**The pivotal role of student assessment in work-integrated learning**

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**Abstract**

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is proliferating in university courses across many countries. Like many educational practices, students' experience of it is shaped by the assessment processes adopted. Does assessment support or inhibit what WIL seeks to foster? To explore how students experience assessment in WIL, a small-scale investigation was undertaken across Faculties in a UK university. Students who had recently undertaken WIL in contexts where it was either tightly coupled or loosely coupled to their programme of study undertook a drawing-stimulated interview about their placement and the role of assessment within it. A thematic analysis was used to discern key themes in student responses. Key issues identified were the importance of assessment in scaffolding learning, the multiple roles of university and workplace staff in assessment, the extent to which assessment practices promote students seeing themselves as becoming practitioners and the reflexive effects of assessment on learning. The paper discusses the implications of these issues for the design of WIL activities.

**Keywords:** placements, assessment, work-integrated learning, student experience

**Introduction**

Providing students with a range of experiences in work and community settings has become increasingly adopted in higher education. This serves a dual function: it facilitates achievement of course learning outcomes; and it provides students with experience of the world of practice and the kinds of roles they might undertake as graduates. The generic term work-integrated learning (WIL) has been adopted to encompass the variety of profession- or

context-specific descriptors of experiential activities beyond the education institution (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Alongside this development, WIL is being introduced more widely across courses to contribute to students' employability by giving them a taste of work, irrespective of whether their course was designed for a specific career path.

In some, primarily professional courses, such as in education or health, WIL has been for many years integrated into the curriculum. This has been called tightly coupled WIL. In other types of course, WIL complements what is learned in the rest of the curriculum but may have a more limited connection to the course of study – termed loosely-coupled WIL (Ajjawi et al 2020). In both types, higher education tutors have a limited oversight of the day-to-day experience of students, unlike, for example, in supervised on-campus laboratories. In tightly coupled WIL programs there may be closer working relationships between the parties involved. Both kinds of WIL share the feature that they form a credit-bearing part of the overall course. Accordingly, these experiences are aligned with course learning outcomes and are necessarily assessed for summative purposes (Biggs, Tang and Kennedy, 2022). WIL-like activities that are not credit-bearing and therefore not assessed fall outside our present scope.

Ensuring a good fit between the aims of WIL and its successful implementation poses challenges as well as opportunities. These include developing assessment frameworks and procedures that recognise what is learned during a placement, and that align with the expectations of the educational institution and the workplace as well as the individual student. At the same time, any WIL activity must negotiate the pragmatics of placements, including who selects them and how, how best to prepare students for more independent, self-managed learning and workplace responsibilities, and how to balance the trade-off between benefits to the host workplace and to students.

This paper focuses on the pivotal role of summative assessment in WIL and explores key factors in its implementation, including the extent to which assessment methods articulate and capture what is learned. This exploration is grounded in data from a selected number of students at a UK university who undertook WIL placements, at a point where the experience of the placement and its assessment was still fresh in their minds. Semi-structured interviews examined placements in different professional areas and in different contexts. A thematic analysis of the data points to areas of students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their placements and the ways in which they were assessed. It also identifies features of the assessment of placements that facilitate or limit various opportunities for learning. We show the importance of assessment in scaffolding learning, the multiple roles of university and workplace staff in assessment, the extent to which assessment practices promote students seeing themselves as becoming practitioners and the reflexive effects of assessment on learning.

**Background**

Prompted by the need to characterise a very wide variety of different practices with common features, the term work-integrated learning was established first in Australia (ACEN, 2015), then more broadly. However, in many places WIL is known by a wide array of discipline- and profession-specific names such as work placements, work-related learning, workplace learning, experiential learning, practicums. Pedagogies associated with these terms have been co-opted by the move towards graduate employability (QAA, 2019). What all the practices have in common is that as they carry academic credit, they must incorporate the assessment of student learning outcomes.

