

# Delivering Quality WIL Without Compromising Wellbeing: Exploring Staff and Student Wellbeing in a WIL Context Through the Lens of Organisational Health

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## Abstract

Recent scholarship has highlighted the need to be attentive to the student experience of placement-based work-integrated learning and its possible impacts on the wellbeing of student participants. The experiences of staff involved in planning, delivering and supporting work-integrated learning programs and the impact on their wellbeing have received less attention. Using data from a survey conducted at an elite Australian university, this article explores staff perspectives on, and experiences of, work-integrated learning. Through the theoretical lens of organisational health, this article proposes key contributors to ensuring quality learning outcomes for students without comprising the wellbeing of staff. These include conducting realistic workload assessments and providing staffing and allocating workload in line with these; providing appropriate training, staff recognition and reward, and employment which recognises work-integrated learning as a specialist skillset; and resourcing skilled administrative support and technological systems.

**Keywords:** Work-integrated learning; WIL; wellbeing; staff satisfaction; organisational health; higher education leadership.

## Introduction

Australian universities are under increasing pressure to develop graduates' employability and ease the transition from higher education into employment through the widespread adoption of work-integrated learning (WIL). As one of the more ubiquitous forms of WIL, practicum placements provide an opportunity for students to apply learning in a work context (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Jackson & Collings, 2018; Jackson & Dean, 2023). Australian universities place a high priority on WIL (Universities Australia, 2019) and the Australian Government (under the Job-ready Graduates reforms) allocates funding to universities to include WIL in degree programs (Daly & Lewis, 2020). This high-level commitment to WIL is based on the expected developmental gains for students in relation to their self-perception, professional identity, work self-efficacy and ability to deal with the practical and emotional demands of their chosen profession (Bowen, 2018; Jackson & Wilton, 2017; Thompson et al., 2016; Trede, 2012; Weldon & Ngo, 2019). However, while WIL research has traditionally focussed on skills acquisition (McManus & Rook, 2021) and employment outcomes (Lawson et al., 2015), in recent years this narrow focus on the benefits of placement-based WIL has been challenged (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2018).



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Drawing attention to experiences of “WIL wellbeing” (Grant-Smith et al., 2017), an emerging body of research explores the “dark side” (Bengtson & Barnett, 2017) of WIL and the potential for participation to negatively impact participant wellbeing. These negative psychosocial and physical wellbeing outcomes (Drewery et al., 2016, 2019) associated with participation include financial stress (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2019; Johnstone et al., 2016), a loss of dignity (Davis et al., 2020; King et al., 2021), and exploitation (Cameron, 2013; Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2016). These negative impacts on wellbeing can extend to those tasked with delivering and supporting WIL programs, whose wellbeing is closely connected to that of their students (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020). Although responding to student wellbeing is an expectation of academic work (Hughes et al., 2018), there is a paucity of research regarding the wellbeing of those who supervise and administer WIL activities. Initial evidence indicates WIL staff often feel invisible in terms of support for their own self-care (Gillett-Swan & Grant-Smith, 2020). Using data from a survey conducted at an elite Australian university, this article provides insights into staff wellbeing and experiences of providing and supporting WIL. Through the theoretical lens of organisational health, key contributors to ensuring quality learning outcomes for students without comprising the wellbeing of staff are also identified. The close links between student success and the wellbeing of students (Henrich, 2020) and educators (Hobson & Maxwell, 2017; James et al., 2019) have been clearly established in previous studies, but there has been little research into educator wellbeing at the tertiary level as a discrete topic. A keyword search using these terms on Google Scholar over a date range from 2010 to 2023 in September 2022 identified only 29 results. Of these, 28 articles mentioned ‘tertiary’ only in reference to the experience of authors or in the context of required qualifications for educators at other levels, e.g., early childhood professionals (Jackson, 2020).

