

**The WIL Pathway: Shared understandings build vocational identity,
occupational capacity and professional transition**

Josephine Pryce

josephine.pryce@jcu.edu.au

Discipline of Management & Marketing

School of Business

Faculty of Law, Business and Creative Arts

James Cook University

Cairns, QLD, Australia

Jackie Simoes

jackie.simoes@jcu.edu.au

Good Practice Project Officer

James Cook University

Cairns, QLD, Australia

Lisa Crema

lisa.crema@jcu.edu.au

Graduate and Student Employment Officer

James Cook University

Cairns, QLD, Australia

The WIL Pathway: Shared understandings build vocational identity, occupational capacity and professional transition

Josephine Pryce, Jackie Simoes, and Lisa Crema

**James Cook University
Cairn, QLD, Australia**

Abstract

Work integrated learning (WIL) has become a catch phrase in higher education in recent years with various models advanced, and each advocating their virtues for students, educators and professions. In the milieu of WIL experiences, the notion of developing professionals is a key driving factor of WIL programs. At James Cook University (JCU), this imperative is equally noticeable across the various disciplines and schools but one model is exemplary for its linking of students within the Human Resource Management (HRM) discipline with Human Resource Professionals through the ongoing support of and collaboration between School of Business, JCU Careers and Employment, and the local HRM Professional Association. This partnership has been effective in developing graduate attributes, vocational identity, occupational capacity and professional skills that facilitate the successful transition of students to graduates to professionals. The aim of this paper is to examine in more depth the factors which have contributed to the evolution of this model and to evaluate its success as measured by the perspectives of various stakeholders, especially those of students, graduates and HRM professionals. It uses qualitative approaches integrating individual conversations and reflective tools to illuminate how shared meanings of what it means to become a HRM professional have enabled the program to grow over the years such that graduates return as HRM professionals to perpetuate best practice in the HRM profession. In this way, the paper proposes a model for a scaffolded approach to embedding WIL activities in a HRM major so that students are presented with valuable opportunities to position themselves for entry into the professional world of HRM.

Keywords: work integrated learning, vocational identity, occupational capacity, professional development

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an impetus to embed work integrated learning (WIL) activities in curriculums at universities as “a valid pedagogy and as a means to respond to demands by employers for work-ready graduates, and demand by students for employable knowledge and skills” (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Preto, 2008, p. v). The term WIL is generally used to refer to “a range of activities and experiences that draw together formal coursework with industry or workplace learning in a purposeful way” (Brown, 2010, p. 507). In their study of 2008, Patrick et al. identified a range of WIL models in the higher education sector, which conferred the benefits of WIL programs to students, employers, professions and the community (Patrick et al., 2008). These models highlighted that as engagement with WIL grows, there is widespread recognition that the positive outcomes for students include:

- integration of university coursework with industry which develops skills, knowledge, experience and competencies (Atkinson, Rizzetti, & Smith, 2005; Bates, 2011);
- provision of opportunities to learn in context in the work environment (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004);
- facilitation of transition to work (Alderman & Milne, 2005; Smith & May, 2011);
- promotion of reflection on professional practice (Brodie & Irving, 2006; Schön, 1984).

Other researchers have also commented on the broader value of engaging with WIL. For example, Purdie, Ward, McAdie, & King et al. (2011) examined the relationship between WIL and “the psychological variables believed to play an important role for graduate success in the subsequent transition to the labour market”. They sought to “determine if there are significant psychological outcome differences in self-concept, self-efficacy, hope, procrastination, and study skills/work ethic between students who pursue WIL and students who pursue a more traditional degree programme”. Their findings indicated that “the more work-related experiences a student had, the more hope, agency, intrinsic goal orientation and academic self efficacy they reported ($p < 0.05$)”. They concluded that “it is not simply a question of the right placement at the right time, but that WIL is most influential when students consistently build on the gains they make via multiple experiences”, i.e. work-based experiences.

In terms of benefits, for industry and the professions, WIL programs can work strongly towards: the preparation of graduates for the complexities of their professions (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996; Eyers, 2005; Sheppard, Macatangay, Colby, & Sullivan, 2009); enhancement of professional networking and behaviour (Lizzio & Wilson, 2004); and, optimisation of employability (Sturre, von Treuer, & Keele, 2012). In terms of value to communities and society at large, Patrick et al. (2008, p. 9) note that:

Some universities use such WIL-related terms as ‘real world learning’ or ‘professional learning’. Others refer to ‘social engagement’ with the community, an engagement focused on building social capital and citizenship through curriculum design that incorporates opportunities for students to engage with the professions through a range of teaching approaches.

