EQUITY FELLOWHIP REPORT

Addressing placement inequities via participatory action research

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2024 ACSES Equity Fellow

With Minahil Khan, Lachlan Sibir, Tara Soanes, and Tina Tran

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THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in our work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

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Table of contents

List of tables

List of figures

Abbreviations and glossary

ACDET	Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training.
ACEN	Australian Collaborative Education Network, now Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Australia.
ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success.
CALD	Culturally and linguistically diverse.
COMPASS	Competency Assessment in Speech Pathology, a competency-based tool to assess the performance of speech pathology students in their placements.
CSP	Commonwealth-supported places; subsidised places at Australian universities where part of the students' fees are paid by the Australian Government. Most domestic undergraduate students receive CSPs. CSPs are more limited for postgraduate study and are not available for Higher Degrees by Research.
Educators	We have used this term in a broad sense to describe those involved in educating students, whether on campus or in workplaces. In some places we have made distinctions between university educators and placement/workplace educators. Participants also used terms such as "supervisor" and "clinical educator" to describe workplace educators.
EPHEA	Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia, a professional association for equity practitioners in tertiary education in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific.
Equity-deserving students	We have used the term "equity-deserving" to "describe excluded, marginalised, and underrepresented students" (Mackaway et al., 2024, p. 2) to acknowledge that education is a right for all, and to counter deficit views of the student as the problem. Instead, it places the focus on systemic barriers and exclusion.
HECS	The full name is HECS-HELP, or the Higher Education Contribution Scheme – Higher Education Loan Program, which is a loan from the Australian Government that students can use to pay the remaining costs of a CSP, known as the student contribution amount. Students repay their loans through the Australian tax system via a mandatory repayment once they start earning above the compulsory repayment threshold, usually after graduation.
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. Australian Government funding to universities to aid them in improving access, retention, and completion in undergraduate

	courses for people from regional and remote Australia, of low socio-economic status backgrounds, and Indigenous persons.
HETI	Health Education and Training Institute, offering the New South Wales (NSW) Health online learning system, providing mandatory training and professional development for NSW Health staff. Students also complete mandatory modules prior to NSW Health placements. HETI also provides a range of scholarships and grants to assist students with placement costs, particularly in rural areas and for rural students.
LGBTQIA+	“An inclusive umbrella abbreviation of diverse sexualities, genders and sex characteristics” (Victoria State Government, 2025).
Mob	“a colloquial term identifying a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or Country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from” (Deadly Story, n.d.).
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (now the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES]).
NESA waiver B	A scheme by the New South Wales (NSW) Education Standards Authority (NESA) where teaching students in NSW can complete their final placement at the school in which they are employed (NSW Government, n.d.).
NESB	Non-English speaking background.
Neurodiversity	Refers to the natural variation in human brain function and cognition. It acknowledges and includes individuals whose neurological differences, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, diverge from what is considered “neurotypical” by society. Some people colloquially use the term “neurospicy” to describe themselves. (Annear, 2024).
Neurodiverse-affirming	An approach that recognises, respects, and supports neurodivergent individuals without trying to change them to fit neurotypical norms.
NGO	Non-government organisation.
NSW	New South Wales.
OECD	The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is an international organisation that promotes economic growth, trade, and social wellbeing, and consists of 38 member countries.
Opal	The smartcard ticketing system used to pay for travel on public transport in Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Central Coast, the Hunter, and the Illawarra in NSW.

Padlet	A virtual collaboration tool useful for interactive brainstorming, discussion, and resource sharing.
Placements	A form of work-integrated learning where “the teaching and learning process … occurs in real-world organisational contexts with structured supervision and [is] a compulsory part of an academic program with assigned learning outcomes” (Hay, 2020, p. 51). Known by many other terms, including “prac” and fieldwork.
Placement inclusion	Ensuring all students have access to high-quality, welcoming, safe placements, that are free from exclusion such as racism, discrimination, transphobia, and ableism.
Placement poverty	The financial stress that students on placement experience due to loss of regular income, placement costs such as travel and accommodation, and unexpected extra costs associated with placement, such as parking and vaccinations.
Placement site	A workplace or workplace-like setting where students undertake their placements. Usually off campus, although there are some on-campus placement sites, including simulation and student-led clinics.
Prac Payments	The full name is Commonwealth Prac Payments, but we generally refer to the shortened “Prac Payments” throughout this report. A weekly means-tested payment for domestic students on placement in nursing, midwifery, teaching, and social work degrees, provided by the Australian Government from July 2025.
Professional staff	“a large community of university staff who perform essential administrative, student services, financial, technical and numerous other roles” (Veles et al., 2023, p. 128).
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning; “a process that assesses competency, acquired through formal and informal learning, to determine if students meet the requirements for a unit of study” (Australian Skills Quality Authority, n.d.-a).
RTO	Registered training organisation; “Registered training organisations (RTOs) deliver nationally recognised training in the Vocational and Educational sector” (Australian Skills Quality Authority, n.d.-b).
RQ	Research question.
SAGE Athena Swan	An accreditation pathway for organisations to demonstrate gender equity, diversity, and inclusion via Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE, 2022).
SES	Socio-economic status.

Simulation	Or “simulated placements”; “interactive … experiences that evoke or replicate real-life characteristics of an event or situation as the basis for developing skills, confidence, and problem-solving abilities in a safe, controlled and monitored environment” (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency [AHPRA], 2023).
Welcoming Workplaces	A new initiative whereby businesses can be certified regarding their commitment to embedding and advancing cultural diversity and inclusion practices (Welcoming Australia, n.d.).
WIL	Work-integrated learning; “authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum” (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 39).
WIL Australia	Australia’s national professional association for work-integrated learning and collaborative education (previously ACEN).
Youth Allowance	Students who are 18 to 24 and studying full-time may be eligible for financial assistance from the Australian Government, subject to income and assets tests.
Zoom	An online video conferencing platform.

1. Executive summary

Students undertaking compulsory placements as part of their university degrees encounter financial stress, known as placement poverty, and often other forms of exclusion as well, such as racism, discrimination, transphobia, and ableism. These inequities particularly affect equity-deserving students, and so this Fellowship aimed to generate actionable practices. In this project, we worked together with students and educators with lived expertise of placements to co-develop solutions to the interconnected issues of placement poverty and placement exclusion.

We conducted four online workshops with a total of 74 participants during the course of the project. These workshops were designed and co-facilitated by the project team of an educator and four students. Alongside the workshops, we reviewed the literature to find solutions to placement poverty enacted in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); our findings are published in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management.*

Via the workshops and our reviews of the literature on placement poverty and placement inclusion, we identified 40 solutions and eight overarching themes. These solutions and themes are summarised in the recommendations in the next section, and include both small and large practical steps for educators, universities, placement sites, and federal and state governments.

2. Recommendations

We make the following recommendations:

1. **That all stakeholders involved in placements take a partnership approach to address placement inequities**. A partnership approach is essential for addressing placement inequities, bringing together students, educators, professional bodies, policymakers, employers, and politicians to develop shared understandings and solutions. Students, particularly those most affected by placement inequities, need to be included and compensated for their time. This project has demonstrated how partnerships build capacity, foster collaboration, and strengthen ownership of outcomes. Strong partnerships also enable flexible, creative approaches to work-integrated learning (WIL).
2. **That universities, professional bodies, and industry question assumptions about, and critically examine, WIL.** A more critical and evidence-based approach is needed to create fairer and less onerous WIL models. Universities, professional bodies, and industry must critically assess assumptions about WIL and examine systemic barriers to high-quality, inclusive placements. Students often perceive WIL as labour rather than learning, and placement hour requirements in some disciplines lack clear evidence. Restrictions on placements in students' existing workplaces persist, despite models to address conflicts of interest. Additionally, the financial burden of training remains largely on universities and students, rather than being shared with industry. Universities also have a role in educating students about the history and context of WIL.
3. **That federal and state governments, universities, and industry expand financial support for students on placement**. Financial support from federal and state governments, universities, and industry is the most direct way to address placement poverty. While the Commonwealth Prac Payments are a positive step, many degrees with compulsory placements are excluded, and international students are ineligible. We recommend expanding government funding, increasing financial support from for-profit industries, and strengthening university support schemes. All funding initiatives should be accessible, with clear and simple application processes, to ensure students can easily find and apply for them.
4. **That universities and placement sites provide flexible placement options.** Universities and placement sites should offer flexible placement options, such as part-time schedules or shorter days. These arrangements help alleviate placement poverty by allowing students to maintain their part-time paid work while also supporting those with caring responsibilities, health conditions, and/or disabilities.
5. **That universities, together with their placement partners, take a whole-of-degree approach to inclusive WIL.** A whole-of-degree approach to inclusive WIL ensures that students are gradually prepared for placements throughout their studies. This includes embedding inclusive practices into the pedagogy of educators and practices of professional staff who manage placements and disability accommodations. A strengths-based approach should guide this process, helping students recognise, value, and develop their strengths, and learn how to apply them during placements and in their future careers. This approach should extend to placement sites and educators,

supporting them to create inclusive environments—such as LGBTQIA+ friendly, neurodiverse-affirming, disability-accessible, and culturally safe spaces.

6. **That federal and state governments, universities, and placement sites resource WIL to ensure inclusive, high-quality experiences.** Federal and state governments, universities, and placement sites must adequately resource WIL, including recognising and valuing the relational work involved. This investment is crucial for fostering inclusive, high-quality WIL and encouraging innovative solutions. Staff involved in WIL should be appropriately compensated, with sufficient numbers to manage the workload effectively. Support mechanisms for staff—particularly to prevent burnout from relational work—should be strengthened. Additionally, increased support for student mental wellbeing, such as accessible counselling services, is essential.
7. **That educators, students, and other stakeholders sustain their advocacy for placement inclusion**. Educators, students, and other stakeholders should continue to build on their collective efforts towards placement inclusion. Advocacy, activism, and research have been crucial in raising awareness of placement poverty and pushing for effective solutions, particularly by highlighting the impact of placement poverty on students and translating research findings for a wider audience. We recommend that these advocacy efforts persist, with ongoing involvement from students, educators, professional bodies, unions, and politicians.

3. Introduction

Mandatory placements are a core aspect of many degrees, for example, in allied health degrees such as speech pathology, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy, placements are commonly 25% of the degree, with students spending significant periods of time on placement, where they must meet mandatory competencies set by the professional bodies. Across Australia, on average, 37.4% (or 451,263) students undertake some form of work-integrated learning, commonly abbreviated as WIL (Universities Australia, 2019). There are significant disparities in WIL participation for students from the following equity-deserving groups: Indigenous, low and mid socio-economic status (SES), rural, and regional (Universities Australia, 2019), with cumulative disadvantages at play. Students from diverse backgrounds face challenges in accessing WIL, such as financial barriers and distance from workplaces, as well as other labour market barriers including caring responsibilities and disability (Dollinger et al., 2023; Universities Australia, 2019). A need for enhanced training and support for WIL workplace educators has also been identified so that they can better support students from diverse backgrounds (Bell et al., 2024; Grant-Smith & Gillett-Swan, 2017).

This Fellowship commenced at around the same time as the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord) final report was released, with its ambitious targets for higher education attainment, including a tertiary attainment target of at least 80% by 2050 (it is currently 60%), and increased participation for historically underrepresented groups: First Nations people, people from low SES backgrounds, people with disability, and people from regional, rural, and remote communities (Department of Education, 2024).

The Accord final report contained two specific recommendations about placements in recognition that in degrees with lengthy compulsory full-time placements students usually have to give up their paid work and experience financial stress, known as placement poverty. The recommendations covered the introduction of financial support for unpaid work placements (recommendation 14), and the development of a code of conduct to ensure placement requirements are evidence-based and not onerous (recommendation 9) (Department of Education, 2024). The Federal Government acted on Accord Recommendation 14 to address placement poverty by announcing the Commonwealth Prac Payments (referred to as Prac Payments in this report) in May 2024. The Prac Payments are a weekly means-tested payment for domestic students on placement in nursing, midwifery, teaching, and social work degrees.

The Fellowship also took place amidst other contextual factors, including a cost-of-living crisis, the massification of higher education where the “typical” full-time student who does not need to work much does not really exist anymore, a high prevalence of mental health issues in young people (for example, McGorry, 2024), and shortages in key professions such as psychology, teaching, allied health, and medicine. All of these contextual factors affect students undertaking compulsory placements. A recent survey of Australian students by Grant-Smith and de Zwaan (2023) found that:

> Close to half of participants who had undertaken a placement agreed or strongly agreed that participation was stressful due to financial reasons (46.3%) … and that the percentage of students who classify their financial circumstances as struggling to

> pay for necessities rose from 15% during the semester to 48% during placement. (p. 9)

Alongside the financial barriers associated with compulsory placements, equity-deserving students face challenges in finding inclusive, supportive, flexible placements. Students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, carers, neurodiverse, LGBTQIA+, and/or who have a disability face additional barriers and discrimination (for example, Gair et al., 2015; King et al., 2021).

Due to these urgent placement inequity issues, in this project, we aimed to explore placement poverty and placement inclusion first via reviewing the literature and then through participatory action research, with students and educators with lived expertise of placements. Together, we developed practical solutions to address placement inequities.

3.1 Structure of this report

This report first provides a background about the issues of placement poverty and placement inclusion via two literature reviews. It then details the methods; we used participatory action research to discuss issues and co-develop solutions through a series of national workshops with students and educators. The findings are then presented and discussed, followed by a conclusion and recommendations.

4. Background

The background section of this report is presented in two sections. The first is a review of the literature on placement poverty, with a focus on solutions, which has been published by the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* in open access. It is presented here, with the attribution that the version of scholarly record of this article is published in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* (2025), available online at https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2469356. The references have been added to the main reference section of this report, for ease of reading. The second section covers the literature on placement inclusion.

4.1 Placement poverty literature review

Ameliorating placement poverty: Insights from OECD countries

A pivotal recommendation of the Australian Universities Accord is the provision of financial support for students undertaking compulsory placements. The Australian Government has acted swiftly to implement this recommendation, announcing a means-tested Prac Payment scheme for students in nursing, midwifery, teaching, and social work degrees. However, work-based placements are compulsory in many other degrees, including medicine, dentistry, psychology, veterinary science, speech pathology, occupational therapy, pharmacy, and physiotherapy.

The prevalence of students experiencing placement poverty has been highlighted by several researchers and student activists. The demands of full-time placements mean that students cannot work their usual jobs, and so they often experience extreme financial stress. This literature review explores the policies, practices, and advocacy efforts surrounding financial support for students on compulsory placements in OECD countries. By examining international precedents, the review seeks to contextualise and inform the Australian discourse on support mechanisms to ameliorate placement poverty.

Keywords: *higher education student finances, work-integrated learning, student advocacy, unpaid internships, unpaid placements*

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is defined as “authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum” (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 39). Placements are a form of WIL where “the teaching and learning process … occurs in real-world organisational contexts with structured supervision and [is] a compulsory part of an academic program with assigned learning outcomes” (Hay, 2020, p. 51). Many degrees in Australia require students to undertake placements, including education, social work, engineering, oral health, dentistry, exercise and sports science, exercise physiology, occupational therapy,

physiotherapy, speech pathology, nursing, pharmacy, nutrition and dietetics, clinical psychology, veterinary science, and medicine. In many cases, these placements are required by the professional bodies that accredit the degrees (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018) and are lengthy; for example, social work students complete 1,000 hours during their four-year undergraduate or two-year postgraduate degrees, and veterinary science students complete 52 weeks during their five to seven years of study (Crowe, 2024).

While some compulsory placements are paid, many are not. In Australia, under the *Fair Work Act*, students completing placements are not viewed as employees and hosts are therefore not obliged to provide remuneration, though some may elect to do so at their discretion (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2023). Unpaid compulsory placements have been recognised as a financial issue for students for some time (for example, Noble et al., 2007); however, in the context of the cost-of-living and housing affordability crises, there has been a growing awareness of the impacts of what is termed “placement poverty”. Based on the experiences of Australian students, we know that students on placement experience loss of regular income, lack of money for food and other costs, and unexpected extra costs associated with placement (for example, Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2019; Harvey-Bravo, 2024; Hodge et al., 2024; Morley, Hodge et al., 2024; Oke et al., 2023; Usher et al., 2022). For example, undertaking the requisite 1,000 hours of unpaid placement, it is estimated that social work students lose more than $21,000 of minimum wage income per degree (Students Against Placement Poverty QLD, 2023).

The above studies reveal that students also encounter limited availability of affordable rural accommodation and may incur debt via family loans or credit cards. Some students continue part-time work alongside their full-time placements, leading to exhaustion and in some cases being fired from their paid work and/or performing poorly during their placement. As a consequence, some students defer or withdraw from their studies and experience mental health impacts, including anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout. Students report that at times they are unable to access financial support from their university for reasons such as being deemed ineligible, lacking time to navigate complex processes, and feeling undeserving.

These financial impacts are compounded for students from diverse backgrounds. Research highlights the additional effects of placement poverty on women, single parents, carers, low-income, and mature age students (Cox et al., 2022). For example, Cowan and Robinson (2023) found that female students often have complex caring responsibilities, including caring for children, ageing parents, unwell partners, and family members with additional support needs. International students are often financially unprepared for unpaid placements and have the additional pressures of high university fees (Crawford et al., 2024).

Concerns about placement poverty have been echoed in other countries. For example, in Canada, it was reported that “unpaid mandatory work terms are a growing concern for students sinking deeper into debt” (CBC News, 2014). Similar to findings by Australian researchers, the negative impact of unpaid placements on student wellbeing is well documented in the international literature. New Zealand students in unpaid placements reported significantly lower wellbeing, greater stress due to financial worries, and felt less able to cope with stress than students completing paid placements (Zegwaard et al., 2024). Caregiving students in New Zealand reported major financial impacts of unpaid placements, compounded by sleep deprivation and exhaustion (Bartley et al., 2024; Hulme-Moir et al.,

2022). Similarly, European students in unpaid placements experience exploitation, stress, and burnout (Moxon et al., 2023).

The Australian Universities Accord is the outcome of a nationally funded review aimed at enhancing the quality, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability of higher education in Australia (Department of Education, 2024). Due to advocacy by students, educators, unions, and professional bodies, there are two recommendations in the Australian Universities Accord related to alleviating placement poverty. As a result, in May 2024, the Australian Government announced the new Commonwealth Prac Payment. The Commonwealth Prac Payment will provide eligible nursing, midwifery, teaching, and social work students undertaking mandatory placements with $319.50 per week from July 2025 (Clare & O'Connor, 2024). The payments will be means-tested and provided in addition to other income support, to relieve cost-of-living pressures for 68,000 higher education students and 5,000 vocational education and training students (Clare & O'Connor, 2024).

Purpose of this paper

The prevalence of payment for compulsory placements varies across different disciplines, countries, and institutions (Hoskyn et al., 2023). We sought to explore a range of possible solutions to the issue of placement poverty, including direct financial aid, tax incentives for organisations hosting student placements, and co-op degrees and degree apprenticeships. We aimed to highlight the pros and cons of various support models, and to identify success measures where available, such as the impacts on student participation and outcomes.

Further, we aimed to explore critical factors contributing to the implementation of these policies and initiatives, including how student and other advocacy groups campaign for financial support, influencing policy changes and raising public awareness. Our paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for Australian higher education policy and by offering practical recommendations for the Australian context. Our study addresses three research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the key strategies for ameliorating placement poverty in OECD countries, and what are the associated pros, cons, and impacts?
- RQ2: In what ways and with what impact have students and other advocacy groups campaigned for financial support for placements?
- RQ3: What recommendations can be made for alleviating placement poverty in Australia?

A note on terminology

WIL is known by several terms, including "work placements, internships, practicum, cooperative education, field work … [and] service learning" (*International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, n.d.). These terms are sometimes used interchangeably, even when they describe different types of experiences, making reviews of WIL literature challenging. For example, while internships can refer to WIL placements, they also commonly refer to the work experience that students or graduates undertake alongside or after their studies to gain experience and career opportunities. Although this paper, like the Australian Universities Accord, focuses on compulsory unpaid placements undertaken for academic credit, we have also included relevant sources about internships. This is because many of the challenges associated with compulsory unpaid placements—such as financial strain on students from low socio-economic status backgrounds—also apply to unpaid work-experience internships.

As a result, insights from the literature on internships can inform discussions about compulsory unpaid placements.

Methods

Our intention was not to identify every possible article on this topic, but rather to gain an overview of key strategies to ameliorate placement poverty in OECD countries. We utilised a scoping review methodology that included traditional peer-reviewed literature and also relevant grey literature such as media articles and webpages. We included grey literature due to the prevalence of discussion and, in particular, advocacy, about placement poverty occurring outside of peer-reviewed publications. This is a similar rationale to that of Jensen et al. (2025) in reviewing the grey literature about generative AI in higher education.

We also included references and resources that we were already aware of, such as a TedX talk on placement poverty (TedX, 2024) which we became aware of via social media, and we utilised back-chaining by including key references cited in articles identified in our initial searches. The searches and screening were conducted in the period May–August 2024. We searched using Google and Google Scholar, using the search terms “[country]” AND “unpaid placements”, cross checking against other terms such as “sandwich degree”, “dual apprenticeship”, “co-op”, and “mandatory internship”. Our inclusion and exclusion criteria are shown in Table 1. As a team of five researchers, we divided the 38 OECD countries between us for searching (seven to eight countries each) and then added search findings to a shared spreadsheet.

Table 1: Literature search inclusion and exclusion criteria

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Dates	All years (no date range)	
Study design	Any, including theoretical	
Study population	University students	Students in vocational education, graduates
Publication type	Journal papers, book chapters, books, webpages and media articles, documentaries/videos, reports	Conference papers, theses
Language	English	Languages other than English
Country	OECD countries: Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Türkiye, United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (US)	Non-OECD countries

Our searches returned 226 articles. After screening, we excluded articles without a focus on placement poverty, and articles that duplicated similar news stories, and were left with 64 articles. We identified six additional articles through back-chaining. As a result, 70 articles were included in the review. Once we had completed our searches we then discussed and identified common themes. Each paper was carefully read and re-read by the lead researcher and at least one other researcher to identify themes. Our analysis was guided by RQs 1 and 2, with RQ 3 directing the development of recommendations in the discussion. Consensus was readily reached across the team, as it was clear which theme/s each paper covered. We reflected on our own biases as a team of four students with experience of placements and an educator teaching placement subjects, and how our experiences might affect the analysis.

