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The challenge of assessing professional competence in work integrated learning

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Abstract

A fundamental aspect of work integrated learning (WIL) is the development of professional competence, the ability of students to perform in the work place. Alignment theory therefore suggests that the assessment of WIL should include an assessment of students' demonstration of professional competence in the workplace. The assessment of professional competence in WIL is, however, problematic. It may be impractical for the academic supervisor to directly assess professional competence if there is a large number of students in external placements. If evidence of professional competence is provided by the student, the student's ability to articulate his or her own capabilities will interfere with the validity of the assessment. If evidence of professional competency is provided by the supervisor then the assessment is heavily dependent on the individual supervisor and may be unreliable. This paper will examine the literature relating to the assessment of professional competence in WIL. The paper will be informed by the author's experience in coordinating a WIL subject in an undergraduate law course. It will recommend that a mix of evidence provided by the student, the workplace supervisor and the academic supervisor should be used to assess professional competence in WIL.

Keywords

Work integrated learning, internship, assessment, professional competence, portfolio, collaborative assessment

Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has proliferated in Australian universities as a means of developing graduate attributes and employability skills (Bates, Bates and Bates 2007). In response to the growing demand for graduates to be "work-ready" many Australian universities have recently increased the emphasis on WIL "with the inclusion of WIL goals in institutional strategic directions and the provision of internal structures and support" (Patrick, [Peach](#), et al. 2008, 3). The 2008 Australian Learning and Teaching Council commissioned National Scoping study into WIL ("the WIL Report") identifies significant challenges faced by universities in implementing WIL which include the need to develop innovative assessment methods that encourage reflection and integration of theory and practice within the constraints that result from the level of engagement of workplace supervisors and the ability of academic supervisors to become involved in the workplace (Patrick, [Peach](#), et al. 2008, 42). The assessment of characteristics such as tacit knowing, intuition and artistry is one of the greatest challenges to WIL, particularly given the constraints identified in the WIL Report in relation to the level of workplace supervisor engagement and academic involvement in the workplace (Coll, Taylor and Grainger, 2002). This paper addresses one aspect of the assessment of WIL, the assessment of professional competence as demonstrated in the work placement.

In this paper, professional competence is defined at its simplest as the ability to use professional knowledge and skills in the workplace (Kane 1991). WIL is uniquely placed within university courses to facilitate the development of professional competence and accordingly it is an essential aspect of WIL. Alignment theory therefore suggests that the assessment of WIL should include assessment of students' demonstration of professional competence in the workplace (Biggs 2003). The assessment of students' professional competence in WIL is, however, problematic. It may be impractical for the academic supervisor to directly assess professional competence by observation if there are a large number of students in external placements. If evidence of professional competence is provided by the student, the student's ability to articulate his or her own capabilities will interfere with the validity of the assessment. If evidence of professional competence is provided by the supervisor then the assessment is heavily dependant on the individual supervisor and may be unreliable.

This paper will first briefly define WIL generally and internships in particular. It will then explain the context for the discussion of assessment of professional competence in WIL, an internship subject in an undergraduate law course. The paper will examine the need to assess professional competence in WIL in light of constructive alignment theory and will then consider the literature in relation to how professional competence should be assessed. The discussion will be informed by the author's own experiences in assessing professional competence in WIL. The paper will conclude that professional competence should be assessed collaboratively by the workplace supervisor, the student and the academic.

Definition of WIL

There have been a range of definitions of WIL provided by the literature (Abeysekera 2006). WIL is widely used to describe situations where students spend time in a workplace setting as part of learning. The WIL Report defined WIL as: "An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick, Peach, et al. 2008, iv). WIL brings "a dual emphasis on the development of both the learner and the organisation... [or] contextual learning founded on the theory of constructivism because learners make meanings by contextualising the content within the learning environment in the workplace" (Delahaye and Choy 2007, 3).

