



Editorial

Advancing graduate employability through community-engaged Work-Integrated Learning: Innovations, partnerships and impact

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) has long been understood as curriculum that places students into authentic, discipline-relevant tasks (Patrick et al., 2009). However, the field has shifted markedly in recent years towards a broader, three-way relationship between student, university, and community, with authentic tasks increasingly organised around career aspiration rather than discipline alone (Zegwaard et al., 2020). Community-engaged WIL sits at the centre of this shift. As universities face growing pressure to demonstrate their contribution to sustainable development, addressing global challenges while valuing local knowledge and partnership (United Nations, 2024; Wright et al., 2022), community-engaged models of WIL are being adopted more widely and with greater institutional investment than in previous decades. This contemporary iteration of WIL extends traditional placement models by creating authentic learning experiences in which students engage with real world challenges through reciprocal partnership with community organisations. Such approaches are recognised for their capacity to foster graduate employability, develop professional identity, collaborative skills and a sense of civic responsibility (Jackson & Dean, 2023; Jackson et al., 2025; Otto & Dunens, 2021). Yet this growth brings its own demands, chief among them the sustained work of building, maintaining, and sustaining partnerships that genuinely serve both community priorities and student learning (Kligyte et al 2024; Nguyễn, 2022; Rook & Sloan, 2021).

Despite this momentum, community-engaged WIL research remains fragmented. Much of the literature continues to centre student outcomes and career readiness, with comparatively little attention paid to how community partners themselves experience and benefit from these arrangements (Chika-James et al., 2022). This gap has become increasingly significant as generative AI reshapes the capabilities that employers and community organisations expect graduates to bring to professional practice (Dilinika 2026).

The intersection between community-engaged WIL, education and sustainability demands, and the emerging influence of Gen AI on graduate capability is explored within this special issue. Contributions were invited across a deliberately wide range of forms, from scholarly papers reporting research-based evaluations, literature reviews, and case studies, through to shorter practitioner reflections and provocations offering fresh or dissenting perspectives from students, practitioners, and industry. This breadth was a deliberate choice: community-engaged WIL is a space where practice-based insight and

scholarly theorisation each have something distinct to offer, and where community stakeholders' perspectives, and students own views on the partnership that shape their learning are often absent from conventional academic accounts.

The articles selected for this special issue highlight six important themes of scholarship in community-engaged WIL which impact both student experience and outcome. The first theme focuses on how community-engaged WIL is embedded in curriculum, revealing the importance of designing learning environments that connect students with authentic community challenges while fostering professional identity, belonging, and employability. Harris-Reeves and Pearson (2026) examine how community-engaged WIL can be intentionally embedded within first-year curricula to support students' transition into higher education. The study compared students engaging in early community-engaged WIL with those from health degrees where professional exposure is typically delayed. Results revealed that students exposed to community-engaged WIL earlier in their degree reported a stronger vocational identity, particularly in relation to professional belonging and identification with their future profession.

The second theme, explores how higher education institutions can recognise, document, and communicate the value of learning developed through community-engaged experiences. Ojo et al., (2026) explore the growing role of micro-credentials in enhancing the employability outcomes of community-engaged WIL within technical education programmes in South-East Nigeria. Using a convergent mixed methods design the authors found that students perceive micro-credentials as valuable mechanisms for documenting employability skills, building professional confidence, and strengthening career readiness, while community partners view credentialed students as demonstrating greater initiative, reliability, and ability to apply learning in authentic settings. The study highlights the signalling function of micro-credentials, enabling students to communicate competencies gained through community engagement to prospective employers and external stakeholders.

Another theme addresses the critical role that community organisations play in creating authentic learning opportunities for students. Stevenson et al., (2026) provide a practitioner reflection on Anglicare Southern Queensland's approach to community-engaged WIL within the social sciences and humanities. Through examples spanning undergraduate and postgraduate programs, the authors illustrate how this approach can create reciprocal benefits for students and host organisations, supporting professional learning while enhancing organisational research capacity, advocacy efforts, and service development.

