

INCORPORATING AND EMBRACING WIL COMPONENT INTO CAREER-BASED QUALIFICATIONS IN TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The world of work continues to evolve, and there is growing recognition of the need for universities to adapt their education to the demands of the modern workplace. One promising approach is integrating Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) into career-based qualifications within traditional university education. This approach allows students to combine academic studies with practical work experience, enabling them to develop industry-relevant skills and knowledge while earning credits towards their degree. The qualitative study used thematic analysis. This article reviews the benefits and challenges of embracing WIL, including enhanced employability, improved student engagement, and increased graduate outcomes. The article also examines the challenges of implementing WIL, including ensuring quality assurance, managing logistics, and addressing equity and access concerns. Furthermore, the article explores future directions for WIL, including the potential for technology-enhanced WIL platforms, industry-academe partnerships, and the role of WIL in promoting lifelong learning and career development. By embracing WIL, universities can then better prepare students for success in a rapidly changing job market and contribute to the development of a skilled and adaptable workforce.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, career-based qualifications, graduates, employability, skills

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive job market, integrating practical skills and experiential learning into traditional university education has become imperative (Iglesias-Sánchez, Jambrino-Maldonado, and de las Heras-Pedrosa, 2019). Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) emerges as a transformative approach that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, offering students invaluable opportunities to gain career-based qualifications alongside their academic credentials (Chan, 2022 and Kestel, 2023). By embracing WIL, universities can enhance their graduates' employability, equipping them with the essential skills and experiences employers' demand. However, this integration is not without its challenges. Institutions must navigate logistical complexities, ensure quality placements, and support

diverse learning experiences while maintaining academic integrity. The article explores the benefits of WIL, including improved student engagement and stronger industry partnerships. This discussion will also address the obstacles that must be overcome and propose future directions for the effective incorporation of career-based qualifications into traditional higher education. In doing so, the article aims to foster a deeper understanding of how WIL can redefine the educational landscape, shaping a new generation of professionals prepared to thrive in a dynamic and evolving workforce. Transitioning the programs without a mandatory WIL program also serves as a mission of curriculum revitalisation and pedagogical evolution. Matiki (2014) highlights that since the 2003 merger of the Universities of Technology, these institutions have been mandated to incorporate Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) into their programs to ensure that graduates are prepared for the workplace. This integration was intended to enhance the relevance of their graduates in the job market (Turin et al., 2021). In contrast, Traditional Universities were not required to include WIL components in their non-career-based programs, with mandatory on-the-job training primarily limited to professional programs such as Nursing and Teaching (Matiki, 2014). Consequently, a significant gap remains in career preparation for students enrolled in non-professional programs at Traditional Universities (de Villiers Scheepers et al., 2019). This existing gap highlights the issue that forms the foundation of the problem statement for the current study, which will be further explored in the next section

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The South African government, alongside various private-sector stakeholders, has been placing greater emphasis on skills development to address the labour-market skills gap. This includes promoting WIL programs, which combine academic learning with practical workplace experience. There has been a growing trend of partnerships between universities, colleges, and businesses. These collaborations aim to design curricula better aligned with industry needs, thereby enhancing graduates' employability through WIL opportunities. Higher education institutions in South Africa are increasingly seeking to enhance the employability and skill readiness of their graduates. The integration of WIL into traditional university education frameworks has emerged as a potential solution.

However, despite the recognised benefits of incorporating career-based qualifications, such as improved student engagement, practical skill development, and stronger industry connections, the transition is fraught with challenges. The challenges include allocating credits, since the current programs already have credits; finding placement for students; and faculty resistance to implementing WIL. These include resistance from faculty and administration,

students not being emotionally ready for on-the-job training, and employers' willingness to accommodate them or exploit them after they are on the job. Most of all, the need for substantial curricular changes, the necessity of collaborating with industry partners, and the varying perceptions of WIL's value among students and employers. There will be an overhaul of policy and operations due to national policy frameworks. The South African government has introduced various policies to promote WIL. This includes the National Skills Development Strategy and the Higher Education Act, which encourages institutions to incorporate experiential learning into their programs

While traditionally associated with professional degrees, the inclusion of WIL in career degree qualifications such as those in the arts, humanities, and social sciences has become increasingly recognised as beneficial for students, employers, and educational institutions (Jackson, 2015; Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). This discussion explores the necessity of integrating WIL into career-based degree qualifications, emphasising the enhancement of employability, skill development, and the real-world relevance of education