Findings

We identified six themes: 1) Direct financial aid; 2) Degree apprenticeships, sandwich degrees, and co-op degrees; 3) Government initiatives that indirectly ameliorate placement poverty; 4) Flexible placement models; 5) Legal considerations; and 6) The impact of advocacy/activism.

1. Direct financial aid

Our review revealed a variety of ways students receive direct financial aid for compulsory placements, including stipends, bursaries, wages, and scholarships. However, the availability and structure of these schemes vary significantly by country, state, discipline, and institution.

France mandates non-remunerative payments for placements lasting over two months (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Similarly, in Luxembourg, students receive compensation based on the country's social minimum wage (Moxon et al., 2023); in Latvia, students on placement receive a minimum wage from employers of no less than €255 per month (Passport to Trade 2.0, 2024); and in Poland most internships are paid (Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, 2024). Türkiye offers paid placements of up to 90 days based on the minimum wage; however, challenges of delayed payments and unsafe working conditions persist (Arpat et al., 2021).

At the disciplinary level, Finnish pharmacy students receive approximately €1,000 monthly during internships (Pitkä et al., 2014). Danish students undertaking early childhood education placements receive grants for shorter placements and salaries for longer six-month placements (J. J. Jensen, 2015). UK social work students can apply for a limited number of NHS-funded non-means-tested bursaries to cover placement costs (National Health Service [NHS], n.d.). New Zealand medical students have benefited from year-long paid pre-internships since 1972, enhancing their clinical experience (Goodall et al., 2024). Competitive scholarships, such as those offered by the Australian and New Zealand Society of International Law (ANZSIL), are also available, providing financial support for unpaid internships with international organisations and NGOs (ANZSIL, n.d.). Cameron and Hewitt (2022) identified numerous examples of non-remunerative support for placements and noted that funding may come from universities, governments, or organisations.

In Australia, there have been State Government initiatives to alleviate placement costs, particularly in areas of workforce shortages. For example, the Queensland Government announced a $5,000 cost-of-living allowance for eligible final-year nursing and midwifery students who undertake placements in regional, rural, or remote Queensland (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2024).

Around half of the advisors surveyed (n = 112) believed employers take paid internships more seriously than unpaid ones, and two-thirds thought students themselves did as well (Senat et al., 2020). This finding was confirmed by Hora et al. (2020), with students viewing paid internships as adding professionalism to their roles and reflecting that the organisation values their work. Employers who pay for placements confirm these sentiments (Smith et al., 2015).

Although unpaid placements disadvantage students from low socio-economic backgrounds, the impact of paid work experience on these students is under-researched (Wang & Crawford, 2019). Wang and Crawford found two studies that showed that unpaid interns often feel exploited and report lower satisfaction than paid interns. Hurst et al. (2023) surveyed 5,735 US students and found that 57% of internships were paid, with both paid and unpaid interns generally reporting positive experiences. However, men were nearly twice as likely to secure paid internships as women, and students from lower-income households were slightly more likely to take unpaid roles (Hurst et al., 2023).

Different types of funding present varied challenges. Wage-based support entitles students to employment benefits, though low wages can be exploitative (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Non-wage financial aid, such as stipends or bursaries, may cover only a portion of placement costs. Concerns about fairness and transparency in selection processes persist, with unclear criteria deterring potential applicants, and part-time and international students often excluded (Cameron & Hewitt, 2022).

Another concern related to paid placements is the blurred line between student and employee, with students being used to address staffing shortages (Kent et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2015) and expected to work long hours at the expense of their academic studies (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Some employers report that they are not financially stable enough to be able to pay students on placement (Buckley & El Amoud, 2011). Despite these concerns, paid placements are highly valued by students and educators, with a survey of Australian social work students, educators, and practitioners ranking paid placements as the most preferred strategy to address placement poverty (Morley, Ryan et al., 2024).

2. Degree apprenticeships, sandwich degrees, and co-op degrees

Degree apprenticeships, sandwich degrees, and co-op degrees are educational programs combining academic study with work experience. These models are a strategy for overcoming placement poverty (RQ1), as they offer students a salary while they gain industry experience. As with direct financial assistance discussed above, there is significant variability in the roll out of these initiatives within countries.

Degree apprenticeships, introduced in the UK in 2015, allow students to work while completing a degree in a regular timeframe, with the majority of learning occurring in the workplace (Fabian et al., 2022). These apprenticeships are often sponsored by employers and are partially funded by a government apprenticeship levy (Quew-Jones, 2023). In 2021–2022, 105,100 higher apprenticeships were started in England (Quew-Jones, 2023).

Sandwich degrees, completed by around 8% of students in the UK, include a year-long work placement between academic years (Udell et al., 2023), taking one year longer than a regular degree. Similar to sandwich degrees, co-op degrees, originating in the US, integrate multiple work terms throughout a student's degree, typically with paid placements (Fannon, 2023). For example, the University of Waterloo in Canada has a large co-op program, where over 23,000 students complete four to six paid work terms, receiving on average $12,700 CAD per four-month work term (Fannon, 2023). Germany offers dual study programs whereby students alternate between coursework and vocational paid training, often leading to full-time employment with the training company (Ertl, 2020). Around 100,000 students are completing these programs, though only 3,400 at universities, with the majority in vocational institutions (Ertl, 2020).

Benefits of these programs include better meeting industry needs (Fabian et al., 2022; Fannon, 2023) and building university–industry collaborations (Quew-Jones, 2023). There is some evidence that students undertaking degree apprenticeships are promoted and offered permanent contracts (Jones et al., 2023). Sandwich placements have been shown to improve graduate outcomes, especially for widening participation students, though these students are less likely to undertake placements due to barriers such as a desire to complete their degrees more quickly (Kerrigan et al., 2018). Female students, students with disability, students from ethnic minority groups, and low SES students are underrepresented in sandwich degrees (Traynor et al., 2024).

Students can have a poor-quality experience if roles and learning processes are not well defined (Ertl, 2020; Fabian et al., 2022). Building effective partnerships between universities and employers is complex and time consuming (Quew-Jones, 2023) and employers may struggle to fund student payments (Fannon, 2023). Where employers are able to select students for degree apprenticeships, there can be unintended consequences. For example, although the UK policy aims to use degree apprenticeships to enhance employment opportunities for low-skilled school leavers, almost two-thirds of participants in the 2018–2019 academic year were 25 years or older and had been employed for over a year (Jones et al., 2023).

3. Government initiatives that indirectly ameliorate placement poverty: Fee-free degrees and business tax incentives

An indirect method of ameliorating placement costs is offering fee-free degrees. For example, in Denmark, all students receive financial aid while studying (Danish Agency for Education and Research, n.d.) and also do not have any tuition fees (Noack, 2015). In Australia, the Victoria State Government has offered fee-free degrees for nursing and midwifery students (Cowan & Robinson, 2023).

Another form of government support is offering tax incentives or subsidies to businesses offering paid placements. In the Netherlands, businesses offering placements can access a subsidy scheme of up to €2,700 per work placement per academic year (Netherlands Enterprise Agency, 2024). In Ontario, Canada, businesses can claim a tax credit for co-operative education (Government of Canada, 2024).

4. Flexible placement models

Flexible placement models help alleviate placement poverty by reducing students' financial pressure while maintaining quality learning. These models include part-time, remote, and shorter placements; simulations; recognising prior learning and current work experience; and competency-based assessment. For example, there is little evidence supporting the 1,000-hour placement requirement in social work (Hodge et al., 2024; Morley, Ryan et al., 2024), and some countries, such as Canada, require fewer hours.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, adaptations such as remote and simulation-based placements were introduced, and Zegwaard et al. (2020) argued these innovations should continue. Professional bodies such as the Australian Association of Social Workers temporarily reduced placement hours and allowed telehealth placements (Fronek et al., 2023). Canadian co-op programs shortened work terms and allowed remote placements (Kay et al., 2020). Remote placements reduce travel and accommodation costs and often allow students to continue paid part-time jobs. However, Hoskyn et al. (2020) noted that while some New Zealand students saved money, inequities persisted for those lacking technology or workspaces.

Casual part-time work can be integrated into WIL, as part-time work develops transferable skills and promotes self-reflection and critical thinking (Atfield et al., 2021). On-campus placement models are another alternative, with programs such as Australia's National Tax Clinic Program allowing students to provide services within university-based clinics (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2024). On-campus models reduce travel costs and offer flexibility for students to balance placements with coursework and paid work.

While flexible placement models offer many advantages and are supported by students and educators (Morley, Ryan et al., 2024), they are not without challenges. Alternatives may not fully replicate real-world experiences (Buckley & El Amoud, 2011). McDonald and Grant-Smith (2020) caution that remote placements may limit networking and workplace socialisation opportunities, and that unregulated unpaid remote work in some countries poses legal risks.

5. Legal considerations

Regulation of unpaid WIL placements varies across OECD countries. In Australia, unpaid placements are considered vocational placements under the *Fair Work Act*, with students excluded from labour protections like minimum wage (Cameron, 2018). Similarly, in Canada, most provinces exclude WIL students from labour laws, though nationally regulated industries set minimum employment standards (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018). The UK excludes students from minimum wage requirements for placements shorter than one year, and unpaid students do not qualify as workers with statutory protections (Hoskyn et al., 2023).

France offers the most comprehensive protection for WIL students. French legislation ensures that unpaid WIL students have labour rights, including limits on working hours, adequate rest periods, and payment for transportation costs. The law prohibits placements from exceeding six months per academic year and mandates compensation for placements longer than two months (Hoskyn et al., 2023). Students on these longer placements receive paid sick leave, holiday leave, and parental leave (Ng, 2022).

In contrast, unpaid students on placement in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK have limited labour protections, which can lead to legal ambiguities. In some cases, students have successfully claimed compensation for unpaid work, raising questions about the rights of students who are not considered employees (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018). More than 30 lawsuits were initiated by unpaid interns against organisations in the US in 2011–2014 (Hurst et al., 2023). Nuances around whether unpaid students should seek legal recourse were discussed by Zhang (2021), where a lawyer who was interviewed warned that employers are unlikely to make job offers to students who bring legal action against their companies.

In the United States, legal protections for unpaid internships are defined by the *Fair Labor Standards Act*, which sets criteria for internships to qualify as unpaid, focusing on the educational benefit to the intern (Hurst et al., 2023). However, a Department of Labor guideline emphasises that if the company benefits more than the intern, the intern should be paid (Hurst et al., 2023). Similarly, in New Zealand, unpaid WIL students must not perform work that benefits the business financially (Employment New Zealand, 2024).

In Canada, although WIL placements are a provincial responsibility, some regions exempt professional interns from certain employment standards, while others mandate payment for certain types of work (Rachlis, 2022). These discrepancies highlight the need for clearer regulations to balance educational value with student rights. It has been suggested that the Australian *Fair Work Act* could be changed to require that vocational placements be paid (Morley, 2023).

6. The impact of advocacy/activism

Advocacy and activism play a critical role in challenging unpaid placements. In New Zealand, the Paid Placements Aotearoa campaign, led by student researcher and activist Bex Howells, exemplifies the power of grassroots activism. This campaign highlights the financial strain on students undertaking compulsory unpaid placements and is promoted via social media and a TedX talk (2024). It culminated in a petition of 16,000 signatures delivered to the New Zealand Parliament (Gosavi, 2024; Radio New Zealand, 2024). This movement builds on earlier media attention highlighting students' financial stress (Taylor, 2022) and drawing links to critical workforce shortages (for example, Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2023).

Globally, advocacy efforts have gained momentum in response to widespread concerns about unpaid internships, and highlight broader issues of unpaid work that also affect compulsory placements. The 2019 documentary *Call Me Intern* brought international attention to the harmful effects of unpaid internships. The film depicted the filmmaker living in a tent during an unpaid UN internship in Switzerland and illuminated the financial hardships and workplace harassment faced by interns (Berger & Hyde, 2019). This documentary, along with advocacy by the Global Intern Coalition, likely contributed to the introduction of paid internships in parts of the UN system.

Social media is an important tool for student-led advocacy. For example, students in New Zealand took to social media to protest unpaid internships offered by an architecture school, pointing out that only affluent students could afford such opportunities (Brown, 2022). Hashtags such as #PayYourInterns, #UNpaidisUNfair, and #BanUnpaidInternships continue to amplify these voices globally. The European Youth Forum, campaigning to abolish unpaid internships, gathered 8,400 signatures for a petition presented to the European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights in 2023 (European Youth Forum, 2024). The European Trade Union Confederation has since been putting pressure on the European Parliament to publish a binding legislative directive after voting to ban unpaid internships in June 2023, though there has been counter-pressure from employers (Chini, 2024).

Earlier advocacy efforts laid the groundwork for these contemporary movements. Grant-Smith and McDonald (2018) point to the Carrot Workers Collective in the UK and Interns Australia, together with Ross Perlin's book *Intern Nation* as key factors in drawing widespread attention to the issue. In North America, the Canadian Intern Association has been a vocal advocate, with co-founder Claire Seaborn becoming a sought-after media source on the topic (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018).

Cohen and de Peuter (2018) analysed 855 media articles about unpaid internships, finding that while earlier coverage normalised unpaid work, later narratives increasingly framed it as exploitative and unfair. Media attention, driven in part by intern activism, helped to shift public opinion and policy. However, gaps remain in media coverage, particularly inequalities related to gender, race, and class. While campaigns have succeeded in securing paid internships in some cases, an unintended consequence has been companies discontinuing internships entirely (Cohen & de Peuter, 2018).

In Australia, Students Against Placement Poverty (SAPP), supported by unions, academics, and political groups like The Greens, play a key role in advocating for paid placements. Their efforts contributed to the inclusion of Prac Payments in the Australian Universities Accord. Students in fields excluded from the scheme continue to advocate for broader support

through campaigns like the Australian Medical Students Association's Placement Poverty Campaign (AMSA, n.d.), and SAPP contend that the payment is not sufficient.

Discussion

Our literature review reveals a variety of ways in which placement poverty has been addressed in OECD countries, as well as the legal complexities, together with the impact of advocacy and activism. In this section, we discuss the importance of considering political and economic contexts, make some practical recommendations, and cover the limitations of this study.

In OECD countries, the regulation of placements varies significantly depending on legal and political frameworks. As Rose (2023) points out, the macroeconomic and political systems of a nation influence how WIL programs evolve. These contexts are dynamic, and there are also varying contextual factors at the mezzo level, "such as educational institution, workplace, industry, community, major, occupation, and industrial sector" (Rose, 2023, p. 433).

A further contextual issue is different stakeholder perspectives. While students may urge their placement workplace or their university to provide compensation for placements, the reality is that funding placements is challenging for both universities and placement providers. Universities are under financial strain and face significant financial challenges in delivering WIL, with placement-based education costing 15–21% more than other forms of teaching (Atfield et al., 2021; Bracken et al., 2022). Many placement providers, especially in the not-for-profit sector, are underfunded and cannot afford to pay students (Hoskyn et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2015). In addition, placement providers are often not compensated for their supervisory roles, and there are placement shortages in some disciplines.

These contextual factors limit opportunities to critically examine how universities may perpetuate unpaid work. Siebert (2019) argues that by emphasising employability, universities legitimise unpaid work, which students accept as essential for career development despite perceiving it as exploitative. Furthermore, unpaid placements can displace paid workers and contribute to precarious labour conditions (McDonald & Grant-Smith, 2020). Arlow (2023) notes that the increasing reliance on unpaid placements reflects a societal trend of exchanging labour for experience, placing the burden on individuals rather than institutions. Duffy and Pupo (2018) further link unpaid work to systemic social inequalities, particularly in terms of gender, class, and race.

Discussions about placement poverty prompt us to consider the nature and purpose of WIL and how it is experienced by students. Despite efforts by university educators to focus on placements as learning, students often experience placements as work. For example, 60% of healthcare students in the UK said they were treated as part of the workforce rather than as learners, with 40% of healthcare professionals agreeing (House of Commons Petitions Select Committee, 2023). Clearly, there is more work to be done to ensure high-quality placement learning experiences.

Recommendations

We propose the following recommendations to address placement poverty in Australia:

1. **A partnership approach**: The complexities and constraints discussed above reveal that stakeholders involved in WIL—students, educators, professional bodies, policy

makers, politicians, and employers—have diverse perspectives, needs, and experiences. When stakeholder perspectives diverge, partnership is one way to develop shared understandings and solutions. Further, strong partnerships are needed to develop innovative models such as degree apprenticeships and other flexible forms of WIL. We therefore suggest that a productive way to move forward is to collaborate through collegial, respectful processes of partnership and co-design. One example is our Fellowship project "Addressing placement inequities through participatory action research" (Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES], 2023).

2. **Government funding beyond the Prac Payments**: While the Prac Payments are a welcome initiative, many degrees with compulsory placements are not included, and international students are not eligible. The Australian and state governments could therefore provide financial support and tax incentives to industries, especially small–medium enterprises (SMEs), to create paid placement opportunities for students, particularly in sectors with skills shortages. In any such schemes, attention should be given to ensuring workforce diversity, so that students from diverse backgrounds are not disadvantaged by placement poverty.
3. **Change the *Fair Work Act***: There have been calls to change the *Fair Work Act* so that students on placements must be paid a wage by employers (for example, Morley, 2023). As discussed, this may not be feasible for some employers, particularly those in the not-for-profit sector and small enterprises, so this recommendation should be considered in combination with Recommendation 2.
4. **Ensure transparency and clear communication**: Given the complex and fragmented nature of scholarships and other financial assistance for placements, providers should ensure clear eligibility guidelines, remove barriers to applying, and reduce the proliferation of many separate schemes.
5. **Continue building the evidence base**: Our review revealed limited research on the impacts of placement poverty solutions on students' financial stress, learning, and graduate outcomes, and about whether the outcomes of equity-deserving students improved. We recommend that such research continue and expand. For example, the impacts of the Prac Payments initiated through the Accord should be determined, and if favourable, expanded to all other degrees with compulsory placements.
6. **Continue advocacy efforts**: Our review demonstrates that advocacy and activist efforts have been effective in drawing attention to and pushing for solutions to placement poverty. Activism and advocacy play a key role in pushing for systemic change, particularly in highlighting the impacts of placement poverty on students, and in translating research data for a broad audience. We recommend that such efforts continue, with students, educators, professional bodies, unions, and politicians involved.

Limitations

A key limitation of our study was the difficulty in finding comprehensive information about work-based placements, particularly country-wide overviews. Difficulties in conducting literature reviews about WIL have been noted by others (for example, Atfield et al., 2021) and relate to the varied, conflated terms used to describe placements, and the lack of research about the impact and effectiveness of financial and other strategies to ameliorate placement poverty. We did not review placement poverty solutions in non-OECD countries, which remains a topic for future exploration.

Conclusion

Placement poverty affects students undertaking mandatory placements, leading to financial stress, debt, and in some cases, students withdrawing from or deferring their studies. There are compounding impacts for students who are carers, are low-income earners, have a disability, or experience other circumstances that exacerbate inequity. Through a scoping review of 70 sources, our paper investigated solutions to placement poverty that have been implemented in OECD countries, including an exploration of the pros, cons, and impacts. We identified six themes: direct financial aid; degree apprenticeships, sandwich degrees, and co-op degrees; government initiatives that indirectly ameliorate placement poverty; flexible placement models; legal considerations; and the impact of advocacy/activism. We also call attention to the contextual and systemic factors that influence possible solutions. Our practical recommendations include co-designing solutions through partnership, exploring financial options beyond Prac Payments, amending the *Fair Work Act*, improving student-facing communications about available support, encouraging further research on impacts, and sustaining advocacy efforts. By tackling placement poverty, we enhance student wellbeing, address critical workforce shortages, and ensure a diverse workforce that better meets the needs of a diverse society.

4.2 Placement inclusion literature review

Benefits of a diverse workforce include increased creativity and problem-solving, better outcomes for patients/clients, role modelling of career possibilities, enriched perspectives and expanded knowledges, and improved wellbeing for individuals due to feeling safe and included at work (for example, Gomez & Bernet, 2019 Page, 2017; Phillips, 2014). A health-specific example related to Indigenous populations demonstrates that there are benefits when Indigenous health staff treat Indigenous patients, including increased screening and identification of disease; better connection, communication, rapport, and trust; reduced anxiety; improved patient history taking; improved attendance at appointments, more frequent referrals and follow ups; acceptance of treatment and assessment recommendations; enhanced patient health literacy; greater capacity to involve family in patient care; fewer instances of discharge against medical advice; and increased patient contact time (Australian Government, 2024a; Lahn et al., 2020). Clearly, it is crucial to support equity-deserving students to have high-quality, inclusive WIL experiences so that placements are not a barrier to entering their chosen profession. Placements can be particularly beneficial for equity-deserving students. Jackson et al. (2025) found that placements are linked with full-time job attainment for graduates who are regional, Indigenous, low SES, mature age, non-English speaking background (NESB), international and those with disability, who perceived that placements prepared them for future work.

To achieve inclusive WIL, it is helpful for all stakeholders involved in placement to understand and support a strengths-based view of diversity, which means:

> An intentional move away from focussing on problems and deficit views to focus on the strengths and potential of people from diverse backgrounds to achieve exceptional levels of success. (Airini & Naepi, 2018)

In my earlier project about online WIL, funded by the National Centre for Student Equity In Higher Education (NCSEHE, now the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES]), the project team recommended that all WIL stakeholders should actively promote a strengths-based approach, encouraging all participants to share and celebrate diversity. Efforts should focus on fostering inclusive environments where students feel welcomed to bring their full, authentic selves (Bell et al., 2021). In our study, we interviewed students and educators in the USA and Australia, and found several examples of students and educators viewing students' diversity as an asset in their placements. Participants frequently emphasised the value of students' cultural and linguistic diversity in helping placement organisations connect with different communities and proposing ways to better serve specific client groups. Educators, especially in the United States, were committed to increasing workforce diversity by supporting and mentoring young people from diverse backgrounds.