In considering WIL, we are influenced by Vuoskoski and Poikela's (2015) call for a more holistic approach to workplace experiences where the needs, interests and requirements of different people working together are embedded within organisational, cultural and societal contexts and WIL assessments are conducted both by those within the work setting and by those in the educational institution. The emphasis, and often the purposes, of each party is different though and may be in tension: in the workplace to ensure good conduct of work, and in the latter to meet certification requirements. In educational institutions assessments increasingly assure that course learning outcomes are met. The extent to which workplace assessors contribute to educational assessments vary widely, and some only involve personnel from the educational institution and not from the workplace in assessments.

In the UK, subject benchmark statements were introduced in 2000 to inform those involved in program design through establishing a consensus on the nature of standards in each discipline (QAA, 2010). The QAA's foregrounding of integrated assessment practices and graduate employment (Yorke, 2002), embodied in benchmark statements, was a factor in helping to create an audience receptive to WIL. Subsequent studies, however, have found variable levels of uptake of WIL assessment in some disciplines, for example, in accounting (Yorke, 2011; Natoli et al., 2013), where practice lagged institutional policy. Reasons for this particular outcome included resourcing and differing interpretations of terminology. Trede and Smith (2014) found workplace assessors inclined to revert to the dominant practices as defined by guidance materials given, e.g. assessment forms. Yorke and Vidovich (2014) have argued that this latter can be problematic for WIL, especially as such assessors are likely to be peripheral to academic institutional processes and may not fully appreciate the standards to be addressed.

Studies have found that effective WIL assessment design rests on managing the involvement of industry stakeholders (Clarke, Litchfield & Drinkwater, 2010; Henderson & Trede, 2017). Where assessment is perceived to be driven by accreditation requirements, and decoupled from the world of practice, it can lead to cynicism and 'ticking boxes' by students and industry supervisors (Elmholdt, Elmholdt, Tanggaard & Mersh, 2016). Students may interpret the requirements of summative assessment as 'what I will be assessed on' or 'what I need to learn to pass' (Higgs, 2014, p. 265). When these requirements are seen to conflict with those of the workplace, they undermine a WIL agenda by driving inappropriate and/or unintended learning. Accordingly, perceptions of alignment or indeed misalignment can lessen the authenticity of an assessment task (Jackson et al, 2017).

Some studies have found that assessment tools and approaches of tutors and mentors in 'scaffolding' learning in WIL, while they may focus adequately on explicit knowledge, often fail to explore the role of tacit knowledge. This can impinge on students' overall personal and professional development, and the contribution of the unplanned and unintended outcomes that may be afforded by WIL (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013). Such studies argue for learning experiences and assessments in which students are encouraged to draw on personal capabilities to further develop work-readiness and fulfil personal aspirations.

This perspective raises the potential for more authentic assessments as well as deeper understanding of assessing reflective practice (Villarroel et al, 2018; Boud & Ajjawi, 2019; Ajjawi et al. 2020). Studies tend to confirm recent research on the part played in assessment by reflective practice in learning through work (Schedlitzki, 2019, Faller, Lundgren, & Marsick, 2020, Coldham, Armsby, & Flynn, 2021).

Conceptually, this study builds on Biggs' notion of constructive alignment (Biggs, Tang and Kennedy, 2022). Constructive alignment argues that all components in the teaching system – the curriculum and its intended outcomes, the teaching methods used, the assessment tasks – should be aligned to each other and attuned to learning activities addressed in terms of desired learning outcomes. In a well-aligned curriculum, the student would find it difficult to exit without learning appropriately. The application of this idea to WIL takes it one stage further: it is not just the institutionally defined desired learning outcomes that must be assessed but the learning outcomes pursued by the student and emergent from their activities that must be considered.