This problem is compounded by an evolving labour market that demands adaptability and a diverse skill set, raising questions about how educational institutions can effectively align their programs with real-world workforce needs. Furthermore, as the digital landscape reshapes career paths and opportunities, there is a pressing need to understand the future directions of WIL and its impact on traditional pedagogical approaches. Therefore, this research aims to systematically investigate the benefits and challenges of integrating work-integrated learning into university curricula, assess its implications for student outcomes and employability, and explore sustainable strategies for its effective implementation and evolution in response to changing industry demands. The context of this study began with the recognition of the highly centralised education system.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are many definitions of what a WIL is according to different authors like Emlsie 2015 and Lasen et al. 2018 who undertook extensive research, and those definitions collectively illustrate the evolving understanding of Work Integrated Learning, emphasising its significance in bridging educational theories and practical workplace skills, while also adapting to changing educational contexts and technological advancements.

The integration of WIL into traditional university education represents a paradigm shift in higher education. This framework outlines the theoretical underpinnings of WIL, elucidating its benefits, challenges, and future directions in the context of incorporating career-based

qualifications into academic curricula. By examining relevant theories and models, we can understand the mechanisms through which WIL can enhance educational outcomes, prepare students for the labour market, and foster lifelong learning. The purpose of WIL is to enable students to have authentic experiences in relevant learning environments, with a focus on integrating theory into practice (Fleming and Haigh, 2017; Smith et al., 2023; Fleming and Hay, 2021). The following frameworks are the foundation for WIL:

Conceptual foundations of work-integrated learning

Work-Integrated Learning refers to an educational approach that combines academic study with practical work experience. It encompasses various forms such as internships, co-ops, apprenticeships, and service learning and is seen as an overarching framework encompassing various experiential learning modalities, including internships, co-op programs, and service learning, with the aim of enriching the learner's educational experience and enhancing their career readiness (Barends and Nel 2017; Gordon et al., 2021).

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984):

This theory posits that learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. WIL is a prime example of experiential learning, allowing students to engage in real-world tasks that deepen their understanding and assimilation of academic knowledge. Kolb's model outlines a cycle that includes concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation

Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978):

This theory emphasises the importance of social interactions and cultural context in learning. Through WIL, students collaborate with peers, mentors, and professionals, creating a shared knowledge base that enhances learning outcomes. WIL emphasises teamwork and collaboration in real-world contexts, aligning with Vygotsky's idea that learning is a social process. Students gain knowledge through interactions with peers, mentors, and professionals in the workplace

Situated Learning Theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991):

This theory posits that learning occurs in contexts that reflect the complexity of the real world. WIL situates learning within professional environments, enabling students to acquire

knowledge directly applicable to their future careers. This theory is particularly relevant for Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), which combines academic study with practical workplace.

Role of Work-Integrated Learning

The incorporation of WIL into higher education offers several advantages, including enhanced employability. Research by Jackson and Dean (2023) shows that graduates with WIL experiences are often more attractive to employers, having developed relevant skills and competencies. MacNaught and Bisset (2024) add that WIL is a critical component of higher education curricula that promotes the development of transferable skills, enabling students to transition more effectively into the workforce and adapt to various occupational environments. WIL increases graduates' readiness to enter the job market (Alam et al, 2022; Jackson et al., 2022). This normally happens in their minds; employers believe that graduates who went through WIL have acquired some skills. WIL is associated with skill development, or is a very good platform for it. WIL provides students with opportunities to develop both technical skills and soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, which are essential in the workforce (Abuelmaatti and Vinokur, 2025). Oliver (2022) asserts that both employability and skill development can be achieved through WIL. They are deemed the central basis for WIL.

One other advantage of implementing WIL is that it provides theoretical and practical integration. This is achieved by bridging the gap between theory and practice. WIL enables students to apply academic knowledge in real-world scenarios, enhancing comprehension and retention. Higgs and Titchen (2001 as supported by Billett (2024), add that experiential learning bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, emphasising the importance of context and interaction with experienced professionals in fostering deep learning. The WIL students simply gain experience and knowledge through those who have experience in the job. Krause-Wichmann et al. (2023) note that WIL is an educational strategy that enhances student employability by providing structured opportunities for students to engage with and learn from the workplace while remaining connected to their formal academic studies. This approach not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares students for the complexities of the job market. WIL career exploration and networking is achieved, or it exposes the graduates to the world outside the lecture hall. WIL experiences facilitate professional networking, helping students to build relationships within their chosen fields and better understand career trajectories (Scaraboto, Almeida and dos Santos Fleck 2020).

