result in feelings of discomfort or distress.

Interviews with HE students based at Gippsland East HESH

Following Rubin and Rubin's (2012) suggestion that it is important for research examining social issues to consider the views of stakeholders, the current study conducted interviews with four survey respondents from the scoped region. These interviews were run alongside the anonymous survey data collection and their results confirm the findings emerging from the survey data. The interviews were incorporated to triangulate the results obtained from the quantitative survey.

Student interviewees were identified by Gippsland East Hub managers. This selection was informed by responses to the student survey (e.g., WIL opportunities sought). The first author of this report conducted six anonymous interviews with students studying in the Gippsland East Study Hub region. However, two of these six interviews and corresponding survey responses had to be excluded from this study because these two interviewees revealed that they never undertook WIL placements in the past nor did they expect to undertake WIL in their current study program. This project thus reports on the survey data collected from the nine survey student respondents with interviews conducted with four of them.

Stratification for the interview sample was informed by Gippsland East Study Hub managers regarding student proportions across fields of study (e.g., business, health services, manufacturing, agriculture, tourism). Interview participants include students having undertaken WIL previously and/or those currently undertaking these opportunities. Each interview lasting up to 30 minutes was audio and video recorded.

Student respondents presenting for the interview were not expected to experience any level of discomfort or distress. Interview questions required responses to the WIL related experiences and were not in any way personal or personally revealing. On request, interviewees were given an opportunity to review transcripts from their interview and redact any information provided. Any restrictions or requirements in place due to the COVID pandemic were provided for in this project regarding social distancing and personal hygiene (including hand sanitiser availability). Later, interviews were restricted to online or by telephone where this became necessary and upon the agreement of interviewees. Any changes required to the PLIS or Consent form due to COVID restrictions were to be notified

to the Human Resource Ethics Committee (HREC) of the Federation University before the change to planned methods.

Where face-to-face interviews were not possible then:

1. HREC was notified of the change of procedure and amended PLIS, and consent forms were forwarded to HREC for approval.
2. Candidate interviewees were requested to conduct the interview online (via video conference or telephone).
3. Participants who agreed to the online interview had PLIS and consent forms forwarded to them by email.
4. Electronic copies of signed consent forms were returned to the researchers by the participant before the interview, and
5. Participants provided verbal consent to participate and be recorded, with this audio-recorded at the start of the interview. The recording was completed using Federation University Teams software which remains password protected.

Background interview instrument

A semi-structured interview provides a general picture of the views of the informant participants on a given topic and gives the interviewer the flexibility to probe when the situation requires it (Tharenou et al., 2007). This technique was therefore considered appropriate when gathering the broad views of the informant students regarding their participation in the WIL programs in regional and remote areas of Australia. Semi-structured interviewing allowed the researchers of this pilot project to conduct an in-depth exploration of the WIL related perspectives/experiences of equity students and thus understand the sometimes complex perspectives involved. Therefore, the same open-ended interview questions, most appropriate for semi-structured interviews, were asked of all four interviewees, allowing for some flexibility to probe into areas of interest as the interviews unfolded (see Appendix B). Specifically, the questions were designed to assist in developing an in-depth understanding of the attitude of RRA students towards WIL placements and whether they perceive WIL placements as a useful investment in developing employability skills and meeting their educational requirements. However, the interview questions were deliberately kept very general. This enabled these interviews to contribute to a series of possible antecedents to be developed, which are incorporated within the recommendations concerning WIL in the regional and remote areas suggested in this project.

Triangulation of data

Triangulation of data has long been used to ensure validity and quality of the research and corroborating evidence is collected via a combination of anonymous online surveys, unstructured and semi-structured face to face interviews (Creswell, 2007). This pilot study uses online survey data as well as interviews as the basis for multiple collection points for data. This allowed the examination of several perspectives to evaluate the validity of the findings. Methods in this study were purposely designed to collect some overlapping data. For instance, the survey questions 14 ('WIL placements cause me loss of my working hours and thus my income') and 15 ('I wish WIL placements are paid for') essentially measure payment component aspects of WIL as perceived by the survey respondents. This was again asked in the third part of the survey questionnaire when respondents were asked to reveal how important for them is being paid for the WIL placement. Thus, the possibility for triangulation certainly existed and, given the results are convergent, greater confidence can be placed in the overall findings of this research.

Whilst the small size of the pilot research project severely limits the achievement of the project aims, nevertheless giving voice to the equity students of the Gippsland region to reveal/narrate their WIL related views/experiences is a much-needed initiative. We present this study as a pilot study that should be followed by another study. The future study should

consider the results presented in the pilot study and then include more equity students as well as businesses from East Gippsland and other related areas. Doing so will help formulate a comprehensive WIL framework that fits the students studying and businesses operating in the regional and rural areas of Australia in particular and elsewhere in general.