This paper focuses on one type of WIL experience, the internship. Internships are defined as "any carefully monitored work or service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what is being learned throughout the experience." (Abeysekera 2006). An internship is a "three-way partnership between the educational institution, the student intern, and the organisation where the interns take on the challenges of a program of systematic experiential learning" (Inkster and Ross 1998, 6). The three major stakeholders in an internship program are the student, the academic supervisor, and the workplace supervisor as industry or community partner. Each of these partners gains significant benefits from internship programs. Students gain real-world experience; academic programs' reputations grow and employers gain an improved pool of student applicants who have been 'trilled' from which to recruit for fulltime employment (Patterson 1999). For students, one key benefit of an internship is the opportunity to develop professional competence by putting classroom knowledge into practice in real, dynamic settings. Mentoring and training opportunities provided by WIL further strengthens students' transferable skills and abilities,

solidifies their sense of work ethic and enhances confidence in their job performance (Kane, Healy and Henson 1992).

One ongoing challenge for internship programs is to determine the most appropriate assessment that satisfies the requirements of all three partners. Assessment of learning in internships is a significant issue for academic supervisors (O'Toole 2007). ~~When such an authentic program of study is designed, this the~~ real world experience including the development of professional competence needs to be reflected in the manner of assessment.

Context for discussion

The context for the discussion in this paper is an undergraduate law subject *Learning in Professional Practice*, in which students organise their own placements in legal offices in the private, government or community sectors. Students are final year students about to make the transition from their university life to their post-university life. The placements are either voluntary or paid and in many cases are in offices where the student is already employed either as an administrative assistant, research clerk or paralegal. The subject has been offered in second and summer semesters since 2008 with cohorts between 36 and 50 in each offering. A flexible approach to teaching delivery has been adopted with activities taking place online via the subject Blackboard site (which is institution's online learning management system). The assessment comprises a placement plan, contributions to an online discussion forum and a final portfolio (~~incorporating encompassing~~ a supervisor's report).

This type of internship program is novel in the context of Australian undergraduate legal education. Generally, law students do not undertake placements during their undergraduate course but rather as part of their practical legal training that takes place after graduation and prior to admission as a legal practitioner. The reluctance of legal education to implement WIL is in part because historically legal education in Australia has been seen as involving three "relatively discrete stages, ~~involving~~ (1) academic training at a university; (2) subsequent practical training with both institutional and in-service components; and (3) continuing education" (Weisbrot 1990, ~~pp~~ 124-5). Prior to the 1990s, most Australian law schools focussed on doctrinal content (i.e. legal rules) rather than on the legal theoretical and contextual background and the skills necessary for practice (Johnstone and Vignaendra 2003). Until recently most practical legal training occurred during articles of clerkship completed after graduation in an apprenticeship model. In the previous 20 years there has been a shift to providing ~~formal~~ practical legal training as a formal university qualification (post-graduation) and also towards incorporating legal skills training as part of the undergraduate degree; however the traditional divide between undergraduate qualifications and practical legal training has persisted. ~~Where E~~experiential learning ~~occurs~~ in the undergraduate course ~~it~~ has tended to follow a clinic model in which students provide advice to real clients under professional supervision (provided either by a professionally qualified academic or outsourced, often to a community legal centre). Legal clinics are resource intensive and generally only available to limited numbers of students (Giddings 2008). In the past there has been some resistance to for credit internship placements as opposed to legal clinics, however, in the US at least, there is a growing body of literature acknowledging that legal work experience is educationally rich and that it is not necessary for learning to take place that academics control or participate actively in the work experience (Condlin 1996-1997; Stone and McLaren 1999). The literature demonstrates that legal internships are a valuable part of the US law school curriculum and the recent US Best Practices Report into

legal education included recommendations for the design and assessment of internship subjects (Stuckey 2007).