Barriers to Work-Integrated Learning

Despite its advantages, WIL implementation is not without barriers. Traditional university structures in South Africa have not yet implemented WIL in their programs. This is because there is resistance to integrating WIL due to concerns about academic rigour and curriculum flexibility (Gamage, 2022). There have been arguments that WIL cannot just be implemented for the sake of doing it, that sometimes the WIL is not necessarily aligned to the objectives and outcomes of the programs. Moreover, it is sometimes easy to set quality assurance standards to ensure that WIL programs provide a meaningful experience and meet educational standards (Bridgstock, 2009). There has also been reluctance from top management because WIL affects throughput rates, and, as such, universities fear being labelled failures. The findings from the study by Van Wyk and Basson (2014) revealed that ‘although many students experienced difficulties in finding placement, the effect of WIL on completion rate. In the same vein, van der Bijl and Taylor (2020) found that antagonism emerged as a primary reason for some universities to offer WIL, and its implementation ranged from outright rejection to enthusiastic support. Effective WIL requires adequate resources, including faculty training, industry partnerships, and support services, which may not always be available (Billett, 2011). Career-based qualifications without the WIL component are not charged for practical, and when the WIL component is introduced, there will be a need to charge more. This will lead to higher fees, making the programs more expensive than they already are. Psychological readiness, sometimes the students are not prepared or willing to engage in WIL opportunities, leading to disparities in participation and outcomes (Namuwa, 2020) . There is another concerning issue: equality. South Africa remains a very unequal country, and the same inequality is no stranger to the higher education space. Some universities are more advantaged than others, while others mainly serve previously disadvantaged groups. Czerniewicz et al. (2020) write that the inequality in institutions of higher learning is shaped by and is in the nexus “of mutually constitutive factors such as gender, culture, race, class and geopolitical context. These factors also affect students' access to WIL opportunities. In their study regarding South African-specific complexities in aligning graduate attributes to employability, Ramnund-Mansingh and Reddy (2021) proclaim that

“South African higher education (HE) cannot be compared to any other country’s HE systems Due to the unique political landscape and structural narrative that it has undergone. Subsequent to the reorganisation of HEIs in 2004, a number of complexities arose. These included accessibility to education across race and the alignment of the South African HEIs to global pedagogic benchmarks. With the changing political landscape, transformations within higher

education, socio-economic inequities and changes in the workplace, researchers failed to recognise the impact of these factors on graduate employability.” (pg 206)

The disparities affect the students and higher learning. In another context, South African higher education is divided by different access (Lembani et al., 2020). Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) conclude that barriers pose a significant impediment to the implementation of WIL. It is not until all barriers are dealt with that everyone will have equal opportunities and access to WIL.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research provides a deep contextual understanding of the phenomena under investigation. By employing methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, researchers can capture the intricacies of human behaviour and social interactions (Yin, 2018). This context-rich data is invaluable for understanding how various factors: cultural, social, economic, and political that influence individual and group behaviour. Qualitative research is grounded in constructivist and interpretivist paradigms, acknowledging that reality is socially constructed and context-dependent (Creswell and Poth, 2017). The rationale for employing qualitative research methodologies rests on their capacity to provide rich, contextual, and nuanced insights into complex social phenomena.

The research employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach and used in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted to collect data from 10 participants, all of whom were professionals in either lecturing, university management, or human resources. Sample 10 was sufficient, as data saturation was achieved. Data saturation is reached when there is adequate information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Fusch and Ness, 2015). The principles of no new data, no new themes, and no new coding, along with the ability to replicate the study, were followed.

Interviews offered a flexible approach to data collection. This flexibility allows researchers to adapt questions based on participants' responses, probing deeper into areas of interest or clarification (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2021). Purposive sampling was employed to select professionals directly involved in WIL for non-career-based degrees, including faculty members involved in developing WIL curricula and employers who hire students from such programs. The interview protocol was to explore personal experiences, perceived benefits and challenges, and gather suggestions for future improvements. Data Analysis was conducted using NVivo to identify common themes and insights from qualitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research findings are presented below, along with the three main themes and their subthemes.