Student assessment practices should be aligned, not only with the applied pedagogical assumptions and work-life expectations, but also to foster learning and practice improvement in a wider sense. One implication of this is that students need to become assessors of their own learning within the context of participation in practice; be recognised as one of the stakeholders of the assessment process; and involved in the making of decisions that affect them, as well as contributing to the workplace (Poikela, 2004). This thereby calls for a more holistic (relational and contextual) approach to development within higher education regarding work-placements; one in which all aspects of student assessment − regardless of the environment or the tools in use − are collaboratively considered and tuned to support student learning and practice improvement (Vuoskoski and Poikela, 2015). Reflective activities have been common in WIL assessments (Helyer, 2015) and increasingly associated with reflecting on action. If used effectively and purposefully, reflection can facilitate ongoing personal and professional learning and develops practitioners capable of demonstrating their progression towards learning outcomes and required standards.

Such approaches involve scaffolding students' reflection on the assessment's relevance to real-world contexts and the links between theoretical aspects of their course and real-world scenarios. Assessing practice can include actual performance as well as learning gained through reflection. One study of authentic assessment and WIL found that, in the view of students, the tasks had real-world relevance and had a positive impact upon their employability, including, for example, their development of an understanding of 'what is needed for effective career building' (Sotiriadou et al. 2020, p.1239). What is also critical here is learners' ability to evaluate their own performance. Development of evaluative judgement is necessary for learners to monitor their own learning (Tai et al 2017), which is regarded as an essential skill for learning throughout life.

Further studies have indicated the importance of WIL for building employability and formation of identity. For example, Dalrymple et al. (2021) conclude that assessment formats can deepen some students' prior beliefs about their abilities and influence work-related aspirations. They note that evidence of the positive impact of authentic assessments on students' pre-professional self-identity is a 'valuable addition to research in this area, as is the rare presentation of student perspectives on authentic assessment and positive outcomes for their employability' (p.12). Blaj-Ward and Matič (2020) found that assessment format and focus can influence student identities, self-efficacy, interests and aspirations and that authenticity in assessing graduate learning outcomes needed to be 'personally meaningful' and a 'contextualised way to give students the opportunity to use the learning outcomes as a resource and to curate evidence towards career development' (p.327).

**Methods, data collection and analysis**

A focus on assessment is necessarily a focus on what students have learned. Therefore, two research questions were identified. The first on what students considered they had learned, the second on what learning was encompassed by the formal assessment processes they were subjected to:

1) Following a WIL placement, what do students judge that they have learned?
2) Which aspects of their learning were captured by WIL assessment?

A small-scale, interpretivist, qualitative approach was adopted to build up a rich picture of the ways in which WIL was regarded by students as benefiting their learning. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with a range of students who had recently completed a WIL placement. Interviews gathered self-reported perceptions of the placement, based on questions ranging, for example, from assessment ('Did the assessment assess what you learned? What was measured, what wasn't?'), to goal setting ('What were your goals for the placement? How did these relate to the goals outlined for the placement by the tutor/supervisor/university?'), to career aspirations ('What sort of work do you see for yourself in the future? How do you see these assessments relating to your future working self?'). Questions were designed to facilitate understanding of students' personal frames of reference for future employment, and how these were interlinked with the workplace and assessment strategies. A strengths-based approach, drawing on appreciative inquiry (Clarke et al., 2006), was used to shape questions. At the start of each interview, students were invited to sketch a picture of their perceptions of their placement and represent their learning, and then to discuss this image. Drawings were used to ground participants' understandings of and emotional responses to assessment (Brown and Wang, 2013), and to bring into the discussion assumptions and views that might otherwise remain tacit (Cristancho, 2015).

Students were recruited from programmes in professional and social sciences and the humanities. All were at enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate courses (UK levels L6 or L7), had recently completed a placement, and submitted their assessment tasks. Programmes included those with tighter coupling between regulatory body accreditation standards and placement assessment (Health, and Education) and those with looser coupling (Business, Law, and Media Studies). Sampling was purposive, the voluntary nature of participation stressed, and recruitment effected through calls for participation circulated via email by faculty staff. Ethics approval was granted by the university ethics committee and information provided to participants in an information sheet and consent form. Interviewers were academics employed by the host institution and purposefully matched with interviewees from different departments with whom they had no prior contact.

