Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations

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Abstract

Higher education plays a key role in cultivating graduate employability, which is essential to meeting multiple individual, community, social and labour market needs. Universities prioritise employability through strategic goals and initiatives designed to foster work-ready graduates equipped with the skills, aptitudes, and knowledge needed to navigate self-determined career pathways. One core approach to delivering on the employability agenda is through work-integrated learning (WIL). Despite institution's efforts to set targets to increase access to WIL for all students, there is little evidence on how these strategies are implemented, reported, and revised, particularly in resource-depleted environments. This paper illuminates how institutional directives can be enacted when transformative learning is centralised through relational, collegial conversations. It builds on Dean et al.'s (2020) paper to unpack how the WIL Curriculum Classification (WILCC) Framework has been executed through employability champions across the institution, who advocate for meaningful, contextually appropriate change that is co-designed with colleagues. These 'significant conversations' are the impetus for transforming students' learning experiences and career readiness. The paper offers four vignettes to showcase how the WILCC Framework has been implemented and disseminated across local, institutional, cross-campus and international contexts through transformative engagement in relational dialogue. It outlines key recommendations for holding significant conversations to influence change and champion the employability movement.

Introduction

Universities are under increasing pressure to respond to government and employer groups demanding work-ready graduates (Cheng et al., 2022; Fakunle & Higson, 2021). The focus of employability strategies has shifted from securing employment to broader initiatives aimed at equipping learners with lifelong skills. These strategies help learners assess their preferences and strengths, enabling them to navigate meaningful careers in a volatile, technology-driven global market. Employability is described as a 'learning process' (Yorke, 2006), whereby students and graduates develop skills, knowledge, and personal qualities to find meaningful work that positively impacts themselves, the

Dean, B.A. et al. (2024). Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 15(*2), 80–94.

80

community and society (Oliver, 2015). To meet the challenges of the world of work, it is a universal imperative for universities to produce employability strategies and policies that set a vision for fostering agile, well-equipped graduates (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Fakunle & Higson, 2021).

Employability, however, is a complex, contentious, and multi-faceted concept (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017) which has implications for how institutions conceive of and address employability. The concept of employability has deep roots in the objectives of economic and labour market strategies at a national level (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). These drivers have translated into governmental targets for higher institutions to assume significant responsibility for progressing a skilled workforce (Cheng et al., 2022). Despite a clear gap between students', employers' and governments' perceptions of the role of higher education for employability development (Cheng et al., 2022; Tomlinson, 2008), employability holds a well-known economic outcome for both graduates and institutions (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Students expect to participate in experiences that enable them to develop their employability during their studies, to apply discipline learnings to authentic workplace projects, enhance knowledge of their profession and explore options for their careers (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021).

A core employability strategy fostered through a collaborative effort by industry and higher education to enhance student learning is work-integrated learning (WIL). Broadly, WIL refers to authentic, work-focused experiences that integrate theory with practice in academic programs (Zegwaard at al., 2023). Institutional WIL initiatives are aligned to and operationalise employability strategies. However, there is limited evidence regarding the implementation and mobilisation of WIL strategies, particularly in a resource-scarce environment. Building on Dean et al.'s (2020) institutional framework for WIL, this paper reports on one university's implementation approach to transform employability and increase WIL across courses, despite the confinement of resources. It highlights the role of staff who identify themselves as 'employability champions' within their disperse roles and illuminates the transformational impact of conversations for teaching and learning. Grounded in scholarship for situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and academic development (Pleschová, et al., 2021), the paper draws on 'significant conversations' (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) as an empowering mechanism for colleagues to partner with their peers and embed employability into existing curricular. Four vignettes by institutional employability champions are offered to showcase how employability strategy can be implanted at the local, institutional, cross-campus and international contexts when collegial and relational approaches are centralised and valued. This paper closes with strengths and recommendations to advance employability strategy through significant conversations.

Strategic Approaches to Employability

While employability is a global phenomenon, research on the ever-presence of employability predominately stems from Western cultures (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Employability is demonstrable across Western universities as a result of government and policy frameworks (Fakunle & Higson, 2021). For example, in their analysis of institutional documents and review of the literature, Cheng et al. (2022) noted there is an increasing number of universities in the United Kingdom with employability strategies. In their review of research universities across United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, Bennett at el. (2016) reviewed 100 websites for engagement with employability where it was found, to various degrees, across all institutions. While the employability agenda is prevalent in Western cultures, studies have emerged also in recent years to broaden global understandings of institutional approaches from non-Western cultures such as Asia (Tran, 2017) and Africa (Okolie et al., 2020). These studies highlight that national contexts play a significant role in how institutions take up and implement an employability agenda.