The key features of *Learning in Professional Practice* are: the workplace supervisor has the primary role in supervising the student and providing learning opportunities; placements are widely dispersed in a variety of legal offices; the learning focus is on the work experience; academic supervision is by assessments connected to the internship experience; academic/supervisor contact is by phone and email rather than site visits; the student is primarily responsible for their own learning and the student's individual learning plan is emphasised. The subject design is underpinned by experience based learning theory, students engage in reflective practice in order to turn their work experience into an educationally rich transformative learning experience.

The learning objectives for the subject cover the theory/practice nexus, social and ethical issues, legal and transferable skills, career planning and reflective practice. The approach to teaching and learning is to provide academic support in relation to the preparation for the placement (including goals setting tasks and experiential learning theory), learning during the placement (including personality styles, legal skills and interpersonal skills) and reflection on learning after completion of the placement. Resources such as interactive online learning modules, reflective activities, podcasts and readings are provided to students via the subject's Blackboard site.

Supervisors are provided with an information booklet which includes information regarding the supervisor's obligations to the student and to the institution and the type of work to be undertaken during the placement. Templates for interim and final evaluation reports are also provided and are designed to enable an effective evaluation of the student without being overly demanding of supervisors.

Alignment theory

Theory of constructive alignment theory

The theory of constructive alignment suggests that learning objectives, teaching methods and assessment should be aligned (Biggs 2003). Constructive alignment is student centered, so that "the students do the real work, the teacher simply acts as broker between the student and a learning environment that supports the appropriate learning activities" (Biggs 2003, 27). Alignment theory promotes integration of learning, instruction and assessment that results in "assessment as a tool *for* learning, instead of a tool *of* learning" (Dochy, [Segers](#), et al 2007, 88). Alignment theory suggests that the first step in designing a learning experience is to express the learning objectives by using verbs that reflect the desired cognitive level, the next is to design teaching/learning activities that are likely to encourage students to achieve the objectives and the last is to select assessment tasks that will establish whether and how well each student can meet the criteria expressed in the objectives.

Learning objectives

The first step in designing a learning experience is to develop the learning outcomes or objectives. An examination of the literature suggests that the learning outcomes of WIL should include learning theory, critical reflection, professional competence and career management. According to Brodie and Irving (2007) WIL involves three components;

learning theory (understanding how to learn), critical reflection and capability. Capability involves transferrable skills and know-how, essentially, professional competence. Walo (2001) states that WIL “provides opportunities for students to practice what they have learnt in the classroom, gain a greater understanding of the industries’ requirements, test career choices and develop important hands-on workplace skills” (Walo 2001, 12). Abeysekera (2006) identifies two objectives for internships: “firstly, to offer students an understanding of organizational structures within a professional working environment, and secondly to provide students with an opportunity for professional development”.

The need to address issues of professional competence in the preparation of students for legal practice was clearly identified by the recent Carnegie Report into US legal education which declared that while (US) Law Schools effectively provide for intellectual and cognitive apprenticeship, they fail to prepare students for their professional lives by not providing for practice-based learning and the development of professional identity and purpose (Sullivan, Colby, et al., 2007). WIL has a key role to play in redressing this failure to prepare students for professional practice.

This paper focuses on the assessment of learning outcomes that relate to professional competence, which presents significant challenges to the design of WIL. Professional competence includes the ability to perform in the workplace and encompasses relevant knowledge, skills and aptitudes (Paloniemi 2006, 439). It is more particularly defined as the ability “to act at a level of automaticity with knowledge that enables efficient, effective and unselfconscious practice ... [and] the ability to review existing knowledge in order to acquire new knowledge and skills to solve new problems” (Jones 2010, 701).

Learning activities

The WIL learning activities relevant to the development of professional competence include the work placement and feedback from the workplace supervisor. Stuckey (2007) suggests that providing prompt feedback to students is a key principle that should be met by internship programs. Feedback is a part of promoting a deep connection with the learning process for students and is critical to facilitating effective learning in workplace contexts.