A strengths-based view of diversity is not always simple to achieve, nor discussed explicitly with WIL stakeholders. Although principles and guidelines for inclusive WIL exist (Peach et al., 2016; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2015), inequities remain in access to WIL (for example, Universities Australia, 2019). As Palmer et al. (2018) highlight, the students who struggle the most to engage in WIL are often the same ones who face systemic barriers in the graduate job market. WIL inequities affect student wellbeing. For example, Grant-Smith and de Zwaan (2023) found that students on placement who experience verbal or physical abuse, sexual discrimination or harassment, exclusion, intimidation, or being assigned unpleasant tasks

report high levels of stress. Below, we discuss some of the specific challenges faced by particular equity-deserving cohorts.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a lower overall employment rate than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Australian Government, 2024b), and are not represented at parity in many professions. This means that there are not sufficient Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals to meet community needs. For example, most teachers in the Northern Territory are non-Aboriginal, despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students making up 39.3% of the school population (Woodroffe & Chauhan, 2024). In the Australian health workforce, retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff is poor due to workplaces that are not culturally safe (Lahn et al., 2020). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students encounter racism while on placement (Gair et al., 2015; Simpson, 2022). We need to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have supportive, welcoming placement experiences as part of interconnected efforts to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student entry into and through higher education.

Returning to the earlier concept of strengths-based views of diversity, given Australia's colonial past and ongoing oppression of and racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, it is particularly important to understand that education is a right, and it is up to systems and educators to change, rather than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Anderson & Ma Rhea, 2018). Anderson and Ma Rhea (2018) point out that Australia's education system continues to frame Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners as a problem, reinforcing colonial biases. This systemic failure hinders progress in educational outcomes and aspirations. They advocate for a rights-based approach, guided by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

As with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students also report encountering racism and exclusion on placement. Jackson et al. (2025, p. 343) found that "Significantly fewer NESB and international graduates took part in work-based WIL". Some placement sites exhibit a culture that disadvantages and excludes culturally and linguistically diverse students, leading to fewer learning opportunities and higher failure rates (Bell et al., 2024). A lack of dialogue about cultural norms, professional values, and hierarchies in Australia contributes to misunderstandings and persistent stereotyping of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Bell et al., 2024). A dialogic approach has been suggested, so that students and educators on placement develop a mutual understanding of cultural differences. In some professions, for example, health and medicine, registered staff are bound by cultural responsiveness standards in client care, so extending this responsibility to student education should be a natural step (Bell et al., 2024).

Students with disability encounter many barriers to participating in higher education and are therefore "grossly underrepresented in higher education" (Children and Young People with Disability Australia [CYDA], 2022):

> Despite the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the accompanying Disability Standards for Education 2005 requiring providers to take reasonable steps to enable students with disability to participate in education on an equal basis as their peers without disability, many students' rights are not being upheld. … young people tell us that the system places an onus on students to understand their rights, fund the cost of required assessments for supports, self-advocate for supports, and challenge their institution when being treated unfairly. (CYDA, 2022, p. 6)

Within this inequitable system, placements are particularly challenging. Students with disability often cite limited work experience as a major barrier to securing meaningful employment (Eckstein, 2020) and have been found to access placements at lower rates (Jackson et al., 2025; Universities Australia, 2019) and to encounter stigma, lack of accessible placements, and difficulties seeking accommodation (CYDA, 2022, Dollinger et al., 2023 Lawlis et al., 2024). Concerningly, a recent review found that despite some progress, “challenges, concerns, attitudes, and behaviours towards students with disability and creating equitable WIL experiences have not changed over the 12-year review period [2005–2022]” (Lawlis et al., 2024, p.162).

Many students belong to multiple equity groups, yet intersectional issues in WIL remain underexplored in both research and practice. Additionally, students’ sense of identity and affiliation with equity groups can shift over time and in different contexts, particularly depending on whether they feel safe to express themselves. An intersectional lens underscores the importance of flexible, student-centred approaches in placements, ensuring that all students feel safe, supported, and valued throughout their WIL experiences.

4.2.1 Towards inclusive WIL

All of the above issues have been of concern to many educators, researchers, and practitioners for some time. Mackaway et al. (2024) report that over the past five years, around 20% of papers published in the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* have addressed aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A recent review of the Australian and Canadian literature (Garant-Jones et al., 2024) found that creating more inclusive WIL requires input from all stakeholders, with a strong focus on pre-placement preparation. Other strategies found by Garant-Jones et al. (2024) include clear, accessible processes for students to request accommodation, training workplace supervisors to support equity-deserving students, and providing mentorship and peer support. Garant-Jones et al. (2024) recommend that assessment during WIL should be transparent and not reward (even inadvertently) “fitting in” to the dominant culture. Additionally, valuing diversity and critically examining assumptions about WIL are essential for fostering equity and inclusion. Scholars have also advocated for the principles of Universal Design for Learning to be applied to WIL, so that it is proactively designed to be accessible to diverse learners by providing multiple ways of engagement, representation, and expression (Rao et al., 2024).

4.3 Summary

Taken together, the two often interconnected issues of placement poverty and placement exclusion present significant barriers for equity-deserving students. The literature reviews demonstrate the impacts on students, as well as presenting possible ways forward. So that we have vibrant workforces that reflect the Australian population and meet the needs of its diverse communities, it is crucial that we work towards making placements not only accessible, but also welcoming and supportive. In this Fellowship project, we worked collectively with a group of Australian students and educators with rich lived expertise to co-develop solutions to address placement inequities. In the next chapter, we provide details about our project aims, conceptual framings, participants, workshop methods, and data analyses.

5. Methods

5.1 Project aims

The literature reviews in the previous section about placement poverty and placement inclusion reveal that there is sufficient research to demonstrate the problems, and that what is needed now is a solutions-focused approach. This project therefore aimed to:

1. Develop solutions to the inequalities caused by unpaid placements.
2. Develop solutions to ensure that placements are inclusive for all students, particularly those from equity-deserving cohorts.

We aimed to develop these solutions through a partnership approach of working with four student co-researchers, and with a wider group of students and educators from across Australia.

5.2 Conceptual framing

We have drawn on two key conceptual underpinnings: **WIL for social justice** and **lived expertise**. In previous NCSEHE-funded work (Bell et al., 2021), I developed the concept of **WIL for social justice**, where I applied McArthur's (2018) idea of assessment for social justice to WIL. Rooted in critical theory, particularly the work of third-generation theorist Honneth, McArthur's perspective highlights the connection between individual and social wellbeing, emphasising that students should feel their contributions to society are meaningful. At the heart of this approach is the idea of "mutual recognition" of individuals—their identities, actions, and intrinsic value (McArthur, 2018, p. 58). McArthur challenges us to reflect on students' lived experiences and question whether the conditions necessary to truly achieve graduate attributes and employability skills actually exist (p. 61). That question is particularly pertinent here: how can we ensure the conditions for equity-deserving students to thrive in WIL genuinely exist?

Another concept we have drawn on is that of **lived expertise**, defined as "authority grounded in experience and sustained through awareness of additional forms of experiential and institutional knowledges" (Newton et al., 2024, p.1). Lived expertise is distinct from lived experience in that:

> lived experience can be understood as the "raw data" whereas lived expertise is what arises from the distillation of it through reflection, discussion, and integration. Lived expertise isn't just the experience, it's a worldview and a lens through which people see, make sense, and know from. Lived expertise-led practices enable people with lived experience to use their knowledge intentionally, connect with and support others, creating significant impact by catalysing individual and systemic action. (Cataldo et al., 2021, p. 13)

Lived expertise highlights and uncovers complex issues that are hard to capture via quantitative research (Lowe et al., 2023). Valuing lived expertise, here in the context of

people with disability, “unmask[s] the complexity too easily lost when the lived reality of disability is measured and quantified” (Clifton et al., 2020, p. 144).

Together, these two concepts of WIL for social justice and lived expertise have informed our research methodology, particularly the choice to use participatory action research, detailed in the next section.

5.3 Participatory action research

Participatory action research is a scholar–activist research approach that brings together community members, activists, and scholars to co-create knowledge and social change in tandem (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 2). It has a focus on social justice and aims to bring about transformative change. It uses research not primarily to communicate with academic experts but to inform grassroots collective action (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 2). Participatory action research is informed by four key principles: 1) centring lived experience; 2) generating new knowledge; 3) research as a transformative process that “creates empowering relationships and environments”; and 4) “collaboration through dialogue” (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 2). It is cyclical and reflexive, with relationship-building occurring throughout, and involves a long-term endeavour. Cornish et al. (2023) outline six building blocks of participatory action research as follows: 1) building relationships; 2) establishing working practices; 3) establishing a common understanding of the issue; 4) observing, gathering, and generating materials; 5) collaborative data analysis; 6) planning and taking action.

> The knowledge built by participatory action research is explicitly knowledge-for-action, informed by the relational ethical considerations of who and what the knowledge is for. Participatory action research builds both local knowledge and conceptual knowledge. (Cornish et al., 2023, p. 8)

Participatory action research has similarities with co-design, though their origins are different. Participatory action research originates from the social sciences and community development, with the aim of bringing about social change (Jacobs, 2020). Co-design developed from the design disciplines, with a focus on collaboratively developing solutions or products with end-users (Sanders & Stappers, 2008), though it has since been used in many contexts. In higher education, co-design is useful for exploring perspectives and solutions with diverse groups of participants (Dollinger & D’Angelo, 2020). As a project team, we sometimes used “co-design” as shorthand to describe our way of working.

5.4 Project team

Keeping in mind the concept of lived expertise, it was important that the project team brought diverse perspectives and experiences to the project. Amani Bell, as lead researcher, is a higher education equity researcher, and teaches placement subjects in health sciences. She also brings experiences of having an ethnic and religious minority background. Four student co-researchers were part of the team: Minahil Khan, Lachlan Sibir, Tara Soanes, and Tina Tran. Minahil is an international student studying dentistry. Lachlan is a proud Kamilaroi man as well as a high school teacher who is completing an honours degree in history. Tara is an arts and social work student and brings a social justice lens to the project. Tina is a social

work student, bringing her perspectives of having a low SES background and supporting other equity-deserving young people and students as an ambassador and mentor.

5.5 Workshop participants

In this project, our aim was to create a community of practice around improving placements for students from equity-deserving backgrounds. The aim was to have a mix of students and educators, all interested in making placements more inclusive. Participants were recruited via social media, Canvas (the internal learning management system of the University of Sydney), direct invitation (email), and flyers. Direct invitation was the most effective method of recruitment, with a higher success rate if the invitee knew a research team member. Some people were directly invited due to their expertise; see the example wording below:

> You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a student, educator, researcher, or policymaker with experience of student placements and/or an interest in making placements more accessible and inclusive.

To acknowledge their time, all workshop participants received a $50 AUD gift card for each workshop that they participated in, noting that a small number of educators declined the gift card. This was particularly important to demonstrate to equity-deserving students that we valued their time.

We did not collect participant demographics; however, many disclosed various aspects of their identities and experiences during the workshops without prompting. These included low SES, Indigenous, international, culturally and linguistically diverse, LGBTQIA+, disability, neurodiversity, rural/regional, caring responsibilities, minoritised religious beliefs, being an older student, and so on. Participants, of course, often belonged to more than one of these categories, and spoke about their intersectional experiences. Participants were from many disciplines, mainly from a range of Australian universities, with one from Aotearoa New Zealand, and one from Canada, who were invited due to their expertise in placement poverty and inclusion.

5.6 Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee 2024/HE000254. Participants were able to withdraw from the study, if they wished, up until the point when this final report was submitted. Links to support resources were provided in the participant information statement in case anyone became distressed by the topics discussed in the workshops. Participants were able to leave the workshops at any time if they wished. Only de-identified data have been used in this and any other publications. Participants have been allocated a number at random and gender-neutral pronouns have been used.

5.7 Workshops

We conducted four workshops over the course of the project. Each of the four workshops was offered three times, to allow participants some flexibility related to their schedules and

time zones. The workshops were held via Zoom, to enable participation from across Australia. In addition to the five members of the project team, 74 people participated across the four workshops.

Our overall approach with the workshops was to allow some time for participants to get to know each other, to feel welcome, and have an enjoyable experience. We focused on semi-structured conversations and relational aspects rather than a very structured, formal process. In each workshop, we spent some time together as a whole group, but the majority of our time was in smaller breakout rooms (around four or more people per room), each facilitated by a member of the research team.

Workshop 1 introduced the project, the project team, and the participants. It was an opportunity to get to know each other and begin to explore the issues, which were developed in the following workshops. We discussed experiences of and solutions related to placement poverty and placement inclusion. Both big and small-scale ideas were encouraged. We used a Padlet to capture key points as well as making notes and recording each breakout room. Participants were encouraged to share their own research and campaigns. An example of an anonymised Padlet from Workshop 1 can be found in Appendix 2.

During the second workshop, participants explored the 20 solutions related to placement poverty that were developed during Workshop 1. The 20 solutions were broken into smaller sets of four or five solutions to discuss in more detail in breakout rooms. Each breakout group discussed how those solutions might happen, the barriers to implementation, and ways to overcome those barriers. An example of our collaborative note-taking can be found in Appendix 2.

Workshop 3 was similar to Workshop 2; however, this time, participants explored the 20 solutions related to placement inclusion that were developed during Workshop 1. Once again, these 20 solutions were broken into smaller sets of four or five solutions to discuss in more detail in breakout rooms. Each breakout group discussed how those solutions might be achieved, the barriers to implementation, and ways to overcome those barriers. An example of our collaborative note-taking can be found in Appendix 2.

In the final workshop of the series, participants discussed how the solutions might be communicated to different audiences, such as students, educators, and policymakers. We also discussed what would be helpful for the participants to be able to communicate and champion the project findings in their settings. Finally, we covered how people would like to keep in touch as an ongoing network. We used a Padlet to collect ideas, and participants also commented on and “liked” suggestions made by others. An example of an anonymised Padlet from Workshop 4 can be found in Appendix 2.

5.8 Data analysis

As each workshop was offered three times to enable participants to select a time that suited them, and because there were concurrent breakout rooms in each workshop to enable small group discussion, we gathered several hours of data. Once transcribed via Zoom’s auto transcription feature, this amounted to many hundreds of pages of data. Together with Padlets and Google documents that all participants could add to, we have gathered very rich and detailed insights into placement inequities and solutions.

As a project team, we analysed these data in an iterative and reflective way via multiple readings and weekly project team discussions. Participants were also involved in analysing the solutions, via in-depth discussions during the workshops. Within the project team, we took particular note of “data that glows” (MacLure, 2013, p. 661) to identify key insights. We were drawn to participants’ compelling and vivid experiences and suggestions that illuminated critical findings. We paid attention to the unpacking of barriers to suggested solutions, with the knowledge that equity issues are complex, contextual, and not straightforward to address.

5.9 Resource creation

Drawing on the suggestions made by participants in Workshop 4 and inspired and informed other advocacy efforts (for example, Students Against Placement Poverty, Paid Placements Aotearoa), the final phase of the Fellowship focused on creating videos and other resources. Together, the project team developed infographics, social media posts, and videos to highlight and explain key concepts and solutions. Examples of some of the resources we have created can be found in Appendix 3.

5.10 Project and participant team reflections

In the findings section, we have also included some reflections on the process and the project. Workshop participants provided some unsolicited feedback during the workshops, and also in response to an item on the workshop sign-up forms asking for “Any other feedback/suggestions”.

Within the project team, the four student co-researchers reflected on the following prompts:

- What did you enjoy about this project?
- What, if anything, was surprising to you about the project?
- What was challenging about the project?
- How would you extend/change the way we worked as a team and/or the workshop process?
- What ongoing use or impacts do you hope the project may have?
- Is there anything you’d take into your own future projects/work/study?
- Anything else you’d like to add?

The student co-researchers used these prompts during conversations in pairs. They recorded their conversations and checked the Zoom-generated auto transcriptions. We then identified key themes.

6. Findings

The findings are presented in four sections. First, we present some participant stories that demonstrate placement inequities. Next, we cover the co-created solutions that address placement inequities. Following that, we include participants' suggestions on how to communicate and champion the solutions, as well as how to stay connected as a collective to sustain these efforts beyond the life of the Fellowship. The findings section concludes with some of the feedback we received from workshop participants, together with the student co-researchers' reflections of working in partnership.

6.1 Participants' experiences of placement inequities

Workshop participants generously shared examples of placement inequities that they had experienced or witnessed. We have included a selection of these experiences to demonstrate the impacts of placement poverty and exclusion.

6.1.1 Placement poverty

> I had to save the whole year to pay for my placement. We had a month of full-time placement. I raised that with the coordinator, that I cannot financially afford to not work during this whole month. And I was told that the assumption for being enrolled in this program is you can afford to not work for two years and be a committed full-time student. That comes from a sort of privilege that makes this whole degree completely not accessible for people coming from different socio-economic backgrounds. (Student 15)

> I was skipping meals throughout the day. I would go to placement and generally just wouldn't bring food with me. (Student 1)

> We're told we're not allowed to work on placement, you will be too run down, like, some of my friends have been failed for working on placement. And what are you supposed to do then? (Student 1)

> Half our cohort leave at the beginning of third year because they can't afford to do placement. (Student 17)

Some students experienced extreme hardship while also needing to go on unpaid placements: "I recently became homeless due to the rental crisis and I'm currently living in crisis accommodation" (Student 5).

Other participants also discussed the housing crisis and increased living costs:

> It's cost of living, it's housing crisis, it's fees … the reality is that most students probably need to work close to full-time hours while they're trying to study close to full-time hours, and that adds up to too many hours. (Educator 15)

> Honestly, it's been hell being a mature age student. Lots of housing stress. Almost every semester I have to move or I have some issue with landlords. It's been really tough, placements have been so tough for me. (Student 9)

Participants also commented on how some universities have changed to trimesters or other even shorter terms, which means that students no longer have long breaks in which to earn income and to prevent burnout:

> They've got no gaps, they don't have a holiday … I don't think it's helping out students with their life balance or even allowing them to earn money over Christmas to survive. I think it's doing them a disservice. (Educator 13)

> My only option to work would be Saturday and Sunday, then I have placement Monday to Thursday and a seminar on Friday. And my breaks between courses are two or three weeks, which is not a lot of time to save money. (Student 23)

Educator 32 commented that a full-time placement was, in reality, more than full-time: "It's more than full-time because they're also studying and maybe still doing paid work". This cycle of non-stop study and work was not beneficial for student learning or for their other life commitments:

> Just that pattern of placement four days a week, study on Friday, work Saturday, Sunday, no rest. That can burn people out really easily. (Educator 15)

> One of my students, I just felt like they were underperforming. We ended up having an hour-long conversation about what's going on. I found out they're an international student doing seven days a week of work, coming to placement nine to five, then they would work in the evenings five days a week and then the weekends was also work. The parents were still overseas and they were living here by themselves. (Educator 3)

Participants reflected that the expansion of higher education meant that the "typical student" who doesn't need to work no longer exists:

> People are increasingly working higher education around the rest of their lives, so it's like, "oh I can fit in the unit here while I do my part-time job 28 hours because I need to pay my rent and put food on the table and pay my bills and pay for my kids." It's so different to what placement experiences would have been like even 20 years ago. (Educator 1)

Rural placements were acknowledged as particularly financially onerous, especially for students travelling long distances to attend placement, and for international students, who are ineligible for subsidised accommodation and other funding:

> When I got allocated to my rural placement there was a domestic student at the same site who got the subsidised accommodation and a government one-off payment for like $750 or something. But as international students we're not eligible. I had to pay double the rent, one in [rural location] and one in [the city]. (Student 10)

Even when students do receive some financial support for rural placements, they may lack sufficient funds to immerse themselves in local life:

> They get funded for travel and accommodation but there's no money left over for anything else. They don't have any money to do sort of sightseeing and things like that … Part of the prac is getting involved in the community, but if they don't have

> funds to do that … you know for a student who gets invited out with teachers to the local pub, they might not be able to afford that, and that's quite embarrassing for them to admit that. (Educator 4)

Students commented that even within capital cities, they may be allocated to a placement that is far from their home, and that travel can be time consuming and expensive:

> My placement was two and a half hours away, four days a week and I had to be there 8 am to 6 pm. When I checked with the coordinator if that was reasonable [they] said it was only one hour driving. But I can't afford petrol because I can't work [during the placement]. In the end, they did change it … so I think they realised that's not reasonable, but it was super stressful at the time. (Student 9)

> Every hour that you're travelling you can't be earning money. (Student 20)

> Out of all my placements I only had one about 30 minutes' drive from my place. The rest were really far. One was three hours on public transport so you have to drive and pay the toll, which is like 30 bucks a day. I was trying to ask the coordinator if I could swap to a closer one but was told if I want to wait for another allocation I have to wait for half a year to the next semester to see if I might get allocated to a closer site. But it's not a guarantee. (Student 10)

Some students noticed that they were being used to fill staffing shortages and/or were doing work that was charged to clients, yet they were not remunerated:

> I found that the way they were rostering students [at the placement site], casuals were not getting shifts. So they were using it as a way to not give enough shifts to casuals. (Student 15)

In some cases, students were given short notice of a placement allocation, meaning that they could not reorganise their existing paid work:

> It was a Monday, and I got a call saying that tomorrow I'm just going in placement. And it was non-negotiable. I had to call up work and be like, "yeah, I'm not coming in for the next couple of weeks, I'm on placement". I couldn't give them enough notice. I had to drop everything, go work [at the placement] and not get paid; it does ruin a lot. (Student 6)

Students also encountered inconsistent and/or difficult-to-navigate processes to obtain bursaries and scholarships:

> One student told me they got a WIL scholarship one year. The following year they applied for it again, unsuccessfully. Their circumstances had not changed whatsoever. They're like, "I'm still poor, I'm still a single parent." (Educator 2)

> I've had some students in my year where for example, one person will have like $4,000 in savings. And they'll say well if you have $4,000 in savings, you don't qualify for the scholarship. It comes back to realising that some of these rules aren't really practical given people's circumstances. (Student 33)

6.1.2 Placement exclusion

Many students described placements as challenging learning experiences:

> It feels like a battle sometimes, every placement, and if you come out of it victorious, it's like, yay. But if not, then it takes away your confidence even more. (Student 25)

Students with disability shared their difficulties in accessing accommodation for their placements:

> My academic adjustment plans always get declined when it comes to placement, without even any discussion around it … because the idea is that's how industry works after your graduation and you should learn … how to survive. (Student 15)

> [At the beginning of my degree] I went up to the placement officer and said, "Hey, I have a disability, it's complex, and I'm neurospicy and I'm a wheelchair user" and they said, "it'll be fine, stop stressing". [Two years later] we started preparing for placement six months before and they asked for where we wanted to go. I wanted to go to [site] because I knew it would be accessible. And I said that I needed a support worker with me, though not in the room with the patient/client. They had to go to legal who were working on it for three months … first day of placement I get told no. And by the time the rest of my cohort [were well into] their placement, I'm just starting mine because they took all that time to find me somewhere, which ended up being a research placement … And I keep going back to that initial conversation where I said "I'm complicated, how about we start working on this?" In the end, the whole thing was too much, and now I have to start from scratch, and redo the entire thing. I believe that if people understood I am the best person to speak regarding my disability needs, in other words, that I can be trusted, that these kinds of things would not happen. (Student 17)

Students with disability also discussed having to continually "prove" their disability to receive financial support:

> It's massive amounts of paperwork and proof, and I had to have a letter stating that I had a disability, which is genetic, mind you, and it had to be within the last three months. And I'm like, "why? It's genetic, it's not going away. Why can't I use the one from last year?" So I don't have to go and see my GP, who has a two-month waiting list and costs me 50 bucks. (Student 17)

> The burden of proof, the amount of times I've had to resubmit evidence that I still have ADHD. We have to stop embedding the student responsibility into academic and bureaucratic processes. (Student 5)

Students found that some placement educators did not know how to support neurodiverse students:

> We're really losing out on diversity of students when supervisors don't understand the different ways people learn and produce work. I had my supervisor say at my final check-in, "you just seem really bored", and I was like, okay, that's a really strange thing to say because I don't think they realised that people with certain neurodivergences can show up inconsistently. And that doesn't mean they don't care about the placement; it just means they don't always show up the same way. (Student 21)

Nor did they know how to support students from culturally diverse backgrounds to navigate professional norms:

> I come from an immigrant background. I was raised that you have to respect your elders. And it was my first adult placement [placement working with adult clients/patients] and the idea of being the therapist in the room was quite a struggle. But my clinical educator said, “just get rid of this mindset, you’re the therapist, go in there and do it”. And in my head, I was like, “that would be lovely if I could just get rid of that mindset”. It was the same thing every week; it was so mentally draining. I was telling my friends, I don’t know if [working with adults] is for me, because the clinical educator wasn’t [aware] that different cultures and different upbringings have different mindsets. There was no discussion, no brainstorming, just “you’re in the wrong, get rid of it”. (Student 22)

Student 22 went on to relate:

> I wish they would have more understanding. The amount of times I’ve had to go into placement and explain Ramadan to them, like I’m fasting and obviously my energy levels in Ramadan are different than someone who’s not fasting.

