

What's in it for me? Accounting students' perceptions of WIL

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Aim of the research

- To identify alignment between the perceptions of students and employers/academics around WIL
 - Are there differences between those working and those not?
 - Do students' perceptions change over time with exposure to WIL?
 - What value do students place on the technical and soft skills required in accounting?

The research

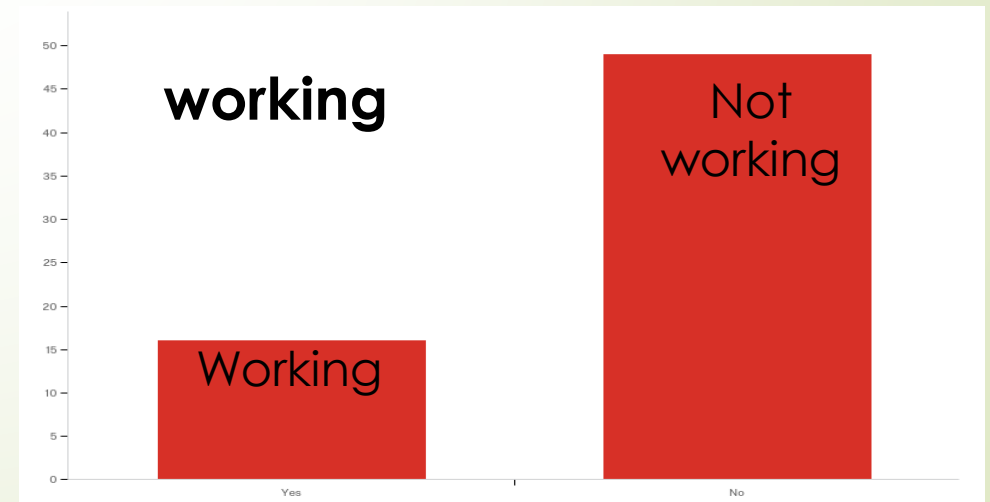
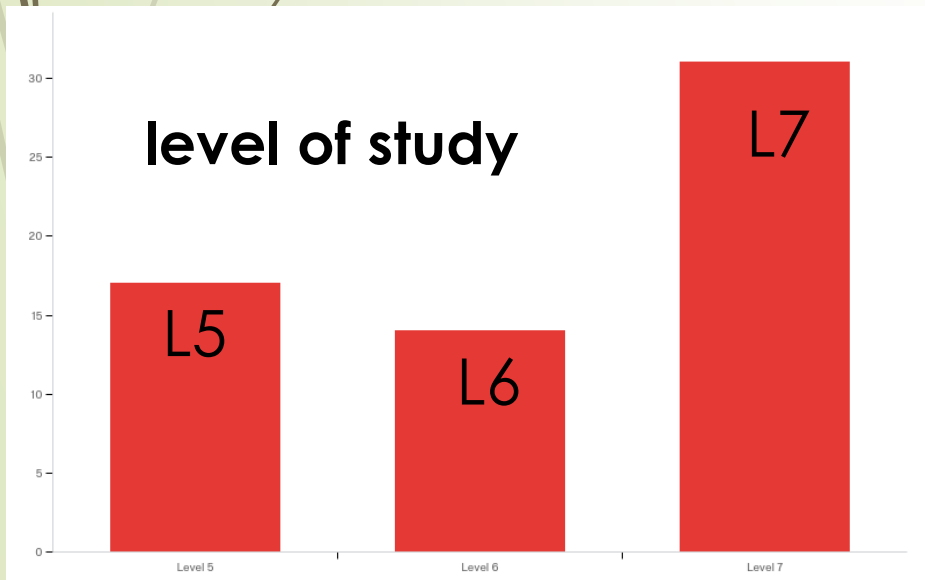
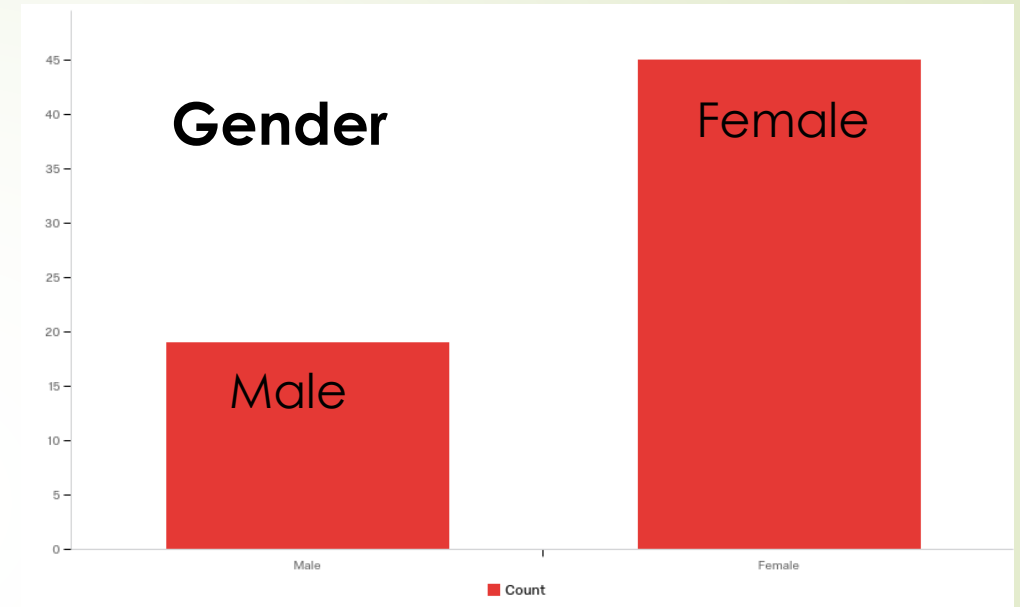
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Survey of accounting students (Levels 5-7)

