



Bridging education to employment through virtual experience placement

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The transition from education to employment is a pivotal point for students. Workplace experience can play a key role in a student's transition to full-time work. Despite the important role in bridging the gap between education and employment, students' participation in work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences varies significantly across disciplines. Through participant surveys, we examined students' reasons for, and benefits of, undertaking WIL opportunities online through Forage: a platform facilitating access to virtual and simulated placements in partnership with employer organisations. Virtual and simulated WIL experiences have gained interest, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings show that virtual or simulated WIL experiences are inclusive opportunities that can assist students, including those studying in areas with a historically low prevalence of WIL, in both career and organisation exploration.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning; Transition to work; Virtual placement; Skills development

Introduction

The transition from education to employment is a pivotal point in a young person's life. However, research indicates that by the age of 25, 50% of Australians have not transitioned to full-time work (FYA, 2018). Workplace experience and engagement with employers during their education have been found to play a positive role in a student's subsequent transition to the workplace. Students in Australia who undertake paid work experience transition to full-time employment faster, with those undertaking 5000 hours of work experience transitioning 12 months faster (FYA, 2018). Students who complete courses with a high prevalence of work-integrated learning (WIL) are more successful in transitioning from education to the workplace and are more likely to report job and career satisfaction at age 25 compared with those who complete courses with a low prevalence of WIL (Hurley et al., 2020). Encouraging and supporting university students to engage in WIL that is both relevant and authentic is important and both employers and educational institutions play a critical role.

The shift towards flexible working arrangements and remote work, which has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, may limit students' opportunities to engage in-person with employers. However, this shift also presents an opportunity for students to engage with employers online, presenting opportunities to integrate work and learning through supporting technologies. Kay et al. (2019) noted that "developments in technology have enabled more rapid connections, both nationally and internationally, which has broadened opportunities for students to liaise with fellow students, supervisors, and employers globally" (p. 403). Technology offers great potential to connect students, employers, and educational institutions and support, rather than hinder, the transition to work. One growing area, particularly during the pandemic, in which technology has great potential is creating accessible opportunities for experiential learning that develops employability skills, such as virtual work experience. However, there is a gap in our understanding of students' motivations for and experiences of undertaking virtual work experience.

In this paper, we examine current literature about types and modes of WIL and explore an online platform (Forage) that offers free and accessible virtual work experience programs in a simulated environment. We examine student responses to engaging with the Forage platform for work experience programs to consider their aims for, and outcomes from, engaging with the platform.

Approaches to Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Definitions of WIL are broad and the recent diversity of practices, which has increased as a direct result of COVID-19, makes clarity difficult (Wood et al., 2020). The term WIL refers to a “a broad range of experience-based education models and curriculum approaches where students engage with industry and community organisations” (Wood et al., 2020, p.332). Universities Australia (2018) breaks WIL down into four main types: 1) placements, 2) projects, 3) fieldwork, and 4) simulations. Placements are paid or unpaid internships where a student spends time at a workplace. Projects are activities completed by students which are designed by the employer and educational institution. Fieldwork involves activities occurring outside of the university (e.g., practicum placement, or clinical internships). Simulations can occur within the setting of the educational institution (e.g., on campus) or in a virtual environment such as through online simulated workplace experiences (e.g., Forage).

In addition to the four *types* of WIL (placements, projects, fieldwork, and simulations), four different *modes* of WIL have been identified in a recent meta-analysis by Wood et al. (2020). These modes include 1) conventional (face to face), 2) remote (distance using technology), 3) virtual, and 4) simulated. Simulated WIL is defined as “an immersive WIL experience in a context created to emulate the functions of a workplace with input by the workplace/community, educational institution, and the student” (Wood et al., p.333). Diversity in the types and modes of WIL may assist in addressing the challenges associated with providing inclusive and equitable WIL opportunities (Kay et al., 2019; Wood, Zegwaard & Turnbull, 2020). While in-person placements tend to be preferred over virtual placements, as replicating a tangible experience with a simulated one is difficult to do, in-person placements are harder to attain, less able to scale, and more costly to implement. While not a direct replica of in-person placements, simulated or virtual placements create the opportunity for access to more students. Wood et al. (2020) notes that there has been an increase in the use of remote and simulated activities to develop employability skills, particularly considering restrictions from the pandemic and in cases where it is difficult to find placements for all students. Consequently, virtual, and simulated WIL opportunities are gaining interest as they have the potential to provide more accessible and inclusive opportunities for a greater number of students to participate in.

