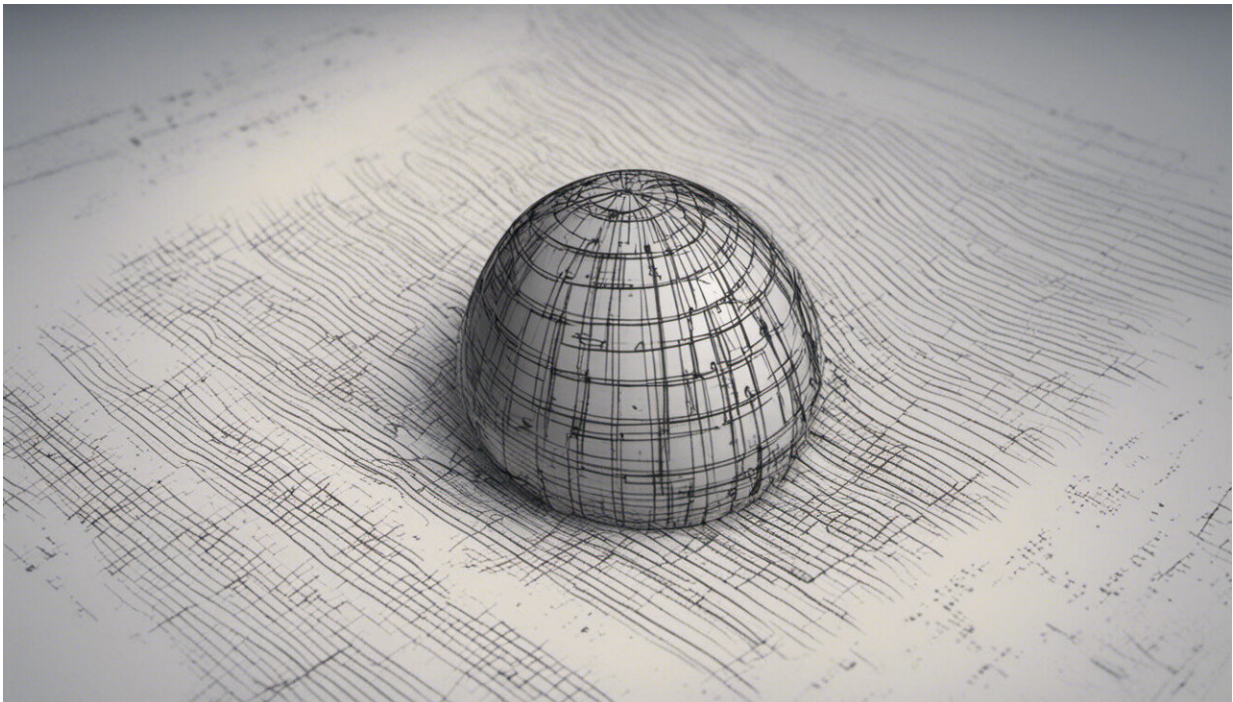


# How work-integrated learning helps to make billions in university funding worth it

August 30 2021, by Sabine Matook, Angie Knaggs

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Australian universities invest heavily in the employability of their graduates. The Australian government [supports this goal](#) with annual funding to increase to A\$20 billion by 2024. This includes \$900 million in grants through the [National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund](#). A key focus is on expanding [work-integrated learning](#).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) includes internships, fieldwork and placements, but also on-campus work projects. In these settings, students solve business problems, implement innovations and manage uncertainties. This makes it a [practice-based approach](#).

According to the [National Strategy on Work-Integrated Learning in University Education](#), it should provide authentic, meaningful and relevant experiences to prepare students for the workplace.

The question today is no longer whether to offer work-integrated learning, but how to do it well.

## **A digitally driven shift in focus**

Teaching for workplace readiness must make the transition to digital so learning does not depend on location.

As recently as 2017, [52.7% of all work-integrated learning was off-campus](#). But limited places, especially during [COVID-19 economic downturns](#), mean fewer students get a practice-based experience.

Digitalising work-integrated learning makes it available for many more students.

The University of Sydney program [Job Start Edge](#), for example, offers international students workplace skill learning in fully digital form. Other universities work with talent platforms such as [Forage](#) to offer "micro internships" of 5–6 hours.

Another model is to bring workplace practice to students, instead of the students to practice. The insourcing model provides work readiness in a digital classroom.

The University of New South Wales' [Sandbox Education Program](#), for example, digitally simulates a professional working environment. By bringing real-world scenarios and problems into the classroom, it offers a safe space to build and test workplace readiness.

Digital on-campus models provide learning that is [resilient to lockdowns](#) and working from home. Universities with simulated work integration in the classroom continued the learning even during the [peak of COVID-19](#). The digital transition has enabled learning anytime and anywhere.

## **Delivering concrete benefits for industry**

Industry partners are essential for showing students the dynamics of real workplaces. Fortunately, broad support from industry exists. The [Australian Industry Group](#) invites its members to join these partnerships.

This was not always so. [Employers](#) were once hesitant to commit time and resources as university partners. Gaining access to fit-for-purpose talent was simply not enough incentive.

The motivation changed when work-integrated learning outcomes began to deliver concrete benefits. Then students produce ready-to-use products or services of value.

For example, at [The University of Queensland](#), we pioneered the concrete delivery model in an [information systems](#) project with [Siemens Digital Industries](#) and [Variety—the Children's Charity of Queensland](#).

Variety wanted a safe digital space for its vulnerable children to stay connected, especially during lockdowns. It also required an events management feature for post-lockdown times.

Students developed the [software app](#) using the low-code development

platform [Mendix](#). Kids in Variety programs such as [Kids Choir](#) and Youth Ambassadors now use the app to plan and chat.

The concrete delivery model directly benefits Australian businesses. The transferable value makes partnerships more attractive.

## **Making sure of quality outcomes**

Large-scale work-integrated learning initiatives exist. Swinburne University of Technology has [announced](#) it will offer work-integrated learning to all undergraduate degree students. At this scale, effective governance with defined quality standards and output measures is imperative.

Universities and educational groups have developed such systems. The University of Waterloo, Canada, developed a [work-integrated learning quality framework](#) to govern quality internally. The [Australian Collaborative Education Network](#) provides a framework for member universities to control process and product quality.

When applied comprehensively, these frameworks provide transparency on the use of WIL funding.

Governance systems also enhance educators' accountability for investments by industry partners. The University of Tasmania, for example, developed an [evaluation tool](#) to identify areas for curriculum improvement.

High-quality learning experiences depend on excellent teaching. Effective governance systems can ensure it's delivered.

## **Creating infrastructure to support work-integrated**

## learning

Early WIL efforts focused on creating boutique-style learning for small cohorts of students. This teaching format [places high demands](#) on educators. The demands will increase as we expand work-integrated learning.

The government's funding under the [Job-ready Graduates Package](#) aims to increase the number and variety of WIL programs. Not surprisingly, universities are ramping up their efforts to meet government funding requirements. This is a risky strategy.

The delivery of more boutique-style programs is not sustainable in the long term. A mental shift is required to focus on creating infrastructure for large-scale work-integrated learning.

For example, Monash University provides an [academic tool kit](#) with the fundamental building blocks for work-integrated learning. Educators save time and effort as they only need to contextualize the blocks for a particular initiative.

The essential elements for work-integrated learning to be done well include:

the experience is authentic for all students  
all stakeholders receive concrete benefits  
teaching frameworks must be adaptable  
governance systems ensure this all happens.

Then work-integrated learning is worth the government's investment.

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