Gender diverse students also encountered placement environments that were not welcoming or safe:

> I’m nonbinary and trans. It’s difficult. Like in one placement I emailed ahead just explaining who I am and these are my pronouns and some information about it. The response was awful. So I didn’t start off in a great place. They said they would try to respect that, but the clients are from cultural and linguistic diverse backgrounds, they’re not going to understand, so to be careful with who I tell, which, like, it was terrible. And in the first week of placement starting there were some really intense neo-Nazi attacks on trans people, which was super upsetting. I couldn’t bring my full safe self. I had to just mask it and just pretend everything was fine. If I’d been in a place that was really affirming and accepting, it would have been a very different experience. (Student 9)

The experiences generously shared by workshop participants demonstrate the detrimental impacts of placement poverty and exclusion, and the urgent need to address these issues. In the next section of the findings, we present the solutions that workshop participants co-developed.

6.2 Co-developed solutions

During the first workshop participants co-developed 20 solutions to address placement poverty and 20 solutions that enhance placement inclusion (the number being the same for each is a coincidence). These were then developed in further detail in Workshops 2 and 3. In this section, we have presented the solutions in two tables, followed by details of the solutions.

6.2.1 Placement poverty

Table 2: Solutions to alleviate placement poverty

Proposed solution	Brief elaboration
Financial support	
Paid placements	Varied options, including bursary, stipend, or wage. Ensure all students can access.
Increased university-level financial support for placement costs	Grants, bursaries, scholarships via universities
Loss of earnings vouchers	Vouchers to compensate students for their lost income while on placement
Increased “industry” scholarships, for example, State Departments of Health and Education	Often available in professions and/or areas with workforce shortages
Government funding for university WIL initiatives (that provide financial support to students)	Universities could then develop their own programs, which could be in collaboration with other universities
Alternative degree models	
Apprenticeship-style degrees with paid placements	Offer students the flexibility to earn while they learn
Paid graduate trainee programs (reducing placement requirements during degrees)	Shift some of the training to employers after graduation
Alternative placement models	
Part-time and flexible placements	Enable students to continue working in their part-time paid jobs
Reduced placement hours	Focus on competence rather than hours; use more simulation and other solutions adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic
Recognition of prior experience—to count towards placements	Could include volunteering, caring work, and high school/vocational education
Placements in students’ existing workplaces / Students’ current relevant jobs to count towards placement	Existing relevant roles include allied health assistants and assistants in medicine
Student-led clinics	May reduce travel costs; may allow more flexibility regarding hours
Reduced or subsidised living costs	
Reduce travel expenses by allocating placements closer to home / capping placement travel times	Reduced travel time to help students spend that time on study or paid work. Tolls and parking can be prohibitive.
Cover/subsidise travel costs	Public transport concession cards to be available for part-time and international students. Provision of petrol cards and covering car hire costs.
Subsidised or free accommodation for rural placements / placements far from home	Rural/regional accommodation is often scarce and international students are often not eligible for subsidised rural accommodation
Provide food vouchers and on-campus and/or placement site food pantries	May assist students to access nutritious food while on placement so they do not go hungry

Proposed solution	Brief elaboration
Laptops/iPads available for students to borrow while on placement	Universities or large placement sites could provide a laptop library, with GPS trackers on the devices
Reduced costs of higher education	
Increase Commonwealth supported places for master's students	Indirectly supports students by reducing study costs
Free degrees	Example of government-funded tuition in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland for eligible nursing and healthcare students
Clear communication	
Make placement costs clear well in advance	Including "hidden" costs such as parking, any equipment, professional clothing, mandatory training such as CPR, vaccinations, and compliance checks

As Table 2 shows, the solutions related to placement poverty have been grouped into six themes: 1) Financial support; 2) Alternative degree models; 3) Alternative placement models; 4) Reduced or subsidised living costs; 5) Reduced costs of higher education; and 6) Clear communication. We discuss each, in turn, below, illustrated with quotes from workshop participants, to show how we unpacked the solutions, particularly barriers to each and how they may be overcome.

1. Financial support

Participants agreed that financial support would make a difference in tackling placement poverty, with comments such as, "any bit of financial assistance is helpful" (Educator 2) and "something is better than nothing" (Student 30).

> The obvious solution to placement poverty is we remunerate people in some way. There is really no way around this. To lift people out of poverty, you have to make sure they can pay their rent, pay for medication, and have the basics so that they are able to not just survive during training but thrive. (Student 20)

The Prac Payments announced by the Australian Government in May 2024 were viewed as "a step in the right direction" (Student 11) and participants wanted the payments to be expanded to other disciplines, the amount increased ("it's still under the poverty line" [Educator 11]), and extended to international students:

> I hope the payment can be expanded to other allied health students. And also the amount itself is lower than the minimum wage. And it is means tested, which basically means you would have to prove that you're experiencing some level of poverty to get that payment. So it is exclusionary in that way. Students who are already experiencing poverty are likely also experiencing mental and social issues as well and they're being asked to basically prove their suffering which is concerning. Also I don't think international students are included in the Prac Payment. (Student 11)

Participants elaborated on their concerns about the Prac Payments:

> Means testing opens up a whole can of worms. That whole process is exclusionary [in favour of] people who have the paperwork, who have the family and community support to go through the hoops to apply for the funding. (Educator 24)

> The whole point of the Prac Payment is to go on top of Youth Allowance, so it's supposed to support your income. That's the whole point of it. But some people might not get Youth Allowance. I know a lot of domestic students like me, I also don't get Youth Allowance because apparently I have too much money in my savings account. (Student 13)

> I was talking to a nursing student. The Prac Payment would barely cover her rent. And there are other expenses you have to think of, like food, petrol for your car to drive to your placement, things like that. (Student 11)

Additional government funding would be welcome. For example:

> It would be good if universities were given funds to develop their own placement programs. I think the government should be paying the students, but I also think there should be an additional pool of funds for universities to use to set up their placements the way that they would like to. (Educator 4)

University bursaries, stipends, and scholarships for WIL were welcome. However, the amounts offered were usually not enough to "cover what you would expect to earn full-time while you're a certain amount of weeks at a placement" (Student 30) and "demand outstrips supply in terms of scholarships within the university. And I think that's a serious equity issue for students" (Educator 11). In particular, international students are often ineligible for university scholarships and in New South Wales (NSW) are ineligible for Health Education and Training Institute (HETI) funding for rural health placements.

Participants agreed that it should be clear where students can access such support as it was often not clear: "They usually don't mention where you can get financial support during the orientation presentation" (Student 2). "They're really hard to navigate, even as someone where English is my first language" (Student 19).

Participants proposed ways to make university-provided scholarships and funds more equitable:

> Surely a start could be equitable distribution across all students who qualify or meet a criteria. Making it less competitive is really important, because you shouldn't have to compete for something that is your right to education. (Educator 14)

> It would be wonderful if students didn't have to get to the point of living week to week before having access to any form of bursary. (Student 21)

One university had automated bursaries to an extent, via Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) markers:

> So students need to qualify for two out of three HEPPP markers, which are low socio-economic status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and rural and remote. But I can see that some of the bursaries have been offered [via email] to students and not collected, and I'm not quite sure why. (Educator 18)

Student 28 suggested making sure that*:*

> the university's records are streamlined to the scholarships, so that it's automatically linked with all the information available. Also have people to support students through the process and explain things.

Participants shared examples of paid placements, such as:

> In New Zealand, where final-year medical students are paid 60% of the wage of an intern in acknowledgement that the work they're providing is almost at a doctor level, as well as the fact that it's the last year of university, they've been studying full-time for a long time and usually by then all the savings are gone. (Student 4)

Scholarships from industry/government were viewed fairly positively:

> NSW Health released this sort of grant system for certain professions, where [students] could get a total of $8,000, $4,000 each year. But the condition of that is that you have to work for NSW Health for, I think, at least three years following your degree. (Student 3)

> For teaching in NSW we have something called the NESA [NSW Education Standards Authority] waiver B. If you're in your final year and you have employment at a school for teaching, they'll pay you for your final placement. (Student 6)

> Say if you took a final-year student on a placement and it was on the condition that you would pay that student and then they would stay on and work for you for a year after—you do get some kind of support to alleviate the pressure on your workforce system. So there's a direct benefit of taking the student. (Student 20)

> We actually have a few initiatives like allied health assistant roles and cadetships for Aboriginal students and they have been quite successful. However, it's so limited with the number of positions. (Educator 12)

There were, however, some concerns about such schemes:

> I know a lot of my friends aren't working at schools and they're sort of scrambling to find a workplace to get that waiver B benefit. It sort of forces us to be in the workplace before placements even begin, which can pose a bit of a barrier to some people. And I know some universities don't allow students to gain access to that waiver B if it's a workplace where they currently are. At [university] their education students can't do their final internship in the school that they're currently working at as a casual or part-time temp teacher. (Student 30)

Some participants expressed concerns about being tied to a particular employer for a significant period after graduation: "Not all of us want to be forced into the public health system if other opportunities arose*".* (Student 3)

Students also had concerns about other conditions associated with scholarships:

> There are some private independent schools that will give scholarships that are a lot of money, like maybe $20,000, $30,000, $40,000 but there are some very strict restrictions, like you have to do an unpaid internship there and then you have to work there once a week for two or three terms. I did consider if I divide out the hours is it worth doing? When it divides out it's less than a casual high school teacher's rate … I also wanted to not restrict myself to just one school for casual teaching and the final internship in my final year. (Student 18)

Student 18 raised equity concerns with such competitive scholarships:

> It would have been competitive, you'd have to submit an academic transcript, a CV, how you would contribute to the school culture, because they're really into extracurriculars, and then an interview process as well. There are a lot of stages to it. So this is obviously not very inclusive in that sense that you have to apply for it and only a select few are chosen.

Another participant pointed out that having a competitive element was likely linked to employers "using that as a recruitment mechanism, so they're identifying who they think are the best students. But what about the ones that miss out?" (Educator 25).

Participants also discussed that there was a plethora of such schemes, both offered by universities and externally, but "I don't know how easy it is for students to find out about them. There could be a clearing house, one place you can go that summarises everything that's available" (Educator 25).

> Yeah, I always say to my friends when I've been trying to apply for scholarships [at my university], I can't find a specific webpage that's like, "apply here". It'd be great if we could have some sort of eligibility checker, where you could go, "this is my situation, this is where I live, this is what I'm studying" and it goes, "you can apply for XYZ". Similar to what they have for Centrelink. (Student 19)

Placement sites were considered a potential source of funding to support students:

> Engineering have an award that says this is what you'd pay a first-year student, second year, third year, fourth year, graduate. So there is meant to be that level of consistency. (Educator 6)

> In psychology we see clients and those clients are often paying to see us. So the businesses are giving us supervision, but they're also making money from students being there. Perhaps there's some conversations that can happen with businesses around us helping them grow their client base. (Educator 26)

> I would really love to see placements where students are doing productive work be paid for by employers so that they begin to value the work that these students are doing. I have certainly interviewed a lot of students where their work has been charged out to clients, but they've received no payment for their work and I think that is unethical. (Educator 6)

However, participants noted that some placement sites may not be able to afford to pay students:

> I understand the concept that businesses are getting free labour and that's not fair. But as a social work student, most of us don't go out to businesses. We work at hospitals, we work at community centres, we work at not-for-profits. They simply would not take students on if they had to pay us. (Student 17)

> If everything was paid for by organisations, we're going to actually lose placements. And there's such a balance between learning and labour, because the students are also learning. (Educator 12)

There were also concerns about the unintended consequences of paying students:

> As soon as you start paying people for their labour, I reckon the host organisations get a lot more picky about the students that they take on. For example, a student with disability comes up on the list, and they know there are going to be costs associated with having that student as part of their team. Potentially that's a bit of a disincentive to bring on students with disability, or students with perceived additional strings attached. (Student 16)

> An interesting potential consequence of paying students for their placement work is how it affects their entitlement to other sorts of payments, like the disability support payment. (Student 16)

And Educator 6 raised possible taxation issues if students have other jobs.

Student 16 described a placement situation where the site had wanted to pay them but the university would not allow it. The student suggested: "looking at ways universities can create more flexible guidelines around how students can engage in WIL opportunities and receive payment where it's available."

Some participants wanted universities to be held responsible for supporting students financially on placement, yet funding cuts to higher education in Australia were acknowledged: "I don't think universities are going to pay for it. I think it has to be government" (Educator 11). Some participants suggested instead a hybrid approach, whereby both universities and industries contribute to remunerating students.

Overall, systemic issues related to remunerating students for their placements were acknowledged:

> You're right, we build businesses … especially with the short staffing situation, this whole thing is cyclical. Organisations are often short staffed. Students going on placement tend to replace staff for that period of time, and most students do 500-hour blocks, so it's a significant portion. (Student 5)

> Some employers are really good and see placements as something they want to do to contribute to the future workforce, but there are some that view placements as a cost. (Educator 25)

> While placement grants are important for universities to offer students, they're still not addressing the systemic barriers. By the time students are in their third or fourth year, they're actually making a very meaningful contribution to that organisation. [Stipends and grants] are a very Band Aid approach. I think there needs to be some really systemic changes in how accreditation bodies work and how industry engages in this space as well, to move beyond the Band Aid solution and address the systemic issues. (Educator 9)

Participants discussed how to make a compelling argument for paid placements:

> Helping people understand that we have this weird split between if you go to university, you're a student and you don't get paid, but if you go and be a police officer, an apprentice, if you train in the military, you would be paid to train. So we need to renormalise that paid training is how you get people into and through these professional training pathways, whether they're taught on the job or whether they're

> taught through universities. There's a cultural shift to get people to understand why it's important. (Student 20)

Student 20 emphasised that an important argument for paid placement is that it will help address workforce shortages:

> We need to help people understand that student poverty has a massive ripple effect on that fact that we can't grow the workforce sustainably, and then they can't access the services that they need when they need them. It's really sad, but most people are only interested in "how does this affect me?"

Canadian Government funding for WIL was seen as a model that could be emulated in Australia:

> Our national WIL association is called CEWIL [Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada] and they have secured quite a bit of funding that universities and colleges can apply [for] to run bursary programs in their institutions. The institutions decide which WIL opportunities are eligible and they'll estimate a cost associated with participating. Students each get a certain amount [without needing to apply or provide their bank details] and if they're in additional need, they might need to go through a second more rigorous application process. It really reduces a lot of work, both for the institution to be reviewing all these documents and for students to apply. There's also a matching fund in Canada that connects industry and institutions and students, and it matches up to 50% of the students' wages. (Educator 19)

2. Alternative degree models

Participants discussed alternative degree models that provide paid WIL, such as apprenticeship degrees in the UK:

> In the UK, for the Master of Social Work, they do have apprenticeship type models available. You are seconded to an NGO [Non-Governmental Organisation], and it ends up being a three-year degree instead of two. You do a portion in the classroom and then a larger portion in the field, and you work with that organisation for the three years at increasing levels of pay. I think by the second or third year you end up being paid £38,000. It's not accessible to everybody because not everybody can work full-time, but it's a different model than we have here and I think it's more innovative than what we're doing at the moment. (Student 5)

> We'd need to propose an expansion of the kinds of degrees that can attract apprenticeship subsidies. So the employer is paying but they are being subsidised to do so. (Educator 32)

> For employers, they get to try before they buy. Is this person a good fit for your organisation? (Educator 5)

> Placement is a wonderful opportunity [for learning] but I just think our model is not right. There's other models of really good practice, if you look at things like cadetships, where you've got students in the workforce being paid but also attending university at the same time. (Educator 9)

One participant proposed a rethink of where training occurred:

> I think that part of the problem is that employers are becoming used to having people who can hit the ground running. Now that's their expectation, that they'll have had

> 1,000 hours of unpaid training and they don't have to train anybody. Whereas when I graduated there was the idea there would be a period of reasonable adjustment where you would be trained when you joined the workforce. And I think this is an unrealistic expectation that has pushed the training burden entirely onto students. Students are funding it themselves and industry isn't paying. (Educator 6)

3. Alternative placement models

Participants discussed that flexible placement options would help alleviate placement poverty by enabling students to retain their paid work:

> Some programs have introduced a placement block of two days a week over a longer period … rather than an intensive five days a week for eight weeks. So students have more choice where they can say, "I have my job which I need to be able to pay my rent and bills and food, so I need to work on a Monday and a Tuesday and a Thursday, so I can only go to placement on a Wednesday and a Friday." It makes it much more challenging for unis to try to administer everything. But for students they can keep a roof over their heads. (Educator 1)

> Students at [university] really liked the idea of shorter placements. But a barrier we encountered from industry was shorter placements required more onboarding, because you're going through more students who are staying for shorter amounts of time. If we're asking partners to pay students, they need to see they are getting value out of students, and if the students are only with them for a couple of weeks, that might be a harder sell. (Educator 18)

Student 18 wondered about possibly reduced ability to develop rapport with a class if doing a teaching placement one or two days a week, though another participant reminded the group that "there are currently teachers who just work part-time and are doing job sharing roles, so why not try it as a pre-service?" (Educator 29). Another participant suggested that rapport can be built in placements that stretch over longer periods of time.

Some participants advocated for varied flexibility to suit individual students' needs:

> Even starting placement at different times throughout the year. And some people can't do 38-hour weeks. Some of us need 10-hour weeks, or 15-hour weeks, or varied amounts. We need to build in more flexibility. (Student 5)

One group fleshed out an idea about online teaching that could count towards teaching placement hours:

> So imagine a WIL student who has a small group of high school students at 8 o'clock at night, because they're elite athletes or something. I think it would reduce some placement poverty because the student could still work their day job and then do their WIL placement at night. And that can be recorded so a supervisor doesn't necessarily need to be present. (Educator 8)

The group noted that "remote placements eliminate travel time and costs as well" (Student 6).

Barriers to implementing flexible placement options were also covered:

> One of the biggest barriers is the inflexibility of huge organisations, including universities, to do things differently to the way they've always done them. It just feels like too hard basket sometimes for organisations to just be a little more creative, and

> it's often scheduling, and now we've got our schedule, so we've got to wind you up by the end of semester. And I think it's just culture change. It has to come through a top-down approach often. It has to be enabled and encouraged and have champions. It takes a lot of time. (Educator 12)

One way of reducing placement hours may be to have competency-based assessment for placement, with a participant suggesting:

> If you had a student who was amazing after two weeks instead of six weeks, in theory you could say, "great, you've actually reached where you need to; your placement could stop". (Educator 21)

The group went on to explore the limitations of such an approach:

> You anticipate you'll see students for six to eight weeks, and you plan your caseload and clients around that, so there's that expectation that they'll be here for that many weeks. But you're right, I've had numerous students this year who have probably at the halfway mark I'd be able to say, "look, you've reached your competency". Maybe we could look at reducing hours rather than cutting the placement altogether. Possibly, that could be a bit of a happy medium. (Educator 20)

> My thought is that even if they reach the competency, they might really want that chance to network and show off how great they are. I would love to hear from students about this. (Educator 19)

> I think building flexibility into placement would be the way to go. I don't know how I feel about competence, just because I can imagine certain groups of students being stuck with always doing longer placements. (Student 21)

> It might seem like a simple solution, but it's not. It would be really difficult for everyone to plan if you think you have a six-week placement but it might suddenly finish in two or three weeks. Like a student would need to have a pretty understanding employer to do that with no notice: "I told you six weeks, but I'm back now". And as [Educator 20] is saying, it makes it hard for educators to plan a progression and caseload. And [Student 21], that point is so important that if there are students, for example, with disability who are always going to need a bit longer, that's an equity issue. Then they're the ones having more severe placement poverty. (Educator 21)

Student 16 agreed that:

> A person with disability, it may take them a lot longer. It's another great rationale that this all needs to be paid, because if it's going to take you longer to demonstrate competency and build up skills, you shouldn't be penalised for that, because that's then working against the whole equity imperative. And if it was paid, maybe people would want to stay on and develop full mastery [if they'd demonstrated competence more quickly].

