

Title: Alternatives to work placements: Real live projects for social impact

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Abstract

This paper outlines an alternative approach to Work Integrated Learning (WIL) work placements in Higher Education (HE) design courses. It involves design students from different campuses across Australia studying on campus, Online and students from a partner institution in Spain, working together on an actual project (Live Brief) but with a benevolent focus set by an NGO for West African implementation as an alternative to work placements in commercial companies. This method demonstrates amplified benefits resulting from a real as opposed to an imaginary project and that collaboration on a live brief leads to a more valuable experience. Significantly augmented learning outcomes through the experience, not least real life/work skills such as tasks negotiating, time management, peer critique and presentation skills add to the credentials of the student in view of future employability. Motivations increase when addressing stringent criteria laid out in the project brief resulting from the prospect to be able to present the project outcome to the client for feedback, critique on suitability. The benevolent or "Here for Good" aspect of the project instils understanding and respect for non-commercial design work and provides skills for working with harsh limitations whilst addressing all "Here for Good" criteria of the brief and the ethos of Torrens University within Laureate International Universities, a registered B-Corporation. Four aspects: Live Brief with clear client expectations, opportunity to present to the client, benevolent or "Here for Good" project with stipulated design boundaries and group collaboration make for a highly valuable and alternative approach that surpasses expectations of HE learning outcomes for WIL and an alternative to job placements.

Keywords—Learning and Teaching, Transition through collaboration, Work Integrated learning

Introduction

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is established in the curriculum of most Australian Universities. Students increasingly realise the many benefits that come from WIL. Trigwell *et al* assert that students appreciate the professional knowledge gains through WIL more than those obtained during universities studies. On the other hand it is felt that university learning combined with WIL experiences influence skills of working independently at the same rate. (Trigwell and Reid, 1998).

Work Integrated Learning allows students to put knowledge into practice but it also develops additional generic skills that are highly valued such as team work, interpersonal and

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communication skills and an appreciation of the rapidly changing world (Fraser and Deane, 2002).

A lot is said about benefits of WIL for students but there are also benefits for those institutions that provide WIL such as; a market advantage to attract students; Universities can also obtain national and international grants for collaborative research projects; and sponsorships (so called third stream funding) from a variety of industries (Abeysekera, 2006); (Eames, 2003); (Smith 2010).

As Alderman and Milne state, WIL engagement helps to fulfil university missions, providing education that responds to present and future needs (Alderman & Milne, 2005). They explain that it is more than adding to the students' disciplinary knowledge as it provides learning that would be of use to society (Barnett, Parry, & Coate, 2001). Additionally through partnerships with different industries, students can engage more actively in the community and community organisations (Alderman & Milne, 2005); (Eames, 2003).

The Faculty of Design at Torrens University Australia, a partner of Laureate International Universities, a Public Benefit Corporation (B-Corp), is required by law to generate public benefit resulting in material or positive impacts on society or the world. The University aims to embed throughout its curriculum principles that promote and instil understanding and respect for non-commercial work in its students. The "Here for Good" model central to the mission of Torrens University is embedded in the WIL subject but could be identified as what Abeysekera calls the "hidden curriculum", meaning the elements not part of the formal curricular content. These include "the norms, values, and belief systems embedded in the curriculum, the faculty and classroom life, imparted to students through daily routines, curricular content, and social relationships" (Abeysekera, 2006); (Margolis *et al.*, 2001).

When Rowe *et al* compare WIL typology according to two criteria e.g. Benefits and Drawbacks by highlighting two classifications e.g. Placement and "Other WIL activities", they argue that placements have fewer benefits for students than "Other WIL activities" (9 vs 10) and that they have more drawbacks (Rowe, Winchester-Seeto and Mackaway, 2012).

It is evident that both Work Placements and Other Will activities have merit. Not just because of the development of the many traits useful in professional careers but it is shown that "other activities" add collaboration and negotiation skills, high in demand in current professional design industries. Which leads me to explain the alternative approach towards WIL at TUA. From the outset of the introduction of the WIL subject in the cluster of HE Bachelor Design degrees, a greater need for opportunities, due to shortages of available

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placements, called for "Other WIL" or alternative opportunities, as mentioned by Rowe *et al.*. Communication Design, Graphic Design and Interior Design courses – offered at the Design Faculty of TUA – especially, called for such opportunities. These professions have developed unique arrangements in which designers work independently as free-lancers or in small collaborative groups as Sole-traders. Exposing students to the challenges and settings of such typical professional environments was of prime concern, but also essential the incorporation of the TUA mission "Here for Good".