In addition to feedback from the workplace supervisor, students should also be provided with support from the academic supervisor to assist the development of professional competence. This might include preparation for the placement, identification of skills or competencies able to be developed during the placement and the ability to self-evaluate and learn from experience. In addition students need clear guidance as to what the learning expectations from the placement are and how to achieve them, and the distinction between work and what is learned at work (Walsh 2007). Students should also be supported in preparing for the commencement of their internship which may be their first experience of a professional workplace. Young and Blanco (2007-2008) suggest students are often unprepared for the workplace in that they do not know how to dress and communicate appropriately; and how to take instructions on assignments. This lack of preparedness can inhibit students from attaining the most from their placement experience and may even embarrass the university which has placed the student.

Assessment

Alignment theory suggests that assessment tasks should be selected that tell us whether and how well each student can meet the criteria expressed in the objectives (Biggs 2003, 30). The assessment of professional competence is also important in order to provide feedback to students on their own performance in the workplace. Stuckey (2007, 174-177) argues that recording student performance, providing prompt feedback and training students to receive feedback are key principles that should be met by incorporated in WIL programs. Further assessment has a key role to play in what and how students learn (Boud and Falchikov 2007, 3):

“Assessment, rather than teaching, has a major influence on students’ learning. It directs attention to what is important. It acts as an incentive for study. And it has a powerful effect on what students do and how they do it. Assessment also communicates to them what they can and cannot succeed in doing.”

It is therefore suggested that professional competence should be included in the summative assessment of WIL in order to ensure alignment of learning objectives and assessment, and to provide feedback to students on their performance and also to meet student expectations.

WIL generally uses a range of tools, such as reflective journals and student presentations, to assess learning theory, critical reflection and career management. However, these methods of assessment are of limited use in assessing professional competence because they are based on evidence of learning provided by the student which is not necessarily verified by an objective source. The next part of this paper will consider the difficulties inherent in assessing professional competence and how these difficulties may be overcome.

Assessment of professional competence

While it is clear that professional competence should be assessed, it is not clear how it should be assessed. In some disciplines such as nursing and engineering while it may be possible to assess a list of capabilities (i.e. specific discipline knowledge and skills) that students would be expected to achieve in any placement, such as assessment may not always be sufficient. However in other disciplines it may not be possible for each placement to cover the list of capabilities expected from graduates. According to Ram (2008, 137):

“It is not satisfactory to award a pass grade which is based only on the technical knowledge and skills that a student uses to complete a piece of work or deliver a product of good value to an industry organization. It is difficult to find a single IBL placement in which a student majoring in computer based information systems could use all of the areas of information and communications technology (CT) prescribed in a tertiary program of study.”

In any event, even in disciplines where it might be possible to categorise capabilities to be assessed, it has been argued that reducing “the full range of skills and competencies utilized in a professional practice to pre-specified, observable work actions or behaviours ...[is] educationally unsound.” (Hodges 2007, 50). Rather, what is being assessed as professional competences is “the degree to which the individual can use the knowledge, skills, and judgment associated with the profession to perform effectively in the domain of possible encounters defining the scope of professional practice.” (Kane 1992, 7). One of the prime purposes of WIL is to learn through observation what it means to be a professional in the discipline (Spencer 2007, 367) and the assessment of professional competence drives this learning.

The assessment of professional competence could be based on evidence provided by the student or the work place supervisor or on evidence collected directly by the academic.

However ~~where what is being assessed is genuinely professional competence rather than defined capabilities~~ there are difficulties associated with each of these methods of assessment which need to be addressed to ensure that the assessment is valid and reliable.