Several studies have sought to classify the approaches that institutions take to strategically operationalise employability. There is agreement that employability has moved beyond singular concepts, such as a skills-based, employment-only, or outcomes-based approach (Fakunle & Higson,

2021). Bridgstock & Jackson (2019) propose that universities tend to adopt approaches that reflect three main aims: Short-term graduate outcomes (measurement of employment post-graduation); professional readiness (accredited degree pathways); and, living and working productively and meaningfully across the lifespan (support for students to harness their own capabilities). Fakunle and Higson (2021) offer three different categorisations of institutional employability, these being: an outcomes approach (competence and employment measures); a process approach (initiatives with courses and through careers services) and the conceptual approach (diverse theoretical understandings). Bennett et al. (2017) identified two dominant approaches on institution's websites, the possessional approach (graduates holding the necessary skills, abilities for employment) and the positional approach (building capital to better position graduates for employment and careers) and argue that there needs to be a move towards a processual pedagogical approach (supporting graduates' professional and emerging identities). Universities' commitment to employability varies widely (Bennett et al., 2017), often remaining tacit and ill-defined (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019), shaped by national contexts and influences (Fakunle & Higson, 2021), and tailored within each institution.

How institutions mobilise their employability strategy is represented in various institutional structures or programs. Many of these highlight the role of Careers centres' activities both within and outside the curriculum (Blackmore et al., 2015; Farenga & Quinlan, 2016). Students participate in employability activities outside the curriculum, with clubs/societies, leadership, mentoring, and volunteering programs featured as activities that students participate in and favour most (Jackson & Dean, 2023). The impact of employability activities on enhancing employability across the curriculum is not well understood, especially when these activities are led by educators instead of career experts within an institution-wide strategy.

One key strategy contributing to enhancing employability development within curriculum is WIL (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Jackson & Dean, 2022; Pham et al., 2018). WIL encapsulates a range of activities including placement-based models (internships, practicums, fieldwork) and non-placement models (industry projects, simulations, consulting) (Dean & Rook, 2023). Evidence shows that WIL increases employment (Silva et al., 2016), increases skills (Jackson & Dean, 2022), contributes to career development (Jackson & Wilton, 2016), develops professional identity (Jackson, 2017) and bolsters graduate's overall perceptions of preparedness for work (Jackson & Dean, 2022). The immense value for WIL pedagogies to support students' employability has led to institutions placing importance on embedding WIL across degree programs.

Academic Development for Employability

Given the imperative to augment offerings to enhance employability, it is essential that the responsibility for delivering employability is not only with careers services but also facilitated through curriculum (Dean et al., 2022). Students declare their teachers as the experts in their field and expect them to support their career development (Bennett et al., 2016). Educators, however, report varying levels of agreement as to whether it is their responsibility to facilitate employability activities within the courses and degrees they teach (Dean et al., 2021; Glover-Chambers et al., 2024). Even so, it is argued that integrating employability where it is taught, by the experts and as part of learning skills and knowledge of the discipline, is an effective and equitable approach enabling all students to experience careers and employability development (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Dean et al., 2021).

How academics learn and expand their practice to include employability, however, has been paid little attention in practice and research. While there is a need for academic development, much of this responsibility falls to professional networks or associations, with limited professional development opportunities within universities (Zegwaard et al., 2019). In Australia, a free massive open online course named *Contemporary Approaches to University Teaching*, targeting all levels of academic teaching staff, includes a module on WIL to enhance learners' integration of theory and practice. Globally, the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) facilitates online global modules on

WIL, designed at upskilling teachers on various areas of quality and assessment in WIL. These two examples target audiences of general academic teachers to enhance knowledge of WIL pedagogies. They don't, however, present an opportunity for employability activities more broadly, overlooking important areas of employability that could be considered such as career development learning, transferable skills, transversal skills, reflective activities, and other forms of industry engagement.

Academics and professional staff teaching and facilitating WIL, have indicated their needs when it comes to professional development. In a survey reaching 688 WIL practitioners, Zegwaard et al. (2019) report that most of the study's participants had a moderate need for professional development in their roles. They reveal that among the topics that would support them most, curriculum design and the evaluation of quality WIL are rated the highest, perceived as the greatest areas in need of development. However, it can be argued that proficiency in designing and evaluating curriculum is essential not only for WIL curriculum but also for broader teaching and learning for employability. This paper focuses on how educators who champion the employability agenda within their sphere of influence advocate for embedding Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) across a range of disciplines. They aim to enhance the awareness of learners, colleagues, and peers outside the institution regarding the benefits of WIL.

Transformational impact of conversations for teaching and learning

There are numerous ways professional learning can be facilitated, including workshops, communities of practice, online modules, programs, and webinars. Many of these, however, require time, effort, and resources to coordinate across an institution, pulling academics away from their practice to attend. To bring academic development closer to the site of practice (Boud & Brew, 2013) and effectively translate learning into contextually relevant applications, an emerging movement in academic development literature is increasingly acknowledging the transformative power of conversation (Dorner & Belic, 2021).