Data Analysis

Using a qualitative approach to analysing interviews, we applied a deductive thematic analysis for deriving theme summaries linked to interview questions and survey responses representing participant views. The datasets used and analysed during this project are available from the first author on request. Data analysis incorporated traditional routines and procedures often utilised in qualitative and quantitative analyses. Importantly, no software was used to analyse interview data. To explain, the audio/video recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researchers. As we read the six transcripts to immerse ourselves in the data (Bazeley, 2013), we determined that the outcomes in two of these six transcripts did not show actual WIL placement experience; rather respondents provided hypothetical answers relating to WIL placements; *these two transcripts were thus excluded* from the final data analysis.

In the qualitative synthesis of the four interview transcripts, we derived codes from the literature thus leading to the development of preliminary codes, that is, 'ways of seeing' (Boyatziz, 1998, p. 4). The codes were then reworked, adjusted, and regrouped into themes in the repeated ways necessary for robust qualitative data analysis. The themes were deductive, and each comment was carefully placed into a theme category (Bazeley, 2013). Comments were checked to ensure that they did conform to the theme and classification in which they had been placed. These themes are presented in the results section.

Numerical reports about various survey responses were obtained from SurveyMonkey and responses were manually entered into Excel. The survey data were analysed using ration analysis, tables, and bar charts. This process is useful for revealing 'patterns within data series' which are themselves integral to 'understanding what the numbers we have collected are telling us'.

Results

The specific focus of the data analysis is to provide insight into the WIL experiences reported by equity students in the scoped region. The results provide these insights by presenting the perceptions about the barriers and constraints to undertaking WIL placements among equity students as well as their expectations in this space. Also presented are these students' perceptions about the benefits from undertaking WIL placements as revealed by the data analysis. The analyses in the results section aim to provide answers to the three research questions of this pilot project.

In terms of demographics, 77 per cent (7) of the equity students participating in this research are female and 23 per cent (2) male (Table 4). Also, more than 75 per cent (7) of respondents are older than 26 years and the remaining two participants are less than 26 years. Further, more than half (5) have attained tertiary education up to the level of Bachelor and all respondents are currently enrolled in higher education programs; two-thirds (6) are studying in full-time mode and the remaining one-third (3) in part-time mode.

Table 4. Demographic details of research participants

	Age Group (Years)	Gender	Highest qualification obtained	Current qualification being studied	Full-time/Part-time
S 1	56-65	Female	Bachelor	Grad Diploma	Full-time
S 2	46-55	Male	Diploma	Cert IV	Part-time
S 3	36-45	Female	Diploma	Bachelor	Full-time
S 4	18-25	Female	Education	Bachelor	Full-time
S 5	46-55	Female	Bachelor	Bachelor	Part-time
S 7	18-25	Female	Bachelor	Bachelor	Full-time
S 8	26-35	Female	Secondary	Diploma	Part-time
S 6	26-35	Female	Bachelor	Bachelor	Full-time
S 9	26-35	Male	Bachelor	Cert III	Full-time

Source: compiled from survey data

Primary barriers and constraints to undertaking WIL placements

Financial pressure

A clear majority of respondents (more than 77 per cent; 7) considered WIL placements to cause a financial loss to them (Figure 2).
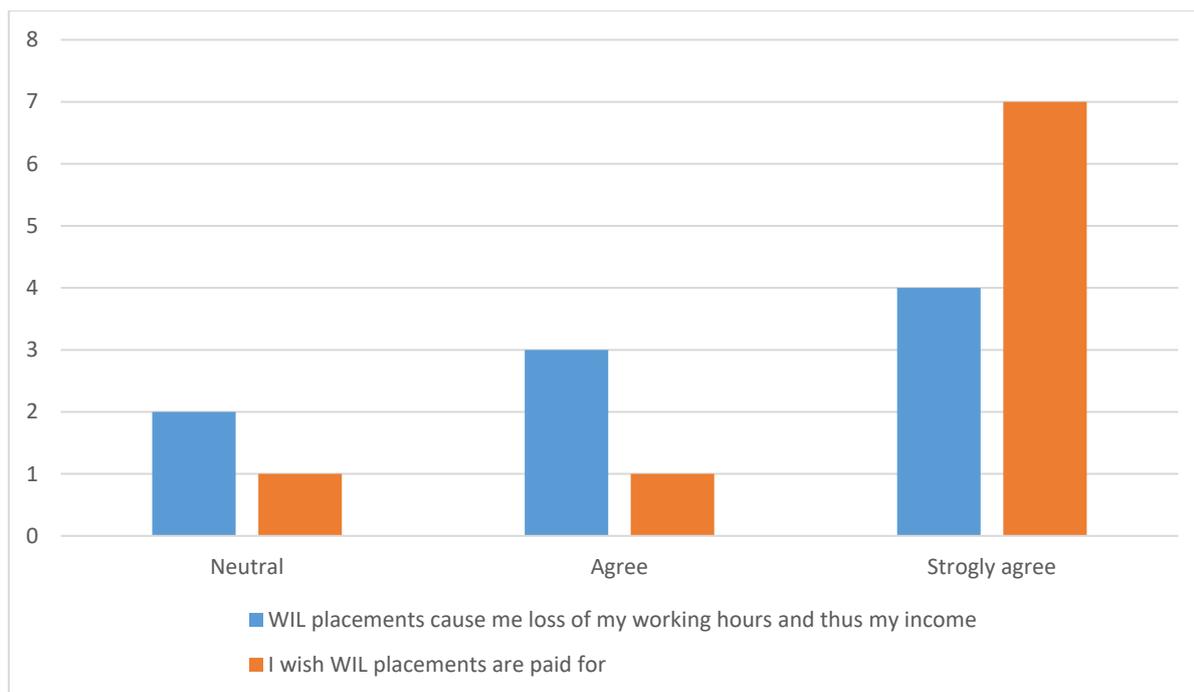
Figure 2. Financial concerns when attending WIL placements