Brodie and Irving (2007, 12) suggest that currently assessment of WIL in undergraduate courses is primarily based on evidence provided by students to support their own claims for learning, such as in presentations and reflective reports. While understanding how to learn, critical reflection and career management, can be assessed on the basis of evidence provided by students, the assessment of professional competence on this basis is flawed. If evidence provided by the student is relied upon, then what is assessed is not necessarily professional competence, but rather the student's ability to articulate their competence (Brodie and Irving 2007, 17). As a result, assessment of professional competence should look beyond the evidence provided by students.

The work place supervisor is an alternative source of evidence of the student's professional competence. However relying on assessment by work place supervisors raises issues such as quality assurance and the reliability of the assessment (Brodie and Irving 2007, 17). The supervisor's assessment may not be reliable because it is heavily dependent on the professional ability of the supervisor (Delahaye 2005, 359). Workplace supervisors may not have the specialised skill that is required for assessment (Costley and Armsby 2007, 29), and it is questionable whether it is possible to ensure each supervisor has a consistent perception about what they are assessing and what standards are expected. There may also be resistance from workplace supervisors to being directly involved in the assessment of students.

According to Stone and McLaren (1999, 176):

“Experience has shown that, when agency employees are asked to grade an intern, they almost universally recommend an A. Among the possible reasons for this recommendation is that agency members may view the grade as a reward for student interns, who are frequently unpaid; or the A may simply be a tactic to encourage more students to intern in their agency.”

Despite these issues in relation to assessment by workplace supervisors, it may still be useful to include the work-place supervisor in the assessment of WIL (Costley and Armsby 2007, 28). Where this occurs steps should be taken to address the concerns in relation to reliability and quality control. The institution may provide some guidance as to what is expected where workplace supervisors ~~who~~ are involved in assessment of students. For instance, there may be a requirement that they be offered training in relation to assessment and provided with information in relation to the institution's assessment policy.

The use of standard criteria to be applied by supervisors in assessing student capability may improve reliability and quality control. It has been suggested by Delahaye (2005, 359-369) that the supervising lawyer's report on which the assessment is based should include a list of skills and performance objectives with a simple yes/no/partly assessment based on the observation form criteria. ~~However it is suggested that Ssuch a list may be more appropriate to professions where defined capabilities are expected to be achieved and may~~ be of limited use in assessing professional competence generally. An alternative to a list of skills and performance objectives would be to use standard criteria in relation to expected ~~workplace skills~~ professional competence. Poikela (2004) suggest three levels on a scale for assessing

workplace learning and knowing; satisfactory, very satisfactory and excellent. According to Poikela (2004) these assessment criteria are highly valued by work supervisors and teachers and result in more focused and concrete assessment than previously.

A further solution is to increase the alternative empirical information available to the academic supervisor which informs the student's grade (Stone 1999). The issues in relation to reliability could be avoided if the assessment of professional competence were to be made by the academic supervisor through direct observation, simulation or objective tasks. However, to ensure reliability the performance would need to be observed "over the full range of encounters in the domain of professional encounters" (Kane 1992, 8). Further the evaluation of student competence is based on judgments about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the student's performance which might not be unambiguous.

The academic is not present in the workplace and even if the academic had the resources to attend the workplace of each student, such a visit would only represent a brief sample which might not be representative of professional competence. An alternative would be for the student to provide direct evidence of work completed in the placement. For example, Stuckey (2007, 174) suggests that student performances in their placements should be digitally recorded. Digital records can then be included in the student's portfolio of work and can be reviewed by the academic. The recordings would enable feedback to be provided to the student on their performance and would also enable them to self-evaluate their performance. For these reasons, the idea of recording student performance in the placement has great appeal. There are, however, practical difficulties such as technical capacity and confidentiality concerns. It is suggested that digital recording be an option open to students as a means of evidencing their work for inclusion in a student portfolio. Records also have the limitation of providing only a snapshot of student performance rather than the entire domain of professional encounters.

