



# Assessing work-integrated learning: developing solutions to the challenges of authenticity and consistency

This *Forum Insight* summarises the background and preliminary findings from the research undertaken by Geraldine O'Neill of UCD Teaching & Learning as part of her National Forum Teaching and Learning Research Fellowship, concluded in December 2021.

## What is your research about?

My research explores the assessment and feedback experiences of higher education staff and students in the area of work-integrated learning. Work-integrated learning, which can take place both on and off campus, is important in preparing students for the world of work and in assuring students, educators, employers and professional bodies that teaching, learning and assessment systems have supported the development of students' knowledge, skills and attitudes to achieve required competencies.

Specifically, this study sought to explore some emerging assessment and feedback challenges and develop potential solutions in collaboration with students, staff and other stakeholders. A review of relevant literature and initial conversations with members of the Irish higher education community stressed the importance of assessment and feedback experiences in work-integrated learning being meaningful/real-life (often called 'authentic') in addition to being consistent/reliable (often described as being 'fair') across different contexts and assessors. Through analysis of survey data, interviews with key researchers and participatory workshops with groups across disciplines and contexts, the research explored these two broad, sometimes conflicting, challenges and the tension that can arise between them. The research empowered participating students, educators and practitioners<sup>1</sup> to engage in inter-stakeholder dialogue and take some immediate actions with respect to authenticity and consistency in their own work-integrated learning policies and practice. It also highlighted potential solutions for other stakeholders such as those involved in national or institutional policies and practices, professional bodies and other disciplinary groups.

## What prompted you to choose this topic for your Fellowship research?

I noted from international and national research and policy documents that Irish students are seeking to become more employable and often equate this with success in higher education (Brooks et al., 2020; National Forum, 2019). For example, in a recent national report the top-rated indicator of success amongst surveyed Irish students (n=887) was "developing skills to maximise employability" (noted by 37%), followed by "achieving high academic attainment" (National Forum, 2019).

I believe that assessment drives learning and if we give it the attention it deserves then it can enrich the experiences of both staff and students. When it goes wrong, it can have a lasting impact on both students' learning and staff confidence in the system. Having conducted previous research on assessment and feedback at national and institutional levels (see, for example, National Forum, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; O'Neill & Padden, 2021), I felt it was timely to extend my enquiry further into the area of assessment of work-integrated learning. I believed it would be particularly valuable to consider how skills for employability could best be assessed across contexts and disciplines.

In addition, my involvement in a series of work-based assessment webinars with the National Forum and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), prior to the Fellowship, facilitated valuable early conversations with the sector, which informed the development of the research focus.

## Why does this topic matter to those who learn, teach and lead across the higher education community?

Assessment is an activity that impacts on all stakeholders in higher education – it matters to many. Recent changes to the assessment system as a result of Covid 19 reduced our reliance on end-of-semester unseen examinations. This was welcome given that this form of assessment, although useful in its own right, cannot support the assessment of the wide range of disciplinary and professional skills, across different contexts, while also supporting the unique learning needs of diverse student cohorts. Across the globe, calls have been increasing for more authentic, engaging and meaningful assessments across the curriculum, both on and off campus (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Hundley & Kahn, 2019).

More meaningful assessment and feedback experiences allow students to become more engaged and begin to develop a sense of their personal and disciplinary identity. Authentic assessment also empowers students, it can support more collaborative and social learning and can assist students to judge their own work. These are important skills for both work and life beyond higher education.

Policy makers and curriculum designers who struggle to find work placements can consider more authentic learning/assessment opportunities on campus to help support the development of employability skills. Whether authentic assessment takes place on or off campus, however, these assessment approaches need be carried out fairly and consistently, a key concern of institutional examination boards, quality assurance processes and professional regulators.

1 'Practitioners' is an umbrella term used in this research to describe the range of staff involved with student learning in the work place, for example, employers, placement educators, mentors, tutors, industry staff, health and social care professionals, teachers, preceptors, engineers etc..