Conversations, specifically those that occur informally or semi-formally (as part of a scheduled gathering), are crucial for professional learning, the application of new ideas and inspiring change in practice (Dorner & Belic, 2021; Thomson & Barrie, 2021). Conversations about teaching and learning are proffered as private, efficient and a sustainable way to address the complexity associated with various teaching philosophies, approaches, and values (Thomson & Barrie, 2021). Anchored in conversations are themes of trust, respect, connection, and shared responsibility (Spitzner & Meixner, 2021; Thomas & Barrie, 2021). They create a space for reflection, negotiation, idea testing, problem solving and transformation (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Spitzner & Meixner, 2021).

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) refer to 'significant conversations' to describe safe spaces for educators to 'continuously construct, maintain and develop an understanding about teaching and learning' (p. 555). They argue that through these significant conversations, significant networks may form. This aligns with Dorner & Belic's (2021) observation that individual conversations can generate movement for broader institutional or collective strategies. The value of context is imperative (Dorner & Belic, 2021; Thomas & Barrie, 2021) as research shows that engaging in conversations prompts individuals to reflect on their pedagogical beliefs, fostering a deeper understanding of their practices, while also serving as a collective learning experience that encourages dialogue across diverse disciplines (Dorner & Belic, 2021). This suggests that through conversations 'the path of change within institutions starts from individual development of university teachers but moves to broader cultural and institutional transformations' (Dorner & Belic, 2021, p. 220). For this paper, significant conversations are proposed as the vehicle for which institutional employability strategy is enacted, by enabling academics to make sense of, reflect on and apply employability development in their disciplinary contexts while in dialogue with institutional employability champions.
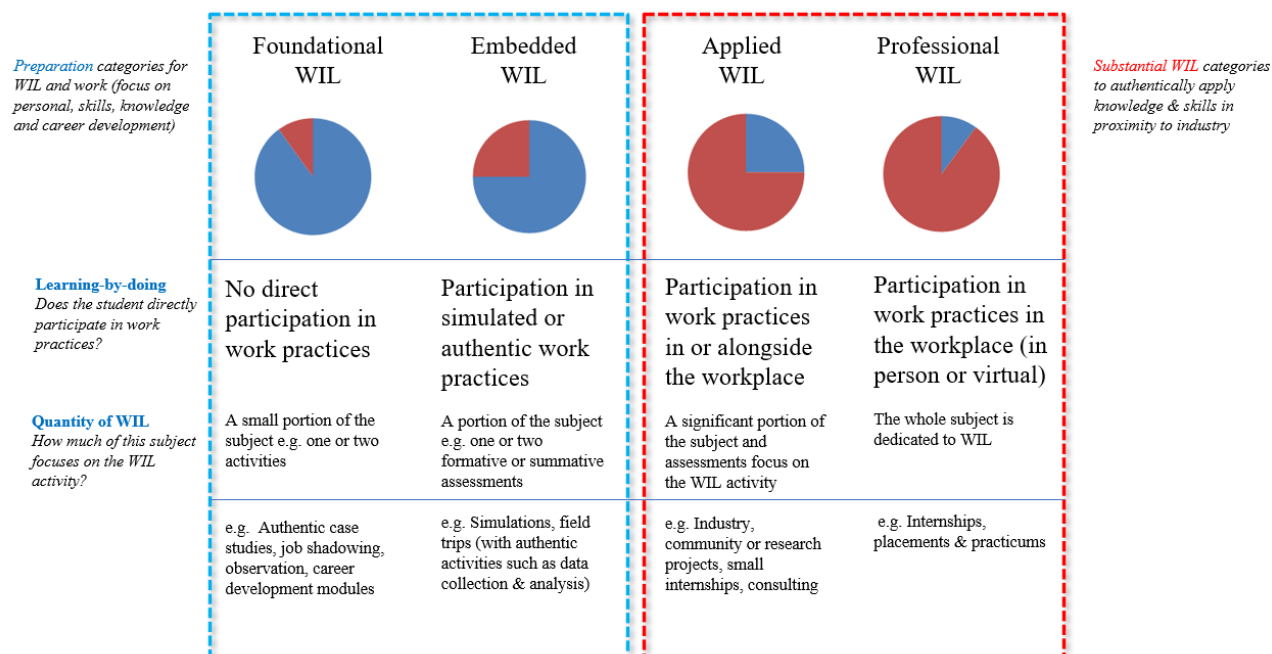
Case Study: The Work-Integrated Curriculum Classification (WILCC) Framework

