The employability of international students has emerged as a key issue facing the international education sector in Australia. The growth in knowledge economies has led to changing skill and knowledge requirements while the massification of higher education has resulted in an expanding supply of tertiary educated graduates entering the workplace. For employers, globalisation has resulted in greater international competition, off-shoring and less certainty regarding their future labour requirements (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2010).

For graduates, this translates into heightened competition for entry level positions, far less certainty surrounding post study employment prospects and the growing need to ‘stand out’ in a crowded graduate labour market. Consequently, international students are placing growing emphasis on acquiring post study work experience in the host country (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

For many international students, studying abroad is considered a pathway to permanent residency in a country offering a higher standard of living, a trend that has been encouraged by host countries seeking to fill labour market shortages and manage changing demographic patterns. For those international graduates planning to return home, foreign work experience is now considered critical as the devaluation of credentials undermines the value of foreign degrees. The rapid growth in international education, particularly in major source
countries such as China, has led to a proliferation of returning foreign graduates crowding the graduate labour market (Biao & Shen, 2009; Li & Yang, 2013). For international graduates seeking to differentiate themselves in a highly competitive labour market, foreign work experience is now seen as a necessary part of the overseas study ‘package’.

However, many international students are dissatisfied with the opportunity to gain relevant work experience in their field of study in Australia (Lawson, 2012). International students seeking to augment their international qualification with host country work experience face many challenges. Lack of formal work experience programs, difficulties identifying placement opportunities, issues surrounding English language competency and ‘soft skills’, and limited local networks are some of the barriers to labour market entry for international students. Visa policy also presents significant challenges. Universities are also under pressure to improve student employability (Gribble & Blackmore, 2012).

Given that the opportunity to acquire experience in the host country labour market is a key driver of student choice, Australia’s continued success in the international education sector is closely linked to its understanding of the issues surrounding international students and employment. This Research Digest examines current research in the area of employability, work placements and work integrated learning of international students in Australia. It discusses current research in the field, identifies key knowledge gaps and provides recommendations for future research.

Summary of key messages

- When considering the provision of work experience for international students, there is evidence to suggest that a ‘one size fits all’ model does not work. International students are often disadvantaged by a lack of knowledge of the local labour market and workplace culture and limited local networks. The evidence suggests that international students require tailored programs and support services in order to create a level playing field with local students.

- Despite placing significant importance on acquiring work experience, international students appear to have low participation rates in Work Integrated Learning (WIL). There are suggestions that international students are reluctant to prolong their period of study to participate in longer work placements. High entry requirements to some programs may also be precluding some international students from entering certain ‘elite’ internship programs. There are also indications that international students do not see the value in WIL until they are well advanced in their studies, by which time opportunities to incorporate a work placement are limited.

- English language competency is critical to all aspects and stages of WIL. International students require high levels of English language proficiency to prepare for work placements, seek out placement opportunities and to fully participate in work experience. International graduates with high levels of English language proficiency are also more likely to have successful graduate labour market outcomes.

- The attitudes and perceptions of employers is a significant impediment to international student’s participation in work placements and successful post study employment. Employers are reluctant to take on international students due to concerns over their English language skills and their capacity to ‘fit in’ to the work place.

- Visa status and the ambiguous legal status of WIL for international students is also a major deterrent. There is a widespread perception among employers that the process of recruiting an international graduate is expensive, lengthy and complicated. It is also considered risky as there is no guarantee the graduate will remain in the country. While post study work rights are intended to provide employers with certainty, it is unclear whether this will be enough to encourage Australian employer to take on international graduates.

Research into international students and employment outcomes

While it appears that international students are highly motivated by opportunities to remain and work in the host country after graduation, there is little published research on how successfully international graduates transition into the host country labour market. It has widely been assumed that international graduates make ideal skilled migrants.
Host country governments and universities have actively encouraged the international student-migration pathway by promoting the benefits associated with attracting and retaining the best and brightest students from around the world (CIC News, 2012).

In the USA, the private sector has advocated for a liberal immigration stance to attract foreign talent including international students (She & Wotherspoon, 2013). International students are often considered ideal candidates as they are of prime working age and are in many ways ‘pre-integrated’ having both developed local networks and become accustomed to local conditions and institutions while studying in the host country (Group of Eight Australia, 2014; Xing, 2014).

In Australia, the decision to liberalise the study-migration pathway in 1999 resulted in rapid growth in international students seeking permanent residency in Australia after graduation (Hawthorne, 2010). While the policy aimed to grow the international education sector and address skill shortages in key areas, concerns soon emerged surrounding the labour market outcomes of international graduates. There were suggestions that despite their local qualification, exposure to the host country society, culture and language, international graduates were struggling to find employment in their field of qualification (Birrell & Healy, 2008; Gribble & Blackmore, 2012; Hawthorne, 2010).