Participants also discussed that:

> The whole idea of a competency model is that you don't fail. You're either competent or not yet competent, and you have another chance to demonstrate that competence, like in another placement, or if you've demonstrated that competence early, say in your first placement, why can't that be signed off then? (Educator 6)

Student 9 related an experience of a competency-based assessment model being applied inflexibly:

> We have six placements. The first two you're supposed to demonstrate beginner competencies, then the second two intermediate, then entry level for the final two. I knew that some of the skills I had were entry level in my first placement, but they still marked me as a beginner. They said, "Oh but you're only in the fourth week of your degree, you're not allowed to be at that stage yet." I found it so demeaning.

Recognition of prior experience was also suggested as a potential solution to reducing placement hours:

> If you're a mature age student, let's say, and you've worked within the social work field before, then come back to get a degree, then I think it would be beneficial if their prior experience could be included in their placement hours. So maybe their placement hours could be reduced. (Student 11)

Student 27 commented that they had completed relevant vocational training, a Certificate III, during the final year of high school and wondered if it could count towards placement hours/competencies. "I think considering relevant experience as well. Some of us end up working part-time jobs while at uni, so having that experience count would be helpful" (Student 27). Educator 2 elaborated: "Whether it's the same industry or a different industry, skills like working in a team are transferable." Student 17 added: "And not just working, but also volunteering. A lot of people volunteer and the jobs they volunteer in are the same as a lot of paid jobs."

Student 12 wondered: "It may be hard for us to gather all the evidence to show that we have these experiences and competencies". Participants went on to discuss ePortfolios as a possible mechanism whereby students would "need to have your supervisors sign off on so that it's official" (Student 17), along the lines of the proposed National Skills Passport (Australian Government, 2025). Ideally, that would include contributions like caring work, noting that students from equity-deserving backgrounds may not have the time to take on volunteering roles, and that caring work is relevant experience for some degrees/professions.

Participants discussed that recognition of prior experience/learning is not straightforward to implement:

> It would need a really strong RPL [Recognition of Prior Learning] model to support it. And I don't think universities are set up to be able to do that, because you would need people in the university to be accredited to make those assessments and we're not really RTOs [Registered Training Organisations]. (Educator 6)

Educator 27 was concerned about workload implications:

> I'd worry logistically who is going to critique this portfolio and decide whether or not students have met the outcomes. From a workload perspective my plate is already very full.

Some participants discussed that these prior and current experiences would not replace placement—there would need to be detailed discussions about what counted and how:

> Where do you draw the line at what's considered experience? For example, with tutoring, some people might think that could count towards teaching [placements].

> But I don't personally think tutoring would be beneficial as a placement for teaching because managing a class is the key thing you learn. (Student 29)

Placements in students' existing jobs were discussed regarding how to avoid potential conflicts of interest:

> As long as there's some sort of office set up for students to contact if they're on placement and if they're unsure if they're being treated ethically. And maybe it's about having that conversation early on, about why it's important to do your placement correctly. (Educator 24)

> Provided these things are declared, they can be managed. (Educator 6)

Student 16 replied*:*

> Absolutely, that's how we do it in literally every other sector. I sit on a couple of boards and committees, where everyone already has relationships with a whole bunch of other organisations and we just declare it and manage it. It seems infantilising to students to say, "oh, you couldn't possibly manage this conflict, therefore we're making a decision for you".

Participants discussed examples of placements in students' workplaces:

> There's a program called AIMS, Assistants in Medicine program, where funds are given to the hospital to employ students and that's either on top of their placement or part of their placement, which is better. (Student 4)

> I know that in childcare, students can find their own placement and can just stay in their workplace to do their placement, which I think is reasonable. (Student 10)

> With teaching, once you've done 75% of your degree, you can be a casual teacher. And that's honestly much more enriching than actually doing placement sometimes. So that should be able to count. (Student 29)

Student 10 suggested: "Maybe we can continue to work in the same organisation and they allocate us to a different [hospital] ward or different location of the practice. That will be much easier for us."

Educator 8 observed:

> It's easier for some students because they're not nervous about joining a new organisation, so they can just focus on their learning, rather than all the … anxiety and managing different personalities and things like that.

Participants went on to point out equity issues if not all students had access to such paid roles:

> The problem with that is just differentiating who gets these roles. (Student 4)

> In my cohort, only a few students work as allied health assistants, maybe less than five. (Student 26)

> I'm an international student and I don't have any connections here [to find a relevant job]. Although most of us [international students in the cohort] have other part-time jobs, we don't have allied health assistant jobs or anything related. That's why we came to study the degree, because we're not working in allied health in the first place. (Student 14)

Educator 1 pointed out that there would likely also be pay discrepancies between students' paid jobs that could be counted towards placement:

> which makes the idea really tough, because it sounds really great, and yes, people should be able to do placements in their workplaces that are relevant to their degree rather than doubling up or having to quit your job so you can fulfil your placement requirements that are unpaid, and then you have to magically go back and find another job after you finish your placement. But at the same time, how do we make it fair for everyone?

Participants also discussed the need to ensure relevant learning experiences: "Placement is a place for education and not being made to do just the most lowly administrative tasks" (Student 4).

One participant suggested that placement sites offer students a few hours of paid work per week, in addition to their placement hours:

> You could work for an hour or two longer [each day] and get paid for that period of time. That would help the placement site maybe release some of their staff demands and create income for those students who require it. I would be more willing to maybe spend an extra five to 10 hours a week if that could be something that aids me with some of the costs of doing a placement. (Student 8)

Simulated placements were discussed as one potential way to reduce placement costs, though they would only reduce travel and not necessarily hours: "Instead of going on placement, I just go to the uni. I'm in the simulation ward but it's the same amount of time" (Student 12). Participants expressed concerns about students in simulated placements "missing out on that opportunity to connect with professionals in your field" (Educator 15), though this was explained by Educator 14 as being a preparation for placement rather than a replacement, and with an emphasis on learning with peers.

One participant suggested embedding more of the learning activities that may be expected during placement into coursework, thus reducing placement hours:

> If you have assessments that measure the same sorts of skills that you're trying to demonstrate, then when you go into placements, you wouldn't have to demonstrate it because you've already provided evidence through coursework. (Student 27)

Student 17 considered this from another angle, proposing that if learning activities are covered on placement then coursework hours could be reduced: "Do your 1,000 placement hours but then maybe cut some time off our class work, because we're doing all that in placement as well as class."

Student-led clinics were also discussed as a flexible placement model that may reduce students' travel time:

> I want to give 100% vote for student clinics. I think they're excellent. The tax clinics that are run by many institutions, that are supported by the tax office, are outstanding. It means you can do your placement on campus. The opportunities for exploitation [of students] are low and it's under the supervision of academics. (Educator 6)

> We have that in law. People who can't afford a lawyer can come to the law clinic, obviously [the students are] closely supervised. (Educator 27)

Student-led clinics have the added benefit that “they give a university so much more social license to operate in the environment that it exists in, because they’re giving back” (Student 16).

4. Reduced or subsidised living costs

Accommodation costs were noted as a big issue, particularly for rural placements or any placements where students have to relocate, especially in medicine and health where a lot of students complete rural placements. The context of many rural areas “crying out” for professionals to move and work there (Educator 22) was acknowledged.

One possible solution to the rural accommodation shortage would be a homestay system:

> Having a host family where the student can stay for a short amount of time, and then that will help them connect better with the community. It might require a bit of funding to make it more attractive for people in the local community. (Educator 23)

Participants noted that international students were sometimes ineligible for funding, such as rural placement scholarships, and so needed to be included in any financial support schemes.

There was a recognition that placement sites in some regional/remote/rural areas were inaccessible without a car, or for students in these areas travelling elsewhere for placement:

> We have a lot of regional, remote students who don’t have a lot of public transport and really struggle getting to any sort of placement because they don’t have a car. You might wait two hours for a bus that doesn’t get close to where you want to go. I was talking to Trade Investment in Queensland recently, and one of [the] things they suggested was some sort of way of funding students for rental cars to get them to placements. (Educator 13)

Even within large metropolitan areas, transport costs can be significant:

> Subsidising travel would be really beneficial for those of us who don’t have cars. We will travel on public transport up to two hours each way to get to placement and it really adds up. (Student 21)

> I’m a part-time student doing placements and my Opal card is an adult [rather than a student] card. A concession Opal card would be immensely helpful. (Student 24)

Student participants wanted to be allocated to placements close to where they lived, to reduce travel time and costs:

> Actually, I live next to a hospital, but I was not allocated to that hospital even though I know the students who were don’t live nearby. Maybe they’re like an hour’s drive away. And I was like, why is it allocated in this way? It doesn’t make any sense at all, because if I can actually go for a placement in the hospital next to me, I don’t even need to pay anything. I’ll just walk there. (Student 7)

Educator participants agreed about the benefits of students being allocated to placements close to home: “You’d have more time available to do other things. You’d reduce your transport costs, which kind of add up over the year” (Educator 5).

Participants also acknowledged that chronic placement shortages in some disciplines, together with students in some disciplines needing to have a variety of placement

experiences, meant that students being allocated placements near home may not be possible: “I know it’s difficult because the uni is struggling to find placement locations” (Student 21).

A participant shared the situation of not having access to a laptop while on placement:

> Last year my laptop broke, and unfortunately I did not have the funds to fix or replace it. Luckily my sibling gave me a desktop computer. But when I went on placement, I didn’t have a device. [Educator] thankfully lent me an iPad from the uni, so that was super helpful. (Student 24)

Participants discussed possible schemes such as laptop libraries, like those in schools, so that students can easily borrow devices, which are tracked via GPS to ensure return. It could be helpful if placement sites had devices available for short-term borrowing and if sites with client/patient confidentiality rules could provide students with devices to use on site that could not be taken home.

Other suggestions for reducing costs included that universities could subsidise uniform costs and name badges if they are required on placement by buying in bulk, and perhaps that could be arranged for compulsory vaccination as well. Perhaps pharmacy students could give the vaccinations, as was done during the COVID-19 pandemic, or university clinics could have a vaccination day, which would save on GP costs. Participants also suggested that any mandatory preparation for placement, such as CPR training, should count towards placement hours.

Food pantries were welcome on campus, though participants pointed out that these were inconvenient for students on placement at other locations and so food vouchers would be more helpful. Food vouchers could potentially be provided by universities or by employers, and could have the added benefit of supporting small businesses at or near placement sites. Student 4 commented that:

> It’s a bit of a last line thing. Like if you’re putting your students in a situation where they need free food to get through the week, surely something needs to be done earlier than that.

Educator 26 pointed out that it can be a bit humiliating to have to “line up’” for free food: “When I was a student, there was a level of embarrassment if you’re going to the food pantry and other people are there.”

5. Reduced costs of higher education

The high costs of some degrees, particularly professional master’s degrees with placements, contributed to overall student debt and poverty. For example, in the Master of Psychology: “We’re expected to do 1,000 hours of placement and the course costs $64,000” (Student 3).

Student 3 went on to explain that among their cohort of just under 30 students, there were only two Commonwealth supported places (CSPs):

> That’s not free, it just means that $32,000 per year becomes $8,000. It means the bulk of students just have to accept that extremely high HECS [Higher Education Contribution Scheme] debt to do the degree. The introduction of more CSP places across all [postgraduate] programs would [help], not so much dealing with that immediate financial burden but more with the ongoing financial burden.

Participants discussed that increasing CSPs would entail "convincing the government that postgraduate study is worth it, not just like an extra thing for students" (Student 21) and that "you'd have to tie the Commonwealth supported places to government priorities, like workforce shortages" (Student 4).[1]

Participants noted that tuition-fee-free education was historically available in Australia, prior to 1989 when the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) was introduced, but felt that, realistically, it was unlikely to happen again, "unless you get a massive change of government" (Educator 25). Free higher education in other countries such as the Scandinavian countries was linked to those populations "paying a much higher proportion of tax than we do in Australia" (Educator 25) and probably wasn't realistic: "If you ask for too much, it's not going to happen. There are more immediate, realistic solutions [to address placement poverty]" (Student 4).

Participants also noted some particular schemes in teaching where tuition fees would be waived:

> It's for secondary teaching in Victoria. You have to work in a government school, so there are a few clauses to receiving your fees waived. And there are a few other ones in NSW. One of them is if you teach rural, they'll cover the whole degree. And there's another one, which it's not completely free, but if you're working in a school as a school learning support officer, they'll fund part of your degree up to $30,000, which is amazing. You have to go to certain universities [to be eligible]. (Educator 26)

6. Clear communication

Participants discussed that it would be helpful if students knew about placement costs well in advance, perhaps even before they started their degrees, "even in the handbook, so before or as soon as you enrol, you would see the costs" (Student 28). That way, they could prepare financially:

> Maybe set an expectation for the students doing the courses, like, "hey, as a mandatory thing, you will need to do these placements" … Just telling them early, like you may want to find a part-time job [to start saving up]. (Educator 3)

Students were often unaware of additional costs, such as parking, being expected "to take clients in their own cars during placement" (Student 23), professional clothing, and so on, so there is a need to make all associated costs clear: "The most transparent thing would be to compile some sort of sheet, try and present the students with clear costs" (Student 23).

Participants also recommended making clear the time commitment of placements:

> You might get told a number of hours, but more clarity around it. Like, "you're going to be on placement for three weeks and you aren't going to be able to do paid work in that time, you'll have to save up in advance." (Educator 2)

> Knowing the placement cost early on gives you a chance to seek scholarship, if your university offers any. Unfortunately last year, I did not know I could apply for [them]. (Student 27)

[1] We note that in September 2024, the Commonwealth Government introduced more CSPs for postgraduate psychology degrees.

6.2.2 Placement exclusion

We now turn to the proposed solutions to alleviate placement exclusion, summarised in Table 3 and then elaborated in the text below.

Table 3: Solutions to alleviate placement exclusion

Proposed solution	Brief elaboration
Mentoring and tailored support	
Supportive mentoring/supervision	Reflective sessions with an educator at least once a week to discuss learning and issues. If it's group supervision, students can share experiences across different placement sites and learn from each other.
Peer mentoring	Set this up in advance—it may work best during placement or pre- and post-placement, depending on context
In degrees where students organise their own placements, universities need to provide support	Support students (for example, international) who do not have personal networks
Advocacy	
Attention to power dynamics	Students are often uncomfortable speaking up as their placement educator is marking them and may provide them with a reference letter. Provide support for students to resolve issues.
Someone who can advocate for students	Having an independent person who can speak up for students when required
Encourage membership of / involvement with student union and/or as student members of relevant professional union, or professional body, or other student advocacy groups	Union representatives may be able to advocate for rights of students. Student membership of professional bodies can help draw attention to placement issues.
Collect and act on student feedback on placement experiences	An external body may be needed to deal with complaints because each university deals with these situations differently, and there is an imbalance of power between the student, the placement site/placement educator, and the university
Advocacy on a larger scale to employers and placement sites regarding embracing students with disability and the benefits of a diverse workforce	Showcase success stories and the benefits of a diverse workforce
Wellbeing and support	
Help students when they encounter stressful/traumatic incidents on placement—pastoral care	More mental health support needed in universities; also, provide students with some proactive, preventative strategies
Easily accessible and well communicated support	For example, a clear document and/or flowchart of where to go for support, who to contact, and what each person/place offers students

Proposed solution	Brief elaboration
Capacity-building for educators	
Training for placement educators about inclusive practices	Build into existing workplace training if possible, and build into university-level education
Curriculum design	
Consistency within each university on how placements work—WIL standards/expectations	Ensure universities are accountable to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) guidelines and WIL quality framework(s)
Pedagogical tools—common assessment model, clear learning outcomes, learning plans, facilitated reflective practice with peers	Having a national standardised competency-based assessment model (for example, COMPASS in speech pathology) is helpful and could be a model for other disciplines
Whole-of-degree approach to placements/WIL	Students are supported to engage in WIL early in their degree, in preparation for off-campus placements
A focus on inclusive practices	
Improved placement allocation processes regarding inclusion and cultural safety	Take into account student preferences—including being able to select placement sites that are neurodiverse-affirming, queer-friendly, understanding of religious practices, etc. Tailor placements to students' skills/strengths, for example, if they speak more than one language.
Ensure cultural safety for Indigenous students	Anti-racism strategies; increase educators' understanding of Indigenous knowledges through a dialogic, conversational approach
Disability processes need to be easy to navigate, students are supported, educators are trained	Ensure that students with disability are supported by universities to request adjustments at placement sites. Clearer guidance and actual enforcement.
Simplify the processes for applying for WIL scholarships	Ensure students do not have to "prove" chronic conditions over and over. Ensure people assessing the scholarships have training in inclusion and disability.
Flexible placements	
Part-time placements, particularly for students with disability and students who have caring responsibilities	Allows students to balance placements with looking after their wellbeing and/or caring responsibilities
Flexible placements, including flexible start and end dates, and flexible daily start and end time	If a student doesn't complete a placement (for example, due to illness), offer options other than just waiting for the next placement block

Table 3 shows that the solutions related to placement exclusion have been grouped into seven themes: 1) Mentoring and tailored support; 2) Advocacy; 3) Wellbeing and support; 4) Capacity-building for educators; 5) Curriculum design, 6) A focus on inclusive practices; and 7) Flexible placements. We discuss each in turn below, illustrated with quotes from workshop

participants, to show how we explored the solutions, particularly barriers to each, and how they may be overcome.

1) Mentoring and tailored support

Participants agreed that effective mentoring and supervision processes help students feel included and supported during their placements.

> Nursing is really good for that stuff, because they put such a heavy focus on debriefing. Like on my placements we will have a debrief at a minimum once a week for a minimum of an hour, with either our clinical facilitator or a clinical nurse educator, and that counts towards our placement hours. And there's lots of strategies in place when you deal with traumatic things on placement. (Student 1)

One student described a system of a "tertiary mentor" for students in teaching degrees. The mentors are very experienced teachers hired by the university to mentor students. They meet with the student and the supervising teacher at the same time: "It's been an open and transparent process, communicating some of my strengths and weaknesses, reflecting on the whole thing, and where we're headed" (Student 18).

Educator 8 discussed the benefits of alumni mentors in a program they ran, noting that as individuals who are "separate from their workplace supervisor and their academic supervisor" and not involved in assessment, they help "[students] feel more at ease".

External, informal networks may also be useful. Student 9 had not encountered placements that were supportive of them as a nonbinary and trans person but had joined an informal mentoring and support network within their profession.

University educator reflection and peer support were found to be helpful:

> We have a reflective session with our tutor every week. We reflect on what we have learned. And if we have any problems, we can raise them, and they will deal with it. It's good because we're all in different sites. Some of us are in hospitals, some of us are in aged care, so we can actually share our experiences at different sites. And I can know how others are doing in their site, and how it is different from my placement. (Student 7)

Student 24 agreed: "You rely so much on your peers, in terms of emotional and clinical support." As did Student 6, who related that in teaching, "they group you together on placements with two to three peers, so you have not only that reflective practice of your peers but also a support network and a social hub".

Participants proposed that universities provide support for students who need to source their own placements:

> For international students, they don't have a network, it really should be the university's responsibility to provide them with more assistance on how to establish that network. (Educator 33)

Alumni mentoring was suggested as one example of a way universities could support students with placements and career preparation: "It's a huge benefit, especially for international students. It's really hard for them to navigate the Australian labour market, so having a personal mentor can really assist them" (Educator 8).

2) Advocacy

Participants discussed that, due to power dynamics, students may prefer to speak about placement issues to someone not involved with assessing them. One student advocate described speaking at a student placement workshop and being inundated with students wanting to speak with them about placement issues that they felt they could not discuss with their supervisors: “It really intersected quite heavily with culturally and linguistically diverse people and people with disabilities” (Student 5).

Addressing this power imbalance may involve:

- “A support person that you can contact. They don’t have control over your mark; they’re not going to fail you” (Educator 2).
- “Someone in the profession who can mentor a group of students and provide support. Just trying to address the power imbalance, because it’s huge” (Educator 16).
- “Putting in some checks and balances around power structures, your mentor could advocate for you” (Educator 17).
- “A regular check in to help students bring up any things they find difficult in the placement” (Student 14).

Such advocates ideally would be “culturally informed, trauma informed” (Student 5).

One participant described a student-led initiative:

> I’ve been the student representative for our cohort and I compile a lot of our complaints or things we feel could be better and I’m that direct contact to the clinic director or whoever needs to be involved. It’s helpful because not every student feels confident to broach these issues. (Student 3)

Student 5 agreed that students often feel more comfortable speaking with a peer, and suggested specific placement advocates: “A bunch of students on campus who you can go to, they’ve been on placement, they know what it’s like and they can help you advocate for yourself”.

And Educator 21 commented that, ideally, each educator has been able to create an environment/relationship in which students feel comfortable to share issues: “If that educator student relationship is working well, then those discussions can be had early enough to do something about it.” Educator 21 went on to recommend the model of “a separate academic, who’s the student liaison contact who sometimes even follows that whole group of students through the degree, so it’s someone they know”.

Participants recommended making sure students know where and how to raise issues. Educator 4 gave the example of a student, who was a pre-service teacher, going straight to the principal without trying to resolve a situation first with their mentor, teacher, or supervisor. It can’t be “an unwritten rule, it needs to be a very clear procedure for people to follow”.

Educator 6 extended the concept of students knowing how to raise issues to ensuring students know their rights:

> Part of the early engagement in WIL should be helping students understand what their rights are. It's always about their responsibilities. It's never about their rights and how they can protect themselves, and what can or shouldn't be asked of them.

Student 9 agreed: "It's true. It's like, 'you should be grateful to be here'. They never say things like, 'you shouldn't be asked to email at 10pm'."

Some disciplines like social work have a system of paid external supervisors alongside the workplace supervisor and the university educator:

> Each week the social work student would not only be meeting with their workplace supervisor, but they'd also have a meeting with their external supervisor, so if anything is happening that they feel they can't talk to their workplace supervisor about, then the external supervisor is meant to be an advocate for the student and help sort that out. (Educator 28)

Some larger sites may have a person responsible for coordinating/leading student placements, who could be a potential resource for any issues.

Other sources of support such as university-based student representative councils/associations were helpful in advocating for students' rights on placement but felt to be "too far downstream", only getting involved when "things have gone really badly", so timeliness is important in offering support in real time (Educator 11).