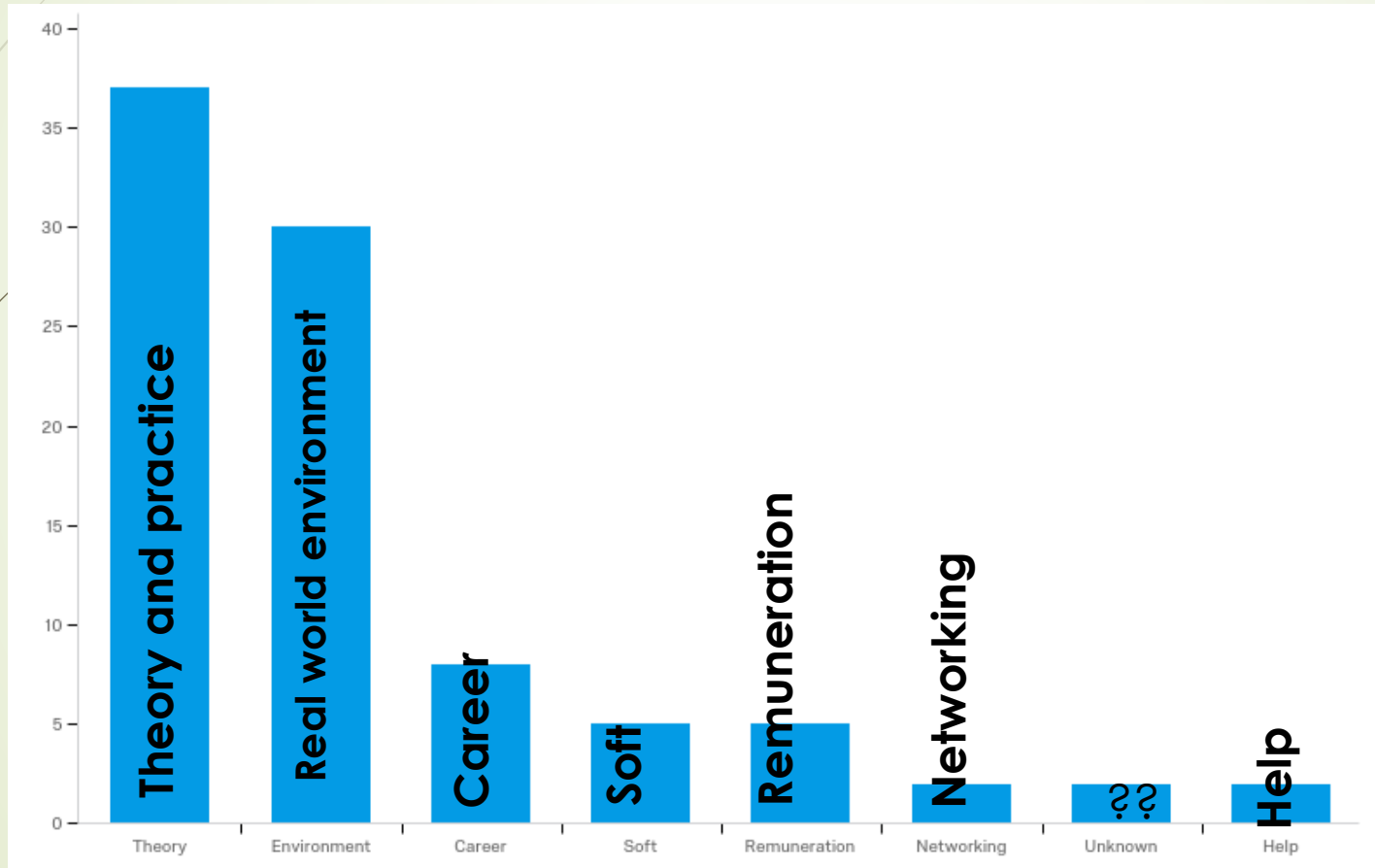
- administered electronically through Moodle in 2017
 - (gender; international, domestic; length and level of study at Wintec; working in Accounting or not)
 - advantages and disadvantages of working in accounting while studying
 - perceived importance of relevant accounting skills (rated on a 5 point Likert scale from Extremely Important to Not at all Important)
- 76 responses
- Thematic analysis of advantages and disadvantages
- Cross tab analysis of Likert responses
 - Limitations
 - Size of sample and self-defined terminology eg "computer skills"