The aim of this paper is to outline the approach to the WIL subject whilst the objective is to explain and show the strategy and benefits of this alternative approach.

To meet the above mentioned aims and objectives the paper is laid out in two ways; a) the approach or the structure of the WIL subject, assessment events, learning outcomes and the different models; b) the strategy and the approach behind the alternative model and the outcomes in comparison to traditional work placements.

Background to WIL at Torrens University Australia

The Design Faculty of Torrens University Australia in its earlier iteration as Billy Blue College of Design did not have Work Integrated Learning in its curriculum. Nevertheless, from the early stages faculty and students worked very closely with industry. In fact, when in the 1980's Billy Blue College of Design formed, it was from a need, identified by industry practitioners, to produce skilled designers employable in their studios. Hence, the practice of providing industry experience has existed for a long time in many forms and iterations at Billy Blue College of Design. In particular as "Live Briefs" e.g. projects set by industry but often without a final production outcome. Most if not all projects, would only go as far as presentation or pitch stage of the complete concept to industry, after which industry would give feedback and co-assess with academics. It was felt that such "real projects" and ample feedback to the students made for a very successful experience with many benefits. The projects, often student-to-student collaborations and internal, were then largely guided by academic staff in the classroom.

Work Integrated Learning models

With the introduction of a series of common subjects across all design degrees in 2016, a subject specifically tailored to Work Integrated Learning is compulsory and situated in the last term of study. A total of 120 hours in total over a period of 12 weeks are required as a minimum for assignment activity in commercial environments. Two arrangements exist to

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give choice and opportunities to students in order to meet the learning outcomes stipulated in the WIL subject.

1. **Work Placement** activity undertaken off-campus in commercial professional environments.
2. **Live briefs:** competitive group work for and in collaboration with industry clients but with supervision shared between industry and academic staff, mostly on campus. These projects are competitive between groups or individuals and the winner may receive an award or token of appreciation by the industry client.

However, there is a nuance in the Live Brief scenarios in relation to the TUA mission “Here for Good”. The alternative to WIL projects based on Live briefs with a “Here for Good” focus, where the client is a Not-for-Profit organisation, allows the outcome of the work to be benevolent in service or delivery with a measureable and positive impact on the society it serves. In stark contrast to the competitive Live Brief this work is not competitive and the social aspect of the project is the motivation for students.

Here-for-Good

To aim for a benevolent outcome in a design brief leads to stimulating projects with entirely new outcomes. These new objectives may be perceived as more honourable and worthy than projects delivering solutions to problems with aesthetics and functionality as main objectives. It changes the approach students take to the end-result of the project. Where students in the past would often opt for project solutions with highbrow stylistic motivations the introduction of the “Here-for-Good” aspect shifts the project investigation and focus. The outcome now has a genuine – a real – rather than perceived value as outcome with a high impact factor for the target group or problem for whom it is intended.

a) Approach and subject structure to WIL

Both models, previously outlined, are facilitated Online via the Learning Management System (LMS) enabling students from all states and modalities (F2F and Online) to engage remotely with the supporting learning material and Facilitator. Students submit their assignments online for grading and feedback against the learning outcomes as stipulated in the project brief. This Online Learning aspect ensures that students can contact Facilitators during the Online Facilitated sessions once weekly and can upload their assignments for grading without attending the campus.

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Abeysekera details the several ways in which students should be assessed and states that it is necessary to monitor the nature and relevance of work offered to students by workplaces participating in the WIL program. He cites a variety of submissions useful for assessing e.g. written journals and reports to reflect on learning, peer review groups and assignments in relation to their learning (Abeysekera, 2006).

TUA Design submissions are in line with these stipulations with the requirement for students to submit three assessments during their Work Integrated Learning placement and Live Brief projects. While the assessment events are tailored to the specifics of the model in questions and not entirely the same the learning outcomes are, for both models.