Twelve interviews were conducted, nine on campus in a private space and three remotely after the advent of Covid-19 precluded face-to-face meetings. Ten interviewees were female and two were male. Programme, numbers, and tighter (TC)/looser coupling (LC) were: Health (1, Level 6, TC); Media Studies (1, Level 6, LC); Business Studies (3, Level 6, LC); Law 1, Level 7, LC); and Education (6, Levels 6/7, TC). Length of placements ranged from 4 weeks to 10 months. Interviews lasted on average 40 minutes, were audio recorded and transcribed.

All data were combined and analysed thematically within an overall interpretivist approach (Patton, 2002). Team members independently read each transcript and triangulated these with assessment documentation. Initial codes were identified and discussed with the team with

samples of data and used to build themes. Two researchers then independently identified participant quotations that were congruent with overarching themes. As drawings were only used to prompt discussion they were excluded from the analysis. As appropriate, course assessment documents were also consulted.

**Findings and Analysis**

The main themes that emerged from the findings were: the role of assessment in structuring learning; the importance of supervisory teams; role modelling and independent learning; reflexivity; and aligning assessment with learning.

*Assessment structuring learning*

Assessments were seen as providing a way for students to structure their learning, shape aspirations, and demonstrate capabilities for professional roles. Participant 9 (TC) used assessment guidelines to see what they had done and what was achievable: 'It is very clear to see where I am at the moment, how I progressed and what I can achieve if I do a little bit more work'.

Students appreciated opportunities to learn within a professional context. While participants in education and health had specific disciplinary professional standards to guide the learning outcomes, for example, in interacting with children, adaptation to the various settings was needed.

Participants (both LC and TC) perceived that some assessments were being used to develop self-regulation as well as assess specific disciplinary knowledge within the workplace. Assessments that included personal planning covered new territory for some students:

> … setting my objectives was something that I really haven't done before and … was really useful for me and the interaction with the tutor made me really think about what I am gonna write about and what is gonna end up in the document (P8).

Business students (LC) as part of 10-month internship placement used criteria that incorporated pre- and post-work experience like a learning contract. Loosely coupled workplace log/journals were not assessed directly but used as a part of the report at the end of the module. Personal learning objectives that guided wider contextual goals were sometimes seen as distinct:

> It's two different assessments. The first one, everything about myself. The second one, about the company and about the workplace (P2).

Preparation related to personal and academic goals, but students could be anxious at the start of the placement. Participant 12 was worried at the start but concluded:

> … because of my observation, I mean assessment as well, because that went well, and it gave me some confidence and that ultimately was why I felt comfortable throughout that placement.

Another participant used repeated interactions with the module leader to manage expectations and sent in formative drafts of the summative assessment requirement.

Timing of assessments to support progression differed and sometimes conflicted with what was happening in the real-world settings. Workplace events, like the ad hoc scheduling of a Nativity play in one early learning centre – a priority for the workplace – could displace students' planned learning.

*The importance of supervisory teams*

Tutor roles and responsibilities affecting assessment were seen as central. Supervisory observations, especially in tightly coupled WIL, were integral to placement activities. Link tutors had the potential to guide preparation for placement roles with feedback inputs. Many participants in both types of placements appreciated individual tutorial support from module leaders:

> … having that one-to-one, it created a friend/teacher bond. So, I was able to talk to him more. He also gave me tips which I will use definitely in my future and it's much better having that one-to-one and especially in your third year where you really want to do the best you can (P1).

Some students observed that the placement team – tutor and workplace mentor – worked well together to support learning:

> We have a tutor from the University, but we also have a tutor from our work. So, for example, my manager is my work-based tutor. I can go at any point to discuss any issues or ask for advice to my tutor at work, not only from University (P9).

Workplace mentors had an active role in both types of placements, which was substantial in those tightly coupled. Workplace settings and prevailing leadership styles were perceived as influential in learning because assessments were based on the everyday setting requirements and scheduling. Workplace learning demonstrated the development of professional levels of practice, such as writing product descriptions that were used on the professional webpages.