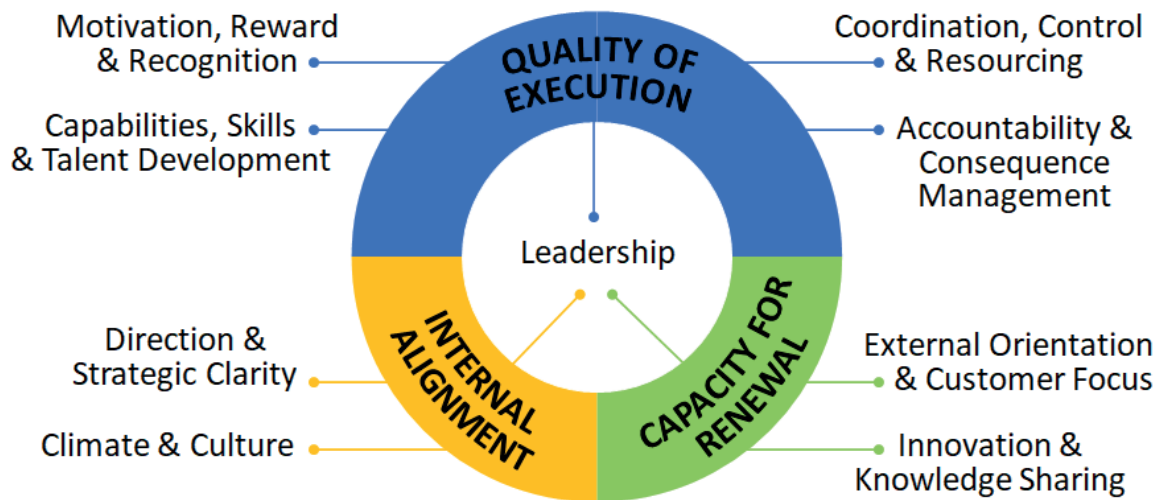
### **Organisational Health and Educator Wellbeing**

Those working in higher education are often experiencing unprecedented anxiety and occupational stress (Morrish, 2022) as a result of neoliberal demands (Berg et al., 2016) including an accepted culture of overwork (Miller, 2019), workload intensification and increasing administrative burden (Kenny, 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Nakano et al., 2021; Pace et al., 2021; Woelert, 2023), and high levels of educational workforce precarity (Blackmore, 2020; Smith, 2022). Exacerbated by the demands of COVID-19 (McGaughey et al., 2022; van der Ross et al., 2022), these factors have combined to negatively impact the wellbeing of academics (Cantrell & Palmer, 2020; Dewi et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2019; Kift, 2022).

Employee stress, burnout, job satisfaction and engagement are all influenced by an organisation’s psychosocial environment (Viitala et al., 2015). In their study of the relationship between working environment and higher education staff wellbeing in the UK, Wray and Kinmore (2021) found that respondents who reported poorer wellbeing related to job demands, control, support, relationships and role had a greater risk of developing mental health problems and burnout. These factors can be understood through the lens of organisational health (de Smet et al., 2014).

Organisational health focuses on an organisation’s ability to adapt to its environment to achieve its goals and the extent to which its formal and informal practices contribute positively to the wellbeing of employees through its organisational climate (Hong et al., 2014) or the shared perceptions regarding the practices, procedures, and behaviours that are supported and rewarded (Schneider, 1990).

As shown in Figure 1, organisational health is comprised of three dimensions—internal alignment, capacity for renewal, and quality of execution (de Smet et al., 2014; Berlin et al., 2019). Each dimension is comprised of several sub-elements, while leadership is understood to straddle all three.

**Figure 1***Components of Organisational Health*

According to Hopkins (1984), an educational organisation with good organisational health is:

...one that is structurally sound in so far as its goals are well articulated, where communication channels are well distributed and free-flowing, and where the power is finely balanced. Internally it is operating harmoniously, near full capacity with little strain and the whole operation is conceived of as being adaptive, dynamic, and having a capacity for problem-solving. (p. 41)

As this quote demonstrates, a connection between organisational health, staff and student satisfaction and the effective management of educational organisations has been long established (Crosby, 2022; Lysons, 1990; Lysons & Hatherly, 1992). Indeed, one could argue that its key observation remains relevant given that prolonged exposure to what has been characterised by many as the increasingly “conflicted and ambiguous nature of academic life” is placing “pressures on psychological and organisational health and well-being” of universities and their employees (Bolden et al., 2014, p.765).

In this article, the concept of organisational health is contextualised within the provision of WIL to understand how these factors might impact the wellbeing of those involved in providing and supporting WIL. The article explicitly examines wellbeing via a range of organisational health factors including perceived institutional commitment to WIL quality and the adequacy of WIL communication practices, resourcing, and institutional support. The following research questions will be answered to draw forth findings relating to the support required to improve staff experiences of WIL through an explicit focus on organisational health as a key contributor to WIL wellbeing:

- (1) What motivates staff to engage in WIL?
- (2) How do staff perceive institutional performance regarding WIL delivery and support?
- (3) To what extent do staff believe WIL wellbeing is being achieved?

