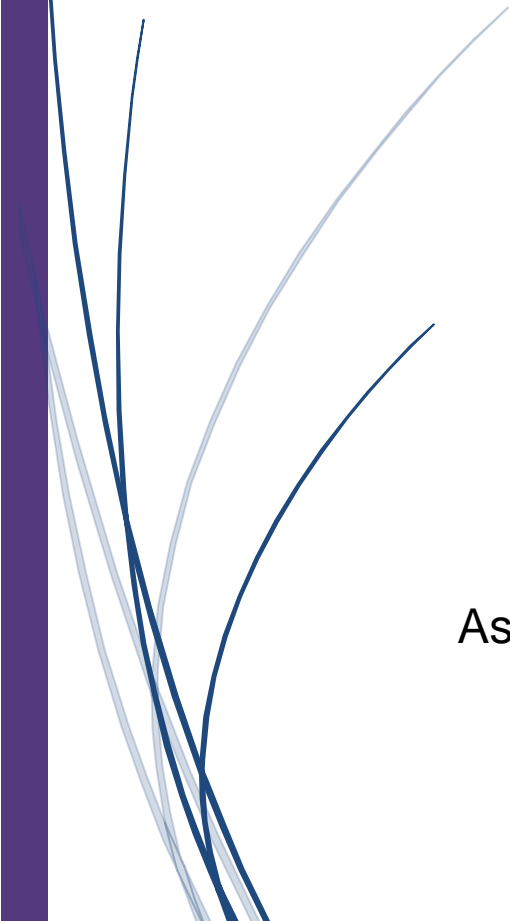


# **EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT LINA**

**Final Report**

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## General assessment of LINA

### Reflect and comment on the overall impression of the research conducted in LINA.

This report assesses the quality of research supported by LINA and the national and international collaborative relationships with external stakeholders fostered by LINA to strengthen connections with the broader community. The report outlines the strengths and weaknesses of the research environment and infrastructure, quality of research, productivity (research outcomes), and networks and collaborations. The report concludes with recommendations for ensuring the good research practice established by LINA continues into the future.

To ensure a well-informed review, several sources were used to gather information and corroborate perspectives about the operational aspects of LINA and the approach to initiating and supporting research activities. Sources of information included:

1. LINA Learning in and for the new working life, (Report: Self-evaluation - ARC 2022);
2. University West website;
3. Publications authored by University West staff;
4. Interview with LINA leadership (23rd June 2022); and
5. Interview with four staff associated with LINA (24th August 2022).

Overall, we believe that LINA has positively impacted on the research capability of University West staff and nurtured a cohesive and collaborative research community. LINA actively supports staff in their research endeavors and provides professional learning opportunities that enable staff to strengthen professional networks and build capacity to undertake innovative and relevant research. Through their connections with LINA, staff have extended networks both within and beyond the university thereby boosting the relevance and impact of research outcomes.

Staff express pride in LINA and are fully invested in supporting and promoting LINA activities. LINA has successfully built a community of like-minded people and provided opportunities to collaborate and learn from colleagues.

The impact of LINA activities could be enhanced with a University-wide agreed understanding/interpretation of work-integrated learning (WIL). A clear and concise definition of what constitutes WIL and what constitutes what has been LINA's research area at University West will avoid confusion and provide clarity for staff, students, and industry partners. While research in collaboration with industry is to be applauded, many of the research activities conducted at LINA are not WIL. It is not uncommon that the research focus of a research centre drifts overtime, which we suspect is what has happened here. The research focus on workplace skills and productivity resonates throughout the activities at LINA and requires a 'label' other than WIL to actively reflect the nature and value of the research outcomes. For greater clarity on its research focus, a vision/mission statement that succinctly articulates the intended research space would be beneficial.

### Strengths

LINA has considerable broad strengths that we draw attention to:

1. A supportive and collegial research space for emerging researchers, established researchers and PhD students

2. Supported by Senior Leadership and aligns to the strategic priorities of University West.
3. Strong connections with industry and government.
4. Funded by the university and government.
5. Encourages collaboration and collegiality across disciplines (departments) areas. Breaks down 'silos' and broadens perspectives.
6. Supports learning through mentoring and builds capacity of mentors – win-win.
7. Peer and cooperative learning among staff is an excellent approach that fosters positive staff morale and a community of practice.
8. Facilitates connections with international scholars.
9. Allocates financial resources to organize/support workshops and other staff development activities.

### **Weaknesses**

There are two broad areas of weakness that should be addressed:

1. The LINA research space has the potential to impact the global higher education sector but labeling the breadth of current research activities using the term WIL will limit impact as the research area is much broader than WIL. Relabeling the research area will enable clarity for staff and students and promote global collaboration.
2. The LINA definition of WIL does not align to that accepted in the WIL literature.
3. Vagueness around the research focus of LINA, including confusion among staff. Greater clarification of the scope and breadth of what is included in LINA research scope will provide better clarity and help focus future research direction.