There was less clarity and agreement about the role of the placement mentor in tightly coupled performance-based assessments. One participant questioned the purpose of the mentor's role in the process because the mentor had not had their mentor training before the tutor's assessment visit. Others felt that their experience of mentor assessment in different placement settings had not added to their learning experience.

> So, those are the things I've learned that weren't visible in the assessment and in the activity that I prepared for assessment. I reflect on those for my own learning (P10).

The perception of supervisory teams was complex and related to expectations not held in common by participants. One issue identified by students was the diverse interpretation of the tutor role. As WIL's assessment criteria and expectations were not necessarily shared amongst tutors and mentors within the sample, then equally, students might not share the same understanding of the processes involved.

*Role modelling and independent learning*

Learning was often accomplished through role modelling and observation. Two participants talked more broadly about teaching skills, routines, and procedures, from observing and working alongside the experienced practitioners in their placements: 'I learn a lot about sensory play by observing other, more experienced, practitioners' (P9).

Organisational culture could affect learning, especially if practice issues were perceived as not being addressed. Placement activity required certain types of behaviours and 'role modelling' (P5). This included learning for a wide set of graduate skills and approaches to professional practice, employability and writing skills beyond those that were assessed:

> My goals, I wanted to just perform well, get good grades and just have that
> on my CV so that when I graduate, I am way ahead of other people. That
> was the main intention there, but I learnt a lot of other things in that
> process (P2).

Activities undertaken in placement provided skill development about operating in a work environment which complemented disciplinary knowledge:

> … I learnt a lot about how to behave on a working environment but also
> my actual English … since I was doing a lot of writing… I really
> developed my researching skill and my investigation skill, and I didn't
> think of it at first, but I added it after because it was something that I
> included in my report (P6).

Assessments were thought to be relevant to the placement activities and future work. Participant 7 in health care felt that assessment was pertinent because 'everything seemed about patient care … and what I am going to do for when I am qualified'.

Keeping a balance between assessment guidance and working independently was a reoccurring theme within the findings. Participants had 'the freedom to choose what activity we want to plan and set up' (P10). However, some students experienced a lack of clarity and consistency when they were not sure on what to focus.

*Reflexivity*

Reflection was prompted by assessment tasks. There was evidence that students developed self-awareness of employment opportunities and choices. Some students commented on their adjustment of assessments to include elements useful to jobs they might seek.

Many perceived assignments as tools for reflection and self-assessment of tacit knowledge essential elements in self-managed learning for WIL.

> It did actually test me on what I learnt and also tested me about myself …
> in my first assignment it allowed me to do a SWOT analysis on myself
> which I never did before… and progress my way up and also test myself
> and also increase my experience and knowledge and skills (P1).

While participants generally expressed confidence about the process, some struggled to uncover their own 'voice' as this was a new way of learning and being assessed for them. There was an increased depth of personalised learning, such as working closely with project managers or developing personal branding as WIL preparation. Participant 7 (TC) acknowledged that they had been briefed as to the nature of the 'self-initiated learning' and discussed the iterative process of learning involved in placements. Discussing this process of trying to absorb learning more holistically was echoed in many of the findings. Even when assessment did not explicitly include reflective aspects, it was often used as a prompt to students reviewing their experience.

*Alignment of assessment with learning*

The way participants perceived performance differed between tightly and loosely coupled programmes, but there were also commonalities. Students in loosely coupled courses normally had written assessment tasks to complete. The module handbooks referred to the importance of discussions about the progress of their learning with supervisors, mentors, or peers in the placement settings. Students were expected to use the final written assessment to evaluate the learning and capabilities they had gained from their placement experience.

When discussing written assessment tasks Participant 1 (LC) expressed a clear understanding of what action was needed to successfully meet assessment criteria:

> I had like a mindset of where I want to be and what I need to achieve to become and what I need to learn and increase my knowledge in.

