To improve internships and placements, embed technology in their design

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Students at Monash University are provided integrated medical and surgical teaching in year three of the new curriculum. Credit: Monash University/flickr, CC BY-NC

Work integrated learning helps prepare students for the world of work. It involves students collaborating with industry and community partners as

part of their degree program. It can be an immersed experience where students participate in internships, practicums or placements, or a virtual or on-campus experience where students are engaged in consulting, projects or simulations with industry partners. But it's currently not properly preparing students for the type of workplace that lies ahead.

Work integrated learning has long been a part of nursing, teaching and health science degrees. But after a [national strategy](#) in 2015 recommended much wider application, universities started applying this type of learning to other subjects.

As more and [more jobs become digital](#), students need technological skills. Work integrated learning needs to prepare students so they can pursue their career goals and give them a snapshot of the digital future.

Part of this means embedding technology in work integrated learning. Technology is currently not at the forefront of how work integrated learning is designed and this is something [educators need to address](#). Work integrated learning should not only develop student skills in using technology, but also show them how it's changing the way we work.

What does successful work integrated learning look like?

Work integrated learning should help students achieve career success in modern work. For some, this may be securing a place on a graduate program or obtaining a full-time graduate role. For others this may mean portfolio work, or taking on contract and gig-type [roles](#) that give them the flexibility to pursue other commitments, such as building their own business or caring for others.

For a good practical work experience, students need to *prepare* by

researching and understanding where they're based and how to behave appropriately and safely. Students can prepare with online modules. The modules would help prepare students on risk and critical incident management, occupational health and safety, and professional conduct. Understanding professional conduct is important for international students who are keen to gain workplace experience, but are not familiar with Australian workplace norms or culture.

Students also need to *reflect* on their work experience through activities and assessments. Online reflection tools (such as blogs, journals and e-portfolios) can help students connect their classroom learning with what they learned on practicum, at an internship or on placement. They can ponder the differences between theory and how things are done in real-time.

Reflection develops self-awareness – what do they do well, how are they struggling and where do they need to improve? Peer reflection, enabled by wikis, discussion boards and social media also enables students to share problems and feel less isolated.

Finally, employers need to give students constructive *feedback* on their strengths and areas they need to improve to do well in today's working environment. Feedback can be facilitated through online surveys and tools such as Zoom and Skype which connect workplace supervisors and lecturers to track student progress and discuss arising issues. These make good alternatives to site visits, and are more efficient for large student cohorts and remote placements or internships.

These are all ways technology can be used to maximise the outcomes from work integrated learning that aren't being fully realised now. A key example is shifting into off-campus mode which reduces barriers for students who are unable to travel to campus. Facilitation through webinars, virtual meetings and bite-size video clips can reach large

numbers of students more efficiently.

Developing the mindset and capabilities for future work

Universities and work integrated learning coordinators at those universities (academics) are responsible for designing these programs.

For them to be successful they should be reviewed regularly to expose students to work that is client-facing and based on relationship-building. Rather than placing accounting students in payroll or invoicing, which are likely to become heavily automated, get them to observe client briefs, shadow meetings and bigger picture bigger picture processes such as budgeting, forecasting and risk analysis.

Graduates move jobs frequently, so they need to apply their skills and knowledge in new environments as they go.

One way to do this is to encourage students to reflect on challenges they faced in applying their skills in work settings and to identify strategies to manage this.

Work integrated learning should be designed to require students to collaborate with industry to solve authentic problems, make decisions, become digitally literate and manage crises that simulate the real world.

Students should be encouraged to challenge the status quo, become critical workers who have the confidence to speak up and drive change in a fast-paced and turbulent future.

Finally, work integrated learning should expose students to cutting-edge practice and technology, such as virtual working through web-based

technology.

Work integrated learning must be carefully designed with preparation, reflection and feedback at the forefront and technology used to maximise each. It should reflect current workplace practice and prepare students to succeed in the future of work.

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