### **Remaining questions to ensure the assessment**

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## 1. Research environment and infrastructure

**Reflect and comment on the research environment, its organization, members, resources and activities of LINA.**

The research environment and infrastructure of LINA promotes collaborative scholarly activities that prioritizes research outcomes that benefit society more broadly. LINA has access to funding and resources that are used prudently to optimize the benefits to University West staff and enhance external engagement opportunities for staff. LINA members are loyal and committed to LINA's intentions and values.

### Strengths

In regards to the research environment and infrastructure, we found the following strengths:

1. Lina has implemented a practical model that enables research and supports staff capacity and development.
2. Excellent support for PhD students and emerging researchers.
3. Financial resourcing and scholarly support for research activities.
4. As best as we can tell, cost structure seems affordable.
5. Passionate, proud, and invested staff.
6. Mentoring of new researchers builds capacity and provides career pathways for staff.
7. Strategic, financial, and scholarly support from university leadership.
8. Contemporary and community-focused research topics within LINA (see comments about labeling the research area).
9. PhDs undertaken with an external stakeholder is very commendable.

### Weaknesses

We found a few areas of need of improvement:

1. There is confusion around WIL (and the broad research area of LINA that is not WIL) as being a 'discipline'. WIL is an 'educational approach' and a research area/field, however, not a discipline per se. Rather WIL is an educational approach that can be applied across all disciplines (e.g., engineering, science, humanities, management, etc). We appreciate that universities at times treat research areas as a 'discipline' (i.e., a research area) to more easily integrate the research area into university structure, however, the term 'discipline' in an academic sense has specific meaning that excludes an educational approach from being a discipline
2. There is confusion around a "Phd in WIL" and "PhD with WIL". As best as we can tell the usage of "PhD in WIL" is not correct and these PhD programs are in fact a "PhD with WIL".
  - a. This is not a criticism of the PhD program. The PhD program is very good and to be commended. However, from discussions, it is clear that University West is undertaking 'PhDs with WIL' with a strong focus on reflection as a learning tool. Albeit, it may seem semantics around a small word, it has particular meaning that is important and relevant to the global context.
  - b. A "PhD in WIL" would be a topic investigating how students learn from work placements, how they integrate into a community of practice, effective design of assessment activities etc. A "PhD in WIL" is a PhD in Education (the discipline), majoring in WIL (the educational approach).
  - c. A "PhD with WIL" is a PhD topic within a discipline (e.g., engineering, computer science, social science, etc) where the PhD student undertakes the PhD with an external partner

from an engineering workplace (much like a graduate work placement). A PhD in Engineering with WIL (e.g., a PhD with a “graduate work placement”). As best as we can tell, this seems to be the PhD practice at University West. This model of PhD is very commendable and we believe University West should be very proud of the PhD program so closely linked to workplaces.

3. There is need to clearly articulate the research area and scope of the research. Currently there is confusion among LINA staff (and the reviewers) on the intended research focus of LINA and what the future research focus will be within the new structure.

#### Remaining questions to ensure the assessment

#### Grading scale

(Choose one) **Excellent**/Very Good/Good/Insufficient

## 2. Quality of research

**Reflect and comment on the quality of research within LINA in relation to its relevance and impact.**

LINA undertakes extensive research activities and has achieved significant research outcomes.

#### Strengths

We make a number of observations of the research quality:

1. Good range of journals and research topics
2. Based on co-authorships of papers, there is good collaboration with other researchers.
3. Outstanding collaboration with industry and other external partners with research providing mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders.

#### Weaknesses

We make one observation of an area in need of improvements, which has already been highlighted earlier.

1. Lack of clarity of research focus (see earlier comments)

#### Remaining questions to ensure the assessment

#### Grading scale

(Choose one) Excellent/**Very Good**/Good/Insufficient

### 3. Productivity – research results and bibliometric data

#### Reflect and comment on the productivity of LINA.

The support and guidance provided by LINA is highly motivating for both staff and students resulting in a high level of productivity. We have noted some exceptional areas of productivity below and no areas of weakness that specifically relate to productivity.

#### Strengths

We make a number of observations of the research productivity:

1. A good number of research outputs per number of staff in LINA. The research output productivity of LINA seems appropriate for a research institute of this size.
  - We have not conducted an analysis of research outputs per individual staff member, and will leave this level of analysis to the LINA leadership.
2. The research outputs highlight that University West is a research-lead university and aligns to the University's strategic intent.
3. Excellent internal and interdisciplinary collaboration within LINA and engagement and cooperation with external stakeholders.

#### Weaknesses

We raise no concerns related to research productivity, however, there is one broad area of weakness that LINA could address:

1. Once appropriate defining of the research field and labeling is agreed on, there will be greater clarity on which publishing outlets (e.g., journals and books) to target with increased appeal to a relevant global audience.

#### Remaining questions to ensure the assessment

#### Grading scale

(Choose one) Excellent/**Very Good**/Good/Insufficient

### 4. Networks and collaborations

#### Reflect and comment on the extent and quality of collaborations that LINA has with academic institutions (national and international) and the surrounding society.

LINA has a particular focus on the changing dynamics of the workplace and society more broadly and how this links to knowledge and competence. Given this focus inherently involves external stakeholders, LINA has successfully built robust connections with government, industry and community organizations. The LINA leadership, researchers and students that work with LINA should be congratulated on the external partnerships forged that ensure optimal outcomes for all.