1 Assessment events Placement activities

Assessment 1	20%	Internship overview duties and e-journal
Assessment 2	40%	Internship interviews, studio diagrams and allocated duties e-journal
Assessment 3	40%	Internship positioning, personal reflection & duties e-journal

2 Assessment events Live Briefs

Assessment 1	30%	Research and preliminary proposal, identify a proposed design response
Assessment 2	30%	Outline development strategy, work in Progress, presentation
Assessment 3	40%	Present design outcome, supported with rational and working prototype

Six Learning outcomes addressed intermittently throughout the three assessment events are:

- a) Demonstrate interpersonal skills by prioritizing competing demands to achieve personal goals and well-developed judgement and responsibility in professional practice.
- b) Combine initiative and judgment in planning, problem solving and decision making within the context of professional practice
- c) Apply decision-making methodologies to evaluate solutions for efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability
- d) Appreciate ethical implications of professional practice
- e) Reflect on personal and professional experiences to engage in independent development beyond formal education for lifelong learning.

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- f) Communicate effectively in ways appropriate to the discipline, client, audience and purpose.

Assignment Briefs

The assessment criteria remain the same, the assignment brief is broadly structured to allow for changes as every Live Brief project differs depending on the type and availability of projects. On the other hand the assignment briefs for the Work Placement remain static and are reviewed for changes during the normal yearly subject review cycle.

b) Strategy and the approach behind the alternative model

The Program Director and Facilitators actively reach out to Not-for-Profit organisations for Live Brief projects with real world and challenging objectives as outcomes. In this example, a Live Project Brief was provided by a European NGO based in Sweden called "Yennenga Progress" www.yennengaprogress.se/. This NGO offers development support to a community in the Republic of Burkina Faso, West Africa.

Live Brief

This particular live brief requested:

- Redesign of the "YennengaProgress" logo and collateral used by the NGO on buildings, website and other support facing outputs.
- The complete design of a new high school, interior and exterior
- The design of a new small clinic with consulting rooms, birthing rooms and convalescing hospital with 10 to 15 beds.
- Uniforms of hospital staff, doctors and nurses
- Uniforms for students

The brief enabled students from several programs to work together on the project. Fourteen students collaborated in total:

- eight students from the Interior Design program,
- two students from Communication Design,
- three students from the Branded Fashion Design program.

Students are from different campuses Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane where they study F2F, two students study fully online. The cohort is largely domestic with only one international student in the group.

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Project approach

Students volunteered to participate with this Live Brief in preference to a WIL placement and chose to participate with the project whilst on a self-funded study tour to Europe. The European NGO client put out a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the project resulting in the experience to emulate a real studio environment. In addition, Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM, a Laureate International University partner) provided studio space whilst their Architecture students choose to compete with a proposal pitch in reply to the RFP. This allowed the experience to emulate a real competitive professional environment. The challenge further increased as the President of the NGO decided to travel to Madrid and make herself available to be present at the pitch. Australian and Spanish students received the brief at the same time on their arrival at UEM. The submission for the first assessment is 30% weighting.

Student approach to project

From the onset, students self-directed the methodology and Australian and Spanish students approached the project in similar fashion; in the manner they collaborated; and attitude to the project. Facilitators did not involve themselves and only observed this process.

Students allocated tasks to small groups within their cohorts depending on individual strengths of the members of these groups:

- The Communication Design students informed the style, colours and fonts for the collateral to their peers which was used by all as inspiration.
- Fashion students used the branding as their source of inspiration for the styles of the uniforms and the fabric prints.
- Interior and Architecture design groups divided the work amongst each other after the initial rough sketch phase and consensus as to which idea would be most suitable for the school, hospital interior and exterior. Also as not all students came with the same level of experience, more advanced students guided the project as they could better anticipate the flow through of the steps for the project to completion.

From this point they worked intermittently in small groups and sometimes on individual basis. They communicated between each other and with the client via *Slack.com* a project communication site for collaboration.

