



The value of embedding work-integrated learning and other transitional supports into the first year curriculum: Perspectives of first year subject coordinators

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Abstract

The first year of university, also known as the first year experience (FYE), is a crucial time for students as they learn a range of new practices that enable them to study and pursue a discipline or profession of interest. The function of this transitional time however in relation to providing both a successful transition into university as well as an orientation to the profession is under-developed. Work-integrated learning is a leading pedagogy in tertiary institutions to build student's career-readiness by applying theory within work experiences. However, despite the growth of WIL across discipline contexts, little is known about the prevalence and impact of WIL practices within the first year of tertiary study. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of those who design and facilitate first year subjects on the value of embedding WIL and other transitional supports into the first year curriculum. A qualitative case study was employed, with interviews from ten first-year subject coordinators within a single degree and institution. The findings reveal three crucial areas of transition in the first year: *Transition into learning*, *Transition into being a student*, and *Transition into becoming a professional*. Recommendations centre on benefits of a whole-of-course approach to transition and WIL for developing students with the necessary knowledge and skills to succeed both at university and into the workplace.

Keywords
transitions,
work-
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learning, first
year
experience,
primary
education

Introduction

University graduates are entering an ever-changing work environment, impacted by the gig-economy and affordances of technology enabling virtual workspaces and global communications (Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020). The nature of contemporary work means graduates are likely to experience multiple workplaces during their careers, reflecting the need for higher education providers to focus on the transference of learning (Jackson et al., 2019) and workplace transitions (Dean & Sykes, 2020). While the transition into work is an important moment for preparing students for success, higher education features ongoing, multiple and concurrent transitions (Jindal-Snape, 2010). Transitions within higher education are key points that may be particularly challenging and represent a distinct change from one phase to another, such as the transition into university, transitions throughout different years of study and transitions out of university into further study or work (Cheng et al., 2015a).

The transition into university for many students is highly anticipated, requiring adjustment into a new and unfamiliar setting. Studies have revealed that the transition phase into the first year of university can have a critical effect on the long-term attitudes and success of students (van Rooij et al., 2018). This transition is complex and involves students developing skills such as self-reflection and self-efficacy, when supported through strategies to enable student engagement and empowerment (Cheng et al., 2015b).

Higher education institutes need to nurture, support and engage students within the first year of study, in order to enhance student achievement and retention (Krause & Coates, 2008; Nelson et al., 2011). Most institutions implement a variety of strategies to support first year students within and external to the curriculum. These strategies focus on psychological factors such as resilience, motivation and stress, which can effect students' engagement and perseverance in their studies (Soiferman, 2017; Ayala & Manzano, 2018). However, given the importance of preparing students for a complex work environment after their studies, it is curious that little research has investigated how the first year of study supports learners for their future world of work and developing professional identities.

Driven by policy and legislative changes that recognise the importance of producing career-ready graduates with competitive skills for the demands of the labour market, universities have emphasised the need to introduce work-integrated learning (WIL) within tertiary degrees (Dean et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2009). WIL is a pedagogical strategy designed to facilitate students' transference of skills and knowledge into work applications (Ferns et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2019). WIL is the Australian term, and increasingly recognised globally, that describes a myriad of experiences within or alongside the workplace such as placements and non-placement activities, for example virtual internships, industry projects and simulations (Dean et al., 2020).

However, attention to developing practical skills through WIL is often located in curricular towards the end of a student's degree (Dean et al., 2020). While locating WIL in the final years of study is useful for supporting students' transference and applications of learning, it may however limit rich learning opportunities to develop these skills, knowledge and identities throughout formal studies. Recent research shows the importance of scaffolding WIL across a degree, from the first year, to engage students in a variety of placement and non-placement WIL activities (Dean et al., 2020; Ferns & Lilly, 2016; Young et al., 2017). While research advocating for WIL across a degree includes or addresses WIL in the first year, there remains little research specifically investigating WIL in the first year experience (FYE). Engaging students in a variety of WIL activities throughout the degree would better prepare students for a moving, dynamic and often challenging workforce (Winchester-Seeto & Piggott, 2020).