Alongside the growing importance of WIL and its recognised benefits, engagement with WIL presents many challenges. For example, Abeysekera (2006) highlights the need for structured WIL programs which progressively and systematically integrate theory with practice. In addition, some authors note that the need for collaborative approaches in

developing successful WIL programs (e.g. Brown, 2010; Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009). However, the challenges in universities are equally well documented, and include many factors. For example, Smith, Brooks, Lichtenberg, McIlveen, Torgjøl, & Tyler, (2009) acknowledge that the development and delivery of WIL experiences requires appropriately prepared, trained and resourced people from across the gambit of academics, career development personnel, and employers.

All too often, the legitimacy of WIL as part of academic disciplinary activity and scholarship is questioned for both academics and student career development personnel. Coll and Eames (2000) explored models relating to the role of WIL co-ordinators and supervisors and highlighted that in order to ensure optimum experiences for students, employers, and coordinators, the latter needed to be a subject specialist with strong links to students and the faculty, and a sound knowledge of 'the business of the employer'. They concluded that a joint role of faculty-educator with placement-coordinator meant the individual had expertise in the subject discipline, were able to attain a good understanding of students' abilities, and so facilitate a better match between the student and employers, which in turn worked to enhance relationships between the university and employers.

Smith et al. (2009) note that traditionally, the Career Services departments of universities, have been instrumental in the delivery of WIL programs. They add that "the extent to which Career Services and other university departments which deliver work-integrated learning interact and cooperate with one another in their separate or joint delivery of work-integrated learning varies across the sector" (ibid, p. 9). This is acknowledged by other authors who note that teaching is primarily a private undertaking and staff having limited opportunities to work with staff from other discipline areas or schools to share resources and their own practice experiences (Brown, 2010; Patrick et al., 2008). In addition, Smith et al. (2009) note that there is scope for partnerships between providers and professional associations.

This paper discusses the evolution of a partnership consolidated by the three authors, who are from different areas of the university, which has worked to link students from the Human Resource Management (HRM) discipline with the Human Resource Profession, and so deepened and enriched their learning experiences and prepared them for their graduate roles. The authors are an Educator from the discipline of Human Resource Management, a Careers Officer from the Graduate and Student Employment Officer, and the Teaching and Learning Good Practice Officer (herewith, 'T&L Officer'). The paper examines factors which have contributed to the growth of this partnership and evaluates its success as measured from the perspectives of the authors and students who have been involved in related activities and programs. Drawing on the findings from conversations, student feedback, creation of an exemplar, and critical reflection, the paper presents a pathway for a scaffolded approach to embedding WIL activities in a HRM major so that students are presented with valuable opportunities to position themselves for entry into the professional world of HRM; and, a framework identifying the elements which make such a pathway possible.

THE PROCESS

The aim of this project was to engage staff from across three areas of the university to reflect on activities around the HRM major and determine what made it an exemplar of good practice. The intention was to achieve this through a self-study approach utilising

conversations, use of student feedback and critical reflection. Beck, Freese, and Kosnik (2004, p. 1261) note that self-study is “a ‘personal-constructivist-collaborative’ approach”. The project was personal because it grew from our own personal concerns and interests in teaching and learning and optimising student employability. It was constructivist because it embraced the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and understanding. It was collaborative because we worked together to create the learning environment, to examine the outcomes, and to develop a WIL pathway model. This is also embodied in Russell’s (2005, p. 5) contention that “Self-study relies on interaction with close colleagues who can listen actively and constructively . . . [and] on ideas and perspective presented by others and then taken into one’s personal teaching and research contexts for exploration of their meanings and consequences”. Conversations and critical reflection played a key role in advancing ideas and integrating them into the teaching.

Conversations around an exemplar of good practice drew the three authors together as they examined what it was about the HRM major that provided recognised quality learning experiences for students. Prior to this, the authors had over the years had engaged in conversations around teaching and learning, with two of the authors having sustained fruitful and ongoing purposeful conversations around the HRM major. These conversations formed a rich vein for continued partnerships that have resulted in the WIL pathway described here, and contribute to the methodological approach of this paper.

