

Contextualising Community-Engaged Work-Integrated Learning in Criminology and the Justice Sector: Comparative Insights from Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

As universities respond to global challenges through local partnerships, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has become a key strategy for preparing students for complex career landscapes. This comparative study examines community-engaged WIL in criminology and justice sector programmes within Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (UK). Drawing on key policy frameworks from these three countries, we explore various contexts that shape WIL design, delivery, and sustainability. We begin with a policy landscape analysis of funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks that enable or constrain WIL. Three case studies illustrate how programmes navigate these contexts: (1) an Australian example showcasing low-cost simulation models such as community surveys; (2) a Canadian case highlighting structured partnerships with criminal justice-related organisations; and (3) a case study from the UK examining WIL integration within policing apprenticeships. Our analysis highlights shared strategies including partnerships in community, common challenges such as risk management, partnership sustainability, and tensions between disciplinary fields. Findings offer a practical framework for implementing community-engaged WIL. We argue that innovation often emerges from the margins through creative pedagogy, cross-sector collaboration, and commitment to student and community voice, alongside policy recommendations to strengthen employability, identity development and sustainable community partnerships.

Keywords

community-engaged, work-integrated learning, experiential learning, experiential education, policing, criminal justice, justice sector, criminology

Introduction

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has become a feature of higher education (HE) policy and practice. Across Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK), WIL is increasingly framed as a mechanism for strengthening employability, enhancing civic engagement, and building responsive relationships with industry and community. These expectations are pronounced in criminology and the justice

sector, where students engage with sensitive social issues, diverse career pathways, and organisations operating under significant ethical and regulatory constraints. At the same time, universities are navigating multimodal delivery, dispersed student cohorts, and heightened accountability for labour-market outcomes. Policy frameworks emphasise partnerships and skills development but provide uneven support for the relational and resource-intensive work required to sustain community engagement. Within this context, community-engaged WIL offers a promising but under-examined approach for criminology and justice-sector education.

This paper examines community-engaged WIL through a comparative case study of three jurisdictions: Australia, Canada, and UK. The case studies were a serendipitous discovery emerging out of networking by the authors at the International Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISoTL) Conference in 2025. Australia, Canada and the UK share important structural features, worthy of exploration. Including, common law traditions, English-speaking higher education systems and criminology and criminal justice as an established university discipline. Whilst there are these similarities, there are also differences in governance arrangements, funding models, and the role of professional accreditation which shapes WIL. Using a cross-national lens, we highlight how different policy environments, funding structures, and governance arrangements shape what forms of engagement are possible. Our analysis draws on documentary review, policy analysis, and practitioner-researcher insights from long-standing involvement in WIL design. The paper reviews relevant literature, outlining comparative policy landscapes, presenting case studies illustrating distinct models of community-engaged WIL, and synthesising insights to propose a practical framework and policy recommendations for strengthening community-centred practice in the field.

Literature Review

Early definitions positioned WIL as a mechanism for integrating academic theory with workplace practice, typically through internships, co-operative education, or practicum models (McRae & Johnston, 2016), with a central purpose to prepare students for the workplace through skills, networks and experience development (Aprile & Knight, 2020). More recent scholarship, however, emphasises WIL as a relational and pedagogical ecosystem involving students, higher education (HE) institutions, and community partners (Zegwaard et al., 2020).

Community engagement in HE: A spectrum of practice

The shift towards community engagement in WIL reflects a broader movement in HE towards what Boyer (1996) termed the *scholarship of engagement*—the view that universities have civic responsibilities to connect their teaching and knowledge with the communities they serve. This agenda is visible in recent policy developments such as England’s Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs). The Boyer 2030 Commission (2023) has renewed this call, urging universities to move beyond transactional relationships towards genuinely democratic partnerships characterised by shared power, community-defined priorities, and reciprocal benefit. This vision provides a useful frame for community-engaged WIL.

Saltmarsh et al. (2009) offer a framework for this purpose. Drawing on Boyer (1996), they distinguish between transactional and democratic models of community engagement in HE. Transactional engagement positions the university as the primary actor and treats community partners instrumentally. Democratic engagement is characterised by shared power, community-derived priorities, and a commitment to social change. Community expertise is recognized as legitimate knowledge and community voice shapes not just the delivery but the design of educational activities. Saltmarsh et al. (2009) argue that these are not exclusive categories but a spectrum, shaped by institutional culture, disciplinary context, resource constraints, and the maturity of community relationships.

Community-engaged learning and WIL

Community-engaged learning (CEL) is defined as ‘community-university engagements that aim to support both community priorities and student learning’ (Brabazon et al., 2019: 2). CEL is gaining pace in HE, reflecting a turn towards impact metrics, and a call to re-establish universities as sites that centre community-engagement in educational practices (Eady et al., 2021) to address community needs, equitable access, and social justice. CEL and WIL share a commitment to experiential learning (EL) and authentic engagement but differ in emphasis and purpose. WIL’s primary orientation is towards graduate employability, with community partners valued primarily as providers of learning opportunities whereas CEL centres community priorities and student learning in equal measure. CEL fosters active citizenship, critical reflexivity, and reciprocal relationships rather than the more instrumentalised exchange of employment-ready skills. Further, CEL centres critique, disruptive educational practices, and the redistribution of power in the university-community relationship (Brabazon et al. 2019).