## What do we already know about this topic from previous literature?

Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) explored critical assessment issues in work-integrated learning, highlighting that although assessment is at the heart of the educational institution “it continues to be the cause of dissatisfaction and angst among all stakeholders” (p. 179). This, they emphasise, is particularly true in the assessment of work-integrated learning and its struggle with the tension between a valid assessment, which measures the intended outcomes, and a reliable assessment, which produces consistent results (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Bates et al., 2019). Smith (2014) also argued that the complexity of work-integrated learning challenges the notion of a valid and consistent assessment. Govaerts and Van der Vleuten (2013), in the area of medical education, maintained that the deterministic psychometrics of assessment may no longer hold and that new approaches to validity are needed, i.e., “assessment in the context of the work setting may, therefore, be more usefully viewed as a socially situated interpretive act” (p. 1164).

Whereas validity is a term used to describe the extent to which an assessment is measuring what it intended to measure, authenticity focuses on whether the assessment has meaning and value, usually to the student. It too can be set in opposition to reliability. Authenticity is well described in the literature. The term is often used when distinguishing it from traditional assessments that are less authentic, such as the examination. In 1993, Wiggins, in the US, was one of the key proponents of the term, highlighting the importance of assessing a challenging problem and noted that authenticity was more than just performance; realism of the setting was also important (Wiggins, 2011). The task being based on ‘real-life’ is mentioned by many authors (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014; Forsyth & Evans, 2019; Swaffield, 2011; Villarroel et al., 2018). Villarroel et al. (2018) in a systematic review (1988 to 2015) on the term found that 71% (n=79) of reviewed articles identified “realism” as a key component; “cognitive challenge” was highlighted by 55% (n=62); and “evaluative judgement” by 38% (n=42).

A framework for authentic assessment was developed in 2014 by Bosco and Ferns with the intention of assisting programme teams to review, map and enhance the student experience of authentic assessment in the curriculum. The framework sets out the level of authenticity on one axis and proximity to the workplace on the other. Echoing findings from Villarroel et al. (2018), it highlighted aspects such as students actively engaged with industry/authentic audience, and high cognitive engagement (including reflection). Interestingly, it also emphasised the importance of the contribution of those in industry to aspects of the assessment process (such as grading, development of assessment criteria).

In a recent publication, Ajjawi et al. (2022) summarised some of these concepts in their three principles of authentic assessment. Principle 1 underlines that *assessment is sustainable*. This is linked with the idea of student self-evaluation, also termed “assessment as learning”, a key aspect of Ireland’s National Understanding of Assessment and Feedback (National Forum, 2017a; O’Neill, McEvoy & Maguire, 2020). Principle 2 states that *assessment engages students in active portrayal of their achievements and professional identity*. Identity formation and building capacity to imagine future employment are key to this principle. Finally, Principle 3 states that *assessment involves*

*collaboration among the students, academic and industry partners*. This supports the idea of the involvement of the practitioner, as advocated by Bosco and Ferns (2014), and links with the wider definition of work-integrated learning.

## How did you go about the research?

As a starting point, I explored existing student data from Ireland’s national student engagement survey, studentsurvey.ie. In all, 93,733 open-ended student responses to the survey question “What could your institution do to improve students’ engagement in learning?” were analysed. Responses were gathered over the five-year period 2016 to 2020 and the analysis, which employed Leximancer software, explored the extent to which students identified and connected concepts related to work-integrated learning.

In order to increase the reach and depth of the research and to enhance my own conceptual understanding of the assessment of work-integrated learning, my next step was to interview seven key researchers in the field. The researchers were based in Ireland, Australia (n=2), South Africa, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands.

Following the interviews with key researchers, I recruited participants for nine solution-focused online workshops across a variety of discipline areas. In planning and conducting these workshops, I opted for a Participatory Research and Action (PRA) approach (aka Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) (de Brun et al., 2017; O’Neill & McMahon, 2012)). This research methodology aimed to empower stakeholders in different work-integrated learning contexts to enhance their practice, through “problem posing and problem solving”.