The fourth theme examines both the opportunities and challenges associated with building, maintaining, and evaluating WIL partnerships. Vidal et al. (2026) examine community-engaged WIL within criminology and justice-sector education through a comparative analysis of programs in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Drawing on policy analysis and three case studies, the authors explore how different funding models, governance structures, and institutional contexts shape the design and sustainability of community-engaged WIL. The cases illustrate diverse approaches, including community-based research, justice-sector placements, and policing apprenticeships, while highlighting common challenges related to partnership sustainability, equity of access, resource constraints, and balancing employability objectives with community benefit. Through the lens of transactional and democratic engagement, the authors propose a practical framework for strengthening community-engaged WIL, emphasising reciprocity, community voice, iterative partnership development, and shared responsibility among stakeholders. Complementing this contribution, Meissner (2026) offers a provocation that challenges higher education institutions to critically reconsider how community engagement is conceptualised and supported within postgraduate psychology placements. Arguing that community engagement is often treated as an aspirational principle rather than an embedded practice, the author critiques placement systems that prioritise student numbers and institutional requirements over genuine collaboration with host organisations. The provocation highlights the risks associated with transactional placement models,

including partner fatigue, administrative burden, and the erosion of long-term community relationships. Meissner advocates for a shift towards co-designed partnerships in which community organisations are recognised as educational collaborators rather than placement providers and argues that greater investment in relationship-building and placement coordination is essential for the integrity and sustainability of community-engaged WIL.

The fifth theme demonstrates how curriculum design can align authentic community partnerships with sustainability goals, creating learning experiences that develop both professional capabilities and a commitment to social impact. Papakosmas and Hinchcliff (2026) examine how community-engaged WIL can be deliberately designed to embed the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within undergraduate curricula. Drawing on four case studies from marketing and public relations subjects, the authors demonstrate how community and industry challenges can be aligned with specific SDGs to create learning experiences that simultaneously develop professional competencies and sustainability mindsets. They identify three key design principles that can underpin SDG integration: the explicit mapping of partner challenges to relevant SDGs, the positioning of community partners as co-educators rather than clients, and the feasibility of embedding sustainability-focused learning within existing curriculum structures. The authors argue that community-engaged WIL provides a practical mechanism through which universities can advance sustainability goals while enhancing graduate employability, offering a transferable framework for educators seeking to connect disciplinary learning with meaningful social impact.

Finally, the last theme explores how emerging technologies, particularly Generative AI, create new opportunities and challenges for community-engaged WIL. In a thought-provoking contribution, Fulcher (2026) focusses on the growing enthusiasm for using Generative AI to automate the evaluation of WIL. The provocation argues that before institutions employ AI to analyse placements, reflections, and outcomes at scale, they must first address a more fundamental question: what constitutes meaningful evidence of WIL success? Fulcher contends that existing evaluation frameworks favour easily quantifiable metrics such as employment outcomes, satisfaction scores, and placement completion rates, while overlooking the relational, contextual, and transformative dimensions of learning that practitioners, students, and community partners often value most. The provocation serves as a timely reminder that the challenge facing WIL is not simply how to more efficiently measure learning, but whose knowledge and perspectives are recognised as legitimate within evaluation frameworks.

The development of this special issue was for us, as Guest Editors, an opportunity to reflect on our own teaching practice. Our practice is founded in integrity and authenticity, qualities that are central to our development of meaningful student learning and respectful community partnerships. These same values also inspired the development of the proposal for this special issue, to highlight the work of academics and community partners who share a commitment to building student capability through engaged and authentic learning experiences. The creative responses to the opportunities presented by community-engaged WIL are showcased in the scholarly papers, reflections and provocations selected for inclusion in this special issue. We hope to inspire further innovation across the sector. As our workplaces continue to be shaped by resource constraints, generative AI risks and opportunities, and pressure for decisions to consider sustainability implications, our roles as educators has never been more important.

This special issue represents an opportunity to generate dialogue amongst educators and practitioners and to strengthen understanding of the contribution of community-engaged WIL to graduate employability, community impact and educational innovation. The submissions included demonstrate the diversity and commitment across institutional and community contexts, while also highlighting a range of opportunities for further inquiry and development. As community-engaged WIL continues to evolve, we welcome ongoing research, critical reflection, and innovation. The future of this work will depend on a collective commitment to fostering meaningful partnerships, embracing innovation, and advancing responsive and transformative educational practices.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used a generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) to assist with editing and improving the clarity and flow of this manuscript. All ideas, reflections, and intellectual content were originated and developed by the authors. The AI tool was not used to generate content, analyse data, or produce conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work as published.

Contributions against CReDIT

All authors conceptualised the editorial and drafted the manuscript. All authors also critically reviewed and revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

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