

Book Review

Govender, C.M. and Våland, T.I. (2021) *Work Integrated Learning for Students: Challenges and Solutions for Enhancing Employability*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Stephen Merry

Visiting Research Fellow, Staffordshire University

Corresponding author: s.merry@staffs.ac.uk

It is a truism to state that Covid-19 has had a major effect on workplaces of all sorts. Businesses, public sector organisations and charities are currently struggling to find new sustainable ways of remote working, with universities rapidly developing online and blended activities that mirror these developments. Hence students, tutors and employers are all now collaborating, working and socialising online with face to face contact often limited to some practical and team-building activities. From my perspective, this congruence should make work-integrated learning (WIL) collaborations between universities and workplaces much more feasible as part of a post Covid-19 society. In the Foreword, this book makes sweeping claims for WIL within a fourth industrial revolution, post Covid-19 society; a society with decentralised workplaces where IT systems support humans to collaborate in problem solving and making decisions. Notably, the book posits a central role for WIL in reducing inequalities of opportunity and enhancing the working experience. While I doubt that any single approach will solve inequalities, this does not prevent workplace experiences being vital learning activities which enhance students' employability and shape their professional identities.

The authors of the book are academics with business backgrounds based in different continents. Hence it is unsurprising that much of the content of the book is explained and contextualised using business exemplars from a variety of different regions of the world. While the book is not divided into specific

sections, the initial chapters broadly concern the terminology, nature, benefits and implementation of WIL, with later parts concentrating on overcoming problems, specific exemplars and future developments. The flow seems broadly, but not always strictly, logical with the book being neither a specific instruction manual or, despite the extensive list of recent references cited, a pure research monograph. Instead the book is a guide for those wishing to set up WIL projects with the guidance often provided by posing pertinent questions to shape their project's development. While the structure and style of the book produces multiple lists and some repetition, and the absence of an index to the content unhelpful, I found the writing is informative and accessible.

A central tenet of the book is that our current rapidly advancing, technology driven fourth industrial revolution world of work requires graduates to be lifelong learners. Hence the focus of WIL must be on encouraging students' learning in both university and the workplace, and enabling them to integrate it and apply it in both settings. This approach is not new, but, for me, it was a refreshing change from the often prevailing view that, for universities, employability is simply about teaching students a list of specific skills which are deemed to be automatically transferable to the workplace. For the authors of this book, WIL can encompass work placements of various lengths, internships, consultancy, collaborative business start-ups and other joint university-employer projects. However, WIL is only achieved if there is close liaison and co-working between all stakeholders to ensure that complementary learning activities take place in the different settings and that the WIL students are made aware precisely how this learning supports their overall professional development. The book emphasises the advantages and implications of WIL for students, universities, businesses and governments, and these, together with some possible pitfalls, are summarised below.

For students, WIL provides opportunities to engage in authentic entrepreneurial projects within a workplace environment. It facilitates integration of theory and practice so enhancing their employability and

enabling greater satisfaction regarding their university studies. Furthermore, WIL requires professional conduct and values concerning information, collaboration, communication, planning and confidentiality, which encourages the development of students' professional identities and behaviours, and fosters enterprise within their learning in both their workplace and university. Finally, it provides students with opportunities to engage with potential future employers and their employees, and hence explore their career opportunities more deeply. Less positively, the non-traditional assessments often associated with WIL, such as written reports, oral presentations, reflective portfolios and peer assessments, are often daunting for students and so need to be undertaken within a supportive environment.

For universities, WIL preparation involves providing blended learning to promote students' self-regulation, problem solving, entrepreneurship, team working, and familiarity with ICT; attributes which also often contribute to academic success and lead in turn to more rewarding teaching. Additionally, WIL collaborations may help the university to identify new research or consultancy opportunities. However, it is important for universities to balance the type and design of WIL that they implement with the organisational resources that they have to support it. In essence, it may be more beneficial to all the stakeholders to implement a small WIL project well, rather than a large complex project badly. The barriers to effective WIL implementation can include: stakeholder miscommunication; low stakeholder motivation; poor preparation; and inappropriate assessment processes. Often, both universities and employers need to make widespread changes to their regulations and traditional ways of working, and, to facilitate this, governmental assistance is needed as described later.

For employers, WIL provides opportunities to investigate more speculative developments and projects, to identify potential new additions to their permanent workforce, and, because collaboration is a two way process, to learn recent innovations in their sector and so increase the effectiveness of their existing employees. For commercial organisations, WIL can also have

reputational, and hence business, benefits. It is important, however, for WIL employers to realise that WIL is not simply an opportunity to acquire free or cheap labour; they need to contribute to the student's learning as well as reap the benefits from it. Finally, the commercial or ethical implications of the proposed collaborative work may require confidentiality agreements to be put in place and for the work to only be performed between partners who already have a trusting relationship. While, by providing dedicated support staff, large organisations are often better able to sustain WIL and to convert talented students into employees, smaller enterprises are often more adaptable and receptive to the new ideas emerging from WIL. In all cases, liaising with a single university contact with decision-making authority greatly facilitates the success of the process.

For governments, the enhanced self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem associated with WIL leads to a flexible and responsive workforce that can better contribute to the economic prosperity of the country. More directly, WIL projects themselves can lead to local economic prosperity in the villages, towns and cities where they are based. However, to derive these benefits, governmental agencies need to foster WIL collaborations through incentives and the dissemination of information, training and other support to both academics and employers. Furthermore, governments and professional groupings need to provide quality assurance frameworks which maximise the benefits of WIL projects to all stakeholders, and governments, universities and employers need to work internationally to ensure that their WIL standards are maintained when students undertake international placements.

Overall, I enjoyed and benefitted from reading this book and recommend it to anyone who is involved in WIL or who wishes to know more about the topic. While the context of the writing will be particularly useful to business academics and businesses wherever they are based, its essences could also be applied very broadly and internationally within other academic disciplines and in the public and charitable sectors. The book's content is accessible, comprehensive, global and forward-thinking.