Outcomes and observations

Time allocated to the project

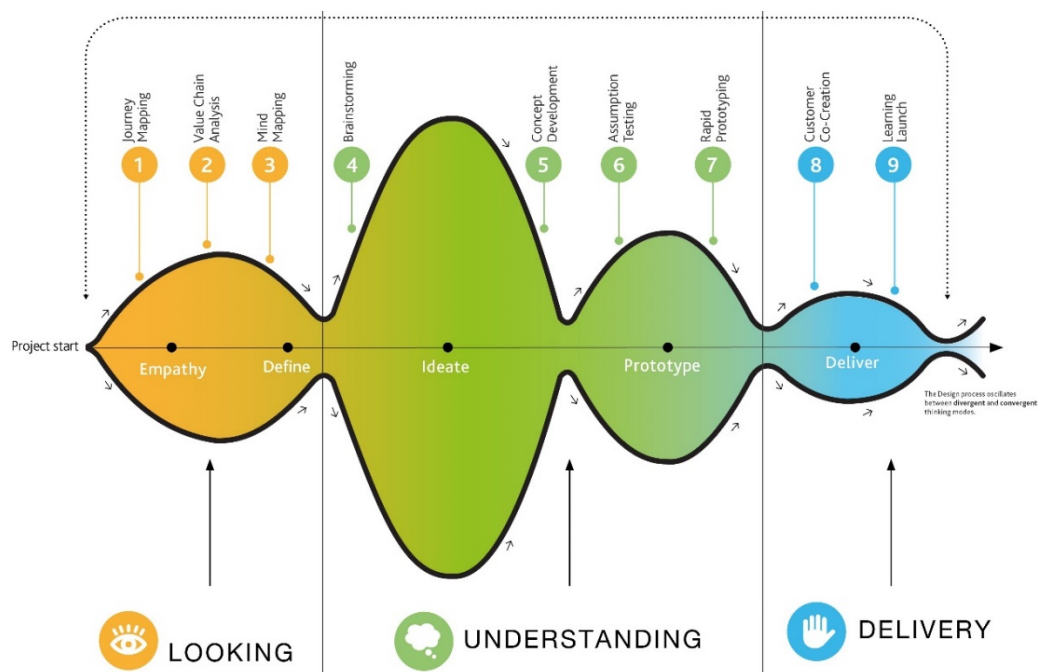
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Less than a week of time was available for the students to finalise the project from briefing to the pitch stage and client presentation. Students (N=8) of the Bachelor of Interior Design course were surveyed to identify time allocated to the different aspects of the tasks to compare this with a typical lifecycle model for design projects of the TUA WIL live brief approach. Below is the table showing the time dedicated by the students leading up to the Request for Proposal during that week (RFP).

The Design Life Cycle Model

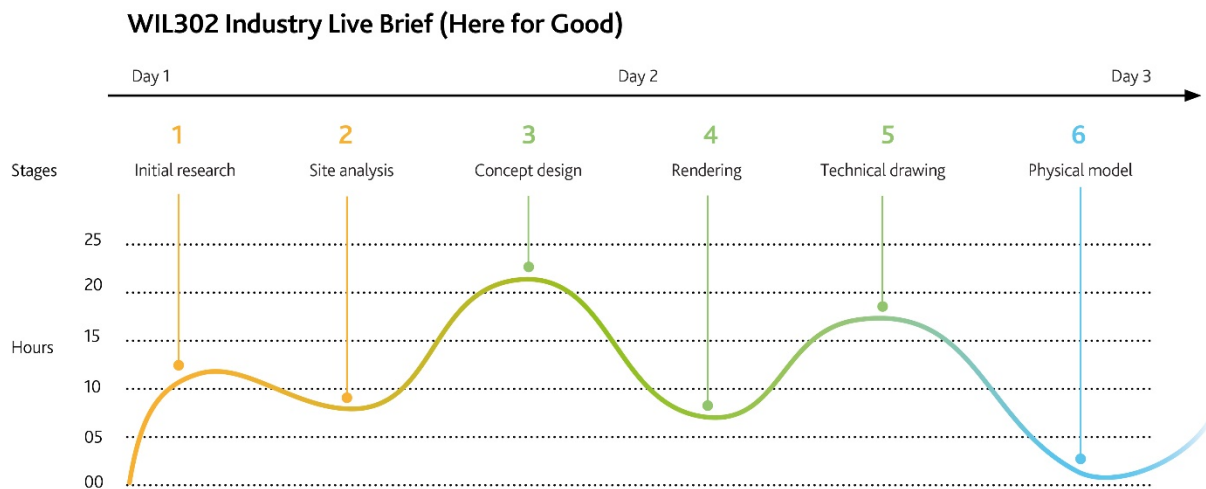
The model is a guide for students to follow when given a design project in any subject following a brief. In this instance, the gathering of the data was undertaken by the Interior Design students who measured time spent against allocated tasks that were then categorised in the order observed during the design project work. Time and tasks are compared with the Design Life Cycle Model to detect similarities or differences in the type of tasks and the intensity of work during the WIL placement from point of briefing to the final submission of the RFP stage. The survey of Interior Design students that were involved with the project exposed how this life cycle model compares against time spend on allocated tasks.