The importance of these graduate attributes was already recognised by the authors, with two of them (the Educator and the Careers Officer) having worked several years in enabling students to achieve these attributes and having had their efforts captured by student feedback. This feedback and the purposeful conversations between the collaborators afforded substance for critical reflection in this self-study.

In 1933, Dewey noted that “while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially acquire the general habit of reflecting” (p. 9) (p. 9) (p. 9). Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985, p. 19) note that reflection is “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation”. This definition extend emphasises critical analysis of experiences and explains that the process deepens meaning and understanding. In this project, there was a genuine interest in reflection on our engagement with WIL practices and to understand our “actions and experiences and the impact of these” (Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009, p. 597). Through the emerging discourse, the authors were able to construct meaning from the knowledge and experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Serendipitous meetings: Evolution of the Project

Repeated encounters between two of the authors (the Educator and the Careers Officer) at local Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) forums signalled to the two that these serendipitous meetings suggested not only a shared interest in the profession and practices of HRM, but also a shared understanding and vision of authentic learning for development of student’s prospective careers and for better employability outcomes for students. As one of the author notes: “The HR WIL Activity started out as a corridor conversation. The difference between this conversation and others is that the conversation has been nurtured and developed for a number of years”.

Ensuing conversations led to an inaugural event organised by the Careers Officer and supported by JCU's Careers and Employment (Cairns): a 'speed dating' event for the HRM student (which was eventually extended to all business students). This was in 2008, and marked the beginning of yearly events wherein HRM students meet with HRM professionals from within the community. These events have now become an integral part of the capstone subject in the HRM major (which will be described later) and reflect engagement with WIL pedagogies. As another author notes: "the collaboration has been driven by several factors . . . predominantly these have been related to a sense of professional responsibilities, personal concerns for the students being employment ready, and to pedagogical aspects". This is exemplified by the collaboration between the Educator and Careers Officer, which has spanned several years, and fostered engagement with local HRM professionals and the local HRM Professional Association.

In more recent times, universities have begun to recognise the strategic value of recognising the scholarship of teaching and learning, especially the contributions of educators to student learning. Subsequently, universities have been actively supporting and championing good and effective practices of teaching and learning. At JCU, federal funding was used to appoint a Good Practice Project Officer in 2012 "to identify and disseminate best practice" so that performance can be improved (http://www.jcu.edu.au/teaching/JCU_083604.html).

At the time, the T&L Officer began conversations with the Careers Officer in relation to showcasing some of the exemplary work being undertaken by JCU's Careers and Employment (Cairns). Despite the breadth and depth of activities and events organised and conducted by the latter, there appeared to be no synergies with the mandate of the Good Practice Project.

In due course, the T&L Officer identified the work in the HRM major as a feasible exemplar. From this, the T&L Officer contacted the HRM Educator and further conversations began. The two knew each other from various university activities relating to teaching and learning, and so already knew that they shared a keen interest in quality learning experiences for students. At their initial meeting, the HRM Educator told of the ethos to teaching and learning, in the HRM major, drawing on various examples to illustrate good quality practice. As the T&L Officer listened, she realised that that the HRM Educator was being insistent that some of her work had been made possible only because of the collaboration with the Careers Officer and that this should be acknowledged in the exemplar. Alas, and quite serendipitously, here was an opportunity to include some of the exemplary activities undertaken by the Careers Officer.

As colleagues in higher education, we realised we shared an interest in creating learning environments that influenced, inspired and provided opportunities for students to bridge the gap between their university studies and the real world of professional practice. This was encapsulated in the comments of one author:

The partnership with the HR academic staff in the School of Business is based on a shared understanding of the impact that interacting with industry professionals has on the career development and professional success of our students. Interactions with HR professionals and the appreciation of their varied career pathways has enabled students to set a pathway for themselves to become part of the local profession.

Given this shared understanding, and noting the possibility of achieving this pathway, we examined factors which contributed to the 'way we did things'.

Seeking Synergies: The Course Structure

In the course of various conversations, the structure of the Bachelor of Business Human Resources Management (HRM) was discussed, with a view to identify synergies for activities between all three parties. As a summary, the course is designed, as are all majors in the Bachelor of Business, with two second year subjects and four third year subjects. The two second year subjects; *Strategic Human Resource Management* and *Business Negotiations* provide opportunities for students to access real world scenarios and situations and to begin to think about their role as future HR professionals. Both subjects are designed to provide a strong foundation for students learning about HRM practices and activities and in developing strategies for managing people. Essential communication and interpersonal skills are developed throughout the program, although the *Business Negotiations* subject, in particular, helps promote effective and respectful dialogue between individuals and teams.