This study aims to investigate the role of WIL and other forms of transitional activities in the first year curriculum that support the transition into university and beyond. It does so through investigating the perceptions of teachers who facilitate a subject. In the context of this study 'subject' refers to the unit or course that a student studies on a specific topic, with multiple subjects comprising a degree. A subject coordinator is responsible for the facilitation, teaching, marking and administration of the subject, a role which elsewhere may also be known as a unit coordinator or module leader. Exploring these curricular elements will illuminate the impact of the first year of studies on students' academic and professional readiness. This paper unpacks some key understandings in the FYE literature and explores the role of WIL in FYE.

First year transition

Students in the first year face a number of challenges as they transition into university and create a new identity for themselves (Briggs et al., 2012). Fernández et al. (2017) explain that transition into university is *a challenging experience that involves significant life changes and adaptation to multiple demands whose effects and significance must be interpreted in the sociocultural context in which*

they are produced (p. 71). These can include social, emotional, academic or administrative challenges (Kift, 2015).

Research into improving student engagement and retention during the first year of university has been prevalent in recent decades (Nelson et al., 2011; Baik et al., 2019; Bowles et al., 2020). Nelson et al. (2010) note the need for universities to identify, monitor and promote students' personal, social and academic engagement. First-year curricular must be inclusive and intentional, with learning environments that have application to work expectations, are well-structured and provide opportunities for learning through social communities with access to support (Nelson et al., 2011).

Kift (2009) states that students come to university to learn and:

...it is within the first year curriculum that students must be inspired, supported and realise their sense of belonging not only for early engagement and retention, but also as foundational for later year learning success and a lifetime of professional practice (p.1).

Kift (2009) further recommends the consideration of a 'third generation approach' for higher education institutions, described as a *collaborative and strategic leap that requires whole-of-institution transformation* (p. 9). This third generation approach comprises integrated and coordinated strategies of teaching and curricular practices across multiple years. While Kift's transition pedagogy focuses on the whole institution's approach to the FYE, her earlier work (Kift, 2004, p. 5) identifies two core beliefs for students in their first year:

- (i) Students must be engaged primarily as learners if they are to have a successful university experience. The 'informal curriculum' of social and community interactions, and external commitments such as work and family need to be acknowledged, incorporated and supported, but it is within the formal or academic curriculum that students must find their places, be inspired and excited, and work towards mastery of their chosen area to the best of their ability.
- (ii) Students in their first year have special learning needs arising from the social and academic transition they are experiencing. From multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the first-year curriculum must help get them there.

These two core beliefs offer a useful starting point when examining educators' perspectives on their role in supporting the first year transition. It articulates the importance of supporting students towards becoming better learners and as they master their chosen discipline area. How these beliefs are enacted by first year educators and the role of WIL activities in this transition, is the space of enquiry for this study.

WIL in the first year

Due to the focus on integrating theory with work practice within university subjects, WIL aims to both consolidate and support learning while also developing the skills necessary for employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). It is vital that universities focus on developing students who are well equipped with the relevant and transferable knowledge and skills in their discipline, in order to prosper in a competitive market (Orrell, 2004; Jackson et al., 2019). These refer to transferable skills including problem-solving, motivation, persistence, critical thinking, teamwork and effective communication (Saunders & Zuzel, 2010). This emphasises the need for university students to actively seek and participate in opportunities that develop relevant skills. It also highlights the need for higher education institutions to integrate WIL pedagogies within the curriculum to support their students' employability and success (Bates et al., 2019).