In response to government initiatives for an enhanced labour-force, the Australian higher education landscape has been promoting strategies to improve graduate employability for over eighty years. Since the 1940s, universities have been instrumental in equipping individuals with the requisite skills to engage in the nation's rapidly burgeoning industrial economy (O'Kane et al., 2024). In 2008, major reform was experienced in response to the Bradley Review (Australian Government, 2008), which opened Australian higher education to diverse and underrepresented populations, proffering changes to impact a skilled Australian workforce. More recently, a National Priority and Industry Linkages funding (NPILF) model required universities to report on industry collaboration and employability initiatives, particularly those utilising WIL (Australian Government, 2020). It is within this national policy environment, that research and national projects for WIL were implemented (see Oliver, 2005; Patrick et al., 2009; Universities Australia, 2019). It was also the context for which groundswell for applied work experiences and greater industry collaborations emerged.

In 2018, the University of Wollongong (UOW), Australia, conceptualised a new framework to make WIL visible across all disciplines and to purposefully scaffold WIL across all students' course-wide learning journeys. Drawing on Oliver (2005), Kaider et al. (2017) and the Universities Australia (2019) audit framework, UOW colleagues passionate about employability embarked on a collaborative undertaking to produce an institutional wide discourse for WIL. The Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum Classification (WILCC) Framework is a novel, practice-based typology that avoids clustering WIL modes and instead focuses on how students learn through practice. It celebrates the complexities and specificities within disciplines and centralises scaffolding of practiced-based experiences, on a spectrum towards greater authenticity and proximity with industry partners.

The impetus, theoretical foundations, and additional details of the WILCC Framework can be found in Dean et al. (2020), while the operationalisation and distributed leadership approach can be sourced in Dean et al. (2021). The framework itself comprises five classifications: Co-Curricular WIL, Foundational WIL, Embedded WIL, Applied WIL and Professional WIL. For the purposes of mapping and integrating WIL across a degree, only curricular classifications are proposed, these are illustrated in Figure 1.

Acknowledging the vital role of career development learning (CDL) for students' employability, the WILCC Framework starts with Foundational WIL, where students observe, reflect, investigate, and analyse their discipline, work interests, their emerging professional identities and future possibilities. Students do not directly practice or do work, but rather expand their understandings of the world of work, their strengths, preferences, and connections. The following classification, Embedded WIL, describes opportunities for students to practice work in safe and low-risk environments. Importantly, activities in this category empower students to apply their knowledge and skills in experiences that complement content learning, supporting trial and error, mistake making, independence and autonomy while supported by the educator, peers and industry or community professionals. Through these smaller authentic activities, such as field trips or simulations, students can practice finding their voice, making evaluative judgements and collaborate with others, while participating in work-like scenarios typical of their discipline or profession. These two classifications, Foundational and Embedded WIL, are conceptualised as preparatory classifications and denoted as essential for building confidence and greater insight into self, before greater autonomy is enabled in industry experiences.

Dean, B.A. et al. (2024). Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 15(*2), 80–94.

84

Figure 1 content:

Preparation categories for WIL and work (focus on personal, skills, knowledge and career development)

Substantial WIL categories to authentically apply knowledge & skills in proximity to industry

	Foundational WIL	Embedded WIL	Applied WIL	Professional WIL
Learning-by-doing *Does the student directly participate in work practices?*	No direct participation in work practices	Participation in simulated or authentic work practices	Participation in work practices in or alongside the workplace	Participation in work practices in the workplace (in person or virtual)
Quantity of WIL *How much of this subject focuses on the WIL activity?*	A small portion of the subject e.g. one or two activities	A portion of the subject e.g. one or two formative or summative assessments	A significant portion of the subject and assessments focus on the WIL activity	The whole subject is dedicated to WIL
	e.g. Authentic case studies, job shadowing, observation, career development modules	e.g. Simulations, field trips (with authentic activities such as data collection & analysis)	e.g. Industry, community or research projects, small internships, consulting	e.g. Internships, placements & practicums

Figure 1: The Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum Classification Framework (adapted from Dean et al., 2020, reproduced with permission)

In the latter two classifications, Applied and Professional WIL, students work alongside industry or community partners to contribute to real workplace outputs. In these substantial WIL activities, students are actively doing work, applying their learned knowledge, making decisions, and activating a range of skills, while in practice consistent with the expectations of the discipline. Applied WIL describes industry experiences that significantly contribute to students' learning in the unit or subject, while students also learn new or extend content knowledge from the educator. Typical activities in this classification include small placements, industry or research projects, consulting, or hackathons. Professional WIL is most easily identified as WIL as it denotes a whole subject dedicated to students spending substantial time in a workspace (physical, online or hybrid) performing duties that contribute to organisational objectives.