This paper positions community-engaged WIL as occupying a productive overlap that deliberately incorporates community partnership, reciprocity, and civic purpose, without necessarily meeting the full democratic criteria of CEL. Useful here is Furco’s (1996) service-learning framework which maps educational activities across two axes (1) the primary beneficiary (student versus community) and (2) the primary purpose (service versus training). Furco’s framework positions internships and placements firmly on the student-benefit/learning end, and service learning on the community-benefit/service end. Community-engaged WIL occupies the middle ground: it is more community-responsive than conventional WIL, but less community-driven than CEL. For Saltmarsh et al. (2009), it is a movement along the engagement spectrum from transactional towards democratic, a movement that is not completed in a single curriculum decision but developed iteratively over time. Critics of CEL have argued that social change is rarely realised in practice, and communities are often involved in educational experiences in thin, transactional and unequal ways (Stoecker 2016). These critiques are directly relevant to the case studies examined in this paper. Rather than dismissing them, we use them as diagnostic tools: they help identify where community engagement remains transactional, where it has moved meaningfully towards democratic partnership, and what structural conditions enable or constrain that movement.

Disciplinary considerations: Criminology and the justice sector

Criminology and criminal justice present distinctive challenges and opportunities for WIL. Graduates enter diverse sectors including corrections, youth justice, victim support, community safety, and policing, each with different expectations, risks and skills profiles. This diversity complicates WIL design by challenging generic employability frameworks and sometimes introducing compliance requirements. It also shapes what ‘community’ means in criminology and criminal justice-sector WIL: without a single professional destination, such programmes cannot rely on the profession-specific relationships that other disciplines enjoy. The ‘community’ available to criminology and criminal justice WIL is plural, contested, and often itself located within justice systems that carry significant power, risk and reputational complexity.

The literature highlights several discipline-specific considerations. First, criminology and criminal justice students often work with sensitive topics, trauma-exposed populations, and justice-sector organisations operating under strict confidentiality and reputational constraints, creating ethical and risk-management requirements (Burton et al., 2024). Second, power dynamics between universities, justice agencies, and community organisations shape the terms of engagement and influence how far community voice can be embedded in curriculum design (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2024). These dynamics are especially relevant along the transactional–democratic spectrum as powerful justice agencies may not readily act as co-designers, limiting the depth of democratic engagement (Wehr et al., 2023). Third, there are equity concerns, as WIL can exacerbate financial, geographic, and

caring-responsibility barriers and these issues may disproportionately affect students who are first-generation and from low socio-economic status backgrounds – two cohorts of students seen among criminology and criminal justice programs (Williams et al., 2025).

Over time criminal justice landscape, educators have diversified by adopting low-cost, scalable, community-embedded WIL models (Kakar, 2025; McDonald & Chavez, 2025). These include community surveys, practitioner co-teaching, policy-focused assessments, and community-based research projects (Sundset et al., 2025). Such models have the potential to create greater opportunities for integrating community voice and lived experience within WIL (Mpuangnan & Ntombela, 2024). Community-organisations and survey methodologies can generate data about communities, involve students in partnerships with community organisations, and produce outputs that serve both educational and community purposes. These characteristics distinguish community-engaged WIL from mere community-adjacent WIL (Rook & Sloan 2021).

Effective community-engaged WIL requires reciprocity, shared purpose and sustained collaboration. Peach et al. (2012) emphasise that partnerships must be nurtured over time, with clear communication, mutual expectations, and recognition of community contributions. Rook and Sloan (2021) highlight tensions between stakeholder priorities, noting that universities often emphasise employability outcomes while community partners prioritize service, capacity building, or social justice. These tensions are particularly salient in criminology and criminal justice, where community organisations may have complex relationships with justice agencies and may experience partnership fatigue or resource constraints that limit their capacity for genuine co-design.

Several convergent themes establish the foundation for this paper. WIL is shifting from placement-centric to ecosystem-centric models involving universities, students, and communities in a shared endeavour (Zegwaard et al., 2020). Community engagement in HE exists on a spectrum from transactional to democratic (Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Boyer 2030 Commission, 2023), and most WIL practice currently clusters towards the transactional. This is not a failure but a starting point. Criminology and criminal justice WIL must navigate specific ethical, political, and relational complexities that shape both the nature of achievable community engagement and the design choices required to expand it. The case studies that follow examine how national frameworks, funding structures, and governance arrangements enable or constrain this movement.

Comparative Policy Landscape

The policy environments shaping community-engaged WIL in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom reflect distinct governance arrangements, funding structures, and national priorities. Yet across these jurisdictions, WIL is increasingly positioned as a mechanism for addressing workforce needs, strengthening civic engagement, and enhancing graduate employability. Despite distinct governance structures, national in Australia, provincial in Canada, and regulator-body driven in the UK, all three jurisdictions share a common tension: policy expectations for WIL continue to expand while the financial and administrative infrastructure to support community-centred practice remains insufficient. This section examines the key policy frameworks, tensions, and structural conditions that influence how programmes design and sustain community-engaged WIL.

National Policy Frameworks and Strategic Priorities

These three jurisdictions each articulate WIL within broader HE reform agendas. In Australia, the Universities Accord (O’Kane et al., 2024) positions WIL as central to national productivity, equity, and workforce development. It calls for expanded access, flexible models, and a national strategy to coordinate industry–university partnerships. In Canada, provincial governance shapes WIL policy. Ontario’s Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs), specifically the third iteration (SMA3) (Ontario & Carleton University, 2020) embed EL within performance-based funding metrics, linking institutional

accountability to job readiness, labour-market outcomes, and available opportunities. Nationally, federal policy emphasises research funding rather than teaching, but community engagement has gained prominence, often through local initiatives meeting broader advocacy goals. In the UK, WIL is embedded within employability and skills agendas, including Skills England (n.d), the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students, 2023), and sector-wide commitments to apprenticeship expansion. Criminal justice practice pathways, including policing education, are shaped by professional requirements such as the Police Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) (College of Policing, 2023), which mandates practice-based learning and embeds community engagement within professional standards. Despite these shared policy ambitions, each jurisdiction grapples with tensions between employability agendas, civic engagement goals, and the disciplinary characteristics of the sector creating mismatch between policy assumptions and disciplinary realities across contexts.