Theme 1: Benefits of transitioning to the WIL

WIL offers many benefits for students, including career advancement and job satisfaction. The importance of transitioning non-career-based programmes to also implement WIL is deemed very important, or at least a starting point, for graduates to first break into the job market. The students were first to acquire skills Participant C: "WIL benefits the students with the following skills: communication, punctuality, technology, observing theory in practise, leadership, career development, teamwork etc. with these skills a student can develop confidence in their job and that may lead to job satisfaction knowing exactly what is expected of them and how to execute it". These skills are considered holistic competencies that future employees need (Chan and Luk 2021). Many employers require job candidates to have at least one skill. Most such programs are just theory-based; as a result, students do not necessarily learn any skills. WIL programs allow students to apply theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms to real-world situations. This helps reinforce learning and understand how academic concepts are utilised in practice. The study also found that participants strongly believed soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, would be acquired through WIL, which are essential in any career.

In addition, the results reveal that WIL serves as a student's future career aspirations and boosts their confidence to face the outside world with career clarity. Sometimes students study programs in general without knowing what they would specialise in. However, if they are exposed to the real world, they will likely identify an area of speciality that they are most likely to pursue after exposure to the work environment. This career clarity can come in two forms.

Participant A: "Informed decisions, exposure to various roles within an industry can help students refine their career goals and make informed decisions about their professional paths, and exploration of Interests: WIL experiences can help students discover what they are passionate about, guiding them in choosing future roles that align with their interests."

Another issue discovered is that the WIL can help students identify their strengths and weaknesses during the WIL. Students often receive feedback from mentors; they receive constructive feedback from supervisors and colleagues. This feedback can highlight strengths in skills like teamwork and communication, as well as areas that may need improvement.

Goal Setting: Participant A: “WIL often afford students to set some goals for performance and learning. As students pursue these goals, they can better understand their abilities and limitations, helping them strategise for future growth.” These are also reflective practices that help students critically analyse their performance, leading to greater self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Benefits of transitioning career-based programs to require WIL include career advancement and job satisfaction. Participant A: “Yes, it spans the gap between theory and practice at the same time, intensifying the understanding and retention of concepts while developing practical problem-solving skills. specific job related are refined and will assist students to build their professional identity and create networks between students and future employers”.

Increased chances of getting employment: Participant F: “Students who participate in WIL stand a better chance of being employed as they have acquired skills to face the outside world.”

The same exposure they receive gives them an advantage over candidates who have never participated in any WIL program.

Results revealed that there are effects of WIL on universities and industry partners, the two sides have an opportunity to work together and Participant E: “Partnerships that will be formed will enhance curriculum development, staff development for both industry and academia”. The two sides will engage each other. The curriculum can be aligned with the industry needs. This will enhance curriculum relevance. Faculties and programme managers can update programs based on industry feedback, ensuring that coursework aligns with current industry needs and practices. Participant F:” Stronger industry ties Building partnerships with industry can lead to collaborative research projects, guest lectures, internships, and sponsorships and there could be more research opportunities that WIL can facilitate collaborative research initiatives between academia and industry, leading to innovations and advancements in various fields” Mostly on the effects there can be an evaluation and reviews that universities can do because of data gathered from students’ performance and outcomes related to WIL experiences, helping to continually improve academic programs.

Theme 2: Practical challenges in implementing WIL

One of the challenges in the WIL process is applying it. Participant A: “First, the department must sit and draft a proposal to the faculty management; if approved, it will go to the senate; these processes are not so easy because there are a lot of questions and engagements. Finally, when it is done, the biggest elephant to approach is the Department of Education”. The process

takes a long time because of the many steps required at all levels, both internally and externally. The curriculum adjustment and credit balancing are also identified as another challenge. Participant D: “Remember this is an existing program and there is an issue of credits that must be investigated and moving around modules so that WIL can be accommodated at the end of the second semester of the final year.” Resources are also another practical challenge. Participant C: “WIL needs its own separate budget to run, (operating costs) office and personnel, there must be a staff member that is going to be dedicated to the issues related to WIL”. The implementation of WIL can disadvantage students in graduating on time because placements can be difficult to obtain, and they may not graduate even though they have completed their coursework, which is a requirement. Participant F: “Universities should build and maintain a relationship with the industry before implementing WIL to avoid difficulties in finding placements for students.” It might also be difficult for universities themselves to find placements. Participant C: “If the government wants to seriously help in the skills development, then it should force all companies, especially corporates, to take students for WIL.” Students are facing resistance, possible ill-treatment, and exploitation. Participant F: hosts industry due to an inferiority complex among those already employed with inferior qualifications, which may make them feel a little threatened. Students are vulnerable to being overworked and exploited, and being asked to go overboard with things that employees will not be asked to do. Internal logistics procedures at the institutional level for transporting students, accommodation, insurance, and monthly or quarterly visits.