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Allocated tasks and intensity of focus during the design project



Time spend on tasks during the development of the pitch in order to address the Request for Proposal (RFP)

Allocated tasks	Combined time
Initial Research	➤ 13 hours
Site analysis	➤ 9 hours
Concept design	21.5 hours
Rendering	➤ 8 hours
Technical drawing	18 hours
Physical model	➤ 2 hours

Clearly even when working on the project in a vastly reduced time frame towards the RFP stage the tasks and time spend on the individual tasks compares with the life cycle model above. In this instance, the break between Site Analysis and Concept Design compares with the intensity of the Define and Ideate stage and type of design work undertaken.

Grade Distribution comparison

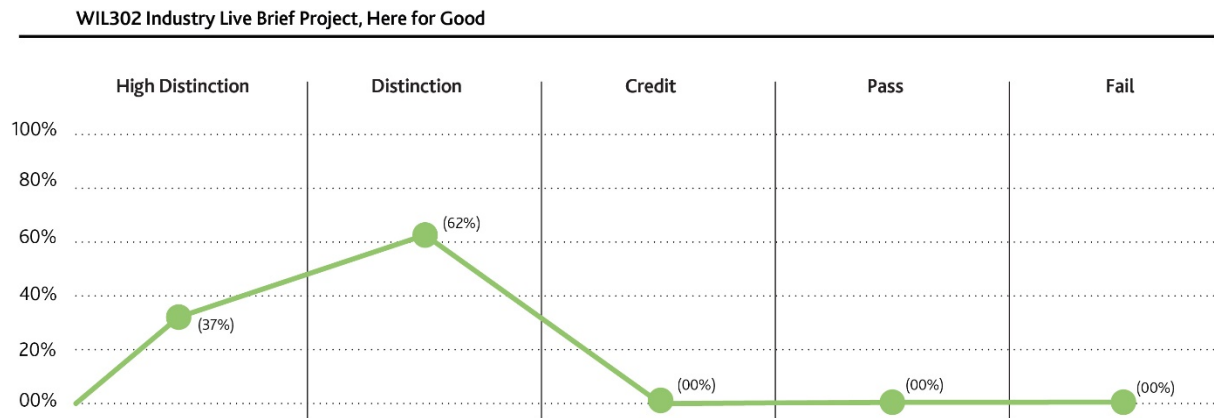
Below is the grade comparison between cohorts

- Live Briefs with a here for Good focus in this case the “YennengaProgress” project;
- a live Brief without a “Here for Good” focus
- A typical Work Placement
- Grade Distribution Will Placement all course groups combined
- Grade Distribution comparison between WIL and Placement