Governance, Institutional Autonomy, and Accountability

Governance structures significantly influence how WIL is operationalised. Australia's national approach provides broad policy direction but leaves implementation to institutions, creating variability across universities in resourcing, curriculum design, and partnership management. The Accord's (O'Kane et al., 2024) emphasis on equity and access requires universities to innovate WIL opportunities. Canada's provincial governance model creates a different dynamic as Ontario's performance-based funding ties institutional success to labour-market outcomes. LaCroix (2024) notes that institutional responses often involve reorganising existing structures rather than substantive pedagogical change. This raises questions about institutional commitment and partnership sustainability. In the UK, governance is shaped by regulatory bodies such as the Office for Students and professional frameworks like the PEQF (College of Policing, 2023). These structures create incentives for universities to integrate practice-based learning into justice sector programmes, such as policing programmes, but they also impose compliance burdens and limit institutional autonomy. The result is a policy environment where WIL is both mandated and constrained.

Funding Models, Resource Implications, and Sustainability Challenges

Universities face financial pressures that limit their capacity to invest in partnership infrastructure, staff training, and community engagement. Australia's funding landscape has been volatile, with declining public investment and historically a reliance on international student revenue (Welch, 2020). Although the Job-Ready Graduates package expanded funding eligibility for WIL, resource constraints remain a major barrier (Hodge et al., 2024). Of note, fluctuations in international student enrolments, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions and shifting visa and immigration policies, have placed significant pressure on Australian universities (Lin & Guo, 2025; Tran et al, 2023). In Canada, federal funding prioritises research, leaving EL and WIL dependent on institutional budgets or provincial incentives (Government of Canada, 2024). Performance-based funding in Ontario creates pressure to demonstrate EL outcomes but does not necessarily provide the resources required to support community partnerships. Universities in the UK operate in a competitive marketised system with capped domestic fees and rising operational costs. Apprenticeship funding supports policing programmes, but community-engaged WIL often falls outside these funding streams. This creates a reliance on academic labour, goodwill from community partners, and short-term project funding—conditions that undermine long-term sustainability. Policy expectations for WIL continue to grow, but financial support for community-centred practice remains insufficient.

Case studies

The case studies presented below reflect the authors' current engagement with WIL programmes. The first example, drawn from Carleton University in Canada, closely reflects a traditional WIL model in which students attend justice-related organisations for work experience. The second example also

situates WIL within the context of a justice-related organisation, in this case a police service within the UK. A point of difference is that the ‘students’ are trainee police officers. In this reversed model, police trainees are enrolled in a university programme to contextualise their professional skills within an academic framework. The final case study describes an approach taken at the University of Wollongong and Griffith University. Here, a longitudinal community survey with co-design elements is distributed by students, offering a simulated research experience. The case studies provide examples that illustrate what is possible across a continuum of WIL approaches within diverse policy, program and funding landscapes, and demonstrate how these approaches fit within a framework of ‘community engaged’ WIL.

Case Study 1: Canada

Context and policy environment

Responsibility for HE rests primarily with provincial governments, while the federal government plays a significant role in research funding, allocating approximately \$4.5 billion annually to grants, scholarships, and infrastructure (Government of Canada, 2024). At the forefront of policy reform has been Ontario, Canada’s largest province and home to 43% of full-time post-secondary students (Brewis, et al., 2025; Statistics Canada, 2023). The introduction of performance-based funding in 2022–2023 marked a major shift in university accountability, replacing a predominantly enrolment-driven model with one that ties institutional performance to labour-market outcomes (Peters, 2021).

Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) frame EL as a mechanism to enhance undergraduate education, improve employability, and strengthen professional skills (Lacroix, 2024). SMA3, the most recent iteration, embeds EL metrics under ‘skills and job outcomes,’ assessing institutional specialisation, graduate employment, and labour-market success (Ontario & Carleton University, 2020). Lacroix (2024) argues that universities often respond to SMA requirements by expanding WIL offerings, yet many institutional changes reflect administrative consolidation rather than substantive pedagogical transformation. The proliferation of EL hubs, for example, may signal institutional commitment but does not necessarily translate into deeper engagement with community partners.

Carleton University’s longstanding commitments to community engagement predate these policy shifts. The Committee for Community-engaged Pedagogy (CCEP), a dedicated network of faculty, staff, and community members, have long organised annual community–campus events and advocated for the establishment of a Centre for Community Engagement, opening in 2022. Although the Centre formalised institutional recognition of community engagement, it has not met the expectations of its early advocates, who in 2023 transitioned CCEP into a Community of Practice. This illustrates the gap between policy commitments and organisational realities, echoing Lacroix’s (2024) critique of surface-level institutional change.

Carleton University has deep roots in community engagement and enrolls more than 30,000 students, including a diverse international cohort (Carleton University, 2020). Carleton is recognised for teaching innovation, research impact, and community partnerships, and hosts Ontario’s third-largest co-op programme (Carleton University, 2024). The Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice was established in 1998, and the multidisciplinary programme integrates law, psychology, sociology, and criminology. Ottawa’s status as the national capital provides access to federal departments, legal institutions, and community organisations, often competing for placements with other regional institutions.

WIL model in practice: Criminology field placement course

Carleton's criminology field placement course combines an unpaid placement (8–16 hours per week from September to April) with a bi-weekly seminar. Each year, 150–200 students apply, with 80 selected. Historically, selection was based solely on GPA (or weighted average mark, WAM) across six required courses. In 2023–2024, the programme piloted a revised process to improve equity: 40 students were selected by GPA (WAM) and 40 students through randomisation among students in good academic standing. The programme maintains partnerships with 65–90 agencies annually. Students rank preferred placements, articulate career interests, and submit résumés, enabling the coordinator to match students with agencies through a centralised process. Placements span government, legal, and non-profit organisations, reflecting the breadth of the criminology field. Learning objectives emphasise employability, integration of theory and practice, and informed career exploration. Reflection is a core pedagogical component, supporting EL and professional development (Bartle, 2026).