While many international students embark on their international education with high hopes of gaining professional employment in the host country, their aspirations of employment post-study are often unmet with lack of local networks and local experience, weak English language skills, a lack of familiarity with Australian job seeking procedures, and discrimination on the part of employers cited as the main barriers (Robertson, Hoare, & Harwood, 2011). An examination of the early employment outcomes of former Australian international students, relative to Australian domestic students revealed that international graduates who were non-native speakers of English, were derived from non-Commonwealth countries and qualified with masters by course work degrees faced serious barriers when seeking employment in Australia.

A key finding was the link between advanced English ability and early professional employment (Hawthorne & To, 2014). While there is clear evidence that post study employment is highly valued by international students, there is relatively little research into employment outcomes of international graduates.

The emerging importance of work experience for international students

The link between relevant work experience and graduate employment outcomes has led to growing interest in work integrated learning (WIL) and how it may be used to enhance the employment outcomes of international students. While WIL has long been a key element of many university programs, there is a growing interest in WIL which is seen by universities as a valid pedagogy and as a means to respond to demands by employers for work-ready graduates. Importantly, students are seeking a return on investment and WIL is seen to provide critical employable knowledge and skills (Patrick et al., 2008).

While research on WIL is extensive, there is relatively little published research on the specific issues relating to international students. The 2011 ‘Good Practice Report: Work-integrated learning report’ noted the growth of robust scholarship and educational development this field of practice in Australia over the past fifteen years. However, the report also commented on the absence of research into key areas, including international students, noting that “Few papers attended to international students, and those that did failed to promote the potential benefit these students might bring in terms of their additional cross cultural knowledge” (Orrell, 2011). While there is little research specifically on international students and WIL, the topic has been flagged as a priority by a number of experts in the field and one that requires further examination. The following section will summarise emerging issues relating to international students and WIL.

Access and equity

The issue of equity has emerged as a key concern surrounding the provision of WIL to international students.

1 Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is an umbrella term used to describe learning that is embedded in the experience of work (McIlveen et al., 2009). The most common forms of WIL are cooperative education, work experience, placements, practicum, internships, field work, workplace projects, workplace research, work-based learning, sandwich years, cadetships, community-based learning and service-learning.
International students have been identified as one cohort of students2 who are disadvantaged when it comes to participation in WIL programs. In the past 15 years, a number of publications have highlighted issues around equitable access to work experience for international students. For example, an analysis of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) reports between 2006-2010 highlighted the value international students stood to gain for participation in WIL but noted that the absence of local knowledge and contacts placed international students at a disadvantage when engaging with the community through industry-based learning (IBL) placements (Burdett & Crossman, 2011). Others have identified significant challenges associated with participation and equal outcomes for diversity cohorts, explicitly identifying international students (Smith, Mackay, Holt, & Challis, 2008). The Work Integrated Learning report identified visa restrictions, language and cultural barriers as barriers to WIL participation for international students (Patrick et al., 2008). A review of 28 WIL related studies also commented on the need for further research into the needs and potential contribution of marginalized students, including international students (Orrell, 2011).

A number of government reports have also raised concerns surrounding the provision of WIL to international students. A report by Australian Education International (AEI 2010) noted that improving opportunities for international students to undertake work experience had the potential to enhance the overall experience of international students in Australia (Lawson, 2012). In 2012 the Victorian government commissioned a report on internships and work placement opportunities for international students in Victoria. The report concluded that international students face additional barriers such as language and cultural differences, limited local networks and visa restrictions when it comes to securing work placements in Victoria. The report recommended that international students should have access to well-designed practical program support in order to create a level playing field (Murray, Blackmore, Gribble, & Hall, 2012).

A key finding of a report to the Australian government by the International Education Advisory Council was that work integrated learning for international students in an English speaking work environment is an important part of a well rounded education and is highly valued by students. The report recommended that opportunities for international students to gain work experience during and after their studies be promoted (IEAC, 2013). This common theme is also reflected in international research on international students and work experience. For example, a report investigating issues surrounding the recruitment of international students and graduates from UK universities found that work and career support is the main area of dissatisfaction among international students in the UK and that providing international students with greater work experience opportunities was key to developing employability skills (Connor & Brown, 2009). Canadian studies show that international students have relatively greater needs for work experience than in other areas of need such as career planning, and that international students often feel that work experience is the missing component in their skill repertoire (Arthur & Nunes, 2014).