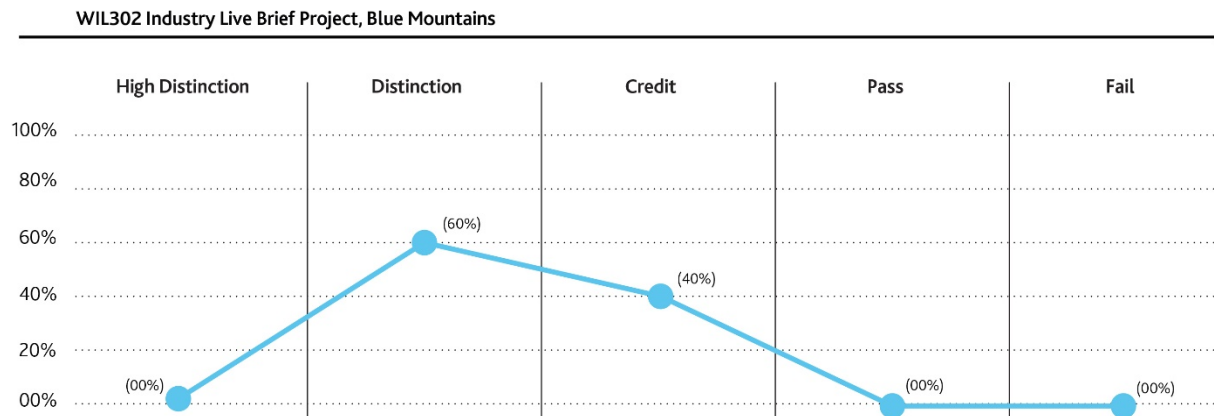
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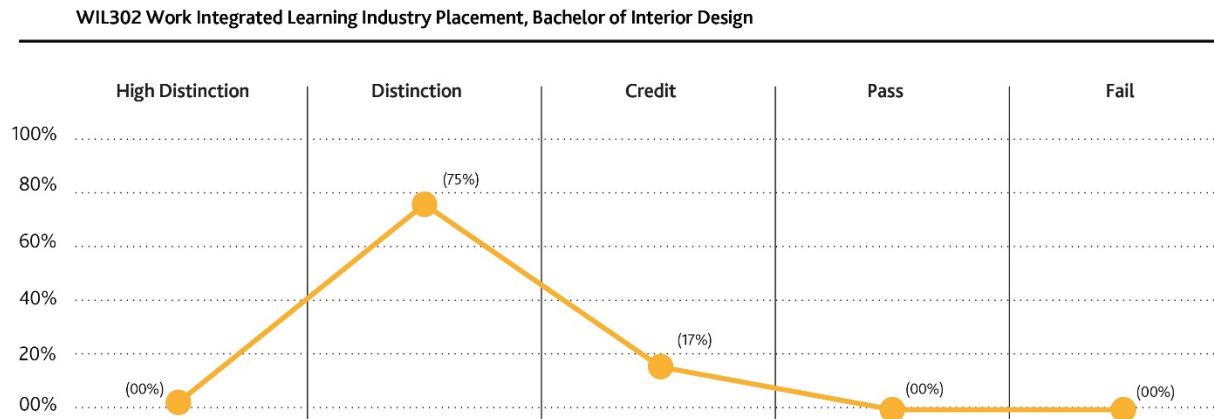
Grade distribution of the “Here for Good” Live Brief