Too often though, WIL is conceptualised within curricular as supporting students in the transition out of tertiary studies and found mainly towards the end of a degree. WIL is described as the 'stepping stone' or 'bridge' into workplace practice as it introduces students to performing and reflecting on

work practices. Recently, scholars have argued that in order to effectively build student career-readiness, WIL is best supported across a degree, through a variety of scaffolded placement and non-placement activities that engage students in authentic work experiences (Dean et al., 2020). Given Kift's (2004) positioning on the imperative role of the FYE on students' success in tertiary studies, it seems greater alignment between WIL and transition pedagogies is required. Both pedagogies, while historically polarised at the beginning or end of a degree, are now emerging as holistic approaches that support successful transitions when embedded throughout a learner's tertiary journey.

Methodology

This study aimed to explore subject coordinators' perceptions and practices that support students' transition into university and development of work practice through embedding WIL within the first-year curriculum. While a range of methodologies are adopted to investigate phenomena in WIL research (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018), a qualitative study was considered most commensurate for eliciting the perspectives and understandings of WIL experiences (Coll & Chapman, 2000). A single case study was selected to investigate the commonalities or differences that emerge from within the same site (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). That is, participants were invited as they coordinated a subject within the same cluster of first year students. Importantly for WIL research, as a case study this project aimed to reflect a *flexible and multiple perspective research approach* (Lucas et al., 2018, p.222) that enabled the researchers to *view the case from the inside out* (Gillham, 2000, p.11). This method allowed the researchers to take on the perspectives of the subject coordinators and their experiences with both WIL and transition support within a specific degree.

Ten subject coordinators across ten subjects within the first year of the Bachelor of Primary Education degree at the University of Wollongong were participants in this study. Following approval for the study from the University of Wollongong's Human Research Ethics committee (HREC2019/091), these first-year coordinators were invited via email to participate in a 30 minute semi-structured interview. They had each been in their current role for a range of years, with two participants teaching this subject for one year, while one participant had taught the subject for the last six years. The ten subject coordinators and subjects for this study included seven core first year subjects on the topics of math, critical writing, developmental psychology, language, special instance, Indigenous studies and science and three elective subjects on the topics math, social development and studies of society.

All ten subject coordinators agreed to participate in an interview. The interview questions focused on exploring subject coordinators' understandings and perspectives of FYE and WIL and to highlight examples within their subject's curriculum. For example, *tell me about your subject and how you support students in their first year? What role does WIL play in your subject? Are there any barriers or challenges to supporting students in their first year? What do you see as important for supporting students transitioning in their first year?*

Interview data was analysed through coding using NVivo® software to generate potential themes. Iterative and reflective thematic analysis was practiced to identify patterns and themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). Interview transcripts and related themes from analysis were emailed to each participant for 'member checking' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to confirm that the data and emerging findings reflected their intended meaning (Patton, 2002). This enabled a reflexive process for the researchers to *challenge and recognize their own personal bias, explore alternative explanations, and gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon* (Kornbluh, 2015, p. 397). Alongside the semi-structured interviews, data was also collected in the form of relevant educational materials such as subject outlines or teaching resources. This provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the assessments, weekly content and learning intentions of the subjects.

Findings

Perceptions of the first year experience

Participants reported the importance of assisting students to envision the ‘bigger picture’ by focusing on their long-term goals right from the beginning of their degree. Assisting students to see where they are going was identified as helpful to student learning and transition in the first year. As one coordinator stated:

I feel like if you're giving people a sense of what they're working towards, it would all make a bit more sense to them. I think they'd become more excited; they'd be more motivated knowing [what] is to come (SC10).

Participants felt it was important that students understood that their studies formed part of a broader process of entering a profession and their role was to shape that development. This included *getting students to understand the realities of what they're going into as early as possible (SC4) because the possibility of transference of learning is much greater if you start [connecting theory with practice] right at the beginning (SC7).*

It was recognised that the beginning of higher education is potentially daunting and difficult for students to navigate. One subject coordinator highlighted common emotional responses in the first year:

So often students feel isolated when they first start because they're transitioning from being really supported to being in a really independent environment. And unless you're a student who lives on campus, you don't have that kind of connection... (SC8).