Despite recommendations for greater access to WIL for international students, as well as enhanced program support, there are indications that Australian international students have lower participation rates in WIL compared to Australian domestic students (Murray et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2008). There are a number of possible explanations for low participation rates among international students. Firstly, international students may be reluctant to participate in any program that requires them to extend the duration of their degree, such as a 6-12 month industry based learning (IBL) placement. Many degree programs are highly structured with minimal opportunities to include electives meaning that those students seeking to incorporate an internship or work placement would need to extend their program. While many WIL programs are highly successful in both enhancing the skills and knowledge of students and linking graduates to industry, the cost and time involved in extending their studies is a serious impediment (Smith et al., 2008). Secondly, many programs have academic prerequisites that have been seen to act as a barrier to international students’ participation. As noted in one report, determining who the ‘best’ students are is rather subjective and involves more than academic results. By selecting participants solely on academic results it is possible that some with much to gain, such as international students may have limited opportunities to participate (Patrick et al 2008).

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2 Other disadvantage cohorts include employed students; students with carer responsibilities; students from low socio-economic backgrounds; students with disabilities; Indigenous students; and, students from regional or remote areas.
There are also suggestions that many international students are not becoming fully aware of the importance of work experience until they are well advanced in their studies or after graduation when they begin looking for work. One report suggested there are misconceptions surrounding WIL among international students who may be reluctant to enrol in an IBL or co-op year for fear they will waste a year doing menial tasks such as photocopying (Smith et al., 2008). Furthermore, international students often struggle to combine their studies with part-time work and day to day life, meaning that seeking work experience, volunteering or applying for an internship is not initially a priority (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Lee, 2010; Ong & Ramia, 2009).

**English Language competency underpins success in both WIL and employment**

There is a plethora of research indicating that English language competency underpins all aspects of the international student experience and is closely linked to the successful transition of Australian international graduates into the Australian labour market (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Birrell, 2006; DEEWR, 2009; Hawthorne & To, 2014; Robertson et al., 2011). Reports suggesting that significant numbers of international students graduate without the necessary English language skills to work in their field of qualification have led to much debate surrounding the English language standards at Australian universities (Barthel, 2012; Birrell, 2006; Trounson, 2011; Victorian Ombudsman, 2011). Most recently the International Education Advisory Council recommended that providers “establish processes that ensure international students maintain adequate English language proficiency throughout the duration of study to prepare graduates for work experience and employment opportunities” (IEAC, 2013).

Australian employers have voiced their concerns surrounding the English language competency of Australian international graduates. An AEI survey of international graduate outcomes and employer perceptions found that while Australian employers were generally satisfied with the performance of Australian international graduates, any dissatisfaction was mostly related to issues with communication skills and standards of written and spoken English (AEI, 2010). A study of the impact of English language proficiency and workplace readiness on the employment outcomes of tertiary international students found that poor English language proficiency reduced the chance of being recruited (Arkoudis et al., 2009). Employers in other key host countries appear to have similar concerns. In a UK study, employers commonly cited weaknesses in English language and communication as a key reason for not recruiting international graduates (Connor & Brown, 2009).

As far as WIL is concerned, English language competency is critical to all aspects and stages. International students require English language proficiency to prepare for work placements, seek placement opportunities and to fully participate in the work experience. The issue of English language and international students was investigated in detail in ‘Five Years On: English Language Competence of International Students’ (2013) with the report acknowledging English language competency in the context of graduate employment has become an increasingly important issue for Australian universities. The report highlighted the importance of developing a clearer understanding of how employers understand ‘English language proficiency’ noting that employers mostly have not articulated the language requirements for their workplaces/professions and often what employers perceive as poor or insufficient English language skills may actually be the lack of work-specific communication skills (Humphreys & Gribble, 2013). Universities may need to play a more active role in helping international students to develop professional workplace English.

**The role of employers**

In Australia, employers have been vocal in expressing their concerns surrounding the work readiness of international graduates. According to one study, more than 60 per cent of Australian and more than 70 per cent of international employers surveyed nominated “providing practical work experience” as one of the main areas requiring more emphasis in an Australian education for international graduates (AEI, 2010). Relevant practical work experience is considered central to providing students with the practical skills and employers are increasingly expecting graduates to have participated in some form of work experience while studying. These sentiments are echoed in other nations such as Canada, the USA and UK where there appears to be a growing expectation that graduates effortlessly transition into the labour market (ICEF Monitor, 2014).
However, while Australian employers have called on tertiary institutions to improve the employability and work readiness of students, they appear reluctant to accept international students on work placements. The 2008 WIL Report identified the attitudes of Australian employers as a key obstacle preventing international students from participating in WIL. According to the report, there is a perception among employers that international students have variable English language skills and limited understanding of Australian workplace culture. Moreover, Australian employers are unwilling to invest time and effort in students who they believe are unlikely to stay in Australia beyond graduation (Patrick et al., 2008).