Grade distribution of the Live Brief in a commercial environment



Grade Distribution of students undertaken a WIL Placement

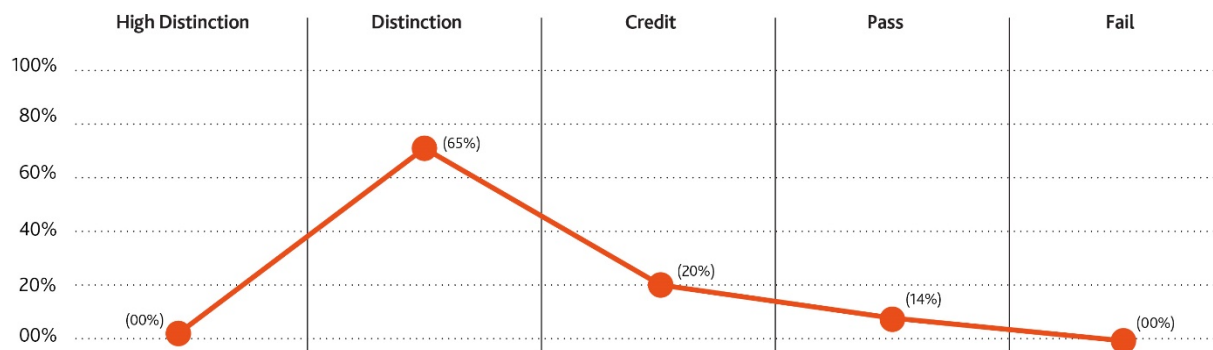


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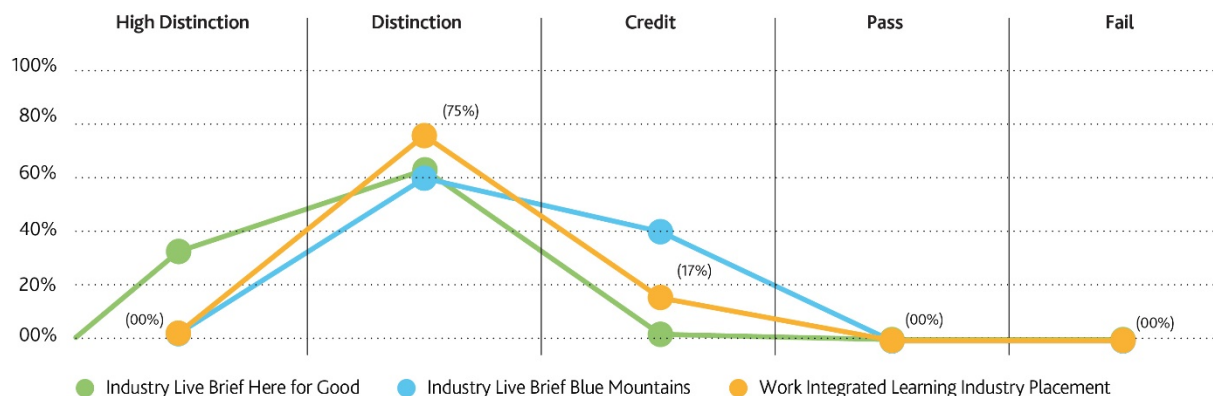
Grade distribution Will Industry placement all courses combined

WIL302 Work Integrated Learning - Industry Placement
(Branded Fashion Design, Communication Design, Digital Media Design, Interior Design)



Grade Distribution comparison between WIL and Placement

WIL302 Work Integrated Learning
Bachelor of Interior Design (Industry Live Brief Blue Mountains, Industry Live Brief Here for Good, Work Integrated Learning Industry Placement)



Observations

Authenticity of the brief meant total commitment by the students throughout. The project provided genuine and valued experience (feedback by students). The environment was conducive for focus optimization resulting in higher than expected outcomes (high results in the assessment). Students felt appreciated and valued as designers by the client (client traveled to Madrid for the pitch presentation). The project resulted in increased confidence by students about their professional approach and work ethic. Their collaborative skills highly improved as they negotiated, planned, analyzed, designed, collaborated and were totally committed to the project, which they finished in time for the presentation to the client.

The grade distribution of the group in this first part of the project (up to the RFP stage) influenced the second and third assignments (2 and 3) and hence their high overall grade

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outcome. They worked on the remainder of the project, after their return from Spain towards the end of the trimester.

In conclusion

Four aspects: Live Brief with distinct client expectations, opportunities to present to clients, benevolent or "Here for Good" projects with stipulated design boundaries and group collaboration presents a highly valuable and alternative approach that surpasses expectations of HE learning outcomes for WIL and is a perfect alternative to job placements. Students clearly value and enjoy their learning as is evident from the feedback provided at the end of the year and from the high grades achieved for the project. Live Briefs also increases student confidence to take on projects with a variety of characteristics, not only commercial. It adds to the breath of learning in many ways not least to professional work approach.

Student feedback

What students say about their experience of WIL Live Briefs with "Here for Good" emphasis in Spain:

"I think that working on the live brief was a very interesting and eye opening experience. I've learnt a lot in working on something in a short period of time.

I will use this live brief as a learning point for future briefs and working in industry.

Nina it will be good for other students to experience this! Thank you!" (Domestic Online student)

"Working on a live brief with real clients and having to collaborate with various students from various faculties and campuses was an invaluable learning curb in my design studies.

Being a part of this aided me in my ability to interact with the client, working together with a fellow Design Communication student, and gave me skills to collaborate with various other programs on the same project. An invaluable experience." (Domestic F2F Student)

"In my opinion, this kind of experiences are important for us in terms of learning. It's a real project with a real client. It allows us to work together as a team. It's about how to manage the project time properly. How to focus on the answers. How to find a way.

I loved this experience. Every student should have a chance to be a part of

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this live brief.” (International Student)

“Working on a live brief and collaborating with other students from different fields was an interesting look into working in the industry. It was challenging to create designs based off of a brief that didn't have a lot of information but was a great experience to gain skills and work with a real client. I believe everyone who is studying should experience a live brief under pressure to weigh strengths and weaknesses and compare gain knowledge of what it would be like working for a real life client.” (Domestic F2F Student)

“Working on a live brief and collaborating with other students across different streams as well as different campuses was an enriching experience!”

Each individual was at a different point in their studies however everyone had a fresh insight and approach that really added value to the overall project. Being able to collaborate on a project like this really puts into perspective what real industry briefs are like and I personally feel much more confident and prepared to tackle industry briefs in the future.” (Domestic F2F Student)

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