The majority of participants recognised how their first year subject played a critical role in developing students' foundation academic literacies and long-term success. It isn't however, until explicit examples of support are highlighted and explored through this study that it can be understood whether or not these perceptions have transferred into the curricular design and activities of each subject.

Examples of first year support

Participants were asked to discuss and provide examples of how their subject supported students' transition into university through their first year of study. Examples of this support were found within most of the subjects from the first year of the Primary Education degree. These examples centred around two types of support; academic and social, which align with Kift's (2004) core beliefs for first year support.

Academic

The data revealed a range of academic activities within first year curricular that supported students' transition into being a learner in tertiary education. Two subjects in particular from the first semester of first year highlighted support for students' academic literacy development. For example, one subject, facilitated by subject coordinator one (SC1), was found to focus on developing students' academic writing skills. The first assessment was highly scaffolded and modelled to outline the expectations of academic writing and facilitate student success. The coordinator explained in great detail:

We're very explicit about looking at models of what we expect. We deconstruct them, we use the teaching learning cycle that was used in schools and tertiary institutions to work through building the field, modelling the text, deconstructing it (SC1).

This joint construction allowed students to *take up the modelled activity and use it as a launching pad for their own theses, their own arguments that they can prosecute across the text (SC1).* This

subject also targeted students' personal and professional literacy through a diagnostic test in week two of the subject that helped them evaluate their own literacy skills and areas for improvement. The results of this test were applied in a later assessment. The coordinator offered further support through this personal literacy competency report as *it's sort of a step into research too, because the students are using their own literacy skills as data* (SC1).

Data collected in the interview with subject coordinator ten revealed similar findings. This subject focussed on foundational assessment skills to help students develop their writing and to understand different assessment genres that they will experience in the degree. This emphasis therefore led to the inclusion of a variety of academic supports for students within the subject. Examples of support included:

... focus[ing] on learning to reference correctly, how to structure an essay, how to write a report and being able to find low quality and high quality articles to then use in [the student's] papers (SC10).

It was revealed that students had several opportunities to engage with peer support. In two subjects, students were able to learn literacy skills outside the subject in a peer program aligned to this subject's curriculum called PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions). One coordinator highlighted this by saying *we have something placed in particular to help these students which is called these help sessions* (SC2). Similarly the other coordinator with a PASS program offered *we have peer assisted sessions as well they can sign up to, so we have PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions)* (SC5). While details on the PASS program were not investigated further, it is noted that these two first year subjects have peer support programs outside curriculum to support academic literacy skills.

Research skills were highlighted as an important academic skill developed in first year. Subject coordinators 4, 5 and 8 each shared a similar examples allocating time to *the first workshop [where] we focus on research skills* (SC4), or *spending a whole tutorial basically on researching*" (SC5) and *"we do some academic skills mixed into our tutorials* (SC8). One participant explained that they include on Moodle:

...a little article on five top tips to succeed in your first year at University...a tab on writing and referencing so they can go to that and a learning development guide (SC5).

Participants claimed these research skills are important in first year to develop problem solving and analytical skills, as well as evaluative judgements about quality research. One subject coordinator pointed out that:

...in terms of foundational skills it does teach students how to analyse and make sense and interpret information and it really does boost that theory to practice link (SC9).

In addition to this, another noted:

We look at finding journal articles, we look at deconstructing journal articles and reconstructing (SC8).

The academic language and vocabulary of students was also targeted as one subject coordinator explained the subject focused on:

...scaffolding them from simple language into using scientific vocabulary that they will use in the classroom (SC8).