The PRA approach is group-based, dwells on consensus of the group, and its methods are visual and transparent to all (de Brun et al., 2017; O’Neill & McMahon, 2012). Each 3.5-hour workshop included polls, brainstorming (using Jamboard), open discussion and discussion notes (see Figure 1). This phase of the research explored how stakeholders, within their disciplinary contexts, negotiated the balance/tension between consistency and authenticity in work-integrated learning and what related solutions and actions they could identify for their practices and policies.

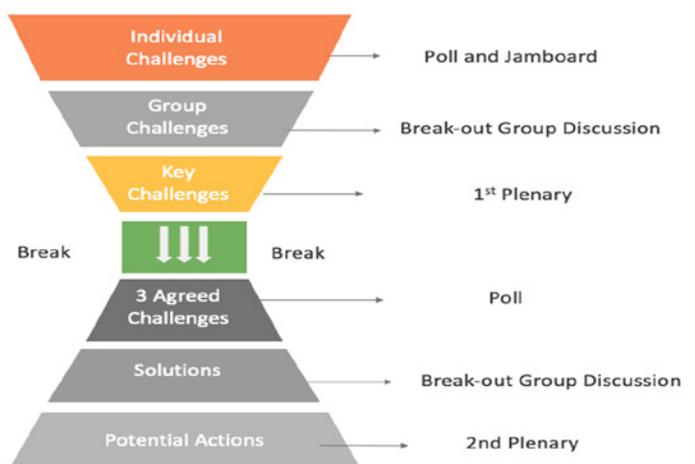


Figure 1: The methodology used in the online discipline group workshops

As the approach advocated an inter-stakeholder dialogue, it was positive that there was an equal balance of the three key stakeholders across the full population of the nine groups, i.e., students (n=40), educators (n=41) and practitioners (n=39). All breakout groups in all the workshops had a mixture of the three key stakeholders, with a total of 120 participants across the nine workshops. Nine disciplines were represented across the three different work-integrated learning contexts: on campus (Context A); on placement and primarily assessed by educator (Context B); on placement and primarily assessed by practitioner (Context C), see Table 1.

a graduate; students want to be employable. Representative student quotes in this theme included:

*Get the university to make the experience more practical for students therefore preparing them for life and future jobs/careers/interests*

*More hands-on practical work... to use what we are learning in college in real situations and see how it*

Table 1: The disciplines, their contexts and institution type

	Discipline	Institution Type
A	Civil Engineering	University
A	Diagnostic Radiography	University
B	Hospitality	Institute of Technology
B	Survey & Construction Management	Technological University
B	Teacher Education (Physical Education)	University
B	Business Information Systems	Technological University
C	Occupational Therapy	University
C	Veterinary Nursing	University
C	Physiotherapy	University

Towards the end of each workshop, in order to achieve some group consensus (De Brun et al., 2017), participants voted on the key challenges in a poll. In total, there were 27 key challenges (9 groups x 3 key challenges). Each disciplinary group then discussed some solutions to these challenges, broadly based around their authenticity and consistency challenges. There are 308 solutions recorded to the 27 key challenges. In addition, there were 129 actions developed across the nine groups.

It is intended to go back to the seven key researchers in the near future to hold a group discussion of the emerging findings from this research and discuss their implications for policy and practice.

### What are the key initial findings from the research?

As the full analysis is not yet complete, I have given a very brief overview of some high-level findings here. Other emerging findings are also mentioned briefly in subsequent sections. A more comprehensive and detailed discussion of findings will be published in the future.

One key finding from the analysis of the student survey data was the prevalence of the concept of 'work' in students' suggestions for how to improve students' engagement with learning (approximately one third of all responses related to this theme). Students sought more 'practical', 'real world', 'real-life', 'work' experiences. The data suggested that students value developing employability skills and it is no longer enough to be

Although students did not directly use the term authenticity, their responses often related to certain aspects of the concept. Students frequently mentioned concepts related to 'realism' (Villarroel et al., 2018) and to some extent concepts centred on cognitive challenge. However, they were less inclined to mention concepts related to self-evaluation (sustainable assessment), as noted by other authors (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bosco & Ferns, 2014; Villarroel et al., 2018).

