# Scaling-up Professional Experience Programs: developing a framework to support broad-based WIL at the University of Technology, Sydney

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## Objectives

This project focused on scaling-up existing WIL activities within the Faculty of Science at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) to:

* Make a step change in the level of WIL activity and comprehensively embed WIL in the curriculum across all Science disciplines;
* Create an effective leadership team to ensure ongoing engagement with academic and professional staff; and
* Ensure project sustainability through the creation of frameworks and structures that support the ongoing implementation of WIL.

The aim was to build upon existing programs and experiences within the Faculty and embed them in a more systematic and sustainable way. Attention was equally focused on the development of student skills and professional identity, as it was on industry-based placement of students.

## Context

The University’s strategic plan focuses prominently on the development of students’ professional identity and a Vice Chancellor’s directive has been focused on the delivery of an internship or internship-like experience for all students. This is supported through centrally-operated units such as Student Services and the Careers Service. Otherwise, Faculties are expected to deliver on programs developed within the context of their specific disciplines.

The Faculty of Science offers approximately 40 courses, including single and double degree options across 11 science disciplines. WIL activities, including clinical or research internships, industry placements, WIL-based learning activities and assessments are sporadically evident across different programs. One of the primary aims of the project was to systematise these approaches and ensure that WIL was effectively embedded and sustainable across all programs. Consequently the project was led from the portfolio of the Associate Dean Teaching and Learning with the support of the Associate Dean International and External Engagement.

Prior to the establishment of the WIL project, the Faculty was engaged in several WIL-focused activities, including:

* A for-credit elective subject Career Management for Scientists, run jointly between the Faculty and central Career Services unit, which focuses on students’ ability to research and understand the requirements of employers of science graduates and to develop professional skills and behaviours
* Assessment activities that focus on employability e.g. writing job applications or mock interviews, embedded within several subjects (but not comprehensively within the curriculum)
* A comprehensive, internship placements program for Chinese medical students including international placements; internal placements (organised by UTS staff); and external placements (found and organised by the students) involving training and assessment activities
* The Professional Experience Program in Biomedical Science which is a Faculty supported program for the placement of students into industry-based internships and includes a screening, training and assessment program
* Research internship subjects offered to students on application but dependent on availability of suitable supervisors and projects. These can be taken internally or externally

This project was aligned with the wider institutional goals and closely aligned to the Faculty strategic plan. Project plans were subsequently embedded into Faculty processes and operational activities and senior management within the Faculty lead the project to ensure that it had sufficient gravitas.

## Implementation

The team undertook an audit of current WIL activities and developed a set of strategies relating to curriculum renewal, scaling and development of individual placement programs, and the creation of administrative processes to streamline and support internship activities. Wherever possible, these activities were integrated into existing Faculty or University initiatives. For example, the Faculty is implementing the Learning. Futures initiative as part of a curriculum renewal process whereby student-centred blended learning activities are encouraged. Small project funds were made available to staff who proposed to develop and integrate WIL-based activities into their subjects. In another example, the University moved to a three-session, balanced period teaching calendar in 2016. As part of this initiative, the Faculty sought to restructure its programs to ensure there was a session (semester) free block in programs to allow for a minimum 12 week internship placement. This initiative was driven by feedback from host organisations indicating their preference to have students on site for a block period of uninterrupted time, which would not normally be possible if students had to attend standard classes. Those students not partaking in an internship or international exchange, or undertaking a part time placement could still enrol in standard subjects.

The individual components of the project such as course restructure, development of training programs, development of virtual internships etc were assigned to academic champions. Standard project management processes were applied and wherever possible, new projects were integrated with existing systems and processes. A small centralised administrative team was established to support academics in the implementation of the project and to deal with enquiries from host organisations and students.

## Achievements and impact

There were several major impacts from this project.