Thus, paid placements were on the mind of most respondents as 77 per cent of them lamented that they missed their working hours and thus income due to attending WIL placements. S1 and S3 worded this challenge,

> *Look, if you're 18, or 19, or 20, and you are living at home with mommy and daddy, …you have that support. But when you are mature age, and you have to pay the rent and put the fuel in the car. I think … it is very, very wrong that you're at financial risk because you can't get paid to go to work…if you're on a WIL placement, your Austudy needs to maybe for those weeks be up a little bit …to cover the time and the cost… to subsidise the income … there is an increased cost when you do WIL, and a lot of our study people do part-time work. Now you can't do even that because you are on WIL …I think we'll need to have some sort of support. (S1)*

> *It is really hard having to work for free for a whole month, and then you've got to do that? I think it's a total of 840 hours of free work. So, you lose your income. Because you're not allowed to work while you're on placement. And you're working really hard. It's very hard physical work. So, you really should be getting paid for it. (S3)*

Being mature age students (majority are older than 26 years), participants have family obligations to fulfil and do not have the family support system that is available to younger age students. Thus, these equity students consider unpaid WIL placements as unjust labour that they need to do in order to earn their academic degrees. As a minor split on this aspect, S2 expressed a different perspective and viewed learning as more important rather than the payment component in the WIL,

> *I guess it's one of those fine lines. Yeah, whether I guess it's a bit more of a motivator for some… I myself didn't wish for any kind of paid work. I was happy to learn … it's not about getting paid it's about learning skills and being there and having something on your resume. (S2)*

The fact that respondents are mostly in agreement about this barrier suggests that students consider this barrier to be significant in the WIL placements. Also, responses suggest that

students living in remote and rural areas feel the impact of this barrier irrespective of their age, gender, or education attainment. To test the disagreement of S2 with this barrier, we investigated the demographics of S2 (Table 4); S2 is employed as a teacher of volunteering courses and his own WIL placement experience pertains to being a student of volunteering diploma. Thus, the nature of work that S2 is involved in reveals the reason behind his dismissive comments about the importance of the monetary component in RRA students' attitude towards WIL.

Improper induction and supervision at the WIL workplace

Data analysis revealed that only four students (less than 50 per cent) had a proper induction when starting WIL placement (Figure 3).
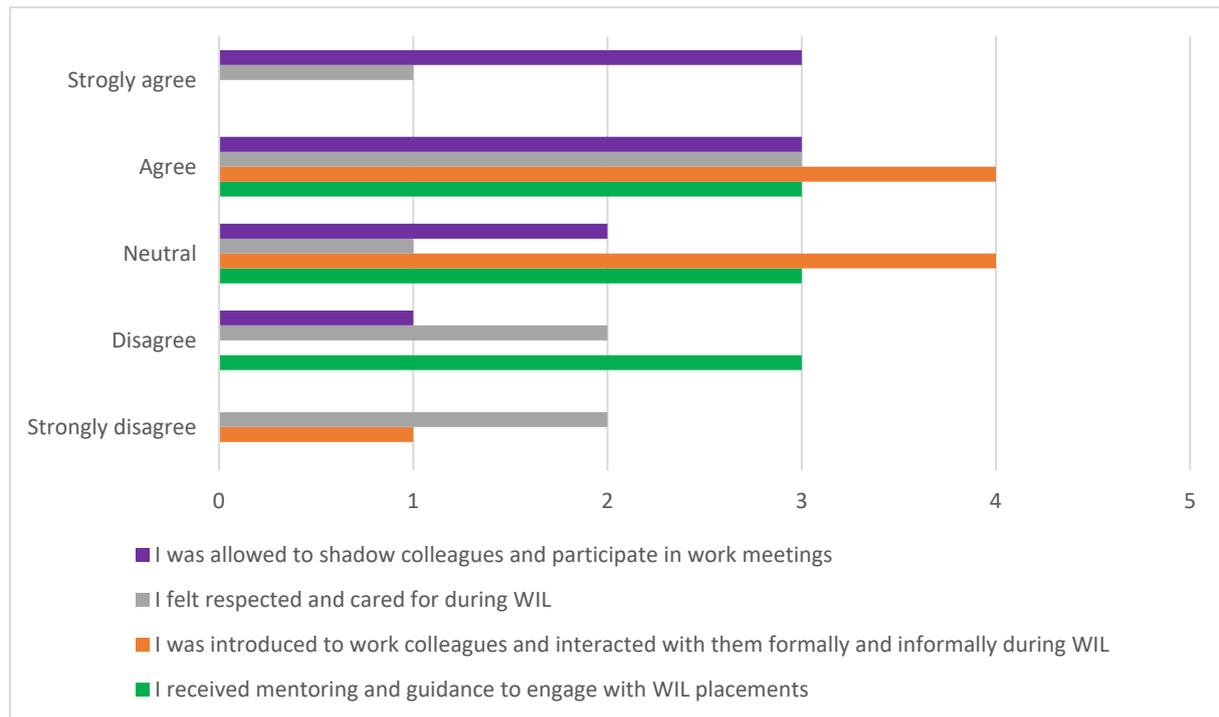