## Method

Access approval was sought from the Australian university under study, referred to herein as “Alpha University”. Ethics approval was granted to conduct the research by the researchers’ home university. A survey instrument was distributed to staff via an email from Alpha University’s student employability centre. The survey link was available through the Qualtrics platform in November and December of 2019. The survey captured information regarding attitudes about WIL, organisational WIL climate, and resourcing and support available for WIL activity.

Seven-point Linkert scales were primarily used as 7-point Likert items have been shown to provide more reliable responses than 5-point scales, particularly for survey instruments delivered online (Finstad, 2010). In addition to questions relating to assessments of student and staff wellbeing, items were based on WIL practices, with a focus on items relating to global climate, work facilitation, managerial practice and customer feedback<sup>1</sup>, and Schneider et al.'s (1998) climate for service scale adapted to the higher education context.

Although Likert scales are widely used for measuring attitudes, many studies incorrectly use cardinal statistics such as sample variances or t-tests means to analyse this attitudinal data (Göb et al., 2007). Because using the mean as a measure of central tendency has been criticised when analysing ordinal data (Jamieson, 2004; Sullivan & Artino, 2013), the analysis of responses is presented as descriptive statistics, with comparisons of weighted proportions. Supporting figures apply a diverging palette ranging from red for negative assessments to green for positive assessments.

Qualitative data, in the form of lists and short phrase responses, were collected via open-ended questions including *What do you believe are the critical resources required to do WIL well? What are the barriers to you introducing (more) WIL into your teaching practice?* and *What could motivate/support you to integrate (more) WIL into your teaching practice?* Qualitative data were analysed through manual coding and a phased hybrid approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) where data were first deductively coded (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) using codes from the organisational health literature (e.g., Berlin et al., 2019; de Smet et al., 2014; Gagnon et al., 2017; Miles, 1965) before an inductive approach was applied to identify additional codes. A subsequent axial coding process was used to identify, sort, categorise and synthesise the data into themes. Quotes are presented in italics.

The survey had 75 valid responses. A considerable portion of respondents (n=33, 44%) chose not to disclose their gender; of those respondents who did, 78.6% (n=33) identified as female and the remainder (n=9, 21.4%) identified as male. Most respondents (n=57, 76%) had current WIL-related responsibilities. Fine-grained analysis based on demographic dimensions was not possible due to the low survey participation rate<sup>2</sup> combined with a high item nonresponse<sup>3</sup> for most demographic questions including level and faculty.

Consistent with the shared responsibility model for delivering WIL (Clark et al., 2016) the sample comprised a mix of academic (n=42, 56%) and professional staff (n=33, 44%).<sup>4</sup> We found no substantial difference in responses between these two groups so collapsed them for the purposes of parsimony and clarity in reporting. This lack of difference is perhaps unsurprising as such role distinctions often reflect respondent pay classification rather than the nature of the work performed, with many staff in higher education occupying "multi-professional identities" (Sebalj et al., 2012, p. 464) or what Kate Seymour (2022, p.1) refers to as "the hybrid 'third' space between academic and administrative realms" created by a blurring of boundaries between traditionally academic and administrative responsibilities (Whitchurch, 2008).

## Perspectives on WIL Benefits, Support and Quality

As shown in Figure 2, there was a strong level of general agreement that participation in WIL activities provides excellent learning opportunities for students (94.5%) and that it improves their employability both generally (94.5%) and in their specific discipline (93.4%). There was also a strong level of agreement that WIL provided benefits for Alpha University (94.7%) and its industry partners (93.2%). Strongly agree was the most commonly selected response for all of these items, indicating respondents' beliefs that WIL provides significant benefits for students, universities and industry partners. However, respondents were not as unanimous regarding the benefits of WIL for staff involved in delivering and supporting these experiences, with 29.3% of respondents selecting a neutral response or some level of disagreement.

<sup>1</sup> In the university context customers are students and industry partners. Questions were included for each of these two key stakeholder groups.