Community partnerships, settings, and voice

The longevity of the field placement course has fostered strong, sustained community partnerships grounded in responsiveness to organisational needs. A 2022 internal department report found that placement supervisors value the programme's streamlined administrative requirements, centralised coordination, and opportunities to inform seminar content. These partnerships extend beyond placements, enabling field trips, job shadowing, and experiential exposure for non-placement students. Community engagement is further embedded through seminar guest speakers from the field. Alumni play a particularly valuable role, offering insight into career pathways across Canada and reinforcing the programme's relevance and reach (Nearing-Guibord et al., in press).

Challenges and tensions

Declining enrolment has reduced the number of students seeking EL opportunities, placing additional pressure on the programme components that once served as major recruitment drivers and the availability of placements has contracted significantly. A federal shift towards paid government internships in 2020 created confusion and initially appeared incompatible with Carleton's unpaid, for-credit model; even after the policy was amended to accommodate academic placements, this clarification did not reach all partner institutions. Compounding this, the Institute suspended policing and corrections placements in 2021 in response to sector-wide criticism and calls for reform, resulting in the loss of roughly thirty placement opportunities and heightened uncertainty among community partners.

Key insights

First, relationship-building is essential: successful placements depend on long-standing trust, consistent communication, and proactive engagement with community agencies. Sustained engagement also strengthens partnerships more broadly, with annual outreach, shared events, and ongoing conversations helping to deepen collaboration and reaffirm mutual commitment. Finally, the incorporation of community voices adds meaningful context to academic learning. This bridges theory and practice, enhances student readiness, and reinforces curriculum relevance.

Case Study 2: United Kingdom

Context and policy environment

Police training and education in England and Wales has always been closely tied to how the police role is understood (Tong & Hallenberg, 2018). For decades, there has been an ongoing debate about what a police officer is and what skills are essential for the role. This discourse has often reinforced the

perception of policing as a 'craft' or an 'artisan trade' (Neyroud, 2011). The Police Leadership and Training Review was commissioned soon after the Conservative government took office in 2010 (Holdaway, 2017; Neyroud 2011). The review highlighted the growing complexity of policing and the need for leaders able to address challenges such as counterterrorism, organised crime, and community engagement. This shift required new leadership capabilities at all levels with an emphasis on professional skills beyond traditional law enforcement.

Neyroud's review led to the establishment of the College of Policing in 2012, the professional body for policing for England and Wales and the single source for defining and disseminating national standards (Neyroud, 2011). The College subsequently implemented the PEQF, mandating collaboration between police forces and HE. In 2016, policing education reform introduced a standardised national curriculum under the PEQF, aiming to professionalise policing and establish it as a graduate-level occupation. The Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA) was launched as a key entry route, combining paid employment with degree-level study to widen participation and remove financial barriers. In 2023, then Home Secretary Braverman announced a new Police Constable Entry Program (PCEP), explicitly designed to increase diversity by offering an additional non-degree pathway into policing (Braverman, 2023).

The PCDA operates within a rapidly evolving skills and HE landscape shaped by national reforms and sector-wide blueprints. The PEQF requires that all 43 forces implement the three entry routes which includes the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship. Forces decide which entry route to implement locally based on their strategy, capacity, and partnership arrangements with higher education institutions. This means that while the PCDA is underpinned by the PEQF, the delivery model varies regionally, with different HE responsible for curriculum design, assessment, and academic support. It is important to note that although England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all form the United Kingdom, these reforms apply to England and Wales only. Scotland and Northern Ireland operate under a separate policing and education framework, with their own recruitment and training standards.

The PCDA is funded through the Apprenticeship Levy, a UK government scheme requiring large employers to contribute 0.5% of their annual salary into a levy fund. Employers can then draw down these funds to cover the cost of approved apprenticeship training and assessment. For policing, this means forces can access levy funding to pay for the PCDA delivered in partnership with HE. In 2025, the funding band for the PCDA was increased, reflecting the complexity and duration of the programme which aims to ensure sustainability for both forces and universities. This helps offset training costs for police forces and provides greater financial viability for HE. The change also aligns policing with other regulated professions, such as nursing, where apprenticeship models require significant investment in workplace learning and assessment.

The Universities UK *Blueprint for Change* (2024) emerged in response to financial pressures, skills shortages, and the need for universities to play a stronger role in local and national growth. Its purpose was to stabilise and future-proof the sector by promoting five major shifts: expanding opportunity; fostering collaboration across tertiary education; driving local economic partnerships; strengthening research and enhancing global competitiveness. This vision positions universities as central to skills ecosystems, which is directly relevant to police-HE partnerships delivering the PCDA and Degree Holder Entry routes under the PEQF. Although the *Blueprint for Change* does not explicitly reference WIL, the emphasis on employer partnerships, skills development, and locally responsive provision aligns closely with the principles that underpin policing apprenticeships.

WIL model in practice: Policing apprenticeships

Unlike short time-bounded placements or internships, policing apprenticeships position learners as employees operating in real-time policing environments, balancing paid responsibilities with structured off-the-job learning. A central feature of the apprenticeship is the Evidence-Based Research

Project (EBRP) which requires apprentices to investigate a live problem faced by their police force in their final year. The EBRP is carried out within the complexities of real policing contexts and aims to generate practical, actionable insights that can inform policing practice. Apprentices also compile a portfolio demonstrating their developing knowledge, skills and behaviours, and operational competence. Together, these highlight the apprentice's growth as a practitioner-researcher, showing how learning is integrated into operational policing, and how community-rooted problems can drive authentic WIL.