Figure 3. Respondents' perceptions about induction and mentoring at the WIL workplace

Although two-thirds of respondents (66 per cent) were allowed to shadow their WIL colleagues, this appears of not much value since most respondents (>50 per cent) did not receive love, care, and respect. Instead, they were left on their own to find their way at the WIL workplace. They did not receive mentoring and guidance during WIL placements as exampled below,

> I did my first placement as a student nurse; I didn't feel respected. I didn't feel cared for it. It was a negative experience; the staff doesn't seem that they like to have students. They don't really talk to you… you sort of just got to follow someone; you have got to really use your voice to make yourself heard. Otherwise, they will ignore you …In my first placement… they moved me halfway in the placement. So, it was four weeks placement, but after two weeks, they put me on a different ward, and I didn't like that because you only really start getting confident in the third week of your placement. … and you can't really consolidate your learning after two weeks. (S3)

> I didn't feel supported by the teachers a lot of time in the classroom. You know, I think sometimes ... teachers have hard jobs …but I felt some of the teachers didn't really support. What … I was doing in the classroom did feel at times like I wasn't welcomed in the classroom. It did feel sometimes when I was in the

room with the kids that I was a burden … and that, you know, my work probably wasn't as important as other work. (S2)

S1 attributes the lack of support to WIL attendees by their hosts to the one-time nature of the WIL placements,

> *… you are kind of seen … as an outsider, probably to be tolerated because we are going to come into their company… take all their time and then go back ...perhaps never to return (S1)*

> *…the way it's done, I think, could improve so that it becomes more purposeful if it is ongoing throughout the course. That is the most valuable way to do a work placement where it's over the three years of your degree on a regular basis. Instead of just doing four weeks where you don't know anyone, you've got to find out where you're going, you got to remember people's names, understand their philosophy and procedures, get to know all the processes. And in between time you are being assessed and you haven't even kind of put your feet on the ground to work out. …So, you're walking into this enormous space with everything that's new to you… you're thrown in for four weeks, you come like a hurricane (S1)*

The above view suggests that more than the WIL hosts' indifferent attitude towards WIL attendees, the structuring of WIL placements contributes to some of these negative experiences. This also suggests that despite operating with similar constraints of staff, resources and time shortages, regional businesses that host WIL students can treat students differently due to differences in their work culture. A positive workplace culture of WIL hosts can also overcome the challenges thrown by the one-time nature of WIL placements it seems as exampled by S3 below:

> *My second placement was just opposite of what I experienced in my first placement…I was supported and guided…that was a different culture altogether…everyone was so positive there…I felt happy doing my placement…I ended up building long term relationships with some of the people there (S3)*

Lack of support strategies by academic institutes

The survey responses clearly indicate that although WIL placements meet most (77 per cent) students' study requirements, still a majority (77 per cent of respondents) want more WIL opportunities than are currently available (Figure 4). There was moderate support sought by respondents when finding WIL hosting organisations and to help them prepare for undertaking WIL placements. A clear majority (77 per cent) want their academic institutions to engage with their WIL hosts in providing them with more information and helping hosts to structure their WIL placements.
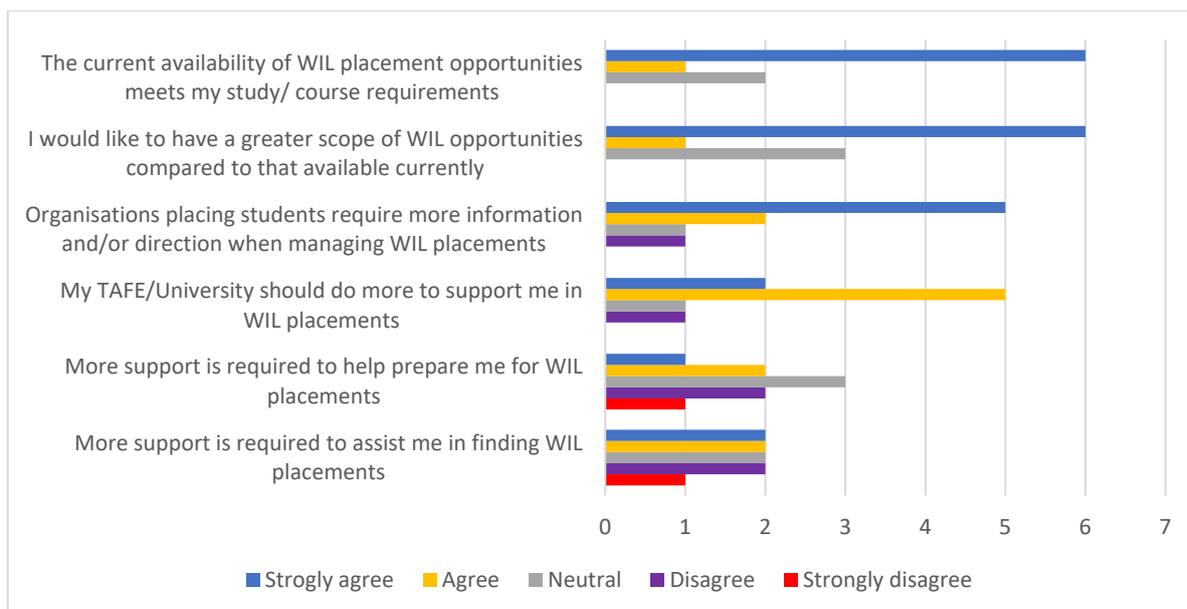
Figure 4. Students' perception of WIL placement support