Survey results: demographics

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Findings: Thematic analysis of written responses: advantages of working



Advantages of working while studying

- Student responses
 - *expand your skills ...while using those new skills in the workplace*
 - *hands on experience*
 - *...clear idea of accountant's responsibilities*
 - *joining the dots in regard to application of other topics*

Alignment with Dressler and Keeling (2011), WIL:

- **enhances work and skill development**
- **enhances theoretical learning**
- **provides meaningful understanding of the environment**

Other advantages

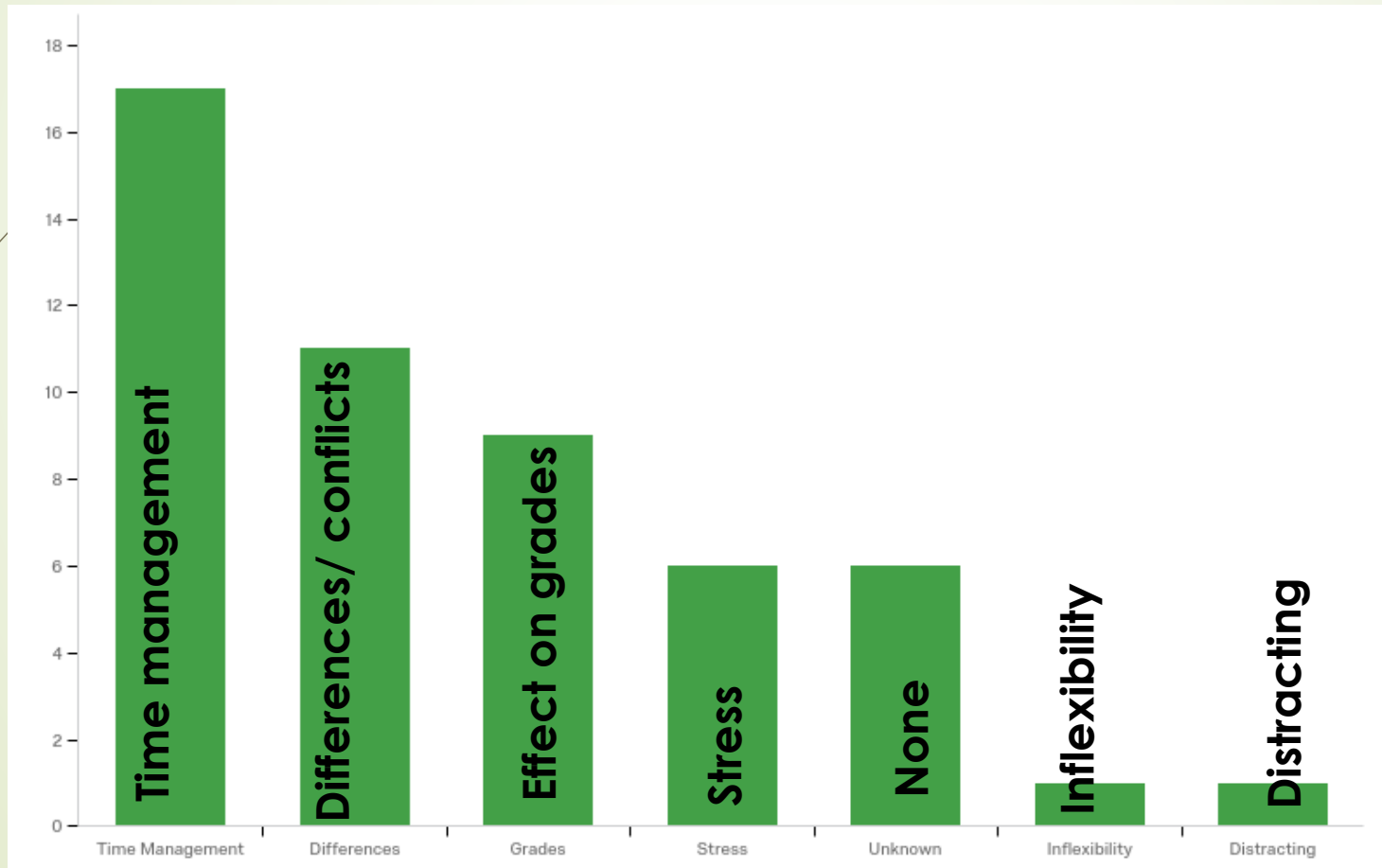
According to Dressler and Keeling (2011), WIL highlights career benefits and remuneration