<sup>2</sup> Low participation rates in employee surveys can stem from perceived low levels of issue salience (Cycyota & Harrison, 2006), low expectations participation will result in meaningful action (Foster Thompson & Surface, 2007) or low levels of staff morale or satisfaction (Rogelberg et al., 2000). Participation rate may therefore reflect organisational climate.

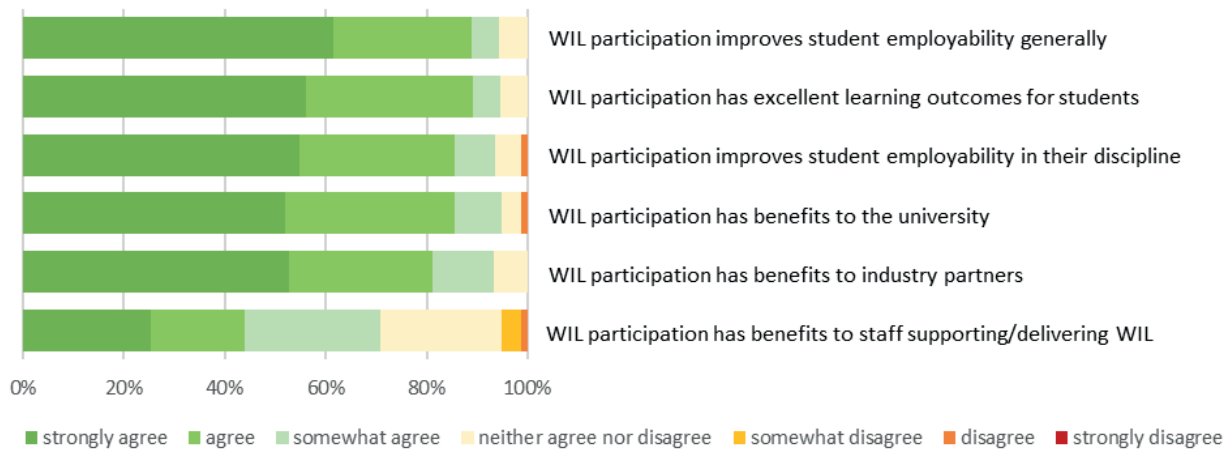
<sup>3</sup> Item nonresponse can be because questions are perceived as sensitive (Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 1995), answering requires significant cognitive effort (Shoemaker et al., 2022) or due to low levels trust and concerns data may reveal potentially identifying data that could result in negative outcomes for them (Saunders, 2012). Again, item non-response may reflect organisational climate.

<sup>4</sup> Following Sebalj et al. (2012) we consciously adopted the term professional staff in preference to non-academic which can be perceived as negative marking of these staff or pejorative assessment of their skills and contribution to university teaching, learning and research administration.

**Figure 2**

*Assessment of WIL Benefits and Value*

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the value of WIL participation...



Prior research has identified that educator motivations for engaging in WIL range from enhancing student learning, engagement and employability, to the development of educator skills and knowledge (Aničić & Divjak, 2022). Respondents in this study reported being more motivated by intrinsic than extrinsic factors. As shown in Figure 3, alignment with teaching philosophy, personal and professional values, and perceptions that engagement in WIL is meaningful work were the most strongly supported reasons for engaging in WIL. Although reward and recognition, including career advancement, were not identified as strong a driver, it would be ill-considered to assume that this is not important at all to respondents as prior research has found that poor reward and recognition are associated with low morale and wellbeing among higher education workers (Gillespie et al., 2001).

**Figure 3**

*Respondent Motivation for Engaging in WIL*

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your motivation for engaging in WIL...



Respondents’ assessments of Alpha University’s performance in recognising and rewarding the delivery of superior WIL was unfavourable, with fewer than one in eight (11.9%) rating it as good, very good or excellent, and half (50%) assessing it as poor or very poor (Figure 4). This perceived low level of institutional performance regarding staff reward and recognition was

also evident in qualitative feedback which indicated a low level of acknowledgement of the importance of WIL work relative to other university priorities e.g., “No recognition for the hard work. Focus is more on research not on WIL in teaching.” This perceived lack of importance was also evident in comments regarding the “lack of time; lack of incentive; lack of reward/recognition from superiors” for WIL. Recognition in this context goes beyond rewards or awards; as cogently expressed by one of the respondents this “recognition of WIL by faculty and institutional leadership is important, and [is] recognition that there is additional workload attached to many WIL activities.”