The policing apprenticeship is built around a model of sustained 'tripartite oversight,' whereby learning is co-managed by the apprentice, their workplace mentor or line manager, and a HE tutors (Evans & Cloutier, 2025; Myers et al., 2025). Introducing this model helps to clarify what distinguishes apprenticeship-based learning from conventional placements, as it embeds work and academic learning in a continuous, formally structured partnership across the full three-year programme (Skills England, 2025). In work-based learning (WBL) degree study, not only is the degree used for work, but work is used for the degree (Bloomfield et al., 2024). Lauritz et al. (2013) argue that creating a learning environment that develops reflective attitudes alongside technical skills is challenging. They position policing as an occupation at the intersection of worldviews: on one hand, officers require technical skills and legal knowledge to provide clear, definitive answers; on the other, they must navigate diverse ideological, cultural, and personal perspectives, requiring open-mindedness and adaptability. WBL cannot be taught in a traditional classroom sense; it emerges through doing rather than reading or observing and plays a critical role in making implicit learning explicit (Helyer & Garnett, 2016).

In policing apprenticeships, WBL is evident through reflective assessments and operational EBRPs. Reflective learning commonly draws on models such as Gibbs' cycle and Kolb's experiential theory, linking reflection to professional frameworks like the Competency and Values Framework (CVF) (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; College of Policing, 2024). It is positioned as essential for developing sound decision-making, emotional intelligence, and continuous learning (College of Policing, 2025). Reflective practice is embedded in WBL modules and used as a core assessment method, requiring written reflections that connect operational experience with academic study. This consistency across HE-police partnerships reflect PEQF requirements, which formalise reflection as part of professionalisation (Salter et al., 2025). Overall, the approach supports deeper learning and makes implicit workplace learning explicit.

Regular meetings between the apprentice, employer, and the HE tutors ensure that operational experiences are connected to academic learning outcomes. Progress reviews are a mandatory requirement for all apprenticeships under the Education and Skills Funding Agency (Department for Education, 2025). In apprenticeships, rather than serving as a simple compliance checkpoint, progress meetings are used to integrate operational learning with academic theory, support reflective practice, track progress against Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviours, and co-create personalised development plans. Typically held every 10–12 weeks, these reviews provide structured opportunities for apprentices to connect real-world experiences with curriculum outcomes, making them a cornerstone of WBL in the PCDA (Department for Education, 2025).

Community partnerships, settings and voice

The national policing curriculum developed under the PEQF is co-designed by police forces, universities, and stakeholders to maintain operational relevance. Local community priorities, partnership structures, and public expectations help shape curriculum content and assessment. The College of Policing's (2016) PEQF consultation incorporated feedback from practitioners, academics, and the public, embedding community perspectives into national standards. Research also highlights the value of community placements and integrated academic-practice learning, highlighting the curriculum's grounding in real-world settings.

Challenges and tensions

For policing apprenticeships, a central challenge is balancing operational and academic demands: apprentices must manage shift work, personal commitments, and coursework simultaneously, reflecting broader concerns about workload intensity within policing education. Embedding academic learning into real-world operational contexts also remains difficult. Persistent gaps between classroom knowledge and frontline practice create barriers to effective learning transfer. Health and wellbeing considerations add further complexity. The psychological demands of police work, exposure to trauma, irregular hours, and organisational stress, highlight the need for structured, proactive support systems to ensure learners can sustain both academic progress and operational performance.

Key insights

Several insights have emerged from policing apprenticeships. Strong communication and partnership between employers, apprentices, and universities form the foundation of successful programmes, aligning academic expectations with operational realities and wellbeing needs. Flexible learning design, such as asynchronous materials and adaptable delivery, helps apprentices manage unpredictable schedules and supports long-term sustainability. Structured support, including mentoring, reflective practice, and guidance from HE tutors, strengthens the transfer of learning into operational contexts. Programmes also benefit from community-informed and wellbeing-focused design, which enhances relevance, engagement, and learner retention. Finally, portfolio-based assessment offers an authentic method for demonstrating competence, enabling apprentices to evidence real-world performance and adaptability in ways that traditional assessment approaches often cannot.

Case Study 3: Australia

Context and policy environment

In Australia, the Universities Accord (O’Kane et al., 2024) positions WIL as a critical component of a future-focused HE system, emphasising its benefits. However, national data indicate that only one-third of students typically access WIL opportunities (Universities Australia, 2019). The Australian National WIL Strategy (Universities Australia et al., 2015) provides a framework for enhancing university–industry partnerships. The Strategy emerged in response to concerns about graduate employability and perceived skills mismatches between university education and labour-market needs (Ferns et al., 2016). It defines WIL as ‘a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum’ (p. 1). Implementation has been uneven across institutions and disciplines, with some universities mobilising efforts more rapidly than others (Young et al., 2023).

Equity also remains a critical concern. Students with disabilities face unique barriers, and disparities continue between university and host-organisation expectations regarding reasonable accommodations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). The Job-Ready Graduates package (*Higher Education Support Amendment Act, 2020*) removed the exclusion of work-experience units from Commonwealth funding, enabling expanded WIL offerings (*Higher Education Support Amendment Act, 2020*). However, the policy also increased student fees for social-science disciplines potentially exacerbating placement poverty (McCormack & Baron, 2023). Against this backdrop, universities are expected to expand WIL opportunities while addressing structural inequities and resource constraints.

The University of Wollongong (UOW) (2024a) serves more than 33,000 students across multiple domestic and international campuses. Founded in 1975, UOW maintains a commitment to widening participation, with approximately 40% of students from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in HE, including 15.9% from low socioeconomic backgrounds and 31.4% from regional or remote areas (UOW, 2024b; 2024c). UOW relies on a mix of Commonwealth funding, international student fees,

research grants, commercial activities, and philanthropy. UOW has sought to align with national WIL priorities through the establishment of a WIL Advisory Committee in 2017 and the development of a university-wide WIL framework (Dean et al., 2019), along with a vision for universal student access to scaffolded WIL experiences. Criminology at UOW was introduced in 2015 as a major within the Bachelor of Social Science. Staffing has grown modestly, but resource constraints have shaped subject offerings and limited elective diversity.