Students emphasised the importance of their academic institution establishing a support system, having experienced sub-optimal WIL practices followed by their WIL hosts. Two respondents' comments explain this situation:

> …sometimes I got put with a graduate nurse who they're still learning themselves. So, I wouldn't ask them questions because I could see they were already stressed. And they didn't really know the routine properly, either. So that doesn't help me learn by getting put with somebody who is also learning. So, the organisation should do more to empower their staff with training on how to supervise students properly. I didn't know who to approach anybody in my university…if you are facing challenges…then universities should come forward to help. (S3)

> But I think a lot of times they put us in positions that we are not ready to take these things on. …I think they should just peel it back a little bit and start thinking more about just going back and finding our strengths, our confidence, and then giving us an opportunity to move forward from there with skills…the soft skills, the employability skills, all that sort of stuff, but wrapped around some personal development as well. (S4)

The above qualitative responses suggest students want to be supported more, both before and during WIL placement time. Still, it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion due to split survey responses and small sample size. The data however suggests that many of the structural issues or barriers such as the unpaid nature of WIL placements, unprepared WIL hosts and attendees along with the academic institutions unable to do the groundwork beforehand of the WIL placements, such as making available a contact point to the host and attendee should any challenges arise, need to be overcome. It is evident that the majority of students view these challenges as hampering their WIL placement engagement and satisfaction. *These findings answer research question 2: What do students consider to be the primary barriers and constraints to undertaking WIL placements?*

Perceived benefits from undertaking WIL placements

Despite the barriers that survey responses reveal students are facing while undertaking WIL placements, an overwhelming majority (>80 per cent) of respondents are unanimous about the realised benefits of attending WIL placements (Figure 5). Across a number of realised

benefits from WIL, there is an observable unanimity in opinion. One such realised benefit is students getting to apply theory to the work practices on their WIL placements. Respondents are of the view that WIL placements not only enhance their employability skills and generate a better understanding of the workplace but also acknowledge that working as part of their curriculum enhances their learning as well.
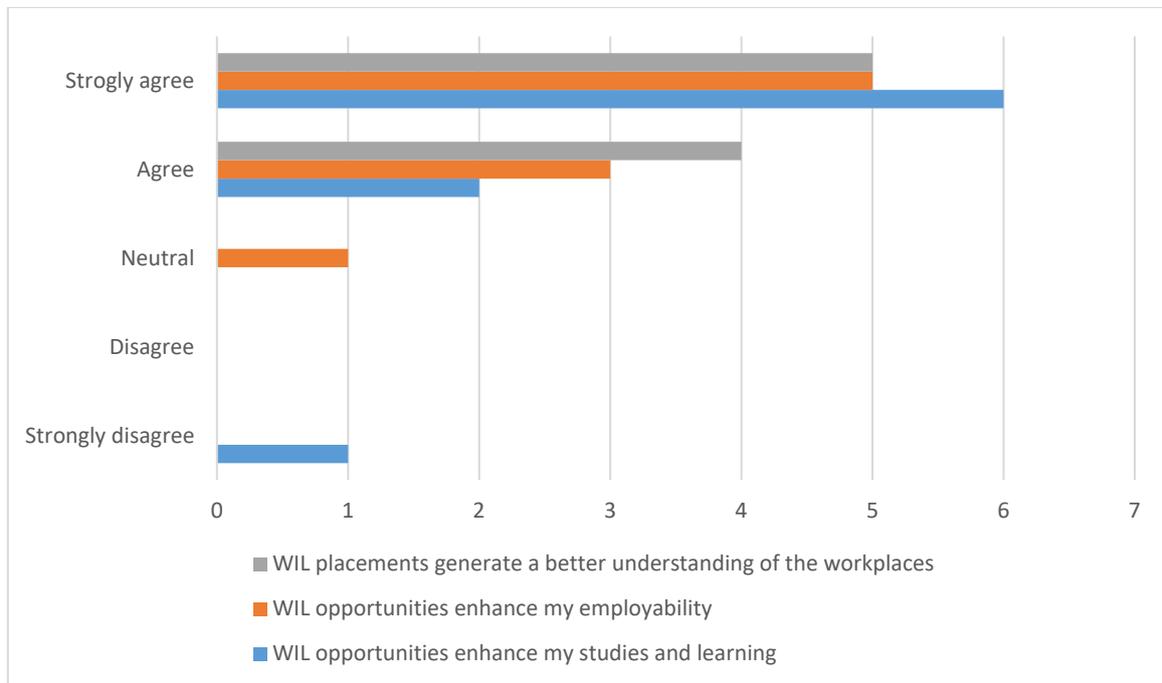