Distinguishing features of the WILCC Framework

Core to understanding the WILCC Framework is conceptualising learning through practice as an epistemological positioning of learning and knowledge. Moving away from knowledge as a cognitive function residing in minds or a commodified thing that can be stored, sold, tested, and produced in economic terms, a body of scholars espouse practice theory, whereby 'practices' are the organising phenomena of learning, knowledge and doing. Acknowledging the influences of Schatzki (2017) who revolutionised understandings of social practices and Orlikowski (2007) who advanced a posthumantist concept, whereby social and material are entangled in everyday practice, we lean on the work of Gheradri (2018) for conceptualising learning as practice. Gherardi et al. (1998, p. 274) state 'learning is always a practical accomplishment. It's goal is to discover what to do; when and how to do it, using specific routines and artefacts; and how to give, finally, a reasonable account of why it was done.' The central organising influence is practice, the degree to which students participate in situated practices, where knowledge is embodied and entangled with doing, the materials, people and systems that produce and connect (Gherardi, 2018). Several scholars in WIL or related areas of higher education have also grounded their work practice-based perspectives (see for example, Billett, 2010; Dean & Sykes, 2022; Eames & Coll, 2010).

Launching from our epistemological position of learning through practice, we denote three critical elements to WIL experience that leverage a focus on learning. First, career development learning

Dean, B.A. et al. (2024). Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 15(2)*, 80–94.

85

engages students in decision making and transitions into and through work, and fundamentally supports the pedagogy of WIL (McIlveen et al., 2008). Second, critical reflection is vital to transforming and articulating new ideas, skills and connections enabling educators to raise the visibility of learning for both learner and assessment purposes (Fraser et al., 2024). Third, engaged feedback is crucial for practice development, beneficial from industry or community stakeholders, peers, educator, or self, to progress and advance authentic practice.

Enacting the WILCC Framework

In this section, we offer four vignettes to unpack how we, the four authors, have each implemented the WILCC Framework in different contexts by leveraging significant conversations for professional learning.

Local: Growing and empowering educators in the School of Law

This section has been written by the second author, an Australian female law lecturer and former lawyer, who coordinates a WIL unit and advocates WIL across the discipline.

Commencing with a mapping exercise of the current WIL landscape in our Law curriculum, the WILCC Framework was drawn on to conduct an audit of core subject outlines to identify any subjects with unrecognised WIL practices. That is, where the subject outline suggested WIL pedagogy practices under the WILCC Framework through seminar activities or assessments, however the subject did not have a formal WIL classification in our university system yet. Through this process, I identified two subjects with unrecognised WIL practices. I emailed the Subject Coordinators, providing information on the WILCC Framework and extending an invitation to formally recognise their WIL practices. I also offered 'to chat'.

While at first it was thought that this would largely be a process-driven task to formally capture the WIL classification as part of a mapping exercise, it was 'in the chat' that the WILCC Framework came to life. Drawing on the WILCC Framework, our conversations resulted in broader discussions on WIL and future WIL pedagogical goals. The WILCC Framework was essentially drawn on as a foundational source to test, share and contemplate how to best capture the WIL practices in each subject. This resulted in a two-way learning process. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) outline that significant conversations in university teaching and learning involve 'an intellectual component of problem solving or idea testing' (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009, p.554). The significant conversations on WIL pedagogy in law exhibited these features. For example, the initial classification for one subject was Foundational WIL, however through our conversation it became apparent that this subject had Embedded WIL with simulated work practices for law students. More broadly, the aims, thoughtfulness, and motivation behind the WIL practices in each subject were evident and both Subject Coordinators were keen to share their experiences and ideas on WIL. In this way, these significant conversations were grounded in idea testing, reflection and respect.

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009, p. 549) recognise 'university teaching as a solitary business.' Enacting the WILCC Framework through significant conversations provided an opportunity for collegiality on WIL practices in law. Our conversations resulted in much more than capturing a WIL classification for each subject: the WILCC Framework was a springboard for deeper discussion about WIL practice in the discipline of law and employability skills more broadly.

Institutional: Mapping and increasing WIL across the university

This section has been written by the first author, an Australian female and academic developer with experience in designing WIL programs, influencing institutional strategy and writing WIL scholarship.

Reflecting on our journey, the WILCC Framework has truly driven change for student real-world learning by offering a method to map, report, and embed WIL practices across the university. This

initiative has revolutionized how we, as an institution, can account for WIL. Our central WIL Advisory Committee, which includes members of our author team, has spearheaded this effort. The committee comprises faculty members and key units, including our quality, policy, and education management divisions. From conceptualisation to full institutional integration, this achievement has been made possible through the dedicated collaboration of local champions among both academic and professional staff. As part of this team, I have witnessed firsthand the power of collective effort in transforming our educational practices.