One subject focused specifically on the academic skill of writing assessments and academic integrity issues. As a subject in the autumn (initial) session of the first year, students were provided with easy access to the university's *academic integrity matters information, the quick guide for the six types of misconduct and a student checklist as well* (SC5). While a wide range of examples of supporting students' academic literacy and research skills were provided, some subjects did not focus on the development of students' academic literacies. This led to further investigation of any types of

support being practiced within the subjects. Through the data it became evident that social support within the first-year experience was another crucial domain to be explored.

Social

In addition to supporting student's academic literacies, the data further clustered around descriptions of approaches that related to nurturing transition through social practices. The role of the tutor emerged as an interesting point of social support for students in first-year subjects. Subject coordinators presented the tutor's role as a positive and supportive influence as they could share relatively similar experiences to those they were teaching. One subject coordinator suggested:

They [tutors] were able to be really honest with the students about the challenges of university and what was required (SC10).

The opportunity for students to interact with someone in a position of knowledge was a beneficial aspect of the particular subject and its social support for students.

A second area of social activity that unfolded connected to supporting students through the uncharted spaces, both physically on campus and virtually through online learning spaces. This support assisted in developing students' independence and awareness of the spaces around them that would have logistical implications for their long-term success. Participants described how they help to navigate the physical and online learning spaces through sharing maps, orienting students to the learning management system and showing the relevant communication platforms.

Another approach described to support students' social development was the inclusion of group presentations that encouraged peers to collaborate. In this way, students were *meeting people that they've never met before and they're having opportunity to hear different points of view (SC6)*. One participant believed in the importance of giving students opportunities to *make friends and connections (SC8)* all as a part of *building a community (SC8)*. In alignment with this social support, students in subject four were exposed to discussions related to *how to work together as a group and how to create a group contract so that you discuss the expectations up front of what it is that you're wanting to do (SC4)*.

As the data suggests, there are a variety of approaches adopted by subject coordinators to support students' transition into first year. Both academic and social approaches are cited in the literature as conducive to an effective transition (Soiferman, 2017). What remains unexplored, however, is the link between authentic work-based practices in first year and the perceptions of the importance of including WIL from the beginning of a student's tertiary education.

Perceptions of WIL

Of the ten available subjects in the first year of the Bachelor of Primary Education, over half of the subject coordinators were unsure of, or had a limited understanding of WIL (n=6). When asked if they had heard about WIL or knew what it was, participants elicited similar responses including:

No...is it different from prac? (SC10)

... know what it stands for, but not really (SC2).

These comments suggest that WIL is not a widely used and known term for first year coordinators in the Primary Education Degree.

Those who were unaware of the term WIL were informed of the definition by the researcher, and after hearing this, relayed to the researcher that they had positive views of activities that can be described as WIL. The data revealed that the majority of subject coordinators recognised and valued the place of WIL within higher education, noting its contribution to developing and empowering employable graduates. Through discussion on personal philosophies and experiences, coordinators offered perspectives such as:

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It is my belief that whenever you can learn and actually apply your knowledge simultaneously, that's ideal (SC2)

In terms of the social work curriculum this [WIL] is really important because that's how students learn (SC9).

From an educational perspective, participants shared the potential influence of WIL experiences on students' later professional career. Most agreed that WIL experiences contribute significantly to preparedness and success as a primary school teacher in Australian schools and should therefore be included across the curriculum of a degree, beginning in first year. Subject coordinators reflected that doing whatever we can from as early as we can is valuable. One explained:

If you're not integrating the learning of these pedagogies with practical application, then you're not getting the whole picture and that results in a disconnect between what they've learnt at university and what they're doing in the classroom (SC7).

One participant noted the importance of partnerships between universities and schools for pre-service teachers to facilitate integrate learning in university curricular with work practices. This participant explained that it was about *finding ways to connect those [partnerships] in more meaningful ways (SC4)*. When the university and the workplace are viewed equally as significant contributors to student success, there are greater opportunities for the development of skills and knowledge. This was articulated by a participant who said:

There is value in what you do at university, but there's so much more value when you can connect it with the school. It's not just learning about theories in isolation, you want to have that connection into the schools. And doing that as soon as you possibly can is a really valuable thing (SC4).