Others recognised how much the written assessment had helped them to reflect on and gain new insights from the capabilities they had developed on placement. Participant 8's (LC) response to the written tasks was more nuanced. She believed that the assessment tasks offered opportunities to evaluate wider learning and experience from the placement but that '[making] a preparation for a possible interview…rather than writing a report' could have been a more purposeful task. A further suggestion was that:

> … feedback from my supervisor from the work [was needed] as part of the assessment rather than only me talking about what I learned.

In contrast to this looser form of alignment, Education and Health placements were more prescribed as they were aligned with specific occupational areas and the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements in place. In these, the role of mentors within the practice areas was integral to the assessment of practice learning with reference to sector-agreed skills or professional standards.

In this context, several participants in Education articulated the critical importance of personalised feedback in preparing for performance-based assessment and improving their teaching practice.

> … so, from my previous assessment, I read a few articles or tips on how to talk to the children. So, then my tutor pointed out that I developed that knowledge, and she can see clearly that I am more confident then talking to very young children (P9).

P4 acknowledged the guidance they received from the tutor's and mentor's observations of their practice, but they referred to self-assessment tools that had also supported their confidence in keeping track of their own progress:

> There is a scale you can go to to see where you have been previously. So, you can reach beginning point or one point, two or three scores.

*Assessments as extending learning*

The assessment could be a way to reflect more deeply on the learning experience during the placement. A participant from Education reflected throughout the interview about the placement as a whole:

> Yeah, so I needed to do an assessment of the work discussion, whatever's emerged during my learning … and that was about the exclusion that I felt outside and not included in the team (P11).

Another from Business reported that the assessments were positive milestones and prompted self-development.

> Yeah, but I wouldn't have known any of this [without] the assessments. … I would have just taken on my experience and gone on to the next but then when I did my assessments, I got a chance to look back and assess whatever happened. ... So, it was a win/win situation. I was able to take from these assessments, where I was assessing myself and the company and everything (P2).

In Media Studies, the portfolio assessment provided a forum for assessment on practice using evidence that allowed the student to broaden their horizons and focus on what was important to them for the placement assessment.

> Basically, I had to just write a portfolio of the projects that I did there and a reflection on everything I learned and just new insight and everything I gained from that experience. So, I included a lot of my articles and work descriptions, descriptions of what I had done there. ... So, I made it work like that. … they [the tutors] gave us an assignment brief and I tried to follow it just as much as possible (P6)

Differing perceptions of assessment in tightly and loosely coupled contexts were reflected in what disciplinary content was assessed. Learning could include the use of working with knowledge outside of the specific placement experience. For example, other coursework studied in a broader programme context could be applied within the placement to contribute to the assessment task.

Experience of assessments could also limit learning. A participant in Law (LC) had enjoyed the placement experience and considered that it had broadened their horizons, but the experience of the written assessment and the reflective nature of the task was less positive. As the mark for the assessment had not met with expectations, it seemed to have undermined the value of the placement experience.

**Discussion**

This study is not designed to identify the full range of assessment issues encountered in WIL experience and map their extent. It is constructed to point to areas worthy of further exploration.

*Alignment*

As might be expected from the wide variation in the purposes and types of placements undertaken, assessment also varied greatly. Assessment in tightly coupled placements was typically more explicit and framed activities more strongly than assessments in loosely coupled placements. The latter assessments were more generic, such as the use of reports and reflections on activities, and not as closely aligned with the rest of the course as the former. This is not surprising as tightly coupled placements necessarily have less flexibility in what is needed of students as they must accommodate specific pre-defined learning outcomes which are often part of an external accrediting or registration body's requirements. In our study, reports by students of misalignment between assessment activities and learning experienced was less in both tightly and loosely coupled experiences than were identified in the paper by Ajjawi et al. (2020). This may not be substantive and could merely reflect differences between small samples.