The genesis of the mapping process begin in 2019, where, after an initial concept testing, we sought to map every subject across the institution according to the WILCC Framework. There were several approaches that could have been employed to pilot the framework and capture academic's feedback and subject classification, such as a survey, university mandate or faculty-based approaches. However, as a team, we chose a relational and dialogic approach to foreground the value of conversation with our colleagues. We thought this would open spaces for respect and trust, build support and enable authentic responses or concerns to surface. So, we began with a pilot and captured 101 subject classifications through 54 conversational interviews. Our conversational interviews revealed a need for practical guides as many academics had questions on the definition and description of the classifications. Therefore, we went on to develop resources housed on a central staff website including a video, documents and an interactive tool that enabled academics to interpret the framework and classify their subjects. It was through conversations that these needs emerged, as they provided space for reflection, discussion, concept testing and problem solving (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Spitzner & Meixner, 2021).

After the pilot and creation of the website, in 2020 we embarked on a process to manually capture all university subjects. To do this we built a central survey on the webpage for academics to review, discern and lodge their subjects' classifications. School, Faculty and Central committee presentations were undertaken to share the framework universally and map each subject. We also facilitated small workshops with administrators and education managers. After six months, once all data was captured, it was imported into the institution's subject database and reporting system.

Full institutional reporting has now been activated for the past two years, showing movement between the classifications. Over 3,500 subjects are reported in the data against the WILCC Framework as well as translated into easy-to-understand language for a public facing student handbook within each subject description. This enables students to select between subjects based on the degree to which they have WIL and can practice their discipline in that subject. For the past two years, the framework has also been a mandatory inclusion in all course reviews. We access the course subject classification data to create a map, which is then utilised for deliberation and development by course teams during the crucial stages of stakeholder engagement and quality assurance. Academics have flexibility and scope to design WIL activities that are engaging, relevant and appropriate for their learners. Once a classification has been registered for a subject, if an academic wishes to change the WIL classification, they undergo the formal subject change process approved by their Faculty Education Committee. This ensures improved quality assurance and accuracy in course-wide mapping.

As representatives from the WIL Advisory Committee, we continue to engage in close dialogue with course coordinators to facilitate reflection and brainstorming, aiming to scaffold WIL across the degree. I am often in critical conversations with individual academics aiming to enhance WIL within their subjects, using these dialogues as a valuable vehicle for achieving higher classification. In addition to course reports and bi-annual institutional reporting, the WILCC Framework is a corner stone in UOW government reporting through the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund. Engaging directly with teachers, we run annual showcases to celebrate and share excellent WIL and has a network of employability champions. Question items relating to WIL pedagogy for each classification can be pre-selected by educators to include in the teacher evaluations.

The success of the implementation of the institutional approach started with a relational, dialogic approach. These initial critical conversations opened ideas, presented challenges to address and enabled a groundswell of support for improving student employability. Our relational efforts are testimony to Dorner & Belic's (2021) notion that institutional change begins with individual development of university teachers and can lead to cultural, institution-wide transformation. Now the framework is embedded throughout UOW, we can reflect that success is grounded in several aspects: systematic reporting; integration into existing university structures for students and staff; community-driven approach; and inspiration and development driven by employability champions.

Cross-Campus: Bringing impact to global campuses

This section has been written by the fourth author, an Australian male who has implemented WIL in master's programs and, in his role as Director of Assurance of Learning (AOL), has significantly improved student employability through effective AOL processes. Additionally, as the Associate Dean (International and Accreditation), he oversees collaborative activities and governance across multiple offshore campuses, including the Dubai campus.

Recognising WIL's critical role in enhancing student employability and engagement, as the Associate Dean in the Faculty of Business and Law, I have spearheaded the transformative journey of integrating WIL within the curriculum using the WILCC Framework at a UOW global campus in Dubai. The initiative began by recognising a need for a shared WIL strategy in 2020. Understanding the importance of practice-oriented business education for improving employability, we initiated wide-ranging discussions to emphasise the significance of industry engagement.

In these formative stages, the conversations I initiated played a key role. The amount of trust fostered a sense of confidence and freedom to speak openly based on shared interests. These low-stakes conversations, which continued over time, built upon previous discussions, and developed into non-judgemental, mutually supportive relationships (Spitzner & Meixner, 2021; Thomson & Barrie, 2021). This environment allowed valuable informal opportunities to emerge from formal contexts, facilitating meaningful change at the Dubai campus. By 2021, our focus at the Dubai campus shifted towards highlighting excellent industry engagement practices through teaching and learning forums at the faculty level. With strong executive support, the Dean of Business in Dubai played a crucial role in selecting and sharing these examples, fostering a culture of innovation and excellence in WIL and inspiring our academic community. In addition to these curriculum case studies, we sought next to quantify industry engagement and catalogue teaching and learning innovations. This period saw a structured increase in academic participation in organising industry-relevant activities, like hackathons, and the integration of authentic assessments. The Dean championed the documentation of these initiatives in Subject Reports and their discussion in program-level forums, which fostered a collective understanding and appreciation of meaningful industry engagement. Mechanisms for recognising and rewarding WIL innovations were also introduced to reflect the core values of meaningful industry collaboration.