An alternative to academic supervisors observing actual workplace performance is a simulation or objective test. A simulation involves the realistic description of a problem likely to be encountered in the workplace, followed by a series of questions about possible actions for addressing the problem and feedback on the results of the action chosen (Kane 1992, 18). While simulations may enable more objective assessment, their artificiality may mean that they do not provide an accurate indicator of what the student would actually do in practice (Kane 1992, 22). Objective tests are commonly used to test aspects of competence for accreditation purposes however such tests provide weak evidence of the student's actual performance in the workplace (Kane 1992, 22-25).

Proposed model of assessment of WIL

The discussion above indicates that evidence of professional competence should be obtained from a mix of sources; the student, the workplace supervisor and the academic supervisor. A collaborative model for the assessment of WIL that relies on evidence from a mix of sources should be developed to ensure that professional competence is properly assessed. An appropriate assessment plan suggested by a collaborative model would include a placement plan individually negotiated between the academic, student and supervisor; a student portfolio or journal which includes student assertions as to capability and direct evidence of work undertaken in the placement and the supervisor's report. The academic would approve the placement plan, assess the portfolio evidence and moderate the supervisor's assessment.

The proposed collaborative assessment model is supported by the literature. Zegwaard, Coll and Hodges (2003) propose a framework for workplace assessment that is mediated by academic supervisors and workplace supervisors. Bates, Bates and Bates (2007, 127) suggest that: “University and workplace staff should also supervise student assessment collaboratively, negotiating the detailed requirements with each student and ensuring that appropriate personal reflection on the experience has occurred.”

Ram (2008) suggests that collaborative assessments will be more reliable where the workplace supervisor is qualified, experienced, and available for and committed to supervision. Collaborative assessment is also impacted by the student’s subject knowledge, commitment, work experience and experience in assessment tools and techniques. According to Ram (2008) the use of a portfolio assessment which requires students to provide evidence of learning is a means of supplementing collaborative assessment to ensure that the learning outcomes of WIL are accurately assessed.

Placement plan

The first step in a model for assessment of professional competence in WIL is to determine what aspects of workplace performance will be assessed. One model is for the placement objectives to be determined at the beginning of the placement by negotiation between the student and workplace supervisor (Zegwaard, Coll and Hodges 2003). According to Walsh (2007) the student is the person in the best position to understand his or her own practice situation and therefore to establish the framework for learning which will be assessed. Further, individually negotiated learning agreements enable alignment of subject objectives, teaching and assessment (Biggs 2003). A collaborative approach to learning suggests that the student’s learning goals should be agreed upon by the student, the workplace supervisor and the academic, however, the primary responsibility for devising learning goals should lie with the student. One way of implementing a collaborative approach is for the academic to establish broad learning outcomes for the subject; the student, in consultation with the workplace supervisor, to develop particular learning goals (that relate to the subject learning objectives) and specify how those goals will be attained. The resulting learning plan would be agreed to by the workplace supervisor and would be subject to approval by the academic supervisor. Learning contracts are “particularly suitable for structuring ... projects which are largely self-directed ... and in tailoring learning to individual needs and interest” (Anderson, Boud and Sampson 1996, 3). This approach empowers students to direct their own learning while still enabling the subject design to comply with the constructive alignment model. The learning plan should incorporate the learning goals, strategies to achieve those goals, the evidence which will be provided of achievement of the goals and the criteria to assess the evidence (Anderson, Boud and Sampson 1996, 4).

Portfolio

The subsequent assessment of the student’s professional competence should be based on the goals and criteria established in the placement plan. The evidence relied upon to make the assessment of professional competence should be provided by both the student and workplace supervisor. It is appropriate that the student’s own claims in relation to their professional competence be summatively assessed. Presenting evidence of professional competence is in itself an important skill for career development and it is appropriate that students should be assessed on their ability to “sell themselves” in a work context. A further benefit in including a student’s own claims in relation to their professional competence as

part of assessment, is that, where appropriate feedback is given on these claims, it assists students to develop judgement in relation to their own capabilities (Boud 2007, p14). Knight (2007, 83) argues that, in order to contribute to making assessment significant and productive, universities should educate students “in the business of making, documenting and presenting claims to achievement, especially to achievements that, for a variety of reasons, resist warranting.”