Figure 5. Student perceptions of benefits from undertaking WIL placements

The above views found resonance in the qualitative component of the data:

I learned a lot about the school system and the roles and the various, you know, bits and pieces in there. I actually went on to do youth work, I didn't go on to teach I went on to do youth work. I was working on a youth program, but that was my first role. And yeah, and getting to know people there and just, you know, starting there really opened up a lot of doors for future roles. (S2)

I found it beneficial. Dealing with death, there was a lot of death. So, I learned how to talk to families about dying, how to care for someone who was dying. (S3)

Yes, I find it extremely beneficial as it gives firsthand experience of what working in that particular field is like. It gives you a taste for what your qualification allows you to do. (S4)

Yes. It helped put theory into practice and consolidate my skills I would learn throughout the semester. (S6)

Respondents are decisive about the extent to which the benefits (shown in Figure 5) impact their learning and the potential to seek employment. However, while there was support in the qualitative survey responses also for these benefits, respondents showed a split in opinion on being able to use their WIL time in doing meaningful work. Less than 50 per cent of respondents agreed that they used their WIL time doing meaningful work (Figure 6).
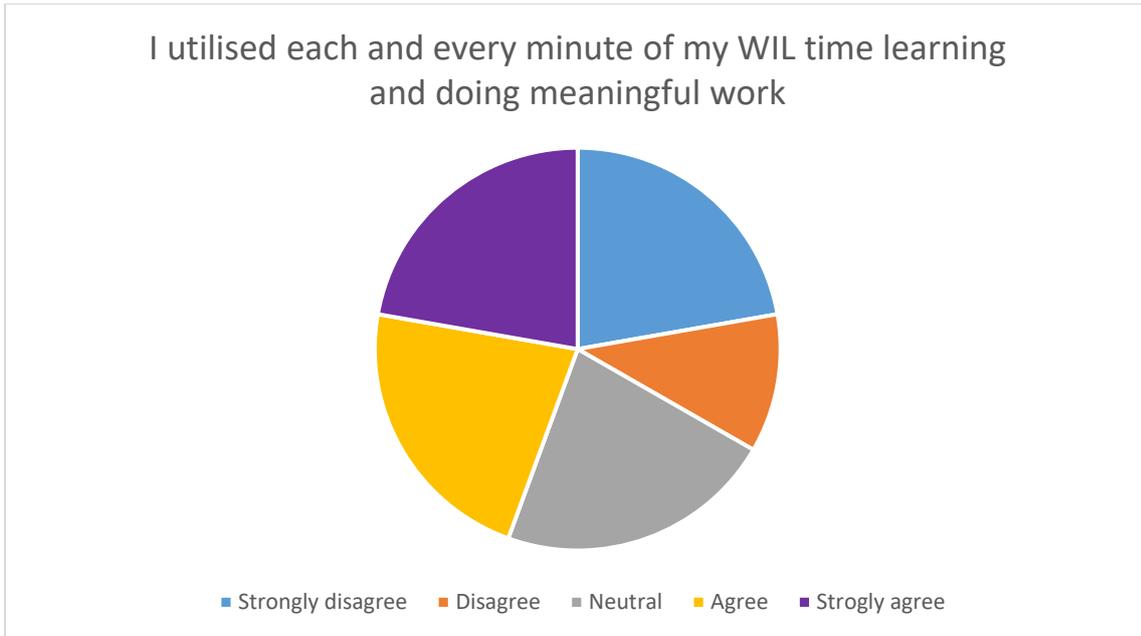
Figure 6. Student perceptions about utilising their WIL time

The split survey responses suggest mixed evidence since equity students view WIL placement as beneficial for learning soft skills and learning practical aspects of course curricula, yet students want WIL placements to be better structured and well-coordinated by their academic institutes. Even though coming from fewer than 50 percent, respondents' perception of not using WIL time meaningfully can potentially undermine the benefits derived from undertaking WIL placements. *This answers research question 1 of this pilot study: What is the current attitude towards WIL placements held by students?*