The significant conversations from the previous phases sustained momentum through ongoing dialogue, reflection and enhancement (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). These collaborative actions created a mutually reinforcing sphere of influence, which greatly improved our ability to implement and improve WIL practices at our Dubai campus. The adoption of the WILCC Framework was pivotal, guiding the Dubai campus's academic staff in incorporating the appropriate WIL classification—whether Foundational, Embedded, Applied, or Professional—into their subject outlines. The continuous conversations facilitated individual development, leading to broader institutional transformation. Ultimately, the conversations encouraged academics to reflect on and seek to heighten the impact of their pedagogic models.

This initiative demonstrates strategic curriculum development and highlights the significant role of academic advocacy in promoting WIL practices across diverse educational contexts. The synergistic

Dean, B.A. et al. (2024). Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 15(2)*, 80–94.

88

endeavours of both the Dean in Dubai and the employability champion on our author team, were instrumental to the successful advancement of WIL across the Dubai UOW campus, employing leadership, advocacy, trust, and a dedication to collaborative development. This dynamic of reciprocal influence showcases the power of shared vision and leadership in driving the development and adaptation of educational strategies to meet the evolving needs of the workforce.

International: Driving a global movement

This section has been written by the third author, an Australian female with multiple citizenships who holds a position of Professor of Education with experience in designing and implementing WIL subjects, influencing degree development strategy and connecting WIL and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

Having laid a strong foundation by showcasing our efforts at the local, cross-campus and national levels, we were cognisant of broader impact we could pursue in an international arena, where our commitment to fostering employability transcends geographical boundaries. As champions of the WILCC Framework, we recognise the imperative to drive a global movement towards empowering students, staff and industry through WIL experiences. Our journey into the international sphere is marked by communication, collaboration, innovation, and a shared vision of equipping students with the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving global employability landscape.

Sharing a component of your work that is a passion, often involves an element of risk. As with many academics, there have been various opportunities that have appeared in email inboxes, through social media, and via direct communication. Within our WIL Advisory Committee family, we each contribute a variety of skills. Over the years, I have found my talent lies in networking, presenting and connecting with others, and I worked hard to champion our global profile across a variety of higher education institutions globally.

These opportunities have included universities, colleges, higher professional education (hoger beroepsonderwijs (HBO) – a level of higher education between college and university) in the Netherlands, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia and Community Colleges in Canada. These institutions are interested in building partnerships between community and industry partners and their educational institutions. Central to sharing our vision for WIL are significant conversations with like-minded instructors and academics across higher education institutions globally. Sometimes the conversation starts at a conference, other times it can be through LinkedIn or an email inviting me into a discussion about a paper or to do a presentation. Having these significant conversations has ignited relationships that have been key to opening opportunities for presentations, invited scholar and visiting professor opportunities which have led to many opportunities for presentations to be delivered to universities in Dubai, Hong Kong, The Netherlands, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark and Switzerland. Keynote speaker invitations have been extended from the World Association of Collaborative Education (WACE), the Beijing Institute of Technology, as well as an invitation to be an expert panel member connecting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and WIL at a four-day conference at a university in Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). In 2022, the leaders of the Centre for Engaged Learning (CEL) at Elon University in North Carolina USA, Writing Research Seminar devoted to WIL accepted my application as the first Visiting Scholar from our WIL Advisory Committee family to participate over a three-year period of writing and researching with collaborators from around the world including Germany, Canada, Switzerland, Norway, Singapore, India, Ireland, England and Australia.

Because I took the time to have a significant conversation with a new colleague and share our passion and framework, doors have opened. These opportunities have led to an international awareness, accolades and application of our WILCC Framework on an international level. Along with students, empowering staff and industry and community partners to embrace the principles of the WILCC Framework is fundamental to our mission. This has led to two Special Issues of journals, in the Journal

of University Teaching and Learning Practice (JUTLP) titled 'Advancing Non-placement Work-integrated Learning Across the Degree the Degree' in 2020, and in the International Journal of Work Integrated Learning (IJWIL) through a special issue on 'Indigenous Perspectives and Partnerships: Enhancing Work-Integrated Learning' in 2022.