#### Strengths

We make a number of observations of LINA's network and collaboration value:

1. Fabulous topics in partnership with industry that help industry to solve contemporary problems.
2. Excellent collaboration within LINA and with external stakeholders
3. LINA's hosting of VILAR generates productive professional development opportunities and provides opportunities to present and share research outcomes.
4. Evidence of cross-university collaborations in research and supporting research activities (e.g., contributions to the national and international associations)

### Weaknesses

We make one observation in need for clarity:

1. There needs to be greater clarity on the long-term benefits gained from international collaboration with visiting scholars for staff associated with LINA (e.g., Billett).

### Remaining questions to ensure the assessment

### Grading scale

(Choose one) **Excellent**/Very Good/Good/Insufficient

## Recommendations for future WIL research

### Give recommendations for future WIL research at University West

We make a number of recommendations from our findings above.

1. LINA is actively supporting rigorous research that needs to continue. There is confusion around the research area and how it is labeled, however, the research outputs are quality outputs.
2. The structure of LINA and resourcing for supporting research activities provided by LINA should continue in the transition to a new structure. The opportunities LINA provide for staff professional development is clearly a valuable entity within University West and should be continue.
3. We recommend a clear description of the research area, a mission statement, and research goals. As it is common for research areas to drift, we recommend these are reviewed (and amended if needed) every three years so the mission and goals continue to reflect the current research activities.
4. We are unsure what label would best describe the research area as it appears to straddle a range of research fields. We, however, suggest considering using several broad terms together to provide the breadth required to describe research activities, for example:
  - a. Workplace-Based Research and Learning,
  - b. External Research Engagement,
  - c. Community and Industry-Based Research,
  - d. Applied Educational Research,
  - e. Learning in the workplace and workplace-based research, or
  - f. Interdisciplinary Peer Learning.
5. We encourage expanding the PhD program where students undertake research for an external partner (PhD *with* WIL). This is commendable and a practice that University West should celebrate.
6. The research area on peer learning in workplaces is an exciting space. We encourage expanding this research area further to include learning for 'future' workplaces, particularly since the concept of 'workplace' has evolved (and will continue to evolve) significantly. The workplace is no longer a single physical location but has components (and could be fully) located online (i.e., the workplace could be a virtual workplace). How does (if it does) peer learning function within such a new workplace construct and how could it be enhanced?
7. Research on how Artificial Intelligence will shift the skill requirements of graduates entering the workforce. As Sweden moves to greater automation in the workplace, what are the future skill needs?
8. To specifically develop WIL research and appeal to a global academic audience, we recommend the research areas of how students learn through WIL (and how to enhance the learning), appropriate and authentic assessment of WIL student learning, quality dimensions of WIL programs, and supporting student wellbeing during WIL.

### Other issues

#### Make other appropriate comments and/or remaining questions

Additional notes for defining work-integrated learning to facilitate collaborative research opportunities with universities globally.



There is to date no single accepted definition of WIL, however, there are a number of accepted defining features of WIL in the literature. These have been explored by a number of authors along with an analysis of definitions already within the literature to derive what is intended as a broad definition of WIL. This definition is closely aligned with the definition used by the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL).

We are happy to share this with University West as we believe this will be helpful in progressing and continuing the work previously done by LINA. However, we caution that this definition is currently *in press* with Routledge for a book entitled the International Handbook for Work-Integrated Learning. We ask that this information here is kept within University West until the Handbook is published.

The following is a section from: Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (in press). *Defining work-integrated learning*. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *International handbook for work-integrated learning* (ppTBA). Routledge.

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development.

The defining elements of WIL within this definition are presented here in terms of how they directly relate to the definition above:

- ***An educational approach***: intentionally supports student learning through a range of practice models.
- ***Involving three parties; the student, the educational institution, and an external stakeholder***: all three stakeholders are engaged in the experience, where the external stakeholder, or host organization, can be an employer, client, community organization, government agency, or an educational institution (where the educational institution is an employer or client).
- ***Authentic work-focused experiences***: tasks undertaken by the student are related to activities expected at a place of practice (e.g., a workplace, a community, or remotely online with an external stakeholder).
- ***Intentional component of the curriculum***: either curricular or co-curricular but not extracurricular. By definition of curricular and co-curricular, the student learning outcomes must be assessed.
- ***Students learn***: there is an emphasis that the student, while engaging with the tasks, is learning through doing.
- ***Active engagement in purposeful work tasks***: the student is an active participant (i.e., not an observer) within the context of the place of practice to which the tasks are intended to be purposefully applied.
- ***Integration of theory with practice***: applying, critiquing, and forming opinions about principles, theories, and knowledge learnt through formal teaching to authentic practice.
- ***Meaningful practice***: the tasks are work-based and relevant to the student and have relevant purpose for the external stakeholder, whereby the student engages with the tasks in a similar way to that expected of a working professional.
- ***Relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development***: the experience supports and correlates to the student's knowledge and skill development requirements as part of their study and/or career interests.