Unions may also be able to support students with workplace issues that need resolving, and helping them:

> Know your rights, what's not okay, what resources are available … From the union perspective this is a way they can demonstrate value to future members. Students could join their relevant unions "for free or at steeply discounted" rates. (Educator 32)

Students joining their professional bodies could help focus attention on placement issues:

> If the universities aren't holding up their end of the bargain [in supporting students to have high-quality, inclusive placements] and then the people taking on those placements aren't holding up their end of the bargain, then a central body [like the professional body] should hold people accountable on both sides and make it a fair system for students, no matter which university you go to. (Educator 4)

Educator 8 agreed that "it's important for the accrediting bodies to recognise the issues and situations that some students are facing". Potentially, the professional body could play a role in ensuring placements are high quality and inclusive:

> The [professional body] could keep a record of placement complaints and look at the ethics behind it. It's outsourcing from the university and having a third party that, whether the student passes or fails doesn't bother them. So if there's a clinic that gets, you know, ten placement complaints, there's a bit of a pattern. Maybe that person needs further education in how to manage students, or something needs to be looked at. (Educator 16)

> We've had students in the past suggest a registry of supervisors who have been trained and have received some evaluation over time and can lose their registration or be put on probation. (Educator 24)

One participant, Student 14, mentioned that “striking off” placement educators may be unrealistic due to chronic placement shortages in some disciplines but instead perhaps students could be assisted to move to a different placement site. In teaching, the tertiary mentor (mentioned earlier in the section on mentoring) could play a role in “coming to your placement school to observe the dynamics between you and the supervising teacher, or you and the school”. (Student 18)

Educator 17 recommended having positive incentives for placement sites as well:

> A set of ideals that we’re all working towards, sort of a charter, a common set of things [demonstrating] that they’re aiming to act ethically … we give our students a good experience, we’re not going to treat them as unpaid employees … The external body needs both the stick as well as the carrot or the praise coming along with it, otherwise you’re just going to alienate placement providers.

Student feedback was viewed as important and should be anonymous and passed on to placement sites for action. A placement educator commented: “I’ve never once received any feedback. I know [the university] collects the feedback from students but then I don’t hear it. So how can I improve?” (Educator 16)

Another participant described that a summary of student feedback on placements was made available to future students: “How supported we felt, whether we felt like we got what we wanted out of placement”, which helps future students make an informed decision about whether the placement is a good option for them … “You have it as far back as five years” (Student 3). In this instance the placement will be likely to suit each student and they will be motivated to do their best, which is a win for the student and a win for the site.

Another educator used student feedback to make selections about placement sites:

> I flag supervisors who give our students grief, and I try not to send students back there. Universities have a duty of care to look after our students, if they’ve told us a workplace is toxic. (Educator 4)

Educator 19 also emphasised the value of collecting positive feedback, “so that we can brag about how great it is” to gain/retain funding but also to learn “how can we improve, what are the barriers”.

Participants suggested ways to build capacity at placement sites about the benefits of a diverse workforce:

> Some strategies I’ve seen that have worked are embracing champions. It’s always essential to have leadership on board for embracing diverse workplaces. I have developed a set of resources that showcase really good stories of where it’s worked nicely and well, and they can see the benefits to their clients or internally to their organisation. (Educator 31)

3) Wellbeing and support

Participants agreed that student support mechanisms should be clearly communicated and very easy for students to find:

> A clear document that says, if you need support, if you’re having problems on your placement, these are the different ways you can access it, like a flowchart that

> outlines all the places you can get support and what each place will offer you. (Educator 16)

Part of supporting student inclusion on placement was about creating a supportive environment and relationships in which students feel safe to seek support:

> We know that nursing students encounter violence and harassment in their placement. I remember there was a study saying at least 50% of students encounter violence and harassment during the placement. So this is actually part of my role to prepare the students to encounter this and do some training before they go to placement. I let them know about the support services where they can go if they have these experiences and also tell them to prepare mentally that they may encounter these things rather than saying, “oh everyone is nice in the hospital”. And I check in with the students regularly. (Educator 7)

Participants discussed that universities should have sufficient resources to support students, particularly mental health support/counselling:

> Even at [a large university] students are saying they have to wait a couple of weeks before they get into counselling. So if there’s something urgent, half your placement might be over by the time you get in. And also the idea the first counsellor you see might not be the right fit for you and you might need to try again with someone different. There’s such a shortage of mental health support generally in the community, so if that’s something unis can put more funding towards, that would be a good thing. (Educator 21)

Another participant commented that at their university, there were “1.6 counsellors for all of our campuses” (Student 17).

Proactive, preventative strategies would also be helpful. Student 5 described “having management plans for my own wellbeing and knowing how to seek support. Embedding that into actual curriculum would help”; and Student 31 agreed it would be helpful to “have some sort of tools or strategies to deal with stressful situations, what sorts of things you can do to unwind, avoid burnout”.

Educator 21 recommended:

> Destigmatising the need to seek mental health support. Yes you can do self-care and prevention but if you do need to seek support, here’s how you do it, and lots of people do, and there’s nothing wrong with that, and it’s helpful.

Educator 32 added: “And tying it into part of a professional skill set”.

One educator shared that their placement preparation program involved discussions of:

> power and politics. So these are some of the challenges you might encounter when you’re on placement. Here are some strategies to deal with that, including sexual harassment. (Educator 8)

4) Capacity building for educators

Educator 20 suggested building professional learning about placement inclusion into existing workplace training, such as HETI modules for NSW Health. Student 5 commented that in workplaces:

> I would hope there would be some provision of training for inclusive practices towards universal accessibility within their own workplace. Obviously that's not controlled by the university, but if the university is selecting placement providers, perhaps that's something to look at. And for educators at universities, I would hope they would all be working towards universal accessibility.

Participants discussed that inclusive practices are often parts of professional standards/codes of conduct:

> The professional standards of many disciplines would have a lot built into them around inclusion, cultural competence, cultural safety. But it's whether those things actually happen in the workplace that's the next step, and some workplaces are probably much better at doing it than others. (Educator 21)

Some universities offer training for placement educators:

> [University] offers a free clinical educator training twice a year. And there are educators available at different universities that are happy to mentor you, and there are some practice guidelines around students and expectations. But it's up to you to go out and seek your own training. No one checks whether you've done any. It's very unregulated but the more you regulate things, the less people are going to want to do them, so it's a real balance. (Educator 16)

Educator 5 commented that:

> If there's training that would be helpful to support my students in any way, I'm personally more than happy to do that, whether it's paid or unpaid [but] other supervisors may be like, "Okay, well this is eating up too much time". If there was training for educators around inclusive practices then I'm all for it, because I think the better educators are trained then they're able to kind of deliver a better placement experience for the students.

Participants were unsure about whether such training should be mandatory, perhaps encouraged but not mandatory, and Educator 10 pointed out:

> It's easy to say that workplace supervisors need more training. But it's not that easy to implement. It would be lovely to have a set of training modules for university educators and a set for workplace supervisors, both with a lens of inclusive practices [tailored to their circumstances].

Educator 10 went on to suggest that such training could consist of short courses that provide digital badges or some other sort of recognition, with LinkedIn Learning used as an example of short video-based training. It could be viewed as a bonus for placement sites, if universities can offer "free micro credentials in workplace inclusion or accessibility or whatever the goal might be" (Educator 32).

Educator 12 commented that even with professional learning:

> The evidence says that people revert back to what they do. I'm sure we all know some less experienced educators who are wonderful at what they do, and some very experienced people that will just never change.

5) Curriculum design

Participants discussed the varied ways that WIL is enacted across and within institutions and disciplines and how it was important to have:

> consistency across an institution, an institution really has to get their act together in order to provide the right guidelines and standards and support. There should be a really clear governance structure of WIL inside institutions. And the reason it's not is probably because of resourcing. (Educator 10)

Pedagogical tools were felt to be helpful in supporting students and having clear learning outcomes and assessment. We need to have:

> very clear learning outcomes for placements. What are the pedagogical outcomes that a student is supposed to be taking out of this environment? What is the performance evidence they need to be able to demonstrate to be marked as competent? (Student 16)

Educator 16 gave an example where this was occurring:

> In speech pathology, we have COMPASS and we know exactly what we have to achieve by the end of the placement. It's got clear outcomes. A student has to progress from novice to intermediate to entry level. It outlines everything really clearly for students and for clinical educators, so we're all talking about the same thing.

Student 24 reflected that:

> I especially like the behavioural examples [in COMPASS], like examples of what each stage should do, that's very helpful … And you can access it in retrospect, to see what feedback you've received in other placements.

Learning plans or agreements were felt to be helpful, with clear expectations for each of the three parties involved in a placement—student, placement site, and university—"so everyone knows what their role is" (Student 20). This can extend to a face-to-face relationship-building meeting that can include negotiation about flexibility and "it does tend to prevent issues cropping up later" (Educator 8).

Participants also discussed student choice and agency—giving them a "menu" of options to demonstrate competencies and practise skills. Participants mentioned reflection and reflective tools as helpful.

Participants agreed that students should be supported to engage in WIL early in their degree, in preparation for off-campus placements, and one educator shared an example from their university:

> We really value the preparation stage for work-integrated learning. We have a dedicated unit, or course, as some universities call them, which is a preparation unit for the workplace. They have those really practical career development learning activities, writing an application, a CV, designing a LinkedIn profile. We've also integrated the university's mentoring program into that. The university uses alumni and every student enrolled in the preparation unit is personally matched with a mentor so that they get insights relevant to their degree. (Educator 8)

Participants also saw a need to ensure WIL is actually integrated:

> Not seeing placements as a tack on or add on, but integrated as part of a whole of course journey. We need additional opportunities woven through every single subject that connects students to who they are and a sense of identity and what they want to do [as a career] … We need more opportunities, not just placement, for students to engage with industry in safe contexts. So enable networking skills, enable conversations with industry partners, where students can ask some questions, test out their application of knowledge before they go on placement. (Educator 10)

6) A focus on inclusive practices

Participants discussed ways that they could introduce themselves to sites: “It would be nice if there was some sort of run down before you start placement, like, this is who I am, this is my culture” (Student 22).

Educator 29 suggested that there be a way for students with fluency in languages other than English to indicate this: “You could have a badge or something that says I’m fluent in Mandarin or Spanish or whatever.”

Student 6 drew a link to health workers indicating which Indigenous community they are from: “I know if you’re working in health and you’re Indigenous, you have your mob on the badge, which is very helpful when working in communities.”

Student 22 wished they could be allocated to a placement near their community: “Because then you don’t have to explain who you are, your beliefs, how you grew up, because most people understand you anyway.”

However, there was recognition of the barriers to being able to allocate placements according to student preferences, including chronic shortages—“We’re just always scrambling [to get enough placements]” (Educator 21)—and that “from a health professions perspective, you do not have a choice [in serving different community groups]. It is literally a service.” (Educator 29)

Participants wondered how placement sites might indicate that they are inclusive: “You would have to have [sites] register themselves as neurodiverse-affirming or queer-friendly, or you know, we’ve got experience in these cultural or religious beliefs” (Educator 29).

Educator 18 pondered: “I wonder if cultural safety can become part of the vetting process for new placement sites. We should take more care to really assess the cultural safety of a workplace.”

Student 16 commented:

> I’d love it if workplaces needed to prove to students that they had capabilities and proficiencies in those areas. It’s all well and good to say, “oh, we’re queer-inclusive”, but like, prove it. As an autistic person who’s worked across a whole range of workplaces, they all go at interview, “oh yeah, we’re really good at this”. And then you start at the workplace and they still don’t understand the basics. So I think we need some kind of framework that workplaces need to prove that they have ABC competency in order to accept students. It shouldn’t always be the students’ responsibility. And there’s only so much the university can do to influence the way a workplace is operating.

When asked what Student 16 would find convincing from placement sites, they responded:

> I'd love to have some really transparent student evaluations as well as a set of evidence, like have you got this policy in place and do you follow it? Do the staff who work for you have a good experience?

Participants suggested that universities could look for placement sites that are accredited with existing initiatives like SAGE Athena Swan, the Australian LGBTQ+ inclusion awards, Welcoming Workplaces, and:

> Supply Nation Organisations [verified Indigenous businesses] who have already made declarations about the makeup of their staff, and the commitments that they've made, so those could be good options for Indigenous students. (Educator 6)

Cultural safety for Indigenous students on placement was discussed as an issue needing urgent attention:

> There's still a long way to go to make these programs a lot more inclusive [for Indigenous students]. One of the difficulties of clinical training is that it's grounded in Western ways of doing things. So I think cultural competency within the training programs, within the placement environment, and of the supervisors is hugely important to actually make these places that students want to go [to], and they feel like their culture will be recognised and valued, and therefore they can contribute safely to a space. (Student 20)

Educator 22 commented that*:*

> We don't have safety for our Indigenous students and we're discussing whether to place Indigenous students together on placement, because they've got support with each other … We also need to have a pathway to support non-Indigenous allies to do a better job, but it does have to be informed by our Indigenous colleagues.

Participants talked about the importance of students learning about systemic barriers to inclusion:

> In health we have embedded power and structural forces to alienate Indigenous and CALD students, so we need to firstly tackle awareness all the way through the various years [of university study] and then talk about how to overcome the barriers. It's understanding that the structural forces are significant and how students might address that when they're on placement. I don't have the answers here; it's a really big thing. (Educator 22)

Student 16 agreed that:

> It's really difficult society level work. It's got to be about how do we create university cultures that proactively support and stand by students, and ensure there are certain standards that are being met by the places that we are sending students. That allyship piece in a proactive way is really important.

Overall, participants agreed that:

> We have a duty of care not to send students into an environment that's not safe, and that needs to override everything. It can't be placement at all costs. And I think that giving staff the toolkit and skills to be able to navigate those decisions … there's got to be more human ways to respond. (Student 16)

We also discussed the importance of strengths-based approaches and that "underpinning all of this is that relational aspect of being able to treat each person we encounter as an individual with their own individual needs, strengths, and interests." (Educator 21)

A challenge of such relational approaches is that:

> To do things relationally we need resources, and we're at a time of what's likely to be a hyper-diminished decrease in resources. I don't think anyone in a university would say they weren't acting in a caring or individual way. It's about structures and also capacity, in terms of what is a reasonable ask of individuals who work in WIL teams, which is a very difficult job, lots and lots of emotional labour. Emotional labour should be resourced. Maybe there needs to be provision for debriefing. (Educator 30)

Student 16 built on this to say:

> Realistic perspectives are so important here because we can come up with principles-based approaches, but we know that universities aren't very good at them. They need specific directives and actions that are really easy to understand.

Participants had extensive discussions about ensuring placements were accessible for students with disability, including relating disheartening experiences of applying for accommodations:

> Some of the language of the application can be confronting. And whenever I open my portal there's a summary on top saying the stuff you cannot do, it's like, "[name] cannot do this this and that." (Student 15)

Student 21 suggested:

> Better support for students [to] go over how to disclose certain things, how to co-create a learning plan between you and your supervisor, and making adjustments in the workplace.

Clear communications between universities and placement sites about disability accommodations were acknowledged as a tricky area, because "privacy law stops the university being able to give us all the information about a student" (Educator 12), which "then puts all the burden of figuring that out all on the student" (Student 19). Student 5 elaborated on this from their own experience:

> The burden is falling on students to create accessibility for themselves, to prove their disabilities, and just mould ourselves into the typical mainstream accessibility model. I agree with there being student-led disclosure but I have an issue where the responsibility for ensuring accessibility falls on the student. Sometimes it's not safe to talk about disability, sometimes you don't feel comfortable. This is another tick for universal accessibility, because if we're working towards that then we're working away from this individualistic, "well that was on you, you didn't tell me. You didn't disclose to me all about what's happening in your body or your brain, and that's your fault." (Student 5)

Participants acknowledged the lack of clarity on who is responsible for ensuring placements are accessible:

> In the disability space, the Disability Standards for Education, which are under the *Disability Discrimination Act*, are the primary vehicle through which students are given their adjustments to do their study. But all of a sudden, when we get into

> placements and there's an employer involved, both the hosting employer and the educational institution kind of just like point at each other and be like, "no, it's your responsibility." So there's this gap of like, is it the Disability Standards for Education that apply here and is the university responsible, or is it the Disability Employment Standards and is the employer responsible? It would seem like if you're not getting paid, then it's the university that's responsible. So yeah, just clearer guidelines and actual enforcement around who is responsible, and who students need to go to when things aren't going right. In my experience, WIL staff don't always have the skillset to be able to look at what workplace adjustments look like and be able to give advice to the hosting employer. (Student 16)

Educator 28 stressed that universities need to ensure the Disability Standards for Education are being met on placement, and students need to know that.

The work health and safety team at the placement site may be helpful in making adjustments for students with disability:

> How are they looking after their employees and catering for disability within their workplace? Because when a student comes in, they should be catered for just the same. So if they have a really supportive, inclusive workplace, a student would feel comfortable to share their disability and say, "this is what I need". (Educator 4)

Reminding placement sites that it's the same as making accommodations for staff, and that they have the policies and procedures in place already would be helpful, so that they realise "they're not reinventing the wheel" (Educator 31).

Participants agreed that training is needed for educators on supporting students with disability:

> Supervisors aren't trained to work with students with any form of disability … This assumption that just because someone's a healthcare practitioner or a teacher or whatever, they're automatically a brilliant supervisor and teacher is just a little bit silly. Even if you do disclose to supervisors, sometimes they can be quite confused and kind of expect you to create your own adjustments, which is a lot to put on a student who's already trying to figure out how to do placement. Much better training for supervisors would be brilliant. (Student 21)

Educator 10 suggested that this training could be national, free, and online, and for campus-based and placement site educators—not every individual university needs to develop its own training resources. The training should "address all of the required legislation, including the disability standards for education" and be "something that's not too onerous for the educator". The resource could be developed and facilitated through a network such as the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training (ACDET) or the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN, now WIL Australia).

Placement sites may value having some sort of grant to be able to invest in tools to take on more students with disability (Student 31). Educator 32 extended this suggestion:

> Yeah if the universities could offer like five grand for this accessibility upgrade, with the agreement that you'll take X number of students over however many years, that seems like a really cool way to work it for both parties.

Educator 32 acknowledged the barrier of understaffing of disability services within universities, and that perhaps:

> It would be helpful for there to be disability officers embedded in the WIL partnerships offices at universities, or the other way around. Because these things sit quite siloed from each other and would benefit from some cross placement.

The discussions about disability included the need to review inherent requirements for degrees:

> Sometimes I talk to other academics and they say, “well it’s an inherent requirement that a graduate be able to do blah, blah, blah. And if you have this kind of disability, you won’t be able to do that.” And sometimes I go, “when was the last time those inherent requirements of the profession were examined? You know, was it 10 years ago? 20 years ago? 30?” It’s incumbent on us to revisit the inherent requirements because they act as gatekeepers to the profession. (Educator 31)

7) Flexible placements

One student already has access to flexible placements, as their university had made changes based on student feedback: “There’s full-time, part-time, even your own personalised part-time [where] you’re not [officially a part-time student] but you can defer your placement” (Student 3).

Participants recommended:

> More flexibility for students who are sick during their placement, where they can have another block of placement, maybe within another month or in a few weeks, instead of waiting another whole year. (Student 14)

One barrier to offering flexible hours and days is staffing:

> We do not have sites that allow students to go over the weekend. And we do not have sites that can offer overnight placement. That’s because we don’t have the facilitators; we would need to pay the facilitators extra if they’re doing night shifts and also over the weekend. (Educator 7)

However, Educator 29 at a different university was able to have an educator on night shift so that students could come in on night shift, and suggested doing this more often in health care as “students may elect to do the nights or weekends when their partner is home or something”.

Another barrier to flexibility is university logistics:

> We’ve got 4,000 students going out at the same time, so if we start allowing students to pick and choose when they’re going out, it would just be a logistical nightmare. There are certain assessment dates that things have to be met by so that your degree gets completed. So if everyone’s doing their own thing, it just gets really tricky to keep up with everyone. (Educator 34)

In the next section, we present the findings from Workshop 4, wherein participants discussed how to disseminate project outcomes and maintain the network we had built.

6.3 Communicating project outcomes and forming a collective

Workshop participants were committed to addressing placement inequities:

> The benefits of a diverse and representative workforce cannot be overstated. It's just truly phenomenal in every way. The more colourful, the more vibrant our workforce, the healthier and the greater wellbeing for our community. (Student 20)

During the workshops, several participants shared that they were conducting research and/or advocacy related to placement inequities. They shared links to petitions, webpages, and research articles:

> The Australian Medical Student Association's big campaign this year is actually about placement poverty. And that's because we've had so many calls from medical students who are really distressed with the cost of living. There's often this paradigm that all medical students are rich and wealthy and still live with their parents, but that's actually not true. And because we have 2,000 plus hours of placement in our degree, it might become true, that the only people who can do medicine are those people. (Student 4)

> I've been advocating for paid placements with Students Against Placement Poverty. You might have seen that we got $319.50 means tested. We're still campaigning and trying to get at least minimum wage payments for students on placement. (Student 5)

During Workshop 4, participants discussed how to communicate the solutions detailed in Section 6.2 (see Tables 2 and 3 for summaries) to different audiences. We also asked participants what would be helpful to them in being able to communicate the project solutions within their own contexts, and also if they had any examples of effective communication. And finally, we talked about how participants would like to stay in touch as an ongoing community. We have summarised participants' suggestions using the subheadings below. They advocated for multiple methods and channels of communication.

6.3.1 Ideas on communicating the solutions to different audiences

Ideas suggested included:

- Use infographics to visually communicate key points, such as comparisons between unpaid and paid placements.
- Present solutions as "win/win", aligned with stakeholder needs and motivations; provide evidence as to how they will benefit.
- Use short videos.
- Use social media posts and engage with social media influencers, including student-focused TikTokers, to amplify messages.
- Stories, role plays, and vignettes can be powerful in expressing issues and creating empathy.
- Disseminate posters around campus.
- Tailor the solutions to different professions/disciplines.

- For academics, present at conferences and WIL Australia webinars.
- With students, share ideas before placements, even before starting the degree.
- Engage with employers, including industry groups, peak bodies, and professional bodies.
- Create stakeholder maps to clarify who needs to receive what type of information.
- Develop a glossary to establish common definitions for key terms, such as “placement poverty”.
- Leverage existing networks to distribute information efficiently and sustainably, such as WIL Australia and the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Association (EPHEA). Collaborate and tag other relevant groups to grow reach.
- Prepare a plain language summary of project findings/report.
- Have some short, simple, “bite-sized” dot point guidelines.
- Engage with unions and government bodies to push for systemic changes.
- Ensure student voices are heard at academic conferences, as they often have more impact than academic speakers. Support a group of students to attend so they have peer support.