Foremost, the project helped the Faculty focus its attention on WIL in a strategic way. This allowed the Faculty to leverage resources and ensure that WIL was effectively integrated into programs, rather treated as a bolt-on activity. This indicated the beginning of a cultural shift towards understanding the importance of WIL integration in an explicit, rather than implicit way.

Through the curriculum renewal process a number of achievements were realised:

* A number of subjects were redesigned to have authentic assessments based on WIL experiences which moved the emphasis away from content and focused on the process of learning. The learning activities were mapped against graduate attributes and threshold learning outcomes in a cumulative way across programs. The outcome of the mapping is yet to be finalised. This process clarified the need for the development of a graduate attribute that explicitly articulates WIL and this will be achieved in 2017
* Fifty percent of our courses were restructured to ensure that four elective subjects could be taken as a block in one session (semester) to facilitate external placements. This had an indirect benefit of supporting international exchange. The remaining courses will be restructured in 2017
* A suite of new subjects with 6, 12, 18 and 24 credit point structures were created to allow for the flexibility of students to take partial or full semester internships either stand alone or in combination with core subjects. These new subjects have been standardised for broad learning outcomes and assessment and have replaced previous subjects which allows for a more streamlined approach to the integration of WIL activities and learning outcomes.

A significant degree of work was undertaken to rationalise processes for external placements including issues around insurance, voluntary vs paid placements, academic assessment by host organisations, work health and safety requirements etc. As part of this, a very modest administrative support structure was implemented. Effective relationships were also built with central support units to ensure effective and streamlined communication protocols for host organisations were implemented. This involved partnerships in the development of pre-internship preparation workshops and application processes for placements.

The table below indicates some of the success achieved specifically in relation to professional placements. Of particular interest is that more than 30% of students find direct employment success through their internship programs (excluding the Chinese medicine program where students move into private practice after graduation).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Placement Program – percentage of students who find direct employment success through their internship programs** | **2015 (%)** | **As of Nov 2016**  **(%)** |
| Professional Experience for Biomedical Science | 26 | 52 |
| Research Internship Subjects | 67 | 73 |
| Voluntary Placements – not for credit | 51 | 46 |
| Chinese Medicine Clinical Placements | 60 | 60 |
| Science Internship Project (new) | NA | 10 |
| Other (eg paid internships) | NA | 2 |

## Emerging Issues and next steps

One of the emerging issues identified was the need for clear definitions on what constitutes WIL activity, and within the context of the UTS environment, a definition specifically in relation to what constitutes an internship or internship-like experience. A debate over the definitions led to an audit of explicit (directly linked and assessed) an implicit (indirectly linked and possibly assessed) WIL within the Faculty. The outcomes of this audit will be known in 2017 and will assist the Faculty in further clarifying and embedding WIL within the curriculum. The outcomes of this project will result in the development of strategies that focus on WIL skills development and authentic assessment. To ensure sustainability of WIL, the project will be integrated fully with the Faculty curriculum review process and the University’s Learning Futures initiative.

A major challenge identified through the project was the need to provide internships at scale within a competitive market. It is estimated that approximately 1000 placements per year would be required. This has prompted the Faculty to adopt new approaches to internships, including rethinking what an internship may constitute and how placements outside of the traditional science workplace may be integrated into a science course experience. The Faculty is also funding the development of a virtual internship program for students across Faculties within the University.

Fundamental to the success of any of these programs however is the need for the creation of formal leadership structures that recognise the work and value of staff contributions. Equally, while the Faculty has invested in administrative support, the degree of administrative support remains very small by comparison with other disciplines such as Engineering or Business. It is clear that if universities want WIL to succeed in Science in a sustainable manner, further and ongoing resources will have to be found.

It has also become clear that there will be an emerging need for a national benchmarking system for WIL which would involve the voluntary sharing of data and hosting of these data on a neutral site such as the ACDS. Potential points for comparison could include things like the number of students on placements, student and host organisation satisfaction, and employment success among other metrics.