Despite the emphasise on 'realism' (authenticity) in the student survey data, students in the disciplinary group workshops seemed more concerned with ensuring that the assessment of work-integrated learning was consistent across contexts and assessors. Key researchers in the field, on the other hand, valued a focus on authenticity over a focus on consistency and even went as far as to suggest that too strong a focus on consistency could be detrimental to the learning experience:

*it strikes me that consistency could be the death of this programme, that has you know amazing outcomes for most students. (Participant 6, Pos. 1297-1303)*

The disciplinary groups, in each of the three contexts (A,B and C in Table 1), identified a higher number of challenges related to consistency than authenticity. Consistency was also most challenging in contexts where the practitioner was involved in the assessment; 69% of challenges in this context related to consistency. However, practitioner involvement has been identified as important for authenticity (Ajjawi et al., 2022; Bosco & Ferns, 2014). This highlights the tension that can arise in trying to optimise the balance between authenticity and consistency.



Authenticity was seen as more of a challenge when work experience was assessed by the educators. This is not surprising as these are often assessed by report and reflections, often post-placement, as opposed to through observations on practice.

The solutions, and related actions, agreed across the nine workshops were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### What, if anything surprised you in this research?

Many participants across the three different stakeholders and across disciplinary groups highlighted the need for clarity of expectations in their different roles. I was surprised at the extent to which this was mentioned. Students were unsure what was expected of them and practitioners, in particular, were unclear at times of their role and what the students' expectations were. A key intended action for many was more inter-stakeholder dialogue, similar to the research process that occurred in the workshops. In the workshops, staff and students had opportunities to debate issues around assessment and feedback in a safe way, and power imbalances between students and staff were less pronounced. The workshops provided a space for students and staff to meet outside of the formal, assessed curriculum context and students felt they had been given opportunity to have their individual and group voices heard. The research methodology therefore could, in itself, be a suggested way forward to enhance this dialogue.

### What do your initial findings mean for higher education policy/practice?

The recommendations for higher education policy/practice can be summarised into seven key themes (see Figure 2).

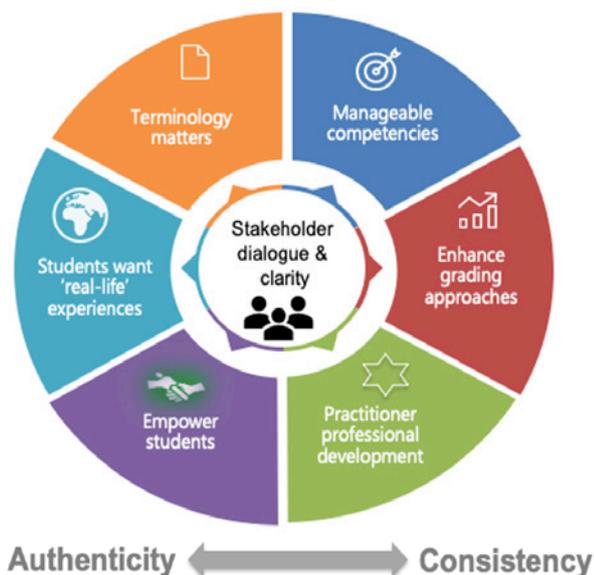


Figure 2: Key Recommendations for Practice and Policy for WIL Assessment and Feedback

#### Employability is important to students

Students want their institutions to improve the curriculum by introducing more 'real and practical' experiences. Higher education policies and practices need to support institutions as they connect with practice and industry to help prepare students for the workplace (see Figure 2). Those designing curricula need

to examine both their on and off-campus curriculum to identify, and where required, to introduce opportunities that enhance student employability skills.