*Adjustment to student needs*

Less tightly defined assessment procedures permitted much greater variation by students in recognising learning emerging from their placements. They were able to interpose their own learning goals in addition to those required by the course and were less constrained by assessment requirements in so doing. So, in the case of tightly coupled activities alignment was strong with professional requirements, whereas in loosely coupled situations, alignment with student goals and the opportunity to demonstrate learning that was emergent from the experience was made available, but not always realised. For this to occur, learning outcomes need to be formulated in ways that permit this. For example, learning outcomes could be articulated more as expressive objectives (Eisner, 1979, Allan, 1996). These do not fully determine what an outcome might be but illustrate the kinds of outcome that would satisfy requirements and allow incidental but important learning to be captured.

Fully pre-determined assessment is not always appropriate and may limit how placements can be adapted to the unique needs of individual students. If too restricted, assessment constrains opportunities for learning; if too generic, it may not prompt suitably focused reflection on practice needed to draw out the potential of the placement. In such circumstances, negotiated learning has been used as one solution to balance flexibility with specificity and response to student desires (Anderson et al 1996). This allows the student to propose, and have validated, a program and assessment regime with the tutor and with the workplace supervisor that meets both the learning outcomes of the course and the goals of the student.

*Scaffolding effects*

While assessment always frames student activity to a greater or lesser extent, a wide range of framing was seen in the data. In some cases, assessment demands provided the focus of specific supervision interventions and discussions with students, mostly in tightly coupled situations and sometimes with direct involvement of a university supervisor. In others,

students were not strongly scaffolded by assessment activities as they saw assessment as additional and separate from the learning in which they engaged. It was something they were required to do, but was seen almost as an afterthought, not part of their work-integrated learning. A lack of appropriate scaffolding through assessment or other required tasks can prompt a need for self-assessment and evaluative judgement (Tai et al 2019) on the part of students. Students' awareness of, or access to, the kinds of scaffolding suited to a WIL placement may be partial and students pushed back on themselves. Some students appeared to flourish under such conditions, but others who appeared less confident did not take up opportunities. This misalignment of scaffolding points to the need for better preparation on the part of students to equip them to manage their own learning, the use of clearer requirements for certain tasks or a more wholistic scaffolding of activities that is responsive to the exigencies of the context and the desires of students. It calls for a placement strategy that is more student-driven and which draws upon the personal capabilities of students to develop their employability skills (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013).

*Becoming a practitioner*

A valued part of placements was the ways in which students could identify themselves as becoming a practitioner of a particular kind. They could see themselves in the kinds of situations an employee would occupy and project themselves into work of that kind. They were thus positioned as *becoming* practitioners (Hager & Hodkinson, 2009) and began to take on the identities that go with such positions. While they learned specific knowledge and capabilities, some of which were linked with their discipline, other capabilities were associated with the role they were occupying. Through reflective assessments students were able to consider wider implications of their work role. Their overall learning was about being a worker in a particular context and what went with that role. For some this led to a desire to continue in that kind of work, while others realised that such work was not for them.

The role of reflective tasks which focus on more than subject-matter is important in assisting students to work with their experiences of becoming (Dean et al 2012). Such assessment tasks can legitimise a focus on what might otherwise be a relatively intangible part of the WIL curriculum: that is, the relationship of the self to what is being learned. What is learned is not further knowledge and skills, but a repositioning of the self with respect to what the course is for and the trajectory the student might take beyond graduation. Assessment tasks within WIL can play a critical role in helping students discover new meanings/values within a space/learning environment that fosters their identity formation and development of a professional self (Trede, 2012).

**Conclusion**

This paper has opened discussion on the importance of assessment on students' experience of work-integrated learning. It begins the process of distinguishing what is of lesser and greater importance in considerations of assessment. It shows how assessment shapes what it is that students attend to and how they are influenced by it. The role of assessment varies greatly depending on whether placements are tightly or loosely coupled. The paper has identified key issues that must be attended to in WIL assessment, including the backwash effect that it has on learning and the ways in which it may limit what can be drawn from placement experiences. It should be noted though that it is a small-scale study in a single institution and further research is needed to identify the complex influences of assessment in a variety of circumstances in different kinds of courses. However, it points the way to the possibility of

more fully realising the potential of assessment in fostering learning that meets the needs of the institution, the workplace and, importantly, students themselves.

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