Innovative models of WIL were being developed in the field prior to the pandemic. In a key Australian study, Kay et al., (2019) explored innovative models of WIL such as micro placements, online projects or placements, and WIL in Incubators and Start-ups, along with other contemporary approaches. Micro placements are of particular interest for this study as the Forage virtual experience programs can provide multiple micro placements for students seeking to develop work experience or different career options before deciding study or work.

WIL has the potential to provide authentic experience for the development of professional skills for employability (Bayerlein, 2020; Bayerlein & Jeske 2018; Kay et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020). WIL can provide opportunities for professional learning (Knouse & Fontenot, 2008) and enhanced opportunities for employment, including a higher starting salary (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010; Knouse & Fontenot, 2008). WIL can also provide students with the opportunity to explore career options, which can assist in career planning (Rastegari Henneberry & Radmehr, 2020; Zegwaard & McCurdy, 2014). Although work-integrated learning (WIL) is a key feature of some areas of university curricula (e.g., Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies, Education, and Health), it is underutilised in others (e.g., Natural and Physical Sciences, Management and Commerce, and Society and Culture) (Universities Australia, 2018). Hurley et al.'s (2021) analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) data found that “university graduates in areas of study with a high prevalence of work integrated learning (WIL) have consistently better labour market outcomes” (Hurley et al., 2021, p. 4). Given its link to enhanced employment opportunities and outcomes, there is a strong case for encouraging broader student engagement in WIL.

Forage Virtual Experience Programs

Forage (<https://www.theforage.com>) was designed to prepare students for the reality of today's world of work. While students may aspire to work in a particular profession or for a specific employer, the reality of what that looks like daily is often black-boxed. The founders of Forage wanted to equip students, before graduating, with an understanding of the day-to-day realities of different workplaces and jobs. To achieve this goal, they created a platform containing virtual work placements developed in conjunction with more than 500 partner organisations. Partner organisations include Fortune 500 companies such as J.P. Morgan, GE, Visa, and Ernst and Young. All virtual placements are offered free to students and education providers to participate in and use.

Students are not required to apply or have any experience to participate in a virtual internship. It is free for students to sign up and they can engage with one or more virtual internships in their own time, at their own pace. Once a student selects and is enrolled in a virtual internship they engage with a series of tasks. After viewing an instructional video (from real employees) they can access curated resources to help them complete the task. Curated resources include background information and context about the organisation, details of the task, and resources to assist with their learning. The average internship takes 5-6 hours to complete and once complete, a certificate is awarded.

Forage's virtual experience programs are offered in a simulated environment. This approach allows Forage to offer organisation-specific virtual internships, which differs from other platforms that base their internships around a single organisation (real or fictional) and industry. By offering a range of organisation-specific internships, Forage is creating opportunities for students to experience and be inducted into multiple professional roles and organisational contexts. The programs can be considered WIL *virtual placement* practice when utilised within curricula or it can be considered a *micro placement* (Kay et al., 2019) or a *simulation* activity when utilised outside an educational setting for example for professional skill development. The Forage placements are virtual/simulated experiential learning programs designed with industry to replicate tasks and roles that the student would encounter in the workplace. The activities are specific to each of the companies represented which is an innovative approach as the students encounter real-world settings and related tasks.

Methods

This research aimed to understand how virtual internships can assist students and employers in bridging the transition from education to employment.

We considered the following research questions:

1. What is the demand for virtual placements through Forage globally and in Australia?
2. What do students aim to achieve through engaging in a virtual placement using Forage?
3. What do students report as the key benefits of completing Forage virtual placements?

Data collection consisted of deidentified enrolment information collected through the Forage platform over a four-year period (June 2017 to October 2021), which included the students' gender, country, education institution, level and discipline of study, and reason for enrolling. While all students were asked to complete enrolment information, only data from consenting students was used for this study. More than half of the students provided consent for their data to be used (1,205,838 out of 2,038,541 enrolments). Data collection also consisted of an online student survey of students who enrolled in Forage's virtual placements in 2021 and consented to their data being used. Developed as part of Forage's Voice of the Student initiative, the survey sought to provide deep, detailed student insights to help employers better understand the audience they are serving. It also enabled Forage to better understand the student experience on their platform, as questions related to career awareness, discovery, confidence, and feedback. The survey contained conditional logic, meaning not all students were asked all (45) multiple choice questions. Depending on the answers they gave to questions, they may skip past certain (irrelevant) questions. Response options to demographic questions (e.g., ethnicity, region, household income, career stage, area of study etc) were consistent with those commonly seen in user surveys. Other response options were based on Forage's understanding of their users informed by previous research, user interviews and product usage. For example, when Forage asked, "*what else could we do to better support you?*" the response options were informed by qualitative feedback received from students in prior interviews and surveys. A total of 1,700 survey responses were received, of which 276 students had already completed their Forage virtual placement.