6.3.2 What would help project participants champion the solutions?

Suggestions included:

- presentation materials, for example, slides
- short summaries
- resources/handouts for mentors
- LinkedIn community
- modules for placement educators on how to help and support students on placement
- factsheets for students
- short videos
- things that can be immediately implemented into practice
- case studies.

6.3.3 Examples of effective communication

Participants shared several examples of effective communication, including:

- Western Sydney University’s Five Moments That Matter: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2028259/5_Moments_that_Matter_-_ETP_FINAL_Document_2.pdf
- UN Sustainable Development Goals: https://sdgs.un.org/goals
- Institute for Collaborative Race Research: https://www.icrr.com.au/
- WHO hand hygiene https://www.who.int/teams/integrated-health-services/infection-prevention-control/hand-hygiene
- Nicole Crawford’s Fellowship guidelines: https://www.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2021/11/NicoleCrawford_Guidelines_final-bound_Digital.pdf

- Students Against Placement Poverty: https://www.instagram.com/sapp_endplacementpoverty/
- Hiring and Engaging Diverse Student Talent: Employer Toolkit: https://experientialmodules.utoronto.ca/faculty-and-staff/hiring-and-retaining-diverse-students/
- Australian Medical Students' Association Placement Poverty Campaign: https://amsa.org.au/advocacy-and-policy/cost-of-living/
- Paid Placements Aotearoa: https://www.paidplacementsaotearoa.org/

6.3.4 How participants would like to stay in touch in an ongoing network

Participants wanted to sustain momentum and connections beyond the project. They suggested to do this by:

- setting up a website with tailored resources for students, staff, policymakers, and facilitators
- linking the community via LinkedIn to encourage ongoing collaboration
- organising regular get togethers
- setting up a social media page that would be accessible and easy to share, for example, Instagram.

Student participants also expressed interest in a peer support network across universities, and may prefer an anonymous/private space to share concerns, due to power dynamics.

6.4 Reflections from the project team and participants on the process

6.4.1 Workshop participant feedback

Workshop participants were not formally invited to provide feedback on the workshop process; however, some elected to do so informally:

> Formatting of these workshops has been fantastic. I've really enjoyed being part of the conversation thank you, particularly representing a profession that often has no voice in these discussions.
>
> What amazing student colleagues you have working with you Amani.
>
> I'm so inspired by this collaborative approach. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute!
>
> Thanks Amani for these workshops. I've met some wonderful people, including my collaborator for our disability support resources! I'd love to collaborate further if there is scope to do so.
>
> Thanks for the opportunity to have our say this way. If there is anything else I can do to help out, please let me know.

> I am really getting a lot out of these workshops as a participant—thanks for the engaging conversations and I cannot wait to see the final results/outcomes :)
>
> It's going so well—kudos team!
>
> Important topic, thanks for working on this.
>
> Thank you so much and congratulations! I've really enjoyed chatting and learning in these workshops.
>
> Sincere thanks Amani and team for all your efforts in this space! It's been wonderful and eye opening to be part of the conversation.
>
> Thanks Amani for the awesome work you do! Looking forward to seeing the outcomes of this project.
>
> So happy to be asked here, great important work, thank you.
>
> What you've started here is part of that groundswell movement and getting people to really understand what we're talking about. And the fact that you had so many people who came back for all four [workshops] only speaks to that.
>
> It's really such great work and it's really wonderful to meet likeminded people in an environment where things are changing so quickly.
>
> A great initiative and really fabulous to involve students as researchers in an equity project.

6.4.2 Student co-researcher reflections

The project team's four student co-researchers participated in semi-structured reflective conversations, and key themes are presented below. The student co-researchers reflected that they enjoyed facilitating the workshops, conducting the literature review, and participating in and presenting at conferences:

> I really enjoyed doing the lit review. I loved that. I definitely learned a lot about accumulating information in an interesting way. (Tara)
>
> There were a lot of different types of people [in the workshops], it wasn't just only students. It really helped me learn more about the problem. And then also, I feel like it not only helped me be a better researcher, but it also changed my opinions in some ways. The knowledge that I gained and also the interactions I felt were very helpful, and I think that you could only get that from something like a workshop, and that is because it was so informal. I liked how it wasn't really like that structured. (Minahil)
>
> Before this project, I'd never been to a formal conference before. So it was a new experience for me, and being able to present our solutions was something I enjoyed. (Tina)
>
> [The conferences were] great opportunities to meet lots of people and network as well. (Lachlan)

The student co-researchers found some aspects of the project surprising, including the partnership approach, and expanding their understanding of placement issues:

> I think one thing that was surprising to me was our role within the project. I feel like we were all very involved throughout the process. And I just think that was really cool. (Minahil)
>
> Being a student that's going to go on placement I didn't think of all these perspectives, especially hearing from a lot of different sorts of groups like international students and caregivers. It really gave me a more holistic approach to placement. (Tina)
>
> What surprised me was how nuanced it is. I hadn't really thought about the compounding factors that, for example, international students have to go through. I knew that they had to pay tuition upfront, but it hadn't clicked in my head the fact that they're doing that. And they're also doing placement. And sometimes they can't work. It illuminated a lot of things that I already knew, but it was always connecting the dots, and kind of putting a puzzle together for me. (Tara)
>
> My understanding grew of others' circumstances and what they're going through, especially in this cost-of-living crisis. And I was a bit surprised [that not more is being done], like some of these things don't really require much funding. (Lachlan)

The student co-researchers found it challenging to fit the project into their existing commitments and schedules, and that facilitating mixed groups of educators and students during the workshops was not always easy:

> Time-managing everything, especially being uni students and having multiple jobs, it's quite hard to find time to do this work. (Tina)
>
> It was difficult, because all our schedules are just so different. Sometimes I would have to rush to get to meetings. (Minahil)
>
> I did find the workshops challenging at some points, navigating a lot of different viewpoints and inquiring, but not interrogating. I didn't want them to feel like I was interrogating them. (Tara)

The team also agreed that it was a huge topic to try to cover and convey:

> There are so many angles and so many intersections between everything that to summarise it, or to do any of it justice, you could do a whole PhD. The challenging part about doing the research is that I feel like it's never going to encapsulate everything and everybody. I think we did a pretty good job of all of it. But it's really challenging to summarise and ensure that we are including all the voices that should be heard and doing them all justice. (Tara)

The student team made some suggestions about how the project could have been enhanced, including having more diverse perspectives, longer workshops, and in-person team meetings:

> I think if we could have had a wider perspective, more from like the government side or an even more diverse group of participants that would have been able to encapsulate the barriers even better. (Minahil)
>
> I feel like extending the workshops and making it longer, because I had such good in-depth conversations. And then Amani is like, "oh, there's five minutes left. Everyone go back to the main room", and it just ended that conversation. I feel like it would be more powerful if we had longer. (Tina)

> It would have been nice to have more time working in person together, either at uni, or an office space or something like that. But I think the limitations of time and distance [prevented that]. (Lachlan)
>
> I love the idea of working in person, but because I live two hours away, it would have been impossible to put all of our schedules together and all get there. (Tara)

The student project team discussed what they hoped the ongoing impacts of the project would be:

> Hopefully engage a lot of practitioners and students. Hopefully, our resources will make an impact for students and educators in a positive way to allow for more inclusive placements for students. (Tina)
>
> Having a platform for people who are interested and passionate about [placement inclusion]. It's really helpful for people to share resources and communicate and inform other students. We learned so much about what placements could be like just by being a part of the project. And so those platforms we're creating could do the same for future students. I think that would be really useful. (Minahil)
>
> Obviously it would be great if it sparked some change, I hope that it shows students that their struggle isn't their fault, and if they feel put under a lot of pressure, it's because it's a really hard situation to be in. I think that our project has done a really good job of illuminating all the reasons why it's really hard to do these things, which I hope inspires some activism coming out of that. I also hope on a smaller scale, it will reach placement organisations and placement supervisors. And they can look at smaller scale ways they can support students more comprehensively. Things as little as making sure you check up on students, making sure that students have all their accessibility needs met. (Tara)
>
> I hope that some key people who are able to make changes see what we've done, and change things. I hope it has an impact on our university system. (Lachlan)

Finally, the student co-researchers shared what they would take into their own study and careers:

> I was able to transfer the [literature review] skills over [to my honours research] which was really good. (Lachlan)
>
> The project helped me develop a lot of interpersonal or communication skills, especially with conferences. The Melbourne conference was actually the first conference I ever attended, and it was so scary talking to that amount of people, especially to university practitioners. Over time, I saw myself developing communication skills and being able to facilitate the workshops. (Tina)
>
> I learned a lot. And I'm doing research now within my [degree] program as well. So I feel like I'm prepared. This project overall has just helped me become more confident. (Minahil)
>
> I'll carry with me what I learned about the qualitative research process, and what we learned from the literature review. I definitely learned that I can take on more than I think I can. I think also the project really honed in how important it is to include the voices of the people you're working with. It's something that I've always been taught in my degree. But we really got to apply it. And I really saw how fruitful it can be. (Tara)

It’s changed my perspective of what I want to do. I’d say that I definitely want to do bigger things now. My goal was set before. I would go to uni, do my undergrad, do my honours, go straight into a PhD program, and become an academic. But I’ve realised that if I want to make the most amount of positive changes, that the path I want to take is not the most practical way to go about it. I’d really like to do something in public policy. I’m very passionate about education. I’m also really into housing policy, especially for Indigenous people out in rural and remote areas. It would be my dream to be able to provide nice and liveable homes to a community of Aboriginal people. (Lachlan)

7. Discussion

In the discussion, we draw together and further develop the key insights and concepts presented in the findings.

7.1 Action is needed towards WIL that works for everyone

Placements are valuable and necessary learning experiences in many degrees. Yet the experiences documented in the literature and expressed by our workshop participants show that universities and placement sites must do better. Considering the statement:

> The fundamental principle guiding WIL must be safeguarding the wellbeing of participants. The emphasis of any WIL placement program must be on providing quality learning opportunities while minimising foreseeable negative impacts of participation on students. (Grant-Smith & de Zwaan, 2023, p. 14)

then we have to say that in many cases we are failing our students, particularly those who are equity-deserving. Only placements with low levels of financial and general stress create what Grant-Smith and de Zwaan (2023) term “excellent WIL wellbeing” (p. 14).

Our participants confirmed the findings of the existing literature that the impacts of placement poverty and exclusion are severe, particularly for equity-deserving students. Participants’ experiences of financial stress, hunger, dropping out, and difficulties navigating systems that provide support are all echoed in the literature (see Section 4, Background). These findings emphasise the need for urgent action, and partnership provides a path forward.

7.2 Partnership is key

One of the workshop participants clearly articulated the necessity for a partnership approach to solving placement inequities:

> If you’re in a partnership, you have space to work together and co-create and have that deeper engagement where you can negotiate these sorts of things. Whereas if you’re working in a transactional sort of way, you don’t have huge scope to collaborate to reshape things. (Educator 15)

Partnership is a way for all involved in placements to discuss and understand systemic barriers. This project, by involving students from equity-deserving cohorts together with university educators and placement providers, demonstrates that it is a productive approach to co-developing solutions.

Partnership also offers a way to address the power dynamics inherent in placement education, where students are often not able to express concerns or propose solutions, because their educators hold the power to pass or fail them and, frequently, to provide a reference. Including students in partnerships to tackle placement inequities helps balance

this dynamic by giving them a platform to suggest solutions. In addition, as demonstrated by the reflections of the student co-researchers, involving students as partners helps them develop research, networking, communication skills, and insights that change their perspectives. Several other scholars have called for a partnership approach towards designing and implementing WIL (for example, Jackson et al., 2024; Nisbet et al., 2021), and in higher education more generally, partnership pedagogy has proved a fruitful approach to designing innovative student-focused curricula (for example, Barrie & Pizzica, 2019).

7.3 Creative solutions are needed

Throughout the workshops, many participants questioned underlying assumptions and accepted ways of doing things: “I just think, in general, we need to stop looking at academia the way we’ve been looking at it and start coming up with out-of-the-box solutions” (Student 20).

We need to interrogate barriers to solutions and find creative ways of addressing them. For example, many universities/disciplines do not allow students to undertake placements in their existing workplaces, mainly due to conflict-of-interest concerns. However, as proposed by our workshop participants, tools exist to overcome such conflicts of interest. Another concern related to placements in students’ existing workplaces is that some students may find it difficult to find suitable work. University career centres could assist, along with placement staff and industry collaborators, to ensure students have equitable access to suitable roles, as well as quality supervision and assessment.

Another example of a creative solution suggested by participants to help alleviate placement poverty is campus-based placements. Grant-Smith and McDonald (2024) also suggest on-campus placement models, such as the National Tax Clinic Program with students providing free tax advice and assistance at 15 university-based clinics across Australia. We are also aware of on-campus student-led clinics for health services, such as the University of Sydney’s SPEECH clinic (University of Sydney, n.d.). While not paid, student travel costs are likely reduced, plus there is some flexibility related to hours, and students can more easily complete other units of study at the same time.

7.4 Flexible options are needed

Linked to the concept of creative options is the need for flexible placement options. Flexible options indirectly help alleviate placement poverty by enabling students to retain their part-time paid work. Flexibility also assists students with caregiving responsibilities and/or health issues.

Flexible placement models suggested by our workshop participants include part-time placements, shorter days, remote (online/virtual) placements, and shorter placements, with a focus on achieving competencies rather than a set number of hours or days. Participants also suggested more recognition of prior learning and current work, including the ability for students to do placement in their current workplace. Some of these adaptations, made to placements during the COVID-19 pandemic, could be reintroduced or expanded (Zegwaard et al., 2020).

Many participants in our study suggested that part-time options for WIL and flexible hours are needed, yet these were not commonly available options—with some degrees not having this option at all. This finding is echoed in the literature; a recent review found that "moving to a part-time WIL experience … was a commonly unapproved accommodation" for students with disability (Lawlis et al., 2024, p. 159).

Hours for hours sake are hard to defend. In the workshops, some students reported completing menial or even no tasks while on placement due to lack of available tasks or to supervisor availability. This finding was also reported by Howells (2024), particularly for nursing and midwifery students on night shift. She recommended that:

> If these hours are not beneficial to their learning, it is unnecessary for them to complete hours for the sake of meeting an arbitrary allocation. If the emphasis were on achieving learning objectives and professional standards rather than clocking up a specific number of hours, students may have greater capacity to rest and restore some semblance of work life balance. (Howells, 2024, p. 39)

Workshop participants, in some cases, found placement and university educators to offer flexibility when asked, but, in other cases, encountered inflexibility with placements only offered in certain timeframes, with the only option to repeat a placement being the following year. In such circumstances, students may conceal illnesses and other life circumstances to "soldier on" (for example, Beddoe et al., 2023, Howells, 2024).

Flexibility, of course, does not always align with the needs and cycles of placement sites, university deadlines, and professional accreditation requirements. Once again, this is where a partnership approach would be helpful, to identify possibilities. For example, a workshop participant identified that sometimes placement sites may be able to match part-time students with part-time staff, yet such options are not always widely known or made available to students.

7.5 Work-integrated learning—labour or learning?

An underlying assumption that we uncovered during the workshops relates to work-integrated learning. Work-integrated learning emphasises that placements are about learning in workplace settings. For example, in healthcare in the UK: "Students in … work placed learning must be supported to learn without being counted as part of the staffing required for safe and effective care in that setting." (House of Commons Petitions Select Committee, 2023). And yet students often experience placement as work. For example, 60% of healthcare students in the UK said they were treated as part of the workforce rather than as learners, with 40% of healthcare professionals agreeing (House of Commons Petitions Select Committee, 2023).

Many student workshop participants experienced placements as work, and were sometimes used to fill staffing gaps, experiences that align with findings in the literature (for example, Howells, 2024; Morley, Hodge et al., 2024). Students' experiences of placements as work have informed advocacy efforts for paid placements—at a rally that one of the project team attended in April 2024, protesters held signs stating: "All work should be paid. End unpaid placements" (Australian Services Union, n.d.).

Some have expressed concerns about paid placements, including blurring the line between students and employees, the use of students to fill staffing gaps, and a shift away from learning (for example, Kent et al., 2021)—yet these things are already occurring. So while university educators may position and think of WIL as learning, we need to understand that this is often not the student experience or perception, and that "the notion that training and employment are distinctly different is a false dichotomy" (Howells, 2024, p. 70).

Placements do not occur in a vacuum. WIL sits within a landscape of university, government, and employer narratives around employability, and unpaid and underpaid work. Duffy and Pupo contend that in higher education: "In almost all national contexts, the lion's share of the financial costs attached to training and education have been downloaded onto students" (2018, p. 19). Universities and placement sites and professional bodies need to ponder:

> Why is it that students appear to accept the practice of unpaid work and evaluate it positively while at the same time a high proportion of them perceived it as exploitative? I put forward the proposition that the university plays a role in shaping students' evaluations of unpaid work both by uncritical acceptance of the discourse of employability and by inadequate consideration of the issues that are associated with it. (Siebert, 2019, p.128)

Siebert (2019) argues that there is a place within universities to discuss and raise awareness of the:

> dark side of the practice of unpaid work … [to] expose to critical interpretation the employers' motives and bring students to an awareness and an enlightened concern for their citizen rights and responsibilities [... and to] offer an alternative narrative of employability. (p. 133)

Topics that could be discussed with students include that: "Unpaid work, as a sociological construct, initially emerged in relation to reproductive labour and, in particular, women's unpaid household work" (Duffy & Pupo, 2018, p. 14), and that other scholars have observed the gendered nature of unpaid placements in highly feminised degrees such as social work, teaching, and nursing, compared to paid apprenticeships/training in what may be viewed as traditionally more masculine professions, such as trades, police, and so on (Howells 2024).

Students and educators could also discuss the trend towards working beyond paid hours, a type of "unpaid work [that] may be less visible as [it is] are often done outside the place of employment or after hours" (Duffy & Pupo, 2018, p. 23). Anecdotally, we can confirm that expectations of working beyond full-time hours extend into placements. Students have reported that they are sometimes required to work beyond regular placement hours to complete time-consuming tasks such as client reports and preparing session plans, in addition to other coursework requirements.

In summary, we propose that learning about WIL and about WIL inclusion has a place within university curricula, and should involve a critical examination of the broader social, economic, and policy contexts in which WIL operates. One of the workshop participants expressed this succinctly: "There are so many factors and determinants that contribute [to placement exclusion] and that complexity deserves to be highlighted in some way" (Educator 1).

7.6 Alleviating placement poverty

Although the workshop participants co-developed some solutions that indirectly alleviate placement poverty, remuneration for students is clearly the best strategy. Similarly, a large survey of Australian social work students, educators, and practitioners found that paid placements were "the most highly ranked strategy across all participant cohorts" (Morley, Ryan et al., 2024, p. 1216). Access to financial support should be equitable, with attention paid to removing barriers for equity-deserving students. Whatever form the financial support takes, it needs to be easy to find and apply for—ideally, automated. Consideration needs to be given to international students, who are not eligible for many of the current forms of financial support for placements.

There are, of course, unintended consequences if students are paid:

> In our experience some businesses take an approach, that the student is being paid and therefore can work as required. In many cases, this is reflected in the normal culture and practices of the organization where all staff work long hours. (Hoskyn et al., 2020, p. 446)

Thus, financial support alone is not sufficient. Our workshop participants also made clear the importance of pedagogy and of placement educator quality, also pointed out in the literature:

> Payment of a student does not necessarily result in a satisfactory WIL experience. If unsatisfactory, a placement may not be beneficial to a student. The motivation of the workplace supervisor is crucial in determining whether the placement is regarded as free or cheap labor or an opportunity to contribute to the development of a future professional. (Goldsmith & Trede, 2019, as cited in Hoskyn et al., 2020, p. 447)

Participants discussed a range of concerns about the new Prac Payments: that they might affect students' eligibility for other support, that some students have been excluded altogether, that they may not continue if the federal government changes, that they create an extra administrative load for students and universities, that they are not enough to cover costs of living while not working, and that there may be tax implications for students. Despite these concerns, participants recommended that the Prac Payments be expanded to other disciplines with lengthy compulsory placements. This, of course, depends on the priorities of future governments; however, the Prac Payment legislation does include a mandate to evaluate the impact on students in the targeted degrees, as well as consider whether the payments should be expanded to other degrees with mandatory placements (Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024) with the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon. Jason Clare MP, stating:

> If we fast forward a couple of years into the future, see the impact that this is having … in terms of students both deciding to go into teaching, go into nursing, go into social work, but also increasing the completion rates—that the arguments will mount for the same sort of reform in other areas whether they're funded by the Commonwealth or by the states or by industry. (ACSES, 2024)

Howells' approach to remunerating students for their placements is to view placements as paid training rather than paid work. This approach could be the way out of some of the conundrums related to paid placements. Howells (2024, p. 73) argues that as students "are in triangular relationships with their academic provider and the placement provider, with

regulation of training overseen by the professional body"; therefore, it falls to government to fund paid training.

7.7 WIL is an ecosystem that needs to be resourced

A solution that was discussed several times during the workshops was professional learning for staff involved with placements. This professional learning could be available to university educators, placement educators, and professional staff involved in facilitating WIL, supporting students with disability to apply for accommodation, and providing scholarships and bursaries. Other researchers have also made similar recommendations, for example, to "ensure non-Indigenous field educators have received cultural safety training when being matched with an Indigenous student" (Simpson, 2022, p. 4). Another example is that:

> education on disability is critical for those who interact with students with disability [and involves] equipping staff with knowledge about disability, accessibility, universal design, discrimination, and legal obligations. (CYDA, 2022, pp. 11–13)

Since professional learning for staff is a common recommendation both in our project and the literature, it is worthwhile unpacking the barriers to this approach. The main barrier is the systemic issue of staff at universities and at placement sites being overstretched. Educators at placement sites are not usually allowed extra time and in many cases are not paid for their educational work. Placement educators being overstretched can contribute to an "engrained culture of mistreating students" (Howells, 2024, p. 34). University staff, too, are often overstretched and burned out, and do not receive support or a workload that recognises the affective demands of supporting students on placement (Bell et al., 2024).