Consistent with statements regarding the need for recognition of the workload involved in delivering WIL, the majority of respondents indicated that there was room for improvement regarding the level of organisational support provided by Alpha University, in terms of tools, technology and other resources, provided for delivering WIL (Figure 4). Only one in four (24.4%) respondents believed Alpha University’s performance was good, very good or excellent in relation to this: “[we need] funding, IT support and resources, workload recognition, students need to see why the university is integrating WIL as many seem very surprised and not that willing to go the extra mile needed.”

**Figure 4**

*Respondent Assessment of Institutional Performance Regarding WIL Delivery*

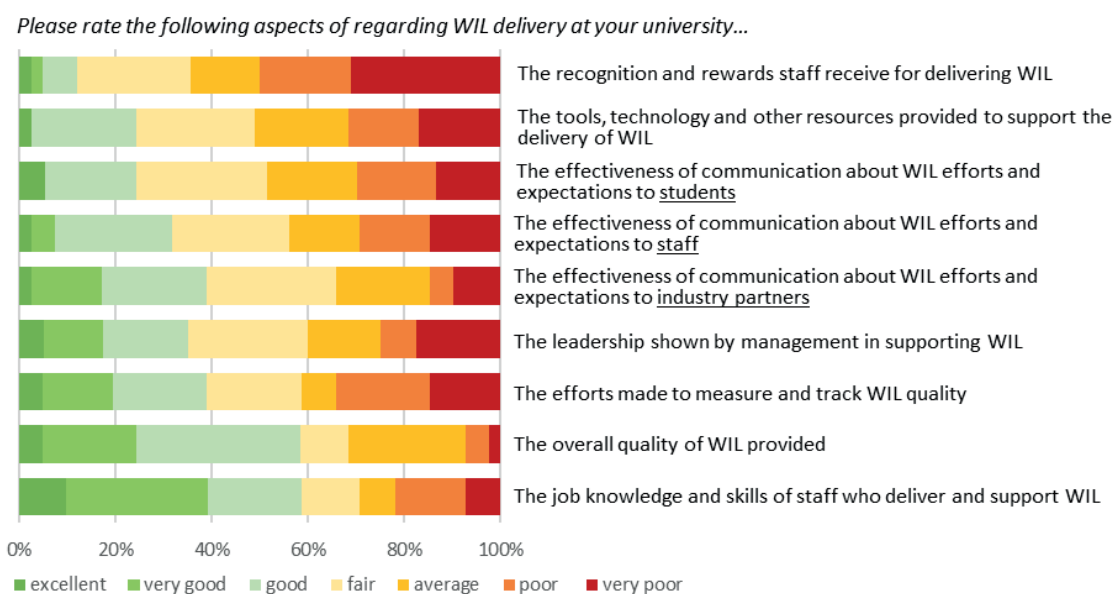
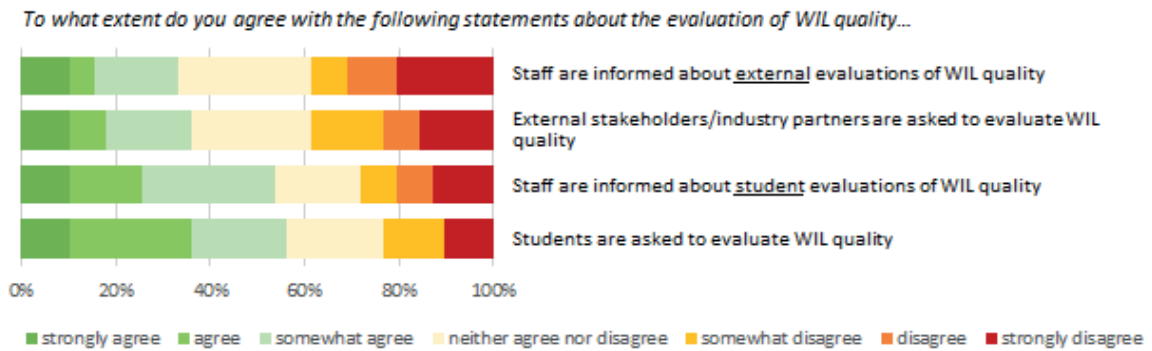


Figure 4 indicates a moderately high level of agreement regarding the overall quality of WIL experiences provided (58.5% rated it as good, very good or excellent) and the knowledge and skills of staff to deliver quality WIL (58.6% rated it as good, very good or excellent). However, respondents were more critical of Alpha University’s efforts to measure or track the quality of WIL experiences which were rated as poor or very poor by around one-third of respondents (34.1%).

Respondents were also mixed in their perceptions of the effectiveness of Alpha University’s communication about WIL efforts and expectations to faculty staff with fewer than one-third (31.7%) rating it as excellent or very good and a similar percentage (29.87%) rating it as poor or very poor. This is concerning as staff require this information to perform their WIL-related roles. Respondents generally indicated that the effectiveness of Alpha University's communication about WIL to external industry partners was better than its communication with staff. The results indicate a perception that Alpha University stakeholder communication may require attention, with a sizeable percentage expressing an ambivalent or negative sentiment which could limit its effectiveness in building relationships with partners and students. A more detailed assessment of communication about WIL by Alpha University can be seen in Figure 5, which details staff perceptions of its efforts to seek stakeholder (typically student and industry partner) feedback on WIL quality and the extent to which the results of such evaluations are shared with staff.

**Figure 5**

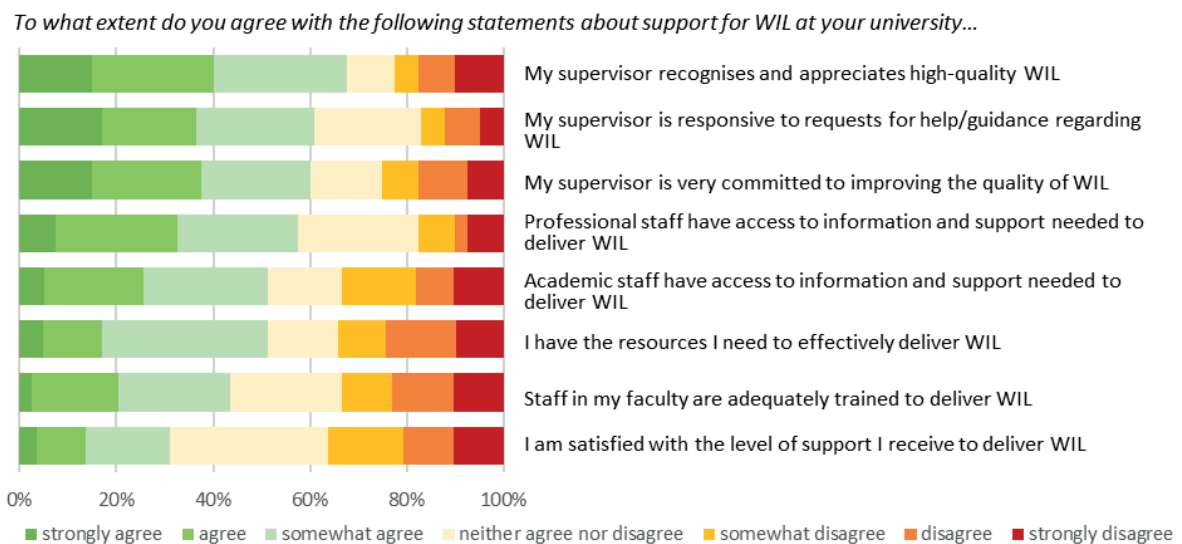
*Assessment of WIL Quality Orientation and Communication*



Recent research has identified that WIL staff are burnt out due to underinvestment in job resources (Wheeldon et al., 2023). Around one-third of respondents (35%) agreed that support of WIL by Alpha University’s leaders was good, very good or excellent. This relatively poor assessment of alignment between leaders’ espoused values and actions is also evidenced in assessments of the extent to which staff members receive the training, resources and support required to deliver WIL well. Figure 6 indicates a relatively low level of satisfaction with the level of support received for WIL work, with more than two-thirds of respondents (68.9%) indicating a neutral or negative level of satisfaction. Respondents were most positive about local-level responsiveness to requests for help or guidance (61.0% positive sentiment). More than half of respondents also agreed staff had access to the information required to deliver on their WIL commitments (51.2% agreement regarding academic staff and 57.5% for professional/administrative staff).

**Figure 6**

*Assessment of Institutional Leadership and Support for WIL*

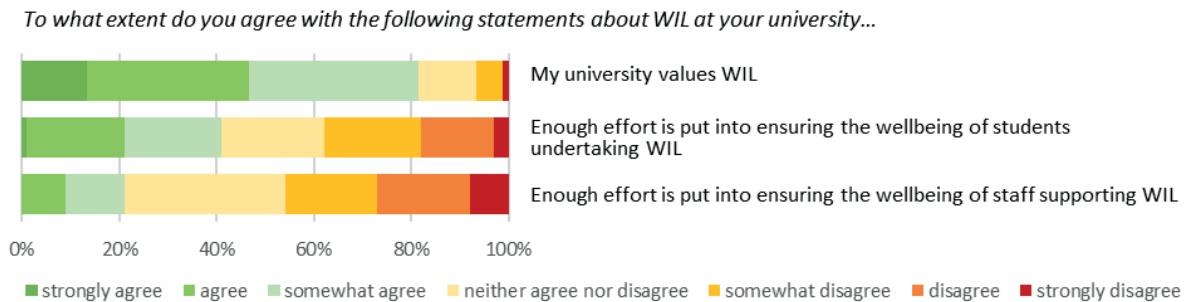


## Assessments of WIL Wellbeing

Most respondents (81.4%) agree Alpha University values WIL, however, this does not necessarily translate into agreement that it puts sufficient effort into ensuring either student or staff wellbeing (Figure 7). There was a generally low level of agreement that Alpha University's current approaches to supporting the wellbeing of *students* undertaking WIL activities were sufficient with only two in five respondents (41%) signalling a level of agreement. The percentage of respondents who agreed Alpha University expended sufficient effort into ensuring the wellbeing of *staff* supporting and delivering WIL was half this amount with only one in five (21%) agreeing and none signalling strong agreement.

**Figure 7**

*Assessment of WIL Wellbeing for Students and Staff*



## Connecting Organisational Health and Staff Wellbeing

Respondents' perceived a disconnect between the apparent value placed on WIL and the way Alpha University acts to deliver quality WIL. If left unchecked, this could result in low levels of staff satisfaction and morale. Given the reciprocal impact of student and staff wellbeing (Abery & Gunson, 2016), this poor assessment of Alpha University's commitment to the wellbeing of staff and students is potentially concerning. One way of redressing this disconnect could be through a focus on organisational health as it explicitly connects employee wellbeing with organisational performance as mutually constitutive outcomes (Cotton & Hart, 2003).

Organisational health has three key dimensions—internal alignment, quality of execution, and external orientation. The first dimension, internal alignment, is concerned with task-centred elements such as goal focus, communication adequacy, and optimal power equalisation (Miles, 1965). It is evidenced via internal alignment, a compelling and shared vision, strategic clarity, and a clearly articulated strategy that is supported by its culture and climate (Berlin et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2017; de Smet et al., 2014). The second dimension, quality of execution, is concerned with the internal state of the system and the needs of those within it, such as cohesiveness, resource utilisation and morale (Miles, 1965). This dimension is related to the quality of execution of the vision, and the governance and other practices and systems instituted by the organisation to achieve it (Berlin et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2017; de Smet et al., 2014). The third dimension is focused on growth and change such as innovation, autonomy, adaptation, and problem-solving (Miles, 1965). This growth dimension has been reinterpreted in contemporary applications as the capacity for renewal and how well an organisation understands, adapts to, and interacts with both the external environment and its responses to it (Berlin et al., 2019; Gagnon et al., 2017; de Smet et al., 2014).

For Alpha University, internal alignment appears to be low in relation to the extent to which the organisational climate is perceived to support the delivery of quality WIL. As evidenced in the quote below, many respondents believe change is required in relation to the disconnect between the espoused value of and commitment to WIL (its WIL vision) and the actual resourcing of WIL work by Alpha University:

There would need to be a very significant change in the rhetoric and positioning of those that direct the projects and the education committee in my school. There is fantastic WIL work done in some parts...but in my area there just isn't the will to make it happen. Research is most important, keeping management happy comes next, the student experience is a distant third.

This is aligned with critical assessments of the quality of execution of the WIL agenda across dimensions such as coordination and control, support, and the allocation of required resources to deliver quality WIL. This can be understood as relating to two



connected spheres—those focused on the management of the university, and those focused on the management and contributions of its human resources. In a healthy organisation these spheres are deeply interconnected and individuals, including those in leadership positions, understand what is expected of them, have sufficient autonomy to act, and feel accountable for delivering results. This requires the resourced implementation of coordination and control mechanisms associated with performance, risk and financial management such as systems, processes and metrics to monitor performance and make adjustments accordingly. However, for staff to be motivated to productively engage with such systems they must receive appropriate training, reward and recognition.