Data analysis of WIL characteristics (Figure 7) reveals substantially higher rates of agreement for all the six enablers to WIL placements.
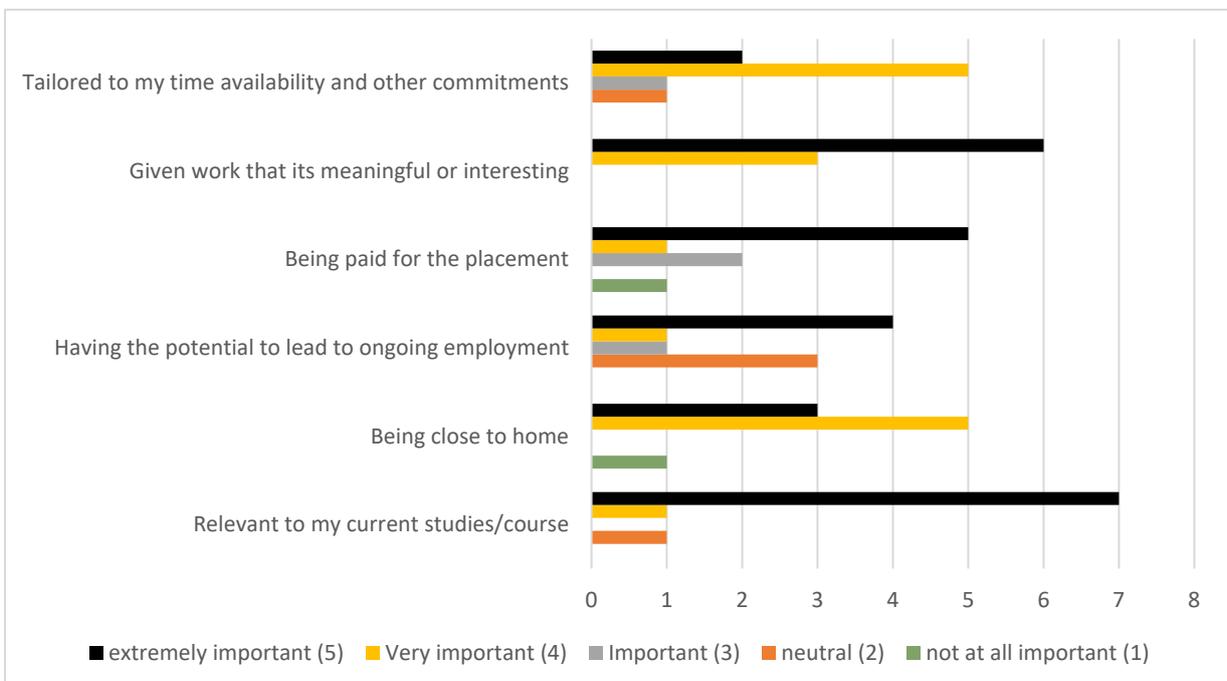

Figure 7. WIL Characteristics- Enablers for a successful placement experience

WIL enablers, such as WIL placements to be structured as paid, flexible, relevant, and meaningful, will likely have the largest impact on students' perceptions of experiencing positive WIL placements, rather than the WIL workplaces being organised close to where students live, and completion of WIL leading to employment for the WIL attendees. The convergence of views among students about the WIL enablers is considerable. This implies that encouraging WIL engagement among students would require an approach that is tailored to the specific WIL characteristics enabling such engagement. A particular area that requires attention for equity students regarding WIL placements is ensuring payment and also tailoring WIL placements to suit these students' time and other commitments.

In conclusion, although a clear majority of equity student respondents agree that currently available WIL placements meet their education program requirements, still a majority also want WIL placements to meet their other needs – for example their financial and support requirements. *These findings answer research question 3: Do current WIL opportunities meet student needs including education program requirements?*

Study limitations, and future research avenues

The project originally aimed to find a WIL framework that increases the participation of businesses functioning in the scoped region. This aim had to be subsequently dropped due to the non-availability of data from the business organisations that are mostly small business enterprises (SMEs), with the average size of businesses in East Gippsland being 5 employees. The businesses are still recovering from the devastating consequences of economic recession, drought, bushfire, COVID-19, and natural disasters associated with climate change during the past two years. Thus, the participation of businesses, whether or not they are offering WIL placements to higher education students in the East Gippsland region, could not be achieved as originally planned in this research project. We thus recommend conducting another study that evaluates the results of our pilot study by including more students as well as including businesses from East Gippsland and other related areas to add the missing dimension to this study's results.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

The findings of this pilot study generally confirm the previously known challenges encountered by equity students enrolled in higher education who are undertaking WIL placements in remote and regional Australia and the nature of their WIL experiences. This pilot research contributes evidence toward understanding the benefits, challenges, and expectations regarding the WIL opportunities aimed at enhancing employability of university students who live, study and work in remotest regions of Australia. Thus, the findings point to some vital flaws in how WIL programs are formulated and implemented in regional and remote areas and the challenges and opportunities in the WIL space that require intervention. The results of the survey also raise some important issues and considerations for policy and practice that we list below:

- Specifying a WIL approach that views regional and remote WIL students as a separate cohort; this new approach will depend on the specific needs of students living in regional and remote areas so as to increase the likelihood of their positive WIL placement experiences.
- Making available governmental financial resources to address identified barriers such as paying for WIL work and appointing a WIL mentor at organisations willing to participate in WIL.
- Creating a comprehensive WIL framework to increase understanding and structure for regional and remote area students required to undertake WIL placements as part

of their academic curriculum. For example, embedding flexibility suiting equity students' work and family and organising WIL placements close to home.