WIL model in practice: the CommunityMATTERS project

CommunityMATTERS emerged in 2021 embedding more authentic learning experiences within criminology. The project centres on a regional omnibus attitudinal survey designed to generate data on community perceptions, trust, belonging, and experiences with local services. Recognising the scale and complexity of such an undertaking, UOW researchers partnered with the Illawarra and Shoalhaven Joint Organisation (ISJO), a regional body representing four local councils. ISJO sought to build an evidence base to inform local decision-making, creating a natural alignment with research capacity and pedagogical goals. To coordinate this work, UOW established the Illawarra and Shoalhaven Social Research and Education Enterprise (ISSREE) with a mandate to provide authentic teaching, learning, and research environments that support critical thinking, communication, and community engagement. The product of ISSREE was two-fold: contemporary research of local policy relevance and a future workforce with deep appreciation for the policy interests and needs of local public and private sector employers.

Student-led practices are embedded in every stage of the survey lifecycle. This involves students learning and being trained on how to evaluate surveys. Students handle live data from residents, producing analyses and policy-oriented posters and presentations. As such, the *CommunityMATTERS* survey utilises its position within ISSREE to embed students within real-world contexts, which past research has linked to stronger professional identity formation (see Blockley et al., 2025), and deeper engagement with the materials and overall learning (Ajjawi et al., 2021; O'Neill & Short, 2025). Written assessments are important for fostering life-long learning and deeper critical thinking and judgement (Ajjawi et al., 2021; O'Neill & Short, 2025), with authentic assessment design critical to achieving this aim. Over the past year, *CommunityMATTERS* has expanded interstate to Griffith University in Queensland. This growth creates new opportunities for collaboration enabling students to share ideas and work together on important social science issues.

Community partnerships and voice

The partnership between ISJO and the ISSREE team is key to *CommunityMATTERS* and ISJO contributes to survey design, identifies topics of local interest, and collaborates on methodological decisions. One example comes from the formation of the Criminology & Social Policy Hub network, organised to connect and share research, including analysis arising from the *CommunityMATTERS* dataset. This provided a space through which researchers at UOW could connect directly with policymakers, government agencies, local councils and businesses to share and discuss survey findings and collaborate on possible future directions. Student-led ideas and activities have been incorporated into the overall design and delivery of *CommunityMATTERS*. Students can ask questions of real-life participants through the *CommunityMATTERS* infrastructure providing a sense of ownership of the results and the overall research process.

Challenges and tensions

Funding and staff resources have become increasingly constrained. This has placed pressure on a small team operating a quantitative project within a predominantly qualitative research environment, complicating workload distribution and long-term succession planning. Perhaps the biggest challenge, however, is the need to align the unpredictability and necessary flexibility of teaching demands (including diverse student needs), against a more rigid institutional and compliance-based system that

governs research and research integrity. Ethics approval, for example, must be completed before teaching begins and this limits students' ability to meaningfully shape survey content and thereby weaken their sense of ownership over the research. A further tension relates to community reciprocity as providing timely (and reliable) feedback to participating communities is an ongoing difficulty. By its very nature, student work is of variable quality and there remains considerable ongoing work for teaching staff to quality assure research product before dissemination.

Key insights

Early investment was essential for building the survey infrastructure, enabling longitudinal data collection and meaningful student engagement with real datasets, but long-term sustainability now depends on renewed institutional support. Co-design with community partners has strengthened the survey's relevance, improved relationships, and deepened student engagement. The project also highlights the value of authentic assessment: working with real data, collaborating with partners, and producing public-facing outputs helps students develop critical thinking, communication skills, and a stronger professional identity.

Discussion

What these case studies show is the depth of community-engagement that is achievable in criminology and criminal-justice WIL, shaped not only by individual institutional choice but by the interaction between governance structure, funding models and the professional or civic identity of the discipline's graduate destinations. To illustrate, we draw out five themes from the cases framed against Saltmarsh et al.'s (2009) transactional-to-democratic spectrum.

Meaning and scope of community

The cases represent diverse approaches to WIL yet share a common feature: the 'community' engaged is primarily professional. In the Australian case, the primary community relationship is a university-local government partnership, with broader public community participation mediated through a survey methodology. In the Canadian case, criminal justice and community advocacy organisations provide sites for authentic student learning. In the UK context, the policing apprenticeship in England and Wales embeds learning within the policing profession itself, which functions as both an employer and primary professional community of practice. Strong and sustained university-professional community relationships underpin the WIL design, and each case demonstrates genuine reciprocity at the professional community level. While there are elements of broader community engagement in each case, there are clear opportunities for development.

The relationship between policy context and community engagement depth

Measured against Saltmarsh et al.'s (2009) framework, these arrangements are best characterised as transactional engagement: purposeful, mutually beneficial, and well-designed. However, in the English case, the primary orientation is towards employer and learner needs rather than community-derived social priorities, with institutional benefit playing a comparatively minor role. This is not a failure of CEL, as Saltmarsh et al. (2009) acknowledge, transactional engagement is the most common form of community engagement in HE precisely because it is achievable within existing institutional structures, funding models, and risk frameworks. For criminology, as a non-accredited discipline whose graduates enter diverse sectors carrying strict confidentiality, ethical and reputational constraints, transactional engagement with professional communities represents a rational and defensible starting point, not a ceiling.

