

WIL-ing the BA: Implementing workplace-learning opportunities in the Bachelor of Arts

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As Australia transitions toward a service-led, knowledge-based economy, employers expect universities to deliver a workforce suited to new contexts (CEDA, 2015; McArthur, 2011). The emphasis in contemporary Australian higher education is shifting to an acquisition of vocational outcomes (Bridgstock, 2013; Marginson, 2004). To address these challenges, there is an increasing trend at Australian universities towards offering work-integrated learning experience (WIL) in undergraduate degrees. In professions-based programs such as engineering or dentistry, the shape and nature of these experiences may be obvious. It is less so in the generalist Bachelor of Arts (BA). Vocational skills are not usually viewed as outcomes of BA programs (Carr, 2009) and balancing assuring graduates' employment outcomes with maintaining the integrity of a liberal arts program is difficult. Getting it wrong can result in fragmented and unstable curricula, affecting student enrolment and attrition rates. In a time of increasing dependence on market share, volatile student enrolment numbers can result in program and school closures changing the face of the Australian higher education landscape (Thornton, 2010).

This presentation showcases the findings from an OLT-funded extension project investigating the multiple ways that Australian BA programs are grappling with the provision of WIL opportunities. The project adopted an appreciative inquiry approach. Current WIL practices in 36 Australian universities offering a generalist BA program were identified via a desktop audit and through communication with unit and program conveners. BA coordinators and Associate Deans Teaching and Learning further explored emergent models and trends at a national forum, where consideration was given to developing value propositions for WIL opportunities that are unique to the generalist BA. The presentation will outline (1) common features and models of effective WIL currently in use in Australian BA programs; (2) describe exemplary cases and models with potential for translation to other contexts; and (3) explore strategies used to encourage adoption and translation practices between disciplines or programs.

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