



Enhancing Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): A Literature Review on Challenges, Strategies, and Graduate Employability in the South African Context

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Abstract: This paper explores existing literature on work-integrated learning challenges, strategies, and its impact on graduate employability in the South African context in higher education institutions. In this paper, the approach followed is a systematic narrative synthesis involving conceptual and empirical literature review. Hence, this literature review includes research studies published as peer-reviewed articles in the English language. Only articles published between the years 2015 and 2025, as well as case studies of WIL in higher institutions used. The theories that formed the backbone of this paper are based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, with a focus on learning as an acquired skill, and Human Capital Theory, which relates to the economics of skill acquisition and employability. The findings from the literature review range from inconsistent industry partnerships to a spectrum of students' preparedness for such requirements, unsatisfactory supervision structures, and even inequities in access to work placements. Co-designed curricula and the related structured reflection underpin the realization of WIL benefits, as does the increasing use of digital monitoring tools, deliberate mentorship, and tight collaboration between academia and industry. Most of the literature consistently establishes that WIL facilitates graduates' workplace competence, professional confidence, and access to a job-related network. This paper is literature-based; findings depend on the scope and quality of available publications and, therefore, do not capture emerging institutional practices not yet published. The increased employability, reduction of youth unemployment, equity, and community engagement for social development in South Africa are among the social impacts of enhanced WIL at HEIs. The research therefore informs HEI policy and curriculum development on how WIL can contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), promote equal learning, improve skill acquisition, and enhance graduate employability in South Africa.

Keywords: Work-Integrated Learning; Higher Education; Graduate Employability; Challenges; Strategies; South Africa; Social Impact

Introduction and Background

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has proven to be a widely accepted and important pedagogical model that has bridged, though not eliminated, the long-existing gap between theory and real-world practice (Khuadthong, Pantaruