

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Early work-integrated learning experiences shaping Australia's future health workforce

R. Forbes¹, N. B. Reinke², S. Paquet-Fifield³, N. Masters² & S. Kusljic³

As educators and researchers dedicated to health professional education, we write to highlight the ongoing focus we must have on early work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences in response to the 2024 Australian Universities Accord (UA) Final Report. To grow Australia's health workforce by 300,000 by 2026, UA has called for an expansion of WIL in health professional programs to meet Australian healthcare and disability needs (UA, 2022). As advocates for this essential growth, we must recognise the importance of integrating WIL throughout the entire continuum of health professional curricula and not just as primarily capstone experiences.

The 2024 UA highlighted significant challenges in securing WIL, especially in fields that require clinical or practical exposure, such as healthcare, disability and social services (Department of Education, Australian Government, 2024a). These challenges emphasise the need for sustainable and flexible approaches to shaping the future of WIL—a future aimed at enhancing graduate employability early and effectively. However, the UA's increased focus on WIL may inadvertently prioritise resource allocation towards intensifying opportunities at later program stages, close to graduation. This emphasis risks overshadowing the equally significant early experiences, which are crucial for foundational real-world exposure that shapes students' professional identities and their career intentions. Early-stage WIL not only helps demystify the healthcare sector but also allows students to identify their interests and capabilities effectively, fostering a better fit that enhances job satisfaction and career longevity. Moreover, early WIL experiences offer an opportunity for students to engage in interprofessional practice, allowing them to understand the complex dynamics of healthcare systems and the various professions that operate within them. We assert that we must not overlook the importance of these early-stage opportunities, which are critical for adequately preparing students for the demands of their professions.

Notably, Section 2 of the UA discusses the financial hardships associated with mandatory placements, reflecting another layer of challenge that impacts not only students but also the institutions that support them (Department of Education, Australian

¹ School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland, Australia

² University of The Sunshine Coast, Australia

³ University of Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: Roma Forbes r.forbes2@uq.edu.au

Government, 2024a). Although the Australian Government's recent Commonwealth Prac Payment scheme aims to alleviate some of this financial burden within a small number of professions (Department of Education, Australian Government, 2024b), significant challenges persist. It is evident that financial barriers, coupled with the logistical challenges of WIL allocation, disproportionately affect students from diverse backgrounds, including international students and those from non-metropolitan areas and low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Equity concerns are also potentially exacerbated by discrepancies across health professional programs regarding the completion of mandatory clinical hours needed for registration. For instance, the difference in clinical hour requirements between different health programs highlights an uneven landscape, which may further be a detriment to student and program equity.

In light of the UA report, a tailored and multifaceted approach is needed to determine both the WIL opportunities that are adaptable to the needs and requirements of each different health discipline and at which timepoint of the specific curricula students would most benefit from the experience. The commitment to maintaining a balance between early- and later-stage WIL opportunities requires the consideration of frameworks that can guide the design and implementation of effective WIL. Such frameworks would require true partnership with industry, communities, governmental bodies and healthcare organisations as well as faculty adaptation and teaching innovation. Clinical educators and host organisations must be central to this partnership and receive appropriate training and support to mentor and facilitate student learning effectively and sustainably.

As we advance this agenda, it is imperative that we embrace a more integrated approach to WIL, one that recognises the formative impact of early experiences in developing a competent, engaged and diverse health workforce ready to meet Australia's future challenges.

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