These positive perceptions of WIL support the arguments presented by Patrick et al., (2008), Orrell (2010), and Billet (2009) and more recently by authors such as Aprile and Knight (2020), Jackson et al. (2019), Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) and Silva et al. (2018), on the broad range of benefits in WIL. The data suggests that coordinators of first-year subjects in the Bachelor of Primary Education value and understand how WIL experiences can develop students' skills through interaction with both theory and workplace.

Examples of WIL in the first year experience

Analysis of the ten subjects' curriculum material and assessments, revealed a small number of activities and assessments that are WIL experiences. All these activities can be clustered under the umbrella of *non-placement WIL*. Activities included simulations, authentic case studies, role plays, observations and industry projects. The majority of activities took place in-class and were supported and assessed by the subject coordinator.

One subject however had a clear link to WIL through engaging students with an industry partner. Named 'special instance', this subject served as an introduction to the profession featuring immersion days at a local primary school observing practice and developing a resource to support a lesson. This subject featured opportunities for students to observe, develop and reflect on teaching professional practices.

While none of the subjects featured placement modes of WIL, those with non-placement WIL activities described these as important for applying ideas to practice and for supporting the transfer of learning from the textbook to a skill of an emerging professional. Reflecting on the transfer of learning one participant suggested:

You're putting it into perspective of where they're going to be. So rather than not leaving it to where they're going to be at the end of their degree, in the actual

classroom, if you start them early, the possibility of transference of learning is much greater if you start right at the beginning (SC7).

Furthermore, participants advocated for the implementation of these experiences within the first year of study to provide students with a sense of what they're working towards (SC10), in turn producing students who are 'excited' and 'motivated' for their future as a professional. Subject Coordinator 10 continued to raise an argument about the value of connecting the workplace with university learning as an important step in allowing students to visualise themselves as a professional. This coordinator discussed the current disconnect between university students and their role in the workforce upon graduation. It was suggested therefore, that bringing a WIL approach to learning into university curriculum could alleviate such pressures for students and provide them with the opportunity to view themselves as *useful in the workplace* (SC10).

Learning through WIL experiences (Dean & Sykes, 2020) and facilitating learning transfer is recognised as crucial for enabling students to operate in diverse workplace settings throughout their careers (Jackson et al., 2019). Participants' comments in this study prompt questions around who may be involved in the planning and structuring of wider tertiary studies as well as when in the degree the facilitation of learning transfer takes place.

Discussion

In light of the findings above and through the dual lens on the FYE and WIL, this study has identified three key transitions: *transition into learning*, *transition into being a student* and *transition into becoming a professional*. Conceptualising transition through this tripartite approach offers a way to frame the first year through reflecting on pertinent developmental areas. Under these three broad transitions, strategies such as those in the findings of this study, academic and social supports activities and WIL pedagogies, can be better conceived as an integral part of the first year experience.

Transition into learning: Academic support

A significant transition for first year students revealed in this study was the *transition into learning* which encompasses the strategies coordinators implement to support students into formal study. According to the literature, the first year of tertiary study is of paramount importance to the long-term success of students academically, socially and professionally as they are *creating for themselves a new identity as higher education students* (Briggs et al., 2012, p.4). Developing academic literacies early in the degree will assist students succeed as a student at university.

The findings of this study demonstrate that first-year subject coordinators within the Bachelor of Primary Education degree at the University of Wollongong held similar opinions to that presented by the literature regarding the value of the first year and the need for appropriate academic support. Participants in the study agreed on the importance of including specifically targeted strategies for students' success throughout their first year of study and across their degree. It similarly became clear that the majority of subject coordinators recognised the impact of providing this purposefully scaffolded support into their subject curriculum. In addition, subject coordinators understood the challenges faced by students during this transition phase.