Managing these matters is important because just as perceptions of support and recognition positively influence educator morale and wellbeing (McMurray & Scott, 2013), insufficient funding and resources, work overload, poor management practices, and a lack of promotion, recognition and reward can result in high levels of occupational stress and lower levels of staff morale (Gillespie et al., 2001). In short, as articulated by a respondent, those engaged in WIL require “leadership recognition of your skill, experience, and knowledge in this area so [that] meaningful resources are discussed before implementation.” Such recognition requires the application of resources commensurate with desired outcomes to limit the disconnect between WIL aspirations (high) and WIL support (low) as they would become “more realistic about how much time and money it takes to deliver successful and meaningful WIL experiences to students and industry partners”.

This notion of connecting WIL resourcing to desired WIL outcomes is linked to the final area requiring attention and investment of resources—the extent to which the university is effective at interacting with and shaping external relationships concerning WIL. Jackson et al. (2017) report that a lack of shared understanding and misalignment in expectations among WIL stakeholders is common. A respectful and effective continuity of relationships with external stakeholders is vital to avoiding misunderstanding. Frustration at what was perceived to be a short-sightedness regarding a lack of investment in external engagement by Alpha University is evidenced in the quote below which draws forth the impact of areas for improvement for all three dimensions of organisational health within the organisation—internal alignment, quality of execution, and capacity for renewal—and the impact of this on staff wellbeing and morale:

[There is] no interest...in any improvement in our current programs beyond what HAS to be done. WIL is seen as all too hard...I find this disappointing and, to an extent, unethical, as I teach a very practical subject in a practical discipline to students who pay a lot of money for an effective education in this area. Most staff that teach in this program are on short-term or sessional contracts so there is little incentive for them to invest in building the program because it takes a year or two to get them set up and stable and it is all about the relationship with industry. If you draw on your relationships to achieve something and then, well, your contract is not renewed, it is pretty embarrassing.

## Conclusion

As the focus on WIL continues to increase, doing WIL well requires prioritising both staff and student WIL wellbeing rather than seeing their needs as in opposition (Brewster et al., 2022). This requires universities not only to have a strategic vision for delivering high-quality WIL, but to back this commitment up with the resources required for the effective planning, administration, supervision and management of WIL. The findings of this research are consistent with prior research that has likewise identified the key challenges encountered in delivering quality WIL as being associated with resourcing (Doolan et al., 2019). This points to the importance of institutional factors in delivering quality WIL experiences for students but also for ensuring the satisfaction and wellbeing of staff involved in delivering WIL.

Higher education is a workplace and worker wellbeing in an educational environment can be significantly advanced through quality leadership, and a supportive policy and institutional environment (Price & McCallum, 2015). This research posits that organisational commitment to WIL wellbeing could be enacted through three priority approaches connected with organisational health. First among these is conducting realistic assessments of the workload and caseload associated with WIL and providing staffing and workload allocation in line with these assessments. Prior research has suggested that those involved in delivering and supporting WIL feel that their work in relation to providing emotional support and solving problems for students is under recognised (Winchester-Seeto et al., 2017) so this work should also be included in assessments. Second, appropriate training, recognition and reward for staff involved in WIL are required, including access to promotion and ongoing employment opportunities which recognise WIL as a specialist skillset. Finally, resourcing skilled administrative support, appropriate technological systems and physical infrastructure, and a coordinated approach to industry engagement are vital to achieving both quality WIL and wellbeing for all involved.

Given its complexity and interrelationship with other aspects of university management and administration, focussed attention on organisational health and its multi-dimensional focus has the potential to deliver on wellbeing objectives. Through its focus on addressing a range of structural factors and its explicit recognition of employee experiences as fundamental to

organisational health and the achievement of institutional goals, a focus on all dimensions of organisational health is an important first step towards promoting WIL wellbeing. Although originally designed to drive financial performance, applying the elements of organisational health across all aspects of university management and administration has the potential to meet institutional performance aspirations without sacrificing staff wellbeing. Indeed, high-level leadership exercised through organisational accountability and the appropriate application of resources has the potential to positively influence wellbeing across multiple aspects of work life within the higher education workforce, including WIL.

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