Taking the time to ignite the spark through significant conversations, build relationships with ongoing communication, and nurture the seeds that were planted, aligns with the literature on the benefits of conversation for development (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Spitzner & Meixner, 2021; Thomson & Barrie, 2021). This approach also reflects the belief of our WIL team. We recognise that effective employability education requires a holistic approach, we are dedicated to not only equipping students with the necessary skills but also empowering educators, higher education administrators and forging strong partnerships with industry stakeholders globally (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Fakunle & Higson, 2021). Through collaboration, innovation, and a shared voice and vision for equipping individuals with the skills necessary to thrive in a rapidly evolving world, UOW is driving a global movement towards a more inclusive, resilient, and employable future for all.

Recommendations for implementing employability strategy

These vignettes showcase how we identify ourselves as employability champions, not by the roles or position titles we assume, but through our commitment to empowering students through employability and belief in our WILCC Framework as a tool to enable employability to be designed into curriculum. As proposed in the literature, we recognise that institutional systems, structures, and resources are crucial to the ability to roll out institutional employability agendas (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Fakunle & Higson, 2021). So too does the approval of senior leadership elevate the recognition and importance of such a strategy. But in resource constrained environments, we have found that employability champions, those academic and professional staff committed to students learning and career development through employability activities, can also be empowered to shape change. Institutional wide approaches, such as the WILCC Framework, addresses calls in the literature for more defined and explicit institutional strategies (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019) and address all students, including those from equity-deserving backgrounds and those who are international students (Singh et al., 2023). Below, we reflect on important factors that have led to the success moving the employability strategy forward.

1. Focusing on conversations to elevate context

Adopting significant conversations as the mode for professional learning prioritises dialogue and collaborative sense-making (Thomas & Barrie, 2021). Significant conversations enact reciprocity and respect, where both parties draw on their knowledge and expertise to negotiate a common goal or understanding (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Spitzner & Meixner, 2021). For our UOW employability champions, the WILCC Framework served as the catalyst for our conversation. We emphasized the educators' context, considering factors such as discipline practices, approaches to learning, access, available time, and space within the curriculum for change, and understandings of potential WIL activities.

2. Prioritizing a relational approach

Institutional strategy is a macro goal that requires translation and operationalisation. For our team, we adopted a relational approach to developing, disseminating, and embedding WIL across all courses. This work takes time, but for us it has been more effective and meaningful than a ubiquitous approach expecting everyone to embed WIL the same way. In disseminating the WILCC Framework across global campuses and internationally, time is also required to invest in communication and forging partnerships that ultimately open doors. Similarly, prioritising a relational approach at the local level (Dorner & Belic, 2021) enabled a richer and wider understanding of the embedding of WIL practices within a core curriculum.

3. Unifying disciplines through a common language

One of the core challenges in the beginning of the WILCC Framework development, was the diverse language used across disciplines to identity different ways students participate in WIL. A core strength of operationalising the WILCC Framework was utilising a common language to enable a more productive conversation. The common language of the WILCC Framework was able to facilitate discourse on discipline-specific WIL pedagogical practices at the local level and drive opportunities globally.

4. Empowering local employability champions

Each of our vignettes highlight how enacting the WILCC Framework empowered us as employability champions in local, institutional, cross-campus and global contexts. This has broader implications for fostering employability in higher education as it enables dissemination and dialogue on WIL activities in diverse educational settings. Even with resource constrained environments, our experiences demonstrate the valuable role of local employability champions who implemented the WILCC Framework and recommend the identification of, and ongoing support for, such roles in higher education institutions.

5. Leveraging our circle of influence for impact

Our approach to implementing the WILCC Framework relies on building strong relationships within our own professional networks to effectively support student employability. We recognise that forming strong partnerships is important for driving change. By working within our existing professional circles, across various institutions and regions, we were able to put the WILCC Framework into action and spread its influence on WIL teaching methods. This approach also helped us to broadly implement and expand employability strategies.

Conclusion

This paper has showcased four vignettes to illustrate how the WILCC Framework has been enacted across a diverse range of contexts: local, institutional, cross-campus and international spheres. It has explored the ways in which WIL practitioners can influence change and promote employability through a relational approach drawing on the WILCC Framework. This extends Dean et al.'s (2020) paper to consider the ways in which the WILCC Framework can be implemented by employability champions through significant conversations on WIL practices and possibilities. Drawing on these experiences, we have identified five key factors for highlighting the need for more employability readiness in higher education and demonstrated how the WILCC Framework was a core resource in promoting and prioritising WIL pedagogies. Drawing on these five pivotal factors, our recommendations underscore the indispensable role of local employability champions. These individuals wield influence within their communities, harnessing relationships to champion the imperative for tailored and collaborative approaches in implementing institutional employability strategies. Given the benefits of WIL to foster employability for students, this paper provides important insights on growing and empowering employability in higher education.

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94