There are various methods which could be used for the student to make such claims; for example a learning journal or portfolio, response to selection criteria, class presentation or individual interview. Of these the portfolio is best suited to incorporating the workplace supervisor’s assessment of professional competence without requiring them to be involved in further assessment activities based outside the workplace.

A portfolio is appropriate assessment in WIL because it not only encourages reflection (Jones 2010, 708) but also encourages and assesses the development of professional competence. According to Biggs (2003) and Knight and Yorke (2003), it is an example of sustainable assessment ‘that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability student to meet their future learning needs’ (Boud 2000, 151). Portfolios can be used in conjunction with a placement plan negotiated by students and placement supervisors because there is flexibility in relation to what is included in it (Zegwaard, Coll and Hodges 2003). The portfolio should include exemplars of student work, supervisor’s reports and student reflection on their learning and professional competence. The portfolio also enables integration between the elements of WIL, reflection, learning theory, professional competence and career management (Hodges 2007).

Where possible the student’s claims in relation to their professional competence should be supported by direct evidence provided to the academic. This evidence may be in the form of samples of work included in the portfolio, digital recordings of work performance or an “on the job” assessment by the academic. Where students are in a large number of different work placements the ways in which direct evidence can be provided should be flexible enough to meet the needs of all students.

The workplace supervisor should be involved in the assessment of the students’ **capability competence** by providing a final report. Ideally this report would contribute to the summative assessment and would not be merely formative assessment. Where the supervisor’s report is summative the supervisor should be instructed in relation to the institution’s assessment policies and clear criteria for the assessment should be established. While the supervisor may be required to allocate a mark for the student’s workplace performance, responsibility for the finalisation of these marks should rest with the academic who has the necessary expertise in relation to assessment to ensure quality processes are followed.

Applying the model in practice

The collaborative model outlined in the previous section has been applied by the author in *Learning in Professional Practice*. In applying the model students are encouraged from the outset to see themselves as active learners during the placement; the subject materials make it clear to students that the emphasis is on assisting them to turn their work experience into a learning experience which is individual to their own learning needs as students making the transition from university study to graduate employment. If students have ongoing

employment at their placement office, they need to see themselves as active learners in the workplace rather than merely as employees.

Various goal setting tasks assist students to identify how their placement can be an opportunity for the development of skills and knowledge, assistance in the transition to graduate employment and the management of their career. The goal setting tasks culminate in the Placement Plan which is the first item of summative assessment. The plan is negotiated between the student and workplace supervisor with input from the academic. The plan includes a description of the activities to be undertaken during the placement, the student's learning goals for the placement, the proposed means of achieving those goals, and the evidence to be provided to demonstrate achievement of the goal and dates for interim and final evaluations.

Students are required to hold an interim evaluation session with their workplace supervisor midway through the placement. A template is provided for the report of the interim evaluation which identifies the student's progress in relation to the goal and any assistance that can be provided by the workplace supervisor in relation to the goal. The student self-evaluates their performance against each of the goals prior to the evaluation meeting and the supervisor adds comments to the evaluation form as appropriate. The interim evaluation provides formative feedback and is not included in the summative assessment.

The final evaluation follows a similar format to the interim evaluation with the addition of simple assessment criteria by which the supervisor evaluates the student's professional competence. The final evaluation is included in the summative assessment and ultimate responsibility for the mark associated with the supervisor's report rests with the academic.

During the placement the student is required to complete a regular reflective diary or journal and engage with readings and other online activities intended to assist students to learn from their work experience. The final piece of assessment, the portfolio, is finalised after the completion of the placement. The portfolio incorporates a reflective account of the extent that the student has attained the goals established in the placement plan and the student's plans for future learning. Evidence of learning may include actual work product and comments from the supervisor, colleagues or clients.

