

Informing business practice: Industry and student feedback

The following is a summary of recent and relevant insights gathered from current students and industry, which have informed Unitec's strategic direction. On the industry side, there is a significant drive to grow the degree of work-integrated learning that Unitec delivers, justified by better graduate outcomes in terms of both capabilities and employment outcomes. On the student side, there is evidence that the things students have traditionally liked most about Unitec – great teaching, small classes, and friendly people – remain a major aspect of the student experience, even as the content and delivery of what is learned moves towards greater integration with the workplace.

Industry feedback

The insights team conducted stakeholder research between June and November 2014 with 48 employers (or potential employers) of our graduates from 15 different industries.

Work experience is good for industry

Among other findings, this research confirmed that work-integrated learning – and work experience in particular – vastly increases the appeal of our graduates. This occurs for two main reasons:

- Stakeholders want students to have experience applying knowledge in the workplace, e.g.:
'if they [students] are not in relevant part time work, they should be volunteering at their local church, sports club, anything, you know, to get them applying the skills they're learning... [otherwise] their knowledge is just way too theoretical.' (Accounting employer, July 2014)
- Stakeholders want students to develop key professional skills ('soft skills') *before* they graduate. The attributes our industry stakeholders are looking for fall into three areas:
 1. Communication skills:
'I don't want boffins' (Engineering)
'There's not one role [in this organisation] that you can spend in an office by yourself, you know, with no interaction.' (Finance)
 2. Attitude/keenness:
'I've been burnt before by employing only on technical, not on attitude or character. I always put attitude and character first and technical second.' (Applied Science)
'You can tell within 30 seconds [if] there's a spark in the eye. You can teach them anything, they're willing to learn.' (ECE)
 3. Well-roundedness:
'People with work experience will shine in interviews – they'll have a breadth of applied knowledge and their answers will have a better quality (Business services)'
'The person who's only interested in architecture can be a bit of an issue...' (Architecture)

To most of our stakeholders, these skills are judged to be at least as important as the technical capabilities that our graduates possess.

Work experience is good for students

Professional skills can be nurtured by effective teachers in the right atmosphere, but many stakeholders advise that they are more effectively learned on the job. Employers do want their workers to be formally educated, but it is relevant work experience that will put them ahead of other graduates when it comes to acquiring a relevant job in their chosen field. In the words of our stakeholders, work experience will help them 'build the relationships that are going to matter,' give

them ‘a foot in the door,’ and make them ‘useful from day one.’ Industry stakeholders saw enhanced work-integrated learning as benefitting students in three ways:

- It helps students form the connections with industry that will help them find paid work
- It will make their CVs stand out amongst other graduates
- It’s a better way to learn/gain the skills that employers are looking for

In short, work experience will get them a job, work-integrated learning and content will help them thrive throughout their careers.

Student feedback

Core values still prevail – June 2014 student engagement survey (1799 respondents)

Our June survey showed that there are 5 main reasons students recommend Unitec to their friends and family:

- Great teaching
- Students feel that they are being well-equipped for the future
- The environment is supportive and inclusive¹
- Small classes and approachable staff
- Unitec is friendly

Students respond well to work-integrated learning indicators – September 2014 student engagement survey (4490 respondents)

In September, Unitec students were also asked to rank their programme of study on the degree of work-integrated learning that they had experienced:

- 96% of our students reported that they have ‘improved knowledge and skills that will contribute to their employability’ (77% of students do this ‘often’ or ‘very often’)
- 91% have ‘explored how to apply their learning in the workplace’ (65% responded that they do this ‘often’ or ‘very often’)
- 94% responded that they had ‘learned how to communicate in ways relevant to their future careers’ (69% said they did this ‘often’ or ‘very often’)
- 83% have been able to ‘weave their career goals into their coursework and assessments.’
- 92% have ‘acquired job or work-related knowledge and skills.’

Students’ perceptions of work-integrated learning at Unitec is has steadily improved since 2010 (Figure 1). This has positive flow on effects for Unitec. A high degree of work-integrated learning in their programmes is correlated with increased brand advocacy for Unitec. Where students answered ‘often’ to questions (such as ‘have you been able to weave your career goals into your coursework and assessments?’), they were far more likely to recommend Unitec to friends and family (see Figure 2) than students who responded ‘never’.

¹ Students were asked ‘how supported do you feel in your programme of study?’ in June 2014 and 75% responded that they felt either ‘very supported’ (42%) or ‘somewhat supported’ (33%).