The findings show a variety of examples of how subject coordinators aimed to target and improve students' academic literacy and research skills within the curriculum. Subject coordinators offered support for academic writing and referencing through tutorials, purpose-built workshops, Peer Assisted Study Session (PASS) availability and scaffolded writing examples. Forming a major component of the degree, assessments commonly involved academic writing, researching and referencing. This emphasises the impact of the first-year on students' long-term trajectory and the influence of subjects that provide targeted support to help students progress through their degree.

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Transition into being a student: Social support

The second major transition identified in this study is the *transition into becoming a student* that emerged through practices that enable social support for students in their first year. As outlined by Kift (2015), one of the unique challenges of transition into the first year of university was the social change and learning that occurs. Labelled as a *crucial time for students* (Gibney et al., 2011, p. 1), the first year of university involves participation within the socialisation process as well as introduction to the discipline area. Li and colleagues (2018) explain social support within higher education contributes to students' academic achievement. Young people who lack access to appropriate social support have been found more likely to be negatively affected by stress and pressure (Rueger et al., 2016). This social support is comprised of both the reception and perception of available assistance within university (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). The findings also discern available supports for students through tutor availability and relatability.

In addition to these examples, Julal (2016) describes a challenge commonly faced by first-year students at university is the unfamiliarity of a new learning environment and its effects on their success. As the findings show, several subject coordinators implemented supports such as campus maps and tutorials on how to use their student email and Moodle page to address this challenge. This assists students in developing independence and confidence, which are positive attributes for students navigating their way through university. The formation of independent learning skills contributes to the development of positive student identity (Briggs et al., 2012). Both the literature and the findings in this study highlight the significance of social support for first-year students. It appears that the participants have identified this and aimed to implement such supportive strategies into their subject curriculum in order to assist students in their transition into university.

Transition into becoming a professional: Orientation to the profession

The third and final transition identified in this study was *transition into becoming a professional*. Assisting students to transfer this learning across classroom and workplace contexts and between theoretical and applied settings can be achieved through WIL opportunities (Jackson et al., 2019). WIL develops employability skills by engaging with industry and practicing discipline skills ((Aprile & Knight, 2020; Ferns & Lilly, 2016; Jackson et al., 2019). However, the degree to which this preparation takes place from first year, to help students transition into becoming a professional right from entry into tertiary education, has been an area of uncertainty.

It was important to identify the current understandings and perspectives of first year subject coordinators in relation to WIL before making comment on practice. Prior to this study, the extent to which subject coordinators had been exposed to WIL pedagogy and understood its purpose was unknown. Approximately half of the participants had no understanding of WIL or were misinformed about what it entailed. It was common that subject coordinators perceived WIL activities to encapsulate only what is done through practicum and internships.

The findings revealed that subject coordinators recognised the value of WIL for students and the workforce, aligning with the perspectives of Edwards et al. (2015), who agreed that WIL has been proven to be an effective tool for preparing students to enter the workforce upon completion of their degree. It was deemed *ideal* (SC2) that students are exposed to experiences that combine learning and application in order to see the 'bigger picture' of the degree towards long-term career goals. It was acknowledged that the inclusion of both theoretical understandings and opportunities to practice were important to maximise learning and skill development.

The findings emphasised that due to the significance and impact of the first year, it is essential that students are provided with WIL opportunities to look forward and visualise their long term, professional orientation and career possibilities. A number of subjects featured non-placement WIL experiences such as in-class activities and one subject with school-based exercises. These practical activities can help students see their skills strengthened through career clarification, helping to

develop a professional identity, and the opportunity to build networks (Cooper et al., 2010; Sotiriadou et al., 2020). Through WIL experiences, educators have the opportunity to start encouraging students to be cognisant of their employability skills including their developing identities, values and practices (Hinchcliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Recommendations for practice

More than a decade ago, the term FYE entered the Higher Education lexicon through Kift's (2009) seminal work on transition into University. Kift's work frames a 'third generation' approach which endorses a whole-of institution approach to supporting all students and their success within tertiary education. Key to this approach is embedding first year support strategies and approaches within curriculum, rather than 'add-ons' or co-curricular activities. This paper proposes that non-placement WIL activities are included in this approach and argues for non-placement WIL activities to be integrated within first year curriculum experiences. Non-placement WIL experiences may include, but are not limited to, authentic assessment tasks, WIL projects with industry partners, gallery walks (Ramasaroop & Petersen, 2020), professional role-plays or simulations, and engaged workshops with local professionals.