The four third year subjects build on the skills, knowledge and understandings developed in second year and provide continued exposure to learning experiences integrated with the workplace and assist in consolidation of personal and professional capabilities. Three of these subjects focus on a specific aspect of HRM and afford students opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding in these key areas: *Employee Relations*, *Cross-Cultural Management*, and *Personnel Economics*. The fourth subject, *Contemporary Issues in Human Resources Management* is the capstone subject, which is designed to bring all of the HRM studies together as students critically analyse contemporary HRM issues. The subject examines key emerging areas of HRM theory and practice which are currently affecting organisations, such as virtual workplaces, war on talent, offshoring, service work, the voice of workers, working life, and monitoring and surveillance in the workplace. This subject aims to assist students to develop an awareness and appreciation of the role of human resource professionals and the ability to become a reflective practitioner who can potentially influence policy and practice affecting employment.

Discussions between the three authors highlighted how the HRM major had evolved into a pathway such that for students undertaking the HRM major at JCU had become a progressive, scaffolded engagement with curriculum that builds and consolidates knowledge, skills and understanding that connect theory and practice through real world experiences. This journey is encapsulated in Figure 1.

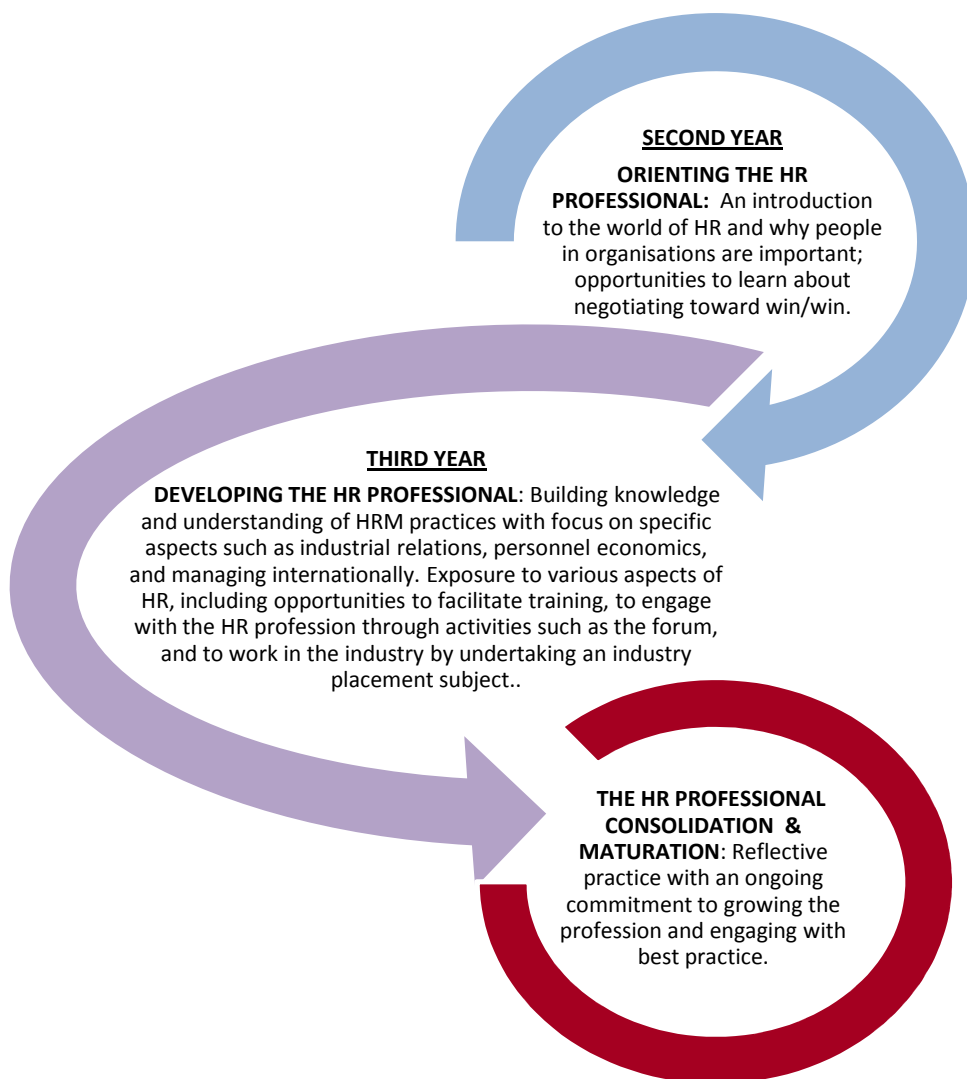


Figure 1: The HRM major: A WIL pathway linking theory and practice.

