Service Learning Best Practice - summary

Insights from WIL Australia Webinar: *Voices and Insights on Service Learning as a Form of WIL*

Service learning is a form of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) that combines academic learning with meaningful community engagement, social impact, and critical reflection. Effective service learning creates reciprocal value for students, universities, and community partners.

1. Put Community Need at the Centre

✅ Start with challenges identified by community organisations, not university-defined projects.
✅ Co-design projects with community partners.
✅ Ensure outcomes are useful, practical and achievable.
✅ Respect community expertise and lived experience.

Key question: *Whose needs are driving this project?*

2. Build Genuine Partnerships

✅ Focus on relationships, not transactions.
✅ Create opportunities for mutual learning and exchange.
✅ Maintain regular communication throughout the project.
✅ Be transparent about goals, expectations and constraints.

Best practice: Schedule regular check-ins between students, educators and community partners.

3. Prepare Students for Community Engagement

✅ Help students understand social, cultural and historical contexts.
✅ Encourage students to examine their own assumptions, biases and positionality.
✅ Teach cultural humility and ethical engagement.
✅ Support students to understand complex social issues before proposing solutions.

Best practice: Slow students down. Encourage them to understand the problem before trying to solve it.

4. Embed Critical Reflection

✅ Reflection should occur throughout the project, not only at the end.
✅ Help students connect theory with practice.
✅ Encourage reflection on power, privilege, ethics and professional identity.
✅ Explicitly teach students how to reflect critically.

Best practice: Use journals, reflection prompts, logbooks or guided discussions.

5. Focus on Process as Well as Outcomes

✅ Assess how students learn, collaborate and adapt.
✅ Value problem-solving, communication and reflection.
✅ Recognise that authentic learning often occurs through challenges and uncertainty.

Remember: Success is not just the final deliverable; it is what students learn along the way.

6. Manage Expectations Realistically

✅ Clearly scope projects from the beginning.
✅ Be honest about what students can realistically achieve.
✅ Acknowledge the resource constraints of community organisations.
✅ Recognise that students and partners have varying capacities and priorities.

Best practice: Aim for meaningful contribution rather than a perfect solution.

7. Provide Ongoing Support and Mentoring

✅ Create structures for regular feedback.
✅ Support students, tutors and community partners throughout the project.
✅ Encourage direct communication between students and community organisations.
✅ Build opportunities for troubleshooting and reflection.

Best practice: Weekly meetings help maintain momentum and strengthen partnership outcomes.

8. Develop Employability Through Authentic Experience

Students gain:

- Client engagement experience
- Teamwork and project management skills
- Communication and leadership capabilities
- Problem-solving in real-world contexts
- Understanding of social impact and civic responsibility

Students reported that service learning provided some of the most valuable examples they could draw upon in interviews, internships and graduate applications.

The Service Learning Formula

Community Need + Reciprocal Partnerships + Critical Reflection + Authentic Projects + Ongoing Support = Meaningful Service Learning

When designed well, service learning develops not only work-ready graduates, but graduates who are capable of contributing to the common good and creating positive social impact.