- *better career (8/35)*
- *you have a foot in the door*

Lizzio and Wilson (2002) suggest WIL students have higher perceptions on the personal “soft” skills.

- Awareness of soft skills was lacking (5/35)
- the benefits of networking were low (2/35)
- These could be included in “real world environment”

Findings: Disadvantages of working”



Disadvantages of working while studying

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- Issues of time management and the impact on grades were identified
- A significant issue is the differences between how tasks were performed at work and in the classroom
 - *“it may be confusing if the job requires different methods to those being learnt”*
 - *“sometimes there are differences in what I do at work to what is taught in class”*
 - *“you learn new...ways of doing things which may conflict with company strategy”*
- Differences are seen as an impediment rather than an opportunity to learn

Cross tab analysis

- Domestic/ international students
- Gender
- Currently in work
- Level of study

perceived importance (5 point Likert) of technical and soft skills

- **Theoretical accounting knowledge**
- **Practical accounting skills**
- **Technical computing skills**
- **Accounting software knowledge**
- **General business knowledge**
- **Team work**
- **Problem solving**
- **Written communication skills**
- **Oral communications skills**
- **Motivation**
- **Task completion**
- **Critical thinking**

Technical Skills

Soft Skills

Theoretical accounting knowledge

- 49 responses
- Significant that 18.87% (9) of students find theoretical knowledge only moderately important
 - Mainly domestic students (6)
 - Mostly female (7)
 - not working in accounting (7)
- Concern that these students populate all levels of accounting study

Practical accounting skills

- 49 responses
- 3 students found practical accounting skills only moderately important
 - tended to be first year students
 - 2 were working in accounting
- International students place greater importance on practical accounting skills (and on all technical skills)
- Females place a greater importance on the practical skills

Computing skills –including accounting software

“Accounting graduates would benefit in better employment opportunities if they are equipped with relevant IT knowledge and skills” (Tam: 2013)

- **50 responses**
- **22% (11) find technical computing skills only moderately or slightly important**
 - **mostly domestic students (10)**
 - **Split between male and female. 6:5**
 - **Tended to be non-working (8)**

General Business Knowledge

- 50 responses
- 22% of students (11) find general business knowledge only moderately or slightly important
- 30% of students (4) actually working found it moderately important
- This is particularly relevant because of the focus now of the accounting profession away from compliance into a business advisory role

Soft skills: Communication

“... employers are seeking graduates who possess a diverse range of non-technical skills including ... communication, self-management... problem-solving, ... and planning and organizing skills.” (Hancock et al.: 2009)

- **50 responses**
- **Oral communication was rated more highly than written communication**
- **7 students saw communication as only moderately important**
- **Higher value from international students (9/15)**
- **Perceived value of written communication (extremely important) increased at higher levels**

Motivation and Task Completion

Motivation

- 50 responses
- 26 (52%) of students across all categories thought motivation was extremely important
- 4 saw motivation as moderately important
- At Level 7 motivation gains relevance slightly (13/22 : 59%)

Task completion

- rated as more important for accounting work in Level 5 (71%) than Level 7 (59%)

Critical thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking

- ▶ Rated as only moderately important by 6/50 students

Students not working work rated critical thinking more highly (93%) than students working (68%)

Problem solving

- ▶ Ranked as extremely important by 23/38 (60%) of females and 4/12 (33%) of males

Tentative Conclusions

Alignment:

- Perceptions of employers and students are generally aligned
 - Slight differences in value importance of all skills

Differences across student groups:

- slight difference between responses at Level 5 and Level 7
- little difference between those students who are working and those who are not
- International students rated most skills at a higher degree of importance than domestic students

What's in it for us?

Issues:

- Students are not aware of required graduate skillset, particularly:
 - Computing technical skills
 - Business knowledge
 - Critical thinking
- **Dissonance (recognise soft skills if prompted)**

Recommendations:

- Need to reflect on teaching practice in terms of course content and delivery style
- Raise awareness of the relevance of soft and technical skills across all classes to prepare students for the CEP (at the end of their programme)
- Survey all students in CBITE

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