Theme 3: Future Directions of Work-Integrated Learning

There seems to be a strong view among participants that WIL is indeed the direction higher education must take in non-career-based programs to address the skills gap among graduates and prepare them for the workplace. Support from institutions of higher learning: all students need great support. The need for universities to form formal partnerships with the industry, Participant B: “finding new industry players and maintaining good relationships with them”. As the landscape of higher education evolves, there must be innovation in the curriculum. Institutions must adapt curricula to include more flexible WIL options, integrating industry feedback to ensure alignment with current workforce demands. Gonzalez and Simpson (2021) note that digital transformation can help, given the rise of remote internships and virtual WIL experiences, which necessitate new pedagogical approaches and the integration of technology. Lifelong learning frameworks are identified as the way through which WIL can better prepare students for an ever-changing job market, promoting adaptability and continuous professional

development (Gale et al., 2020). However, Luk and Chan (2024) question whether the WIL authors' experience was authentic or just done for the sake of doing it. Nevertheless, diversifying participation strategies must be developed to encourage different students to engage in WIL, ensuring equitable access to career-based qualifications (Eady et al., 2024). WIL creates a symbiotic relationship between universities and industry partners, leading to mutual benefits that enhance educational outcomes, student employability, and workforce development. If students do not access WIL, they are being denied equal opportunity with their peers. This disparity can affect who benefits from WIL experiences

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the quantified benefits and challenges of incorporating WIL into career-based programs at traditional universities. According to the study, the traditional universities indeed face a significant challenge in implementing WIL in their programs. Now, the question is: what does the study suggest about implementing WIL? It will be important for universities to assess local industry needs by conducting a needs analysis, collaborating with local businesses to understand their skill requirements and how students can support them, and aligning with local businesses to develop programs that meet their needs. This would help by enabling universities to redesign programs to align with industry, design WIL programs that reflect the local economic landscape, and ensure relevance to both students and employers.

Build Strong Partnerships and sign memorandums of understanding. This is to engage stakeholders by involving local businesses, government agencies, NGOs, and community organisations in the planning and implementation of WIL. It is also worth noting that such partnerships will be mutually beneficial to universities and businesses. It does not help to have a curriculum that does not align with WIL; therefore, it is important to develop curriculum integration. There will be a need to integrate WIL into academic programs to ensure that WIL components are embedded in the curriculum, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings. Moreover, this would be a flexible learning option that provides part-time or alternative learning formats to accommodate students' schedules and local work demands.

In the 4th industrial revolution, it would also be important to employ technology that enables students to connect with remote work opportunities or virtual internships when physical placements are limited. The participants emphasised the need for support to ensure WIL success; therefore, the creation of WIL offices to support students. The office will provide advice to students through their WIL experiences, from placements to reflection. WIL office will also organise skill development workshops and offer workshops to enhance soft skills

(communication, teamwork) and hard skills relevant to the local job market. Moreover, allocating budget resources to support WIL initiatives, scholarships for internships, and faculty-led projects.

Universities should raise awareness and provide opportunities by holding information sessions, where students regularly receive updates on WIL opportunities through workshops, seminars, and career fairs. Call out students who benefited from the WIL program to share their stories in a way that showcases and motivates students and highlights the value of WIL. This will ensure that at WIL, all students, including those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, have equal opportunities.

The universities can also periodically monitor and evaluate feedback on their WIL experiences to continuously improve the program. Furthermore, evaluate the impact of WIL on student employability, satisfaction, and local community development.

Another challenge mentioned by the participants is the issue of logistics and transportation needs; as such, offering n opportunities for current students through mentorship, networking events, and internships.

By facilitating practical learning experiences, the education sector can adapt and thrive in an ever-evolving economic landscape. In conclusion, this article elucidates the multifaceted nature of Work-Integrated Learning within traditional university education. By situating WIL within established learning theories, it becomes evident that integrating career-based qualifications can drive significant educational and professional outcomes. However, addressing the inherent challenges and focusing on future directions will be critical to maximising WIL's potential in higher education. Through collaboration among academia, industry, and students, WIL can enhance the educational experience, fostering graduates who are better prepared for the dynamic demands of the workforce.

Moreover, universities can adopt a policy on WIL, thereby committing themselves to supporting WIL, related initiatives, expectations, participation, responsibilities, and outcomes.

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