The more substantive question is whether transactional engagement is the extent of what WIL can aspire to, or whether the cases presented will reveal iterative movement towards more democratic forms. We argue the latter, and that the movement is most clearly visible in the Australian case. The

CommunityMATTERS survey differs from conventional placement or partnership in ways that matter to the transactional-democratic distinction: some survey content is shaped partly by community members and local council priorities; students engage with data generated by members of the public, not only by justice agencies; and outputs: podcasts, policy briefs, and presentations, are disseminated back to the community rather than being solely retained within the academy. These features do not make *CommunityMATTERS* a fully democratic model in Saltmarsh et al.'s (2009) sense, but they represent movement along the spectrum that is theoretically significant and practically instructive.

The Canadian case remains firmly situated in a transactional register. This reflects its structural position: Carleton University's placement programme is embedded within a justice-sector partnership infrastructure that has been built over decades to support professional community engagement. At the same time, the programme has clear pathways for strengthening democratic engagement, particularly through the inclusion of advocacy organisations and community-driven research projects within the placement portfolio. Realising this potential, however, requires deliberate curriculum investment and ongoing negotiation with professional partners to ensure institutions retain the autonomy needed to embed deeper forms of community collaboration.

In the UK case, the England and Wales policing apprenticeship sits firmly within the transactional register (except for the project length, given that they are employed), but for reasons that differ from the higher-education-centred dynamics described by Saltmarsh et al. (2009). Unlike university-led WIL models, the PCDA is structured around employer priorities: the police force determines operational requirements, governs the workplace learning environment, and shapes the conditions under which academic learning is applied. Apprenticeship governance rules, employer control, and the nationally prescribed policing curriculum define the parameters of engagement, leaving universities with limited autonomy over the forms of learning and partnership that can occur. Although apprentices engage extensively with the public as part of their operational duties, this engagement is framed as professional practice, not as community-led or civic-driven engagement in the sense envisaged by transformational models of CEL. The 'community' within which learning is embedded is therefore a professional community of practice rather than the civic, third-sector, or community-based partners central to CEL (Table 1).

Table 1: Position of case study programmes on the transactional-democratic engagement spectrum (Saltmarsh et al., 2009).

Transactional engagement	Community-Engaged WIL	Democratic Engagement
University/employer as primary actor	Shared purpose and reciprocity	Community as co-designer
Professional community as site of learning	Community expertise recognised	Community-derived priorities
Employability outcomes prioritised	Employability and civic outcomes balanced	Social change aspiration foregrounded
Short-term, project-funded partnerships	Sustained partnerships, iterative design	Long-term trust-based co-governance
← Carleton placements PCDA (Current) →	CommunityMATTERS (Current)	Aspirational direction for all three cases →

Learning goals (and the professional-civic tension)

Learning goals are a critical driver of the development of the cases, and a key site of the professional-civic tension that Furco (2003) identifies as central to community-engaged educational practice. In the Canadian case, individualised career exploration and the integration of theory with professional practice are the explicit aims of the field placement course. Learning is firmly student-centred, placements are matched to individual career interests, assessment emphasises professional competency development, and the seminar component focuses on translating placement experience into critical reflection pathways. Community benefit is a by-product of this design: placement organisations gain engaged students, but it is not a curriculum objective.

The policing apprenticeship in England and Wales inverts this logic in one important respect: learning goals are professionally mandated rather than individually negotiated, and the ‘community’ that shapes those goals is the policing profession as expressed through the PEQF Competency and Values Framework. The learning goal is service to the profession, and the student is simultaneously learner and professional practitioner (Furco, 2003). This model achieves high authenticity and deeper professional community engagement, but the civic and social dimensions of policing: community safety, public trust and accountability are embedded within professional standards rather than foregrounded as independent curriculum objectives. The apprenticeship model represents a particular kind of community engagement that is highly integrated within the professional community but limited in its reach beyond that.

The Australian case reflects a third configuration. As criminology students at UOW are a large, diverse cohort, the WIL model cannot be tailored to individual professional destinations. Instead, learning goals centre on the development of transferable research skills, civic literacy, and evidence-based reasoning - capabilities Curto-Reverte et al. (2025) identify as foundational to professional identity formation in criminology. This orientation means that, of the three cases, *CommunityMATTERS* most closely approaches what Brabazon et al. (2019) describe as the CEL ideal of centering community priorities and student learning in equal measure, even if it does not fully achieve it.

Access, equity and the politics of WIL opportunities

Providing equitable access to WIL was a challenge shared in the Canadian and Australian case studies. In Canada, demand for WIL experiences outstrips availability by approximately two to one, creating a supply constraint that raises unavoidable questions about selection criteria and the differential distribution of WIL’s benefits. The hybrid selection model piloted in 2023-24 combining grade point average (GPA)-based and randomised selection is a principled response to evidence that academically strong students may have access to alternative career-building opportunities, and that students with lower academic performance may benefit more from placement experience (Ross & Elechi, 2002). This approach is consistent with the emphasis of the Universities Accord (O’Kane et al., 2024) and with broader WIL literature on participation barriers (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Jackson, 2025; Peach et al., 2012), but demand continues to exceed supply, suggesting that equity requires not just fairer selection but expanded partnership capacity.

In Australia, a different structural approach was adopted: a key requirement in the design of *CommunityMATTERS* was that it must be compulsory for all criminology students. This approach successfully democratises access to WIL - however, whilst no student is excluded, it has its own equity tensions as the programme expands across campuses and an online teaching environment. This access challenge is not unique to *CommunityMATTERS*: it reflects a structural tension in community-engaged WIL between the authenticity that community embeddedness requires and the flexibility that equitable access demands.