Our findings highlight the interconnected, interdependent aspects of WIL. Where resources, systems, and people are stretched, everyone has a poor experience. So where placement site educators are overworked, it is harder for them to ensure a high-quality, inclusive experience. WIL is costly and time consuming for universities (Winchester-Seeto, 2019) and needs to be adequately resourced. If staff are well-supported in their placement education roles, that creates a climate for a proactive culture of suggesting and acting on solutions.

Within these constraints, participants suggested some solutions to make professional learning more attractive and easier for staff, such as building it into existing professional learning (for example, HETI for the NSW Health workforce), making it short and offering different formats to suit differing preferences. For example, some participants preferred videos to reading and vice versa. Overall though, inclusion needs to be infused into all that we do, rather than sidelined as standalone, one-off training.

7.8 Harnessing the collective

The workshops were a place where participants could share their initiatives, research, and advocacy, and invite others to join these. One example is an interdisciplinary, cross-institution research collaboration between Monash and Western Sydney Universities, where Rosemarie Herbert and Natalie White-Wall are conducting research to better understand

and support disabled and neurodiverse students during work-integrated learning (Herbert & White-Wall, 2024).

The Fellowship co-design workshops have created a wonderful community of advocates for placement inclusion and participants are keen to maintain the community we've built. Following the suggestions made in Workshop 4 on how to communicate the project solutions and stay connected as a group, the project team has developed a series of videos, together with a LinkedIn group and an Instagram account. Through these avenues, we would like to build this network to ensure ongoing collaboration and momentum towards our shared goal. We hope that you will join us at the WIL Equity Collective.

8. Conclusion

Through this project, we have connected with many people committed to making WIL better for everyone involved, and particularly for equity-deserving students. The workshop participants co-developed many solutions to ameliorate placement poverty and to make placements more inclusive. Participants emphasised a strengths-based approach, that also avoids stereotypes, where students are seen as individuals with a range of valuable qualities and experiences.

The project findings illustrate that solutions at all levels are needed, from federal government funding, such as the Prac Payments, to university and discipline-level initiatives. Advocacy, research, and practice work productively together to highlight placement inequities and push for solutions.

We return to a question we posed earlier: how can we ensure the conditions for equity-deserving students to thrive in WIL genuinely exist? WIL needs to be more critically interrogated, assumptions questioned, and flexible, creative solutions introduced. Universities are sites of education, so let's teach about WIL, about its history and the contextual factors that influence and impact students' experiences.

The array of options for addressing placement inequities may seem overwhelming—it certainly has for the project team at times. We suggest selecting one solution and starting from there.

8.1 Suggestions for future research

The workshop participants were primarily educators and students. It would have been valuable to include more policymakers and professional body representatives. Though workshop participants provided some unsolicited feedback and expressed interest in maintaining connections, it would have been beneficial to gather formal feedback from workshop participants.

Another avenue for future research is to track initiatives arising from the project's recommendations, and particularly to evaluate impact on the placement experiences of equity-deserving students. And, finally, in our published literature review (Section 4, Background), we did not review placement poverty solutions in non-OECD countries, which remains a topic for future exploration.

8.2 Recommendations

As a result of this project, we make the following recommendations:

1. **That all stakeholders involved in placements take a partnership approach to address placement inequities.** A partnership approach is essential for addressing placement inequities, bringing together students, educators, professional bodies, policymakers, employers, and politicians to develop shared understandings and solutions. Students, particularly those most affected by placement inequities, need to

be included and compensated for their time. This project has demonstrated how partnerships build capacity, foster collaboration, and strengthen ownership of outcomes. Strong partnerships also enable flexible, creative approaches to WIL.

2. **That universities, professional bodies, and industry question assumptions about, and critically examine, WIL.** A more critical and evidence-based approach is needed to create fairer and less onerous WIL models. Universities, professional bodies, and industry must critically assess assumptions about WIL and examine systemic barriers to high-quality, inclusive placements. Students often perceive WIL as labour rather than learning, and placement hour requirements in some disciplines lack clear evidence. Restrictions on placements in students' existing workplaces persist, despite models to address conflicts of interest. Additionally, the financial burden of training remains largely on universities and students, rather than being shared with industry. Universities also have a role in educating students about the history and context of WIL.
3. **That federal and state governments, universities, and industry expand financial support for students on placement.** Financial support from federal and state governments, universities, and industry is the most direct way to address placement poverty. While the Commonwealth Prac Payments are a positive step, many degrees with compulsory placements are excluded, and international students are ineligible. We recommend expanding government funding, increasing financial support from for-profit industries, and strengthening university support schemes. All funding initiatives should be accessible, with clear and simple application processes, to ensure students can easily find and apply for them.
4. **That universities and placement sites provide flexible placement options.** Universities and placement sites should offer flexible placement options, such as part-time schedules or shorter days. These arrangements help alleviate placement poverty by allowing students to maintain their part-time paid work, while also supporting those with caring responsibilities, health conditions, and/or disabilities.
5. **That universities, together with their placement partners, take a whole-of-degree approach to inclusive WIL.** A whole-of-degree approach to inclusive WIL ensures that students are gradually prepared for placements throughout their studies. This includes embedding inclusive practices into the pedagogy of educators and practices of professional staff who manage placements and disability accommodation. A strengths-based approach should guide this process, helping students recognise, value, and develop their strengths, and learn how to apply them during placements and in their future careers. This approach should extend to placement sites and educators, supporting them to create inclusive environments—such as LGBTQIA+ friendly, neurodiverse-affirming, disability-accessible, and culturally safe spaces.
6. **That federal and state governments, universities, and placement sites resource WIL to ensure inclusive, high-quality experiences**. Federal and state governments, universities, and placement sites must adequately resource WIL, including recognising and valuing the relational work involved. This investment is crucial for fostering inclusive, high-quality WIL and encouraging innovative solutions. Staff involved in WIL should be appropriately compensated, with sufficient numbers to manage the workload effectively. Support mechanisms for staff—particularly to prevent burnout from relational work—should be strengthened. Additionally, increased support for student mental wellbeing, such as accessible counselling services, is essential.
7. **That educators, students, and other stakeholders sustain their advocacy for placement inclusion.** Educators, students, and other stakeholders should continue to

build on their collective efforts towards placement inclusion. Advocacy, activism, and research have been crucial in raising awareness of placement poverty and pushing for effective solutions, particularly by highlighting the impact of placement poverty on students and translating research findings for a wider audience. We recommend that these advocacy efforts persist, with ongoing involvement from students, educators, professional bodies, unions, and politicians.

9. References

Note: **asterisk indicates references found via placement poverty literature search*

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10. Appendices

10.1 Appendix 1: Communication activities

10.1.1 Media

Featured in the *Australian Nursing & Midwifery Journal*:

- Fedele, R. (2024, 10 April). Researcher aims to address “placement poverty” among university students. *Australian Nursing & Midwifery Journal.* https://anmj.org.au/researcher-aims-to-address-placement-poverty-among-university-students/

Radio interview ABC North & West (Regional, South Australia), 18 April 2024.

10.1.2 LinkedIn newsletter

The newsletter, “Solving placement inequities”, has 323 subscribers:

- LinkedIn Fellowship April 2024 update: 6348 impressions and 251 article views.
- LinkedIn Fellowship May 2024 update: 3524 impressions and 139 article views.
- LinkedIn Fellowship July 2024 update: 3913 impressions and 97 article views.
- LinkedIn Fellowship November 2024 update: 3711 impressions and 304 article views.
- LinkedIn Fellowship January 2025 update: 2130 impressions and 300 article views.

10.1.3 Conferences, keynotes, and other presentations during 2024

- Invited to participate in the Australian National University event, Beyond Access: Developing Student Supports in Higher Education, 29 May, Canberra.
- Presentation at STARS Student Success conference, 3 July, Melbourne.
- Presentation for ACSES Fellows webinar, 26 September. 73 attended, 134 registrants received the recording.
- Presentation at the ACEN conference, 21–22 October, Sydney.
- Invited keynote at the Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences Symposium, 25 October.
- Presentation and panel at EPHEA conference, 19–22 November, Auckland.

10.1.4 Journal paper

Paper published in the *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* special issue, focusing on “The future of Australian higher education and the Australian Universities Accord”:

Bell, A., Khan, M., Sibir, L., Soanes, T., & Tran, T. (2025). Ameliorating placement poverty: insights from OECD countries. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 47(3), 299-316.

10.2 Appendix 2: Examples of workshop collaborative tools

Figure 1: Example of one of the Workshop 1 Padlets

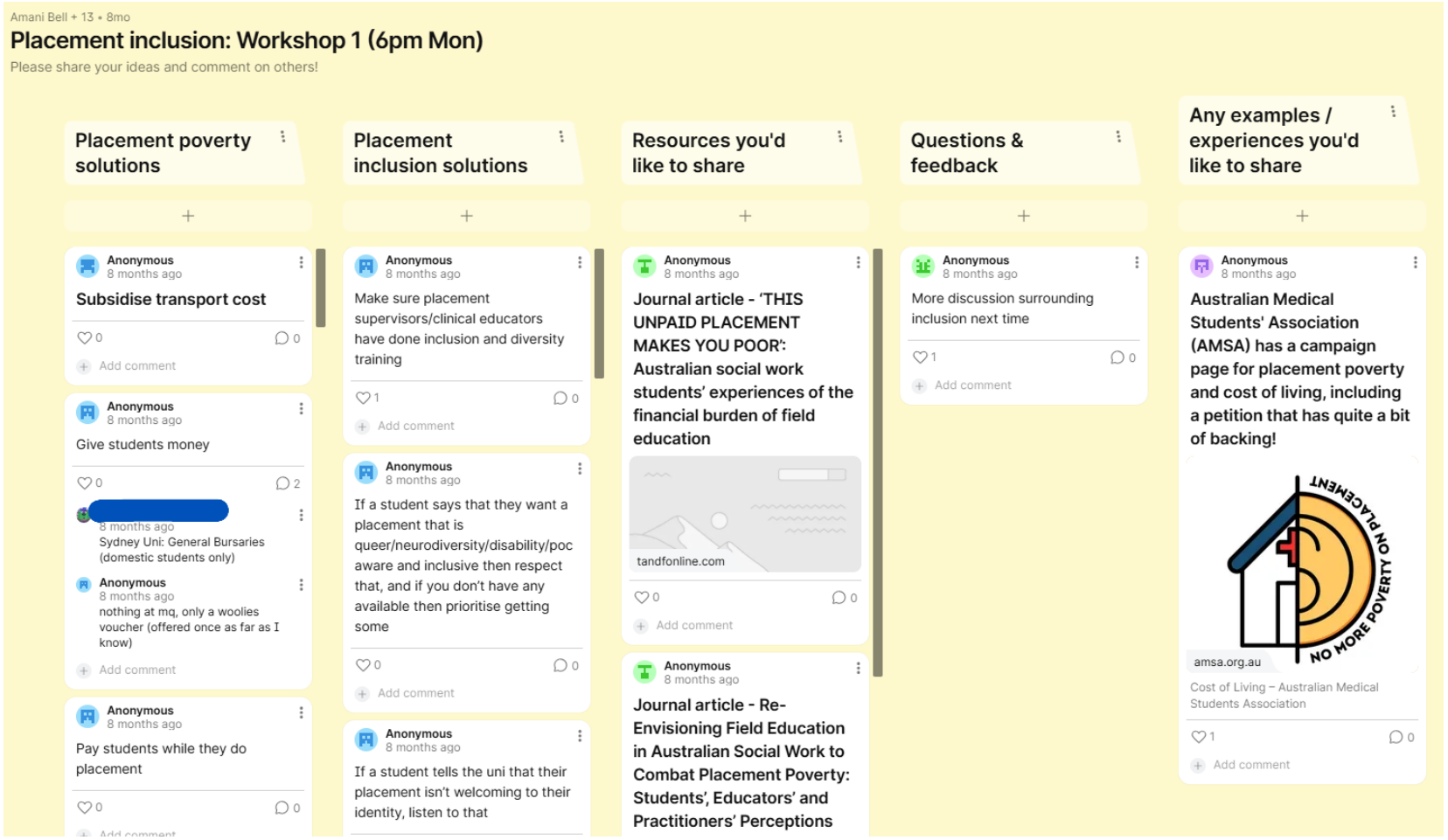


Figure 2: Example of one of the solutions discussed during Workshop 2, documented in Google Docs

Proposed Solution 4	**What/who/how**	**Barriers and how to overcome them**
Recognition of prior experience—to count towards placements	Including volunteering, caring work, and high school/TAFE, unrelated disciplines Lots of examples were provided: • Certificates from TAFE • Experience gained in paid work—unrelated to course work • Experience gained in paid work—aligned with course work • Experience gained from volunteer work, caring work Accreditation bodies	How to gather/demonstrate evidence—eportfolios (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW] journal paper), student passport It might be hard to show the evidence—what sort of documents might be required? (e.g. eportfolios? student passport?) Need a clear set of learning outcomes from the experience: • Menu option—different skills, need to be ticked off, can be addressed singularly • Interview process between coordinator and student—maybe lessen paperwork? Also gives better feel for experience—may take more time, however • Does volunteering count? Does it cover more or less than paid work? Need to be permitted by accreditation bodies. Advocacy from universities and government around this would help.

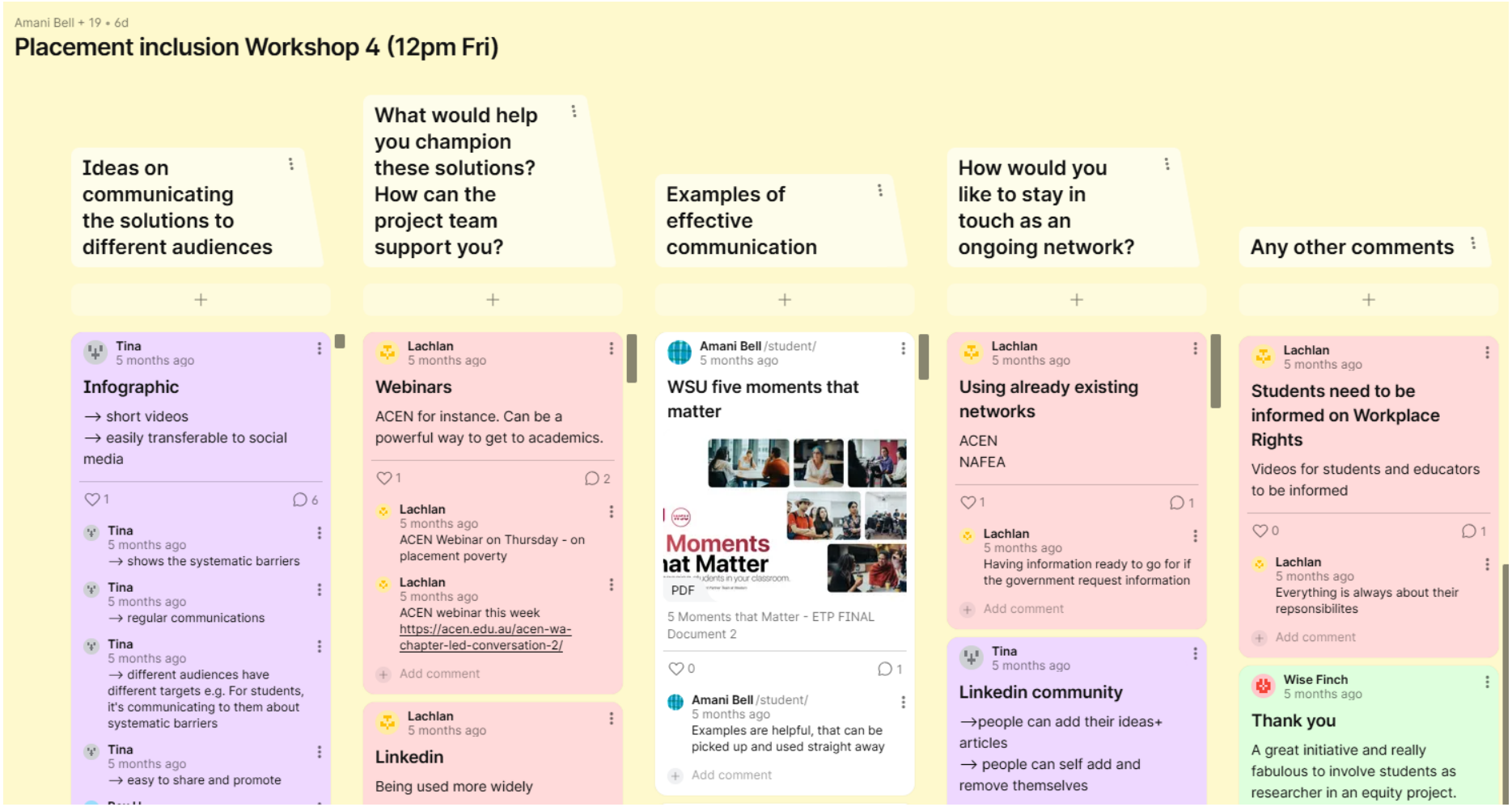
Figure 3: Example of one of the solutions discussed during Workshop 3, documented in Google Docs

Proposed Solution 18	**What/who/how**	**Barriers and how to overcome**

Improved placement allocation processes regarding inclusion and cultural safety	Take into account student preferences, including being able to select placement sites that are neurodiverse-affirming, queer-friendly, and that understand their religious practices
	
	Tailor placements to students' skills/strengths, e.g. if they speak more than one language
	
	Take into account travel distance
	
	Provide clear, early, regular communication about allocations
	
	Unis have a duty of care to send students to safe environments, not placements at all costs
	
	Greater education for staff and students—through onboarding and in classrooms
	
	Understanding why some placements/placement educators are particularly inclusive—more feedback from students on this
	
	Collab between universities and NSW Health HETI modules
		• Health perspective:
		  ○ Paramedics would not have a choice; it is a service
		  ○ Students may prefer certain clinic areas, e.g. mental health is quite popular
		  ○ Students may not want to work in certain areas
		• Units may have to register themselves for students. Organisations may need to go through processes to prove this
		  ○ Could be costly
		• Students can be registered for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for languages other than English, which can be recognised formally
		  ○ CCL test for students; $800 for the test
		• Travel—universities to take action to find more accessible placements
		
		Organisations/individuals not associated with the department to combat problems students faced:
		• Haven't directly seen organisations that are neurodiverse-affirming, queer-friendly, that understand various religious practices, etc. Students have to be cautious about their identity:
		  ○ Collective groups, e.g. people coming together informally as a support network
		  ○ Universities provide support systems for students—mentors that are allies to students (have declared it)
		  ○ A system for sites to be able to declare their diversity; they can be standardised/tokenistic
		  ○ "Blacklist" companies
		
		Not every workplace will be inclusive—systemic issues
		How to vet placement sites for cultural safety

Proposed Solution 18	What/who/how	Barriers and how to overcome
		How would placement sites demonstrate that they are inclusive? Through student evaluations, student reviews/feedback, policy evidence, staff experiences (not just students) Government oversight needed Sell the benefits to mitigate the perceptions of burden Could workplaces draw on existing initiatives (e.g. SAGE Athena Swan) and add student placements to them? Welcoming Universities initiative

Figure 4: Example of one of the Workshop 4 Padlets

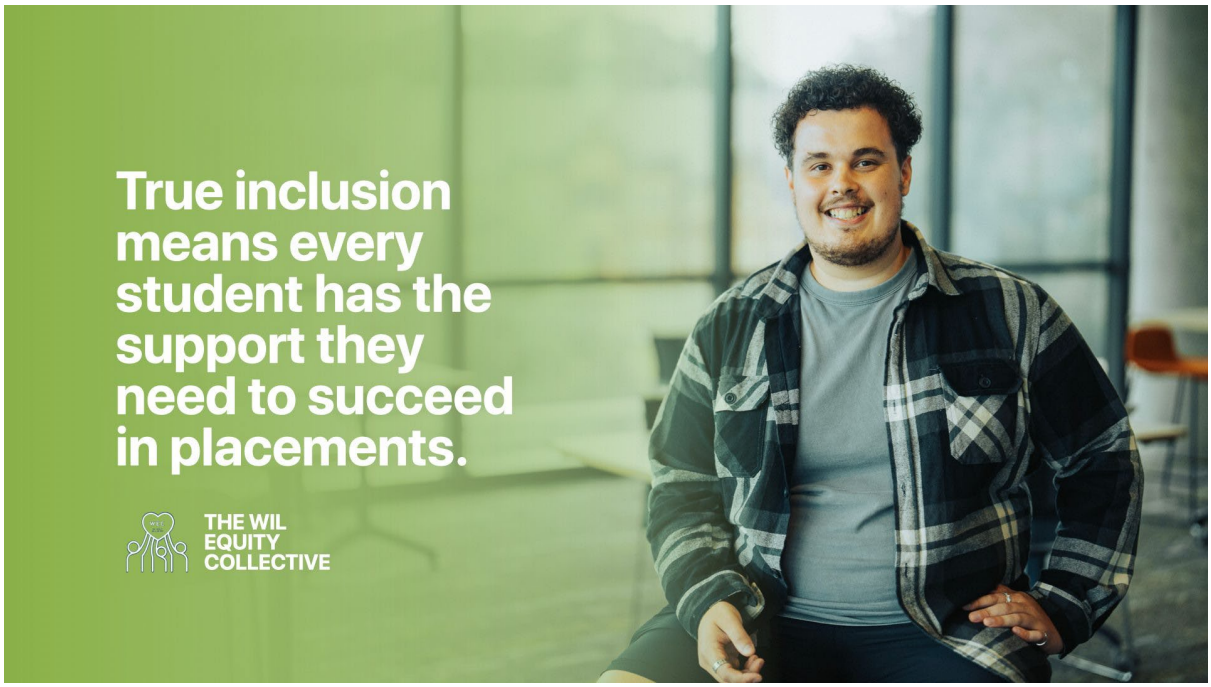


10.3 Appendix 3: Examples of WIL Equity Collective resources

Figure 5: Proposed logo for the WIL Equity Collective

Figure 6: Sample images for social media, featuring the student co-researchers


Exclusion isn't always intentional, but inclusion must be.
THE WIL EQUITY COLLECTIVE


True inclusion means every student has the support they need to succeed in placements.
THE WIL EQUITY COLLECTIVE