The ambiguous legal status of WIL is also a concern for employers. International student visa conditions place limitations on opportunities for internships and work placements with employers often considering the matter as too complicated. While the post study work visa, introduced in March 2013, is intended to provide opportunities for international graduates to test the Australian labour market and offer a degree of certainty for employers, it remains unclear whether employers will embrace the new visa arrangements. Employers in other key host nations appear to have similar concerns. In a UK study, employers nominated issues around language skills; retention following training and issues around visas and work permits as barriers to employing international graduates (Connor & Brown, 2009). In the USA visas restrictions as well as language and cultural issues have also been identified as barriers to both internships and graduate employment (Atwood, 2014) while Canadian employers may be discouraged by students’ accents and lack of Canadian citizenship (Arthur & Flynn, 2012).

These findings suggest that misconceptions around international students and their potential contribution to the labour market remain prevalent. A number of reports indicate that rather than seeing the benefits associated with hosting an international student on a work placement or internship, there is a tendency among employers to focus on possible drawbacks such English language skills, ‘cultural fit’ and concerns over how long an international graduate is likely to remain in the country.

However, those employers who do take international students on placements or hire international graduates are often very satisfied. For example, UK employers cited broadening the outlook of their workforce, increasing understanding of other countries and cultures, specialist knowledge of a country’s language or culture and the better work commitment of international graduates as the main benefits gained from employing international students (Connor & Brown, 2009).

An Australian study revealed that around three quarters of international graduates met or exceeded employer expectations (AEI, 2010). These findings highlight the need for greater awareness of some of benefits associated with both employing international graduates and hosting their placements.

Conclusion

Given the current and projected demand for practical discipline related work experience among international student cohorts, it is critically important for universities to consider how they will address the issues surrounding employability and the provision of work placements for international students. Increased demand for the Professional Year program and other forms of internships and work placements in the private sector suggests that international students are failing to get the practical discipline related work experience that is demanded by the workplace during their studies. While WIL is already high on the agenda, with some Australian universities aiming to have up to 70 per cent of programs demonstrating an identified WIL component, achieving these aims will require new strategies that successfully embed WIL into degree programs and ensure all students have equal access to discipline related work experience (McLennan & Keating, 2008). Clearly not all international students will desire or be suitable for longer industry based learning programs. However, it is highly likely that the majority of international students will want to integrate some form of work experience into their Australian international education experience.

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4 Post study work rights were introduced in March 2013 with the aim of providing international graduates with the opportunity to test the labour market. International graduates can apply to work visa of two, three or four years’ duration, depending on the level of educational qualification they have obtained.

5 The Professional Year is a structured professional development program combining formal learning and workplace experience. The Professional year is available to Engineers, Accountants and IT graduates and provides five points towards meeting the Points Based Skilled Migration pass mark.
This places significant pressure on universities. How universities prepare international students for post study employment, establish productive links with employers and create work experience opportunities for an increasingly diverse student body is one of the challenges facing the university sector in Australia as well as other key host countries. The rewards for those universities who are able to provide programs and support that allow international students to successfully make the transition from classroom to the workplace are significant. Universities who fail to internationalise their WIL curricula risk alienating the international student population who are now vital to the university sector, as well as the broader economy and society. Significant creativity will be needed to overcome the barriers to international student engagement in professional work experience.

**Future research priorities**

**Managing and resourcing WIL**

With the projected increase in demand for work experience, there is a need for greater understanding of the key issues surrounding the management and resourcing of WIL programs. Research into how best to cater for the WIL needs of an increasingly diverse student cohort in a range of disciplines is needed as well as how WIL provision can be expanded without diminishing quality. Investigation into the role of employers and industry and how to strengthen the university-employer relationship to enhance WIL provision for international students is also required.

**International student participation rates in WIL and barriers to participation**

Further research into participation rates of international students in a range of disciplines, the types of programs that international students favour, the barriers to participation, and strategies for enhancing overall participation rates among the international student cohort is required.

**Exploring the diversity of WIL programs available in range of disciplines**

As WIL gains favour among international students, there is a need for more research into the types of WIL programs available in a range of discipline areas as well as issues specific to certain subject areas.

For example, what are the challenges facing universities when providing WIL to international students in the health sciences compared to accounting? There may be opportunities to learn lessons from certain disciplines in order to enhance the provision of WIL for international students.

**The impact of post study work rights on employment outcomes**

The impact of the recent introduction of post study work rights on international graduate employment outcomes is unclear. Investigation into the impact of the new visa arrangements and how they are perceived by employers and industry is needed as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the requirements of Australian employers in the context of international graduate recruitment.
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