The subject has been offered in 5 semesters since 2008 and has consistently received positive student feedback via electronic surveys, student focus groups and formal subject evaluations. For example one student commented:

"This [subject] was the best thing to be introduced! It is fantastic for students already working to obtain credit for their work and assisted in enhancing their working situations. It has assisted with the transition from administrative tasks to 'professional' tasks. I definitely recommend the subject to all students."

The collaborative approach to assessment has been effective in motivating student learning and providing feedback to students. There is evidence to suggest that for many students the combined placement plan and portfolio assessment enables students to shift from reliance upon academic assessment to self-reliance and the exercise of personal judgment in order to evaluate performance. This is reflected in several students' comments in response to a question about the value of reflective practice in the unit:

"I do believe that by thinking reflectively I was able to better understand how I learnt new things and how I integrated my study into the work environment. It allowed me to identify what changes or adjustments I needed"
"Yes! It forced me to think about what I want from my placement and helped me develop ways of achieving those goals."

In response to a question in relation to the most valuable thing learnt in the subject, students commented:

"that I need to be proactive about my needs. No one else will take charge of my career for me."

"I learnt more about myself and my ability to complete research tasks and operate in a professional services environment - something that is a really useful enlightenment in my last semester of study."

"the knowledge that I received about myself and how I could use that knowledge to study and work more effectively."

However some issues have arisen with the assessment. The first issue relates to the confidential nature of legal work. Students need to be reminded to de-identify all work submitted with the portfolio and to ensure confidentiality is not breached. Even with de-identification, supervisors may be reluctant to allow examples of actual work to be submitted. Further, in relation to some goals there may not be work which can be provided as evidence of performance. In response to these difficulties, students are encouraged to be flexible and use initiative in relation to the evidence provided. Evidence may be a template developed by a student for a particular type of work, or it may be a comment from a supervisor, colleague or client in relation to the student's performance. This process encourages students to seek objective evidence of their capability which is valuable for resume building.

Further, even with the inclusion of evidence from the workplace as part of the assessment, a minority of students perceived there to be a heavy reliance placed on reflective practice rather than on assessment of professional competence and one student commented:

"The assessment program was somewhat repetitive - so much reflective writing, I felt like there was too much repetition."

It should be noted however that the majority of students valued the reflective practice in the unit:

Thinking reflectively was the touchstone of the placement. It assisted me into gaining insight into how I was thinking and how my preconceived prejudices and thoughts were inhibiting progression.

Importantly, it is difficult to ensure that the supervisor's assessment is fair and reliable given the range of different supervisors responsible for the assessment. The subject coordinator noted in finalising the assessment in the subject that there was often little correlation between the mark awarded by the supervisor in the final report and the student's learning and competence as demonstrated in the portfolio or evidenced by the supervisor's comments. Unfortunately, this difficulty has not been overcome despite the implementation of various forms of supervisors' reports and provision of information to supervisors in relation to expectations of assessors and institutional assessment policies. Accordingly the supervisor's report is not weighted heavily (10% of the overall grade) and an alternative would be to grade the report on a pass/fail basis only. A further solution may be to remove the separate mark for the supervisor's report and instead include a criterion in the assessment rubric for the

portfolio that is based on the supervisor's comments and determined by the academic. [The author and it is intendeds](#) to trial the [latter approach](#) in future offerings.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the importance of assessing professional competence in WIL. As a result of the examination of the literature and consideration of the author's experience in coordinating legal internships an appropriate model for the assessment of professional competence in WIL has been suggested which involves a collaborative approach to assessment. The collaborative assessment suggested is a portfolio which combines the report of the workplace supervisor, the student's claims as to their own capability and evidence of capability provided to or collected by the academic supervisor. While the supervisor's report may play a key role in the assessment process, the final responsibility for grading should rest with the academic.

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