A capstone experience

The collaboration focused on in this paper is most evident in the capstone subject, which brings all of the HRM studies together. A key aspect of the subject is the JCU HR Managers Panel Forum, an integrated activity collaboratively presented by JCU Careers and Employment with the School of Business. With a focus on work integrated learning and management of career and work life, the event provides students with an opportunity to connect with graduates and professionals working in the local human resources profession, and build networks and prospects for future employment.

The human resources professionals are invited guest speakers and form the 'Industry Panel'. Each guest speaker, as part of their role on the 'Industry Panel', is asked to talk about how they entered the HR Profession and discuss an issue of current relevance to them in the workplace. Afterwards, students are encouraged to ask questions. An ensuing lunch encourages one-on-one discussion and provides fortuitous opportunities for students

to build networks and prospects for future employment. Repeatedly, successful employment endeavours between employers and students have been instigated through this event.

It is compulsory for all students enrolled in the capstone subject to attend the JCU HR Managers' Panel Forum; and the related assessment item is a reflective essay. Students choose an issue raised by one of the panel members, during the forum, and write a research informed business essay wherein they integrate various sources of contemporary thought with the approaches used in industry. The essay is meant to encourage reflection on the topic, linking theory with commentary from the industry professionals, and to think about strategies for dealing with the issue, which are practical. The value of reflection as a pedagogical tool is widely recognised (e.g. Boud & Walker, 1998; Jordi, 2011). More so, the work of Kolb in the 1970s and 1980s, which drew on the earlier work of Dewey, Piaget and Kurt Lewin, resulted in the 'learning cycle' with a reflective element therein (Jordi, 2011; Siewiorek, Besterfield-Sacre, Shuman, & Hamilton, 2010).

For the HRM students, it is anticipated that reflection will assist in gaining fresh insights into the role of HRM professionals, consider their occupational expectations, and work toward developing professional best practice. In addition, a key graduate attribute is the ability to reflect on and evaluate learning, and this is strongly associated with self-directed and deep learning and promotion of 'being a professional'.

Vocational Identity.

In this sense, students' vocational identity is fostered for the HRM students. Porfeli, Lee, Vondracek, and Weigold (2011) contend that vocational identity consists of career exploration, commitment, and reconsideration. They note that: "Adolescents develop their vocational identity as they explore themselves and the working world and get ready to make commitments to both (e.g., crystallizing work choices and personal values and interests)". Comments from one author captures how this applies to the HRM students:

One of the most successful activities we can deliver is to enable connections with industry professionals. These connections fulfill all of our goals and feedback from students is consistently positive. Students who attend these events go on to identify themselves as an emerging professional and see the advantages in engaging with the profession throughout the remainder of their studies. This is evidenced by student feedback to me, such as: 'I know why I am doing this degree'; 'I know how to make connections and network with people. Networking isn't scary anymore'; 'I have been successful in getting an interview for a job'.

This comment parallels thoughts from Porfeli et al. (2011, p. 855) who highlight that: "the extent that adolescents perceive work as offering favorable experiences and emotions, they may be more or less willing to explore and commit to an occupational role and remain more or less doubtful and flexible about their choices".

Occupational capacity

It is recognized that an occupation is "both a human process (the engagement) and an outcome, for example, health through increased skill, competency, or efficacy (Thellefsen & Willemoes Sørensen, 2004, p. 2). Following on from this, it is reasoned that occupational capacity is: "the result of a complex interaction between several elements in the person, in the physical environment and in the demands of the social" (Thellefsen & Willemoes Sørensen, 2004, p. 10). The purpose of the JCU Careers and Employment Service is to

enhance the capacity of students to develop and manage successful professional careers. Its ability to achieve this purpose is accentuated by the collaboration with HR lecturers from the School of Business and is summed up in the following comment:

This activity [The Industry Forum] is no longer an isolated activity in a third year class. I see HR students engaging with the profession in other ways now and I feel excited as collaboration continues to grow and develop into the future.