#### Language matters

The term work-integrated learning, adopted by many internationally (Ferns, Rowe & Zegwaard, 2022), is a term used less frequently in Irish higher education. There is often a false binary between what happens on campus and what occurs on placement/work experience. The use of the term work-integrated learning may go some way towards bridging the conceptual gap between on-campus and off-campus learning centred on the reality of the world of work and may help lead policy and practice towards an acknowledgement of the spectrum of opportunities available. Rethinking the binary nature would allow valuable experiences related to, for example, projects, problem-based learning and digital projects to be included in thinking and planning around work-readiness and the curriculum. The term is more inclusive and could support a more integrative curriculum experience for students.

A recent definition of work-integrated learning which could be valuable to adopt at local and/or national level is as follows:

*an education approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach require that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related tasks, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university and the workplace/ community (Zegwaard et al., 2020)*

In line with earlier work on the definition of assessment completed by the National Forum (2017a), the language associated with assessment of work-integrated learning should also include the concepts of feedback and self-monitoring/self-evaluation. Participants in the current research highlighted the importance of the assessment and feedback literacy of students and staff, the development feedback skills, and students' ability to self-evaluate/monitor (see Figure 2). This is linked in the literature with the key principle of sustainable assessment in authentic assessment (Ajjawi et al., 2022).

#### Inter-stakeholder dialogue and clarity of expectations are crucial to enhancing the assessment of work-integrated learning

The work-integrated learning definition above emphasises the importance of key stakeholders being involved in conversations around assessment. The idea of engaging all stakeholders in dialogue is supported by the work of other authors on this topic (Ruskin & Bilous, 2022). Two major themes that came through the discipline groups' solutions and intended actions were the importance of inter-stakeholder dialogue and the need for clarification of expectations.

If we are to enhance the assessment of work-integrated learning, institutions and policy makers need to establish opportunities and promote processes to facilitate continuous inter-stakeholder dialogue. This would also assist in clarifying expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders. Ongoing dialogue is needed between students, educators, practitioners, industry, quality assurance agencies, and regulators such as professional bodies.

### Students need to be empowered in the assessment process

Student empowerment is under-developed in the area of assessment and feedback in work-integrated learning. Personal and professional development opportunities need to be embedded in the curriculum to support their assessment and feedback literacy. Developing students' ability to make informed choices and allowing them some flexibility within their learning opportunities need to be encouraged by both educators and practitioners. Curriculum designers and policy makers need to support and provide opportunities for students to become more empowered in their learning and assessment. Learning contracts/negotiated learning plans were highlighted in this research as one possible tool to assist students and empower them to progress on the journey to achieving mastery of their unique personal and identified disciplinary competencies. Access to ePortfolio or similar tools could also assist in this regard (Scully et al., 2018).

### Competencies need to be manageable

Despite the need for clarification, many participants did not want more, nor did they want very specific, competencies. They wanted fewer but broader competencies, that would be more flexible across different contexts. Competencies need to be clear, but manageable in number. Policy makers, professional bodies and curriculum designers need to give consideration to the number and specificity of competencies that support an authentic experience for the student across diverse work-integrated learning contexts.

### Institutional grading systems/transcripts need to value work-integrated learning

Norm-referencing (graded/GPA) can give weighting to the value of work-integrated learning in the calculation of the assessment grades, a point raised by some. However, the use of a competent/not yet component approach (pass/fail) was highlighted as allowing students freedom to learn, to make mistakes and prompted fewer concerns related to consistency. This was the preferred approach by many participating staff and students. National and institutional policy makers need to explore how grading systems could adopt this approach but also value the input from practitioners/industry on how well students perform. The inclusion in institutional, national and indeed international transcripts of more narrative or other evidence of achievement would be one step towards addressing this challenge.

### Practitioners need support, recognition and professional development in assessment and feedback

Consistency is a particular concern for students, especially in placements where practitioners are involved in the assessment. For their part, many practitioners (employers/industry) mentioned feeling that the role was undervalued and they had limited opportunity for professional development in the area of assessment and feedback. More needs to be done in this space. Opportunities must be created for the professional development of practitioners focused on topics such as standards and the use of assessment criteria. The development and implementation of national and institutional policies need to recognise and support this group, in particular given their vital role in authenticity and consistency that has been identified both in the existing literature and in this Fellowship research.

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