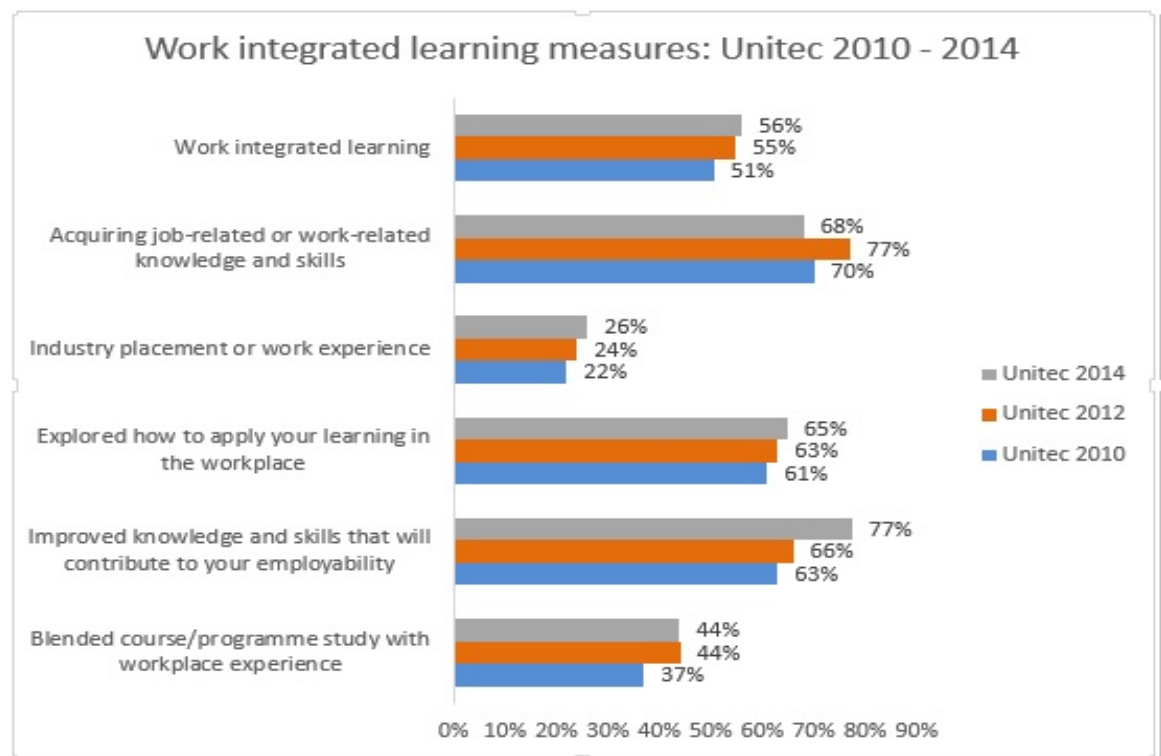


Figure 1: WiL measures (current students) 2010 – 2014²

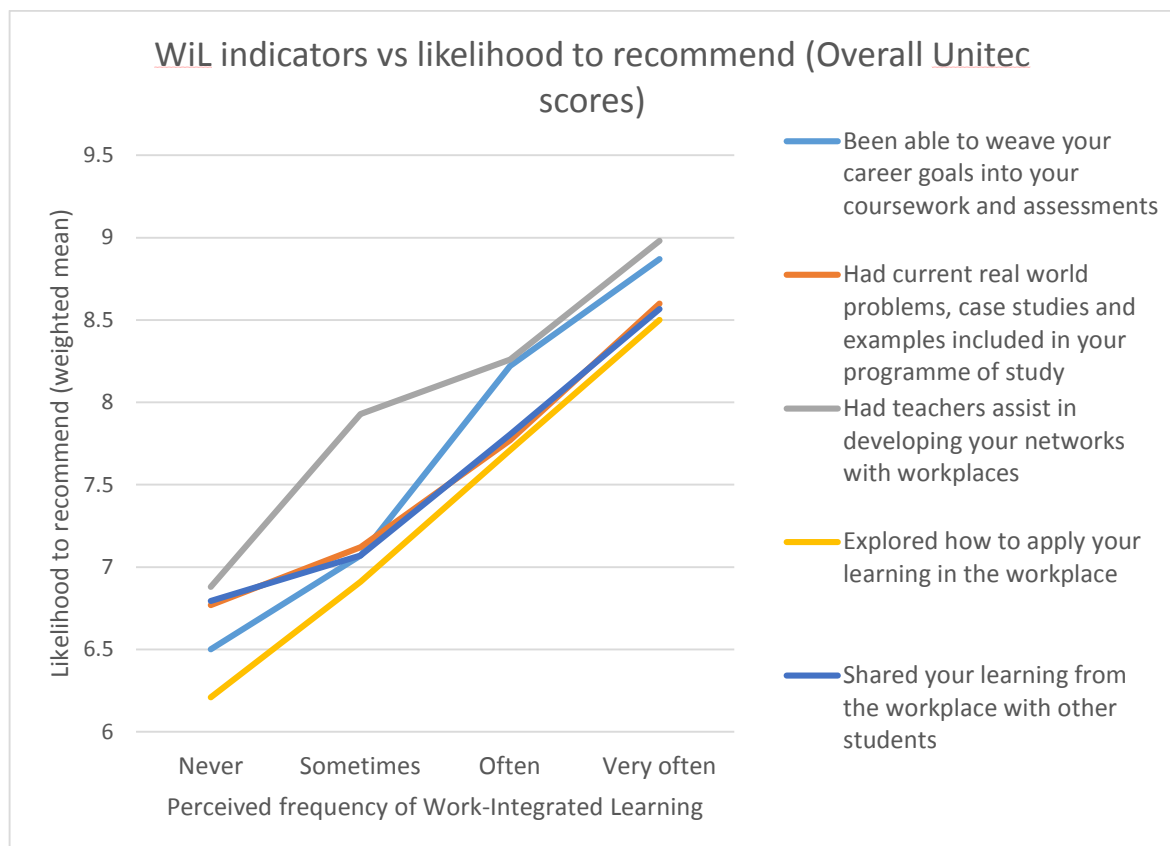


Figure 2: Perceived frequency of WiL vs. Likelihood to recommend Unitec (wtd mean)

² See http://thenest.unitec.ac.nz/TheNest_News/?p=29597.