Findings

Between June 2017 and October 2021 there have been 2,038,542 enrolments in the Forage platform globally. The largest number of enrolments are from India (45%), followed by the UK (20%), Australia (14%), and the USA (10%). A total of 234,311 enrolments have come from students in Australia. 16% of respondents indicated that they would need an employment sponsored visa to work in Australia, suggesting there is demand for virtual placements by international as well as domestic students.

The majority of Australian students came from higher education (84%) with 59% who were currently enrolled in or had completed an undergraduate degree and 25% in a postgraduate degree. Only 8% of students came from Vocational Education and Training and a further 8% of enrolments came from High School. Table 1 shows

enrolments by major in Australia, with two-thirds of enrolments coming from three areas: Business/Commerce (39%), STEM (20%), and Law (16%).

Table 1: Forage enrolments by major (Australia)

Major	Percentage of enrolments	Number of enrolments
Business/Commerce	39%	65,284
STEM	20%	33,033
Law	16%	27,094
Computer Science/IT	7%	11,876
Other	6%	9,574
Arts/Social Sciences	4%	6,513
Health & Medicine	4%	5,901
Finance	3%	5,402
No major	1%	877

To understand students' aims for completing a virtual placement with Forage, students were asked to select one or more responses from a list of choices. Table 2 outlines the percentage of students who selected each response, noting they were able to select as many as they liked.

Table 2: Reason for enrolling in a virtual placement

Reason	Percentage of responses
Gain skills	84%
Improve CV	71%
Increase job opportunities	68%
Explore working in a particular industry	47%
Explore working at a particular organisation	47%
Get in front of employers	35%
Other	3%

Students who enrolled in a virtual placement on Forage in 2021 were asked whether completing a placement that focuses on a specific work environment (i.e., a specific organisation such as KMPG) would help them to be better prepared and make more educated decisions. Table 3 outlines student responses, noting multiple responses could be selected.

Table 3: 2021 Forage survey responses

	% Students who agreed
Be better prepared for the workforce	80%
Make more empowered decisions about what career is right for you	68%
Make more educated decisions about what company is right for you	63%

When asked whether they felt ready for the world of work, only 59% of respondents said yes, while 41% reported that they did not feel ready. 83% of respondents reported feeling anxious about applying for a job and almost all (98%) of respondents felt they would benefit from more practical training.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings indicate that there is clear demand for virtual placements in Australia, particularly for university students wanting to increase their employability skills and job opportunities. However, the proportion of students engaged in virtual placements who are completing a Business/Commerce major is surprising given it is a discipline reported as having a low prevalence of WIL (Hurley et al., 2020). One possible explanation for this

is that the platform offers placements that align with the roles and organisations students from this discipline would typically transition into. This finding indicates that there is a demand for virtual WIL placements for Business/Commerce students in Australia.

While the findings reflect career exploration as a key benefit of WIL (Rastegari Henneberry & Radmehr, 2020; Zegwaard & McCurdy, 2014), they also extend these findings to indicate that organisation exploration is also a potential benefit of WIL. Having a strong understanding of who an organisation is and what they do is important for graduates who may be considering where they want to work and the type of day-to-day work they want to do. Virtual internships can assist in developing and strengthening this understanding. In this regard, organisation-specific virtual internships may be of more value than generic industry-based virtual internships as they allow students to develop an understanding not only of the type of work that is required in a specific role but also an understanding of the organisation(s) they are considering working for. A platform such as Forage is therefore beneficial in making organisations and internships accessible to students who may face challenges finding a single in-person internship. Although our findings indicate that virtual internships are beneficial for students as they can assist in their preparation for the workforce and enable them to make more educated and empowered decisions, there is a need to consider what more can be done to develop job-readiness and to support students in transitioning to fulltime work. Further research is needed to understand how best to address practical training needs identified by students to assist them in gaining relevant workplace skills.

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