- Educating RRA students through an advertising campaign about the importance of WIL for their future careers, targeting students who are not well informed about WIL.
- Universities to liaise with WIL hosts to understand how students can be supported to fulfil their WIL requirements, for instance by negotiating the appointment of a dedicated WIL mentor and providing more details about WIL attendees. Also, universities can investigate examples of effective university support strategies shared across the education sector.

The scope for WIL to increase in rural and regional areas is immense. However, doing so will require addressing some of the key barriers identified by student respondents from remote and rural areas in this research. Students living, studying, and undertaking WIL placements in remote and rural areas who are most likely to be satisfied with WIL experiences will be those who,

1. would be paid for WIL placement work,
2. have the flexibility to accommodate their professional and family commitments alongside the Wil placements,
3. get a dedicated industry mentor to continuously guide them,
4. receive proper induction at the WIL workplace aimed at providing them information about the focal industry's nature of WIL placement work and,
5. have a WIL coordinator at their academic institute to contact should they encounter any challenge at their WIL workplace.

In light of the above findings, higher education institutes (HEIs) are called upon to remove structural deficiencies in how WIL placements are organised. For instance, when finalising WIL host organisations, HEIs can take previous WIL attendees' reviews of WIL hosts into consideration. Once this happens, higher education providers will be providing these students with the ability to integrate theory and practice, taking the stress off their WIL work placements, and safeguarding their wellbeing.

This pilot study, subject to further research, raises fundamental questions concerning the institutional strategies required to increase students' financial capacity and accommodate their non-WIL and non-academic commitments. Some of these questions are: Is there more to be gained for the RRA students by providing paid WIL placements closer to their homes and introducing flexible WIL placement arrangements? Or should governments step forward to fund smaller businesses in remote regions to appoint dedicated WIL mentors who can take the pressure off their regular staff to support WIL attendees? Answers to these questions can help frame a response to the management of social and economic isolation of RRA students and also enhance their resilience in the wake of recent disruptions to WIL opportunities in regional and remote Australia, such as the East Gippsland region. Only then can WIL programs provide to equity students critical management and other workplace skills, which are so valuable to employers in Australia and internationally.

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Appendix A- Student survey questionnaire

Part 1: Attitudes to WIL placement

Using the 5-point scale: from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree, rate the following statements (includes N/A response):

1. The current availability of WIL placement opportunities meets my study/ course requirements
2. I would like to have a greater scope of WIL opportunities compared to that available currently
3. WIL opportunities enhance my studies and learning
4. I received mentoring and guidance to engage with WIL placements
5. I was provided meaningful project/work during my WIL placements
6. I was introduced to work colleagues and interacted with them formally and informally during WIL
7. I felt respected and cared for during WIL
8. I utilised each and every minute of my WIL time learning and doing meaningful work
9. I was allowed to shadow colleagues and participate in work meetings
10. WIL opportunities enhance my employability
11. More support is required to assist me in finding WIL placements
12. More support is required to help prepare me for WIL placements
13. WIL placements generate a better understanding of the workplaces
14. WIL placements cause me loss of my working hours and thus my income
15. I wish WIL placements are paid for
16. My TAFE/University should do more to support me in WIL placements
17. Organisations placing students require more information and/or direction when managing WIL placements

Part 2: WIL characteristics

Rate the importance level to you using the 5-point scale (1 not at all important to 5-extremely important) for the following characteristics of WIL:

- Relevant to my current studies/ course
- Being close to home
- Having the potential to lead to ongoing employment
- Being paid for the placement
- Being given project work under my control
- Given work that is meaningful or interesting
- Flexible regarding placement duration (long or short as required)
- Tailored to my time availability and other commitments

Part 3: Demographics

Residential postcode:

Gender: male; female; other; prefer not to say

Age in years: 18-25; 26-35;36-45;46-55;56-65;66-75;75+

Educational attainment: Secondary; Trade; Tertiary

Highest qualification obtained:

Current qualification being studied:

Full time or part time

Part 4: Details for required WIL engagements

Do you expect to undertake a WIL placement in your current study or course? (skip logic)

Have you undertaken a WIL placement in your current study or course? (skip logic)

Did you find the WIL opportunity beneficial? Why or why not?

- Open response – prompt – duration, industry, suitability, task level, support

What would you be seeking from your future WIL engagement?

- Open response – prompt – duration, industry, suitability, task level, support

Do you expect the placement meet your expectations? Why or why not?

- Open response

Appendix B: Interview questions for student respondents

Question 1: Do you expect to undertake a WIL placement in your current study or course?

Question 2: Have you undertaken a WIL placement in your past study or course?

- prompts – duration, industry, suitability, support

Question 3: Did you find the WIL opportunity beneficial? Why or why not?

- prompts – learning, employability improvement in industry, understanding of workplace

Question 4: What would you be seeking from your future WIL engagement?

- prompts – duration, industry, suitability, support

Question 5: Did the placement meet your expectations? Why or why not?