The results of this study have raised implications for supporting students' transitions in the first year of university. Students do not attend subjects in isolation, rather a full-time student typically participates in multiple subjects concurrently. While the findings of this study suggest that academic, social and WIL strategies were evident, what wasn't revealed was consistency across the subjects regarding transitions or skill development. Each subject was designed and facilitated independently to the others. What is needed is more purposeful curricular design across the course and across the first year. Elsewhere, educators have argued for whole-of-course approaches in curriculum design (Dean et al., 2020). A whole-of-course approach facilitates learning towards the goals of the course and works to ensure learning through curriculum-embedded activities and authentic assessments. Reflecting on the findings in this study, it is recommended that all subject coordinators work together in a whole-of-course approach to support student transitions. A whole-of-course approach to envisioning student transition would contribute to integrating transition pedagogy into institution fabric "by ensuring that it is embedded in perennial curriculum design for sustainability and longevity" (Kift, 2015, p.67).

As a result of the findings, we suggest that:

1. First year curriculum be reviewed as part of a whole-of-course approach to WIL and transition support
2. WIL is purposefully embedded into first year, which includes looking for opportunities to start connecting theory to practice and practicing professional skills. Engaging with workplace practitioners is also of high importance in this preparation
3. A variety of non-placement WIL experiences are embedded into curricular. These activities enable equitable access for all students to start developing practical skills and knowledge at an early stage in their degree
4. Educators in the first year have access to professional development opportunities to learn about and discuss the three transition pedagogies and how this can be reflected in first year curriculum
5. Educators design non-placement WIL activities that are scaffolded into larger WIL experiences across the degree

Conclusions

This study has gone some way towards enhancing understandings of transitions in the first year, particularly in relation to embedding WIL strategies to engage in early experiences around preparing graduates for a dynamic work environment. This study has made a theoretical contribution through

the articulation of three core transitions in first year: *transition into learning*, *transition into being a student* and *transition into becoming a professional*. Through the investigation of WIL in the first year, the *transition into becoming professional* arose and was supported by coordinators practices and understandings. The current practice of subject coordinators revealed that both WIL and transition support for first year students were occurring to varying degrees within the specific site. Participants recognised the value of such pedagogies in addressing their curricula and supporting student learning and future success. It was recommended that increased communication and whole-of-course planning and scaffolding of WIL and transition support would be an effective means of further targeting the needs of students within the degree. Through wider literature and the findings of this study, it is evident that the careful and planned implementation of WIL within first year practice works towards connecting theory and practice, developing the knowledge and skills students require to become employable graduates.

The findings of this study should be addressed within the context of the research design, considering its limitations. This study was qualitative in its approach and included a sample size of ten participants who were subject coordinators in a Primary Education degree at one institution. While this limits the applicability of the findings to broader contexts, the results of the study still contribute towards developed understandings of subject coordinators perceptions of WIL and transition support within the first year of a university degree.

Future directions for research could explore WIL activities and transition support within other universities and within other discipline areas to assist in the development of greater understandings of WIL and its benefits for first-year students. Future research would also benefit from including a wider sample of participants to share their experiences, including students and policy makers, in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the prevalence of WIL and other transitional supports within the first year of tertiary study. This would present the opportunity to explore WIL activities within the curriculum from different perspectives, similarly, offering an authentic voice to the effectiveness of transition support measures.

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