The value of the experience gained from this event is evidenced by student responses to a related survey, which shows a high level of student participation and student satisfaction. For example, with the latter, responses to the statement 'the industry panel provided opportunities to network with employers' showed 73% of students rated this as 'very good' or 'excellent, with all respondents indicating 'good' or better (Survey Monkey, 2011).

The value of this experience is further evidenced in the following student comments: 'great opportunity to have an insight of what HR managers do and what they deal with'; 'diversity and quality of the speakers was fantastic'; 'gave me a good insight to the HR industry and different ways to build my career' (Survey Monkey, 2011).

It is here argued that by integrating learning experiences which link theory to practice and to professional contexts, students are motivated and inspired to learn and to realise their professional aspirations. The HRM program achieves this by engaging students in authentic experiences with peers and HRM professionals, including JCU graduates now working as HRM professionals, local businesses and services; and, through connecting with professional associations, like the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), the governing professional body of HR professionals, During their study, students are encouraged to become members of AHRI, as membership is free for students.

The extent of the value of the Industry Panel event is further illustrated by the following comments from one of the convenors:

This annual event highlights how a collaboration between the academic staff, careers staff, the local employer group and JCU graduates can benefit students, meet the JCU WIL agenda, and provide a better prepared workforce for the community.

The surprising thing for me is the impact of this kind of activity. In reality it isn't a difficult activity to deliver. We can find the speakers, order some food, promote it to students.

The outcomes also aren't hard to see. Students have a much clearer vision of themselves and their potential pathways as an HR professional after these events. They build confidence and skills as they engage in few conversations with supportive industry guests. In addition, the University can boast another WIL activity in the program. The careers service fulfills our goals of improving vocational identity, building capacity and supporting successful professional transitions.

Although this event has particular significance for third year HRM students, an invitation is extended to all business students as it is realised that attendance is beneficial to many students. For first year business students who attend this event, it assists in developing their vocational identity. For second year students, attendance at this event builds vocational

capacity, motivating students to start getting some practical industry experience, if they haven't already done so. For final year students this event assists their professional transition into the world of management.

Graduate attributes

Synchronously, the T&L Officer's review was driven by reflection on the core principles of the policy governing learning, teaching and assessment, and determining how the practices under consideration related to these core principles. Two core principles were identified as relevant: one which focuses on the 'employability' of students; and the other, highlighting the importance of open and regular communication in building shared understandings.

As conversations progressed, it was realised that recognition of graduate attributes also played a key role in the factors which made this HRM major unique. Within JCU there are of two kinds of graduate attributes: generic skills and graduate qualities, which collectively work toward development of "personal and professional skills and capacities"

(http://www.jcu.edu.au/policy/allatoh/JCUDEV_007031.html). The generic skills focus on: literacy and numeracy; information literacy; critical thinking and problem solving; self-reliance and interpersonal understanding; using tools and technologies; and learning achievement. The latter includes "the ability to manage future career and personal development" (ibid).

Alongside these graduate attributes, the graduate qualities include: exemplary personal and professional moral and ethical standards; a commitment to lifelong learning and intellectual development; an understanding of regional issues; and, a sense of professional, community and environmental responsibilities.

As these were highlighted, it became apparent to the authors that the HRM major 'fits the bill' for each of these elements. This is noted in a comment from one of the authors: "As students are exposed to authentic learning experiences they develop graduate attributes, build an understanding of regional issues, community responsibilities and foster professional aptitude".

Graduates return

The power of teaching and learning activities as evidenced in the HRM program is apparent through the continued support provided by JCU HRM Graduates to undergraduate business students. For example, these graduates are receptive to conversing with our students through the JCU Careers and Employment Employer connect program. In 2012, four JCU HRM Graduates participated in the JCU HR Industry Panel Forum. This was a significant reflection of the success of HRM graduates in the profession, on their commitment to promoting the profession, and on their willingness to encourage students to enter the profession. Also, JCU has a HRM graduate on the AHRI Committee in Cairns which is a significant achievement. In 2012, the JCU HR Panel Forum was duly sponsored by AHRI, sharing the theme 'HR is Everyone's Business'. This was an auspicious event as it enabled the regional AHRI chapter to formally showcase its investment in JCU's HRM students and commitment to growing the profession. The JCU HR Panel Forum is hosted once a year and aims to strengthen its affiliation with AHRI. One author notes: "The relationships that we now have with the local branch of the Australian Human Resources Institute and JCU graduates of the HR program will continue to enhance this activity".