In England and Wales, the policing apprenticeship resolves this question through a different mechanism: students are employed as police constables, so financial access barriers are removed. However, workload and scheduling pressures create a different access dimension. The tension between shift patterns, operational demands, and academic study requirements have been identified as significant challenges (College of Policing, 2016) and disproportionately affects apprentices with caring responsibilities or health needs. The apprenticeship model's current response: flexible delivery, asynchronous resources, and structured tripartite review mitigates - but does not eliminate - these pressures. Seemingly, the equity issue in this UK context is less about access to WIL and more about equitable capacity to benefit from it.

Iterative Development: WIL as a 'process' not a 'product'

One of the most significant findings from the cases is that community-engaged WIL develops iteratively, through sustained investment in relationships, curriculum, and community infrastructure. This finding is theoretically significant because it reframes the transactional-democratic spectrum not as a typology of programme models but as a description of developmental trajectories. Programmes do not simply occupy a fixed position on the spectrum but rather move along it depending on the conditions available.

The *CommunityMATTERS* case shows how WIL can evolve through cumulative investment. What began as a methodological scaffold has grown into a regional research partnership with co-design elements, a longitudinal panel, and interstate expansion. The community has shifted from being a site of learning to a co-shaper of the agenda—an evolution achieved through steady relationship-building, student agency, and diversified dissemination, consistent with Saltmarsh et al.'s (2009) account of democratic engagement. The Canadian case illustrates a different trajectory: the fragility of long-standing partnerships when external shocks occur. The loss of around 30 placements following federal policy changes and the suspension of policing and corrections placements shows how decades-old relationships can be destabilised quickly. Rebuilding the portfolio, restoring trust, and trialling new equity-oriented selection processes is itself an iterative process. In the England and Wales policing apprenticeship, iteration is driven less by community partnership and more by regulatory reform. Changes to the PCDA funding band, the introduction of the PCEP, and ongoing PEQF adjustments reflect an employer-led, governance-bound form of development. Movement along the transactional–democratic spectrum here requires working within these regulatory structures.

Conclusion: towards a practical framework for community-engaged WIL in criminology and criminal justice

Stoecker (2016) argues that community-engaged learning often positions communities as sites for student learning rather than partners in social justice and community-driven change. This pattern appears across all cases discussed: universities and students remain the primary beneficiaries, community gains are secondary, and institutions, or in England, employers and regulators, set the agenda. Stoecker's point is not to reject community-engaged WIL but to honour its democratic intent. This paper highlights where current practice falls short and what bridging that gap will require.

Across the cases, three structural conditions consistently limit the depth of community engagement achievable. First, resource constraints restrict the time and capacity required for genuine co-design. Second, institutional risk and ethics governance frameworks constrain student agency in community-facing activities, often in ways that prioritise institutional liability over community voice. Third, community benefit is rarely articulated as a formal learning outcome, meaning it is seldom assessed, resourced, or structurally protected. The persistence of these barriers across such different systems suggests they are not primarily policy failures specific to one context, but structural features of how community-engaged WIL is currently institutionalised in criminology and justice sector education more broadly. The Australian case shows that ethics constraints on real-time student

agency can be partially navigated through bounded co-design mechanisms such as survey addenda. The Canadian case demonstrates that community voice can be embedded through seminar design, guest speakers, and alumni engagement even when placement structures remain unchanged. The UK case highlights the underexplored potential of the Evidence Based Research Project as a vehicle for community-relevant inquiry though this requires negotiation within an employer-dominated governance structure where community engagement is optional and mediated by operational priorities.

These examples are not transformations of the transactional model but iterative moves towards greater democratic engagement within existing institutional and regulatory constraints. They represent the realistic and productive site of development for criminology and justice sector WIL programmes that are resource-constrained, governed by risk and ethics requirements, and embedded in professional frameworks not designed with democratic community engagement as a primary objective. The Boyer 2030 Commission (2023) is right to call for universities to move beyond transactional engagement, but Saltmarsh et al. (2009) remind us that such movement is gradual, relational, and context-dependent. The cases document where that movement currently stands in criminology and justice sector WIL across three jurisdictions and illustrate the conditions under which further progress is possible.

A practical framework for community-engaged WIL

Drawing across the cases and literature, a practical framework for community-engaged WIL in criminology and criminal justice includes four core principles:

1. **Start small and iterate.** Low-stakes, scalable models, such as community-based research, practitioner co-teaching, or bounded co-design, allow programmes to build trust, refine processes, and expand engagement over time.
2. **Distribute responsibility.** Engaging staff teams rather than individual coordinators supports sustainability, reduces burnout, and strengthens institutional memory around partnership work.
3. **Centre reciprocal goals.** Designing WIL around both student learning and community priorities creates more authentic, relevant, and mutually beneficial experiences.
4. **Embed community voice structurally.** Incorporating community input into curriculum design, assessment, and dissemination ensures that engagement is not peripheral but integral to the learning process.

Policy recommendations, future directions, and lessons learned

Across jurisdictions, policy settings should recognise community benefit as a legitimate learning outcome, provide funding for partnership infrastructure rather than focusing solely on student placements, support flexible and multimodal WIL models that seek to reduce equity barriers and accommodate diverse student cohorts, and align risk and ethics governance with pedagogical goals. For professionalised fields such as policing, regulatory bodies should also consider how apprenticeship governance might enable forms of community-relevant inquiry. Further, future research should examine how community-engaged WIL can be scaled without diluting reciprocity, how community partners experience these models, and how institutional governance can better support democratic engagement.

Starting with modest goals enables iterative design and relationship-building and engaging staff teams supports long-term sustainability. Centering student and partner goals creates flexible, scalable WIL opportunities and WIL can bridge modularised curricula and contribute to local problem-solving. Yet the risk remains, as Stoecker (2016) cautions, of treating community as a site of learning rather than a partner in community-derived priorities and social justice work. The opportunity is to move

deliberately along the transactional–democratic spectrum, recognising that meaningful progress is incremental, relational, and shaped by context.

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