Transitioning into the Professional World

This paper has shown how the support from JCU's Careers and Employment (Cairns) has sustained an ongoing relationship with HRM academic staff and HRM students, which has effectively facilitated development of graduate attributes, vocational identity, occupational capacity and professional skills that facilitate the successful transition of students to graduates to professionals. In so doing, the collaborative efforts have enabled students to undertake WIL related activities, such as attending Industry Forums. Further to this, the interest by the Teaching and Learning division of the university in showcasing best practice has contributed to collaboration for articulating and sharing of understanding about this WIL pathway. Through a shared understanding, it has been possible to realise a WIL pathway whose aspects come together to facilitate transition from graduate to professional, and so create a sustained HRM professional workforce.

The shared understanding permeated a collaboration which extended to engage the proponents into a deep analysis of their activities such that over time modifications to pedagogical practice have led to an understanding of the factors that contribute to ongoing quality student learning and career development. These aspects are captured in Figure 2.

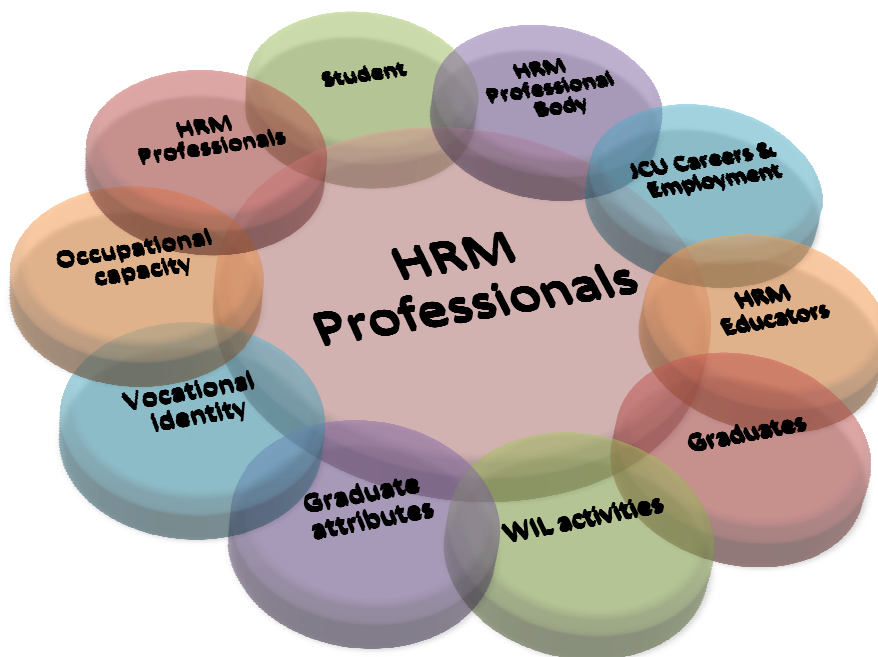


Figure 2: Elements which work to developing HRM Professionals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, WIL programs offer many opportunities for students to connect with workplaces and lay the foundations of their future careers. The model presented here (Figure 1) affords a mechanism for embedding WIL activities in a major and so, scaffold students' experiences in a way that maximises opportunities for students to position themselves for entry into the professional world. This model is exemplary for its linking of students within the Human Resource Management (HRM) discipline with Human Resource Professionals through the ongoing support of and collaboration between School of Business, JCU Careers and Employment, and the local HRM Professional Association. This partnership has been effective in developing graduate attributes, vocational identity, occupational capacity and professional skills that facilitate the successful transition of students to graduates to professionals. The perpetuity of the success of such programs is summed up in the words of one author:

What can be difficult is developing and maintaining the partnerships that make these activities an ongoing and integrated part of the academic development of our students. We have offered activities similar to this with other discipline areas and while they have always been successful, many have been a one-off event. The difference with the HR activity is the willingness of the HRM lecturers to collaborate with us to make this activity an integral and ongoing part of the program.

Hence, a key contributing factor for the success of projects such as the WIL one described here is the collaboration and cooperation of the relevant stakeholders. Recognition that creation of professionals is: 'Everyone's Business', goes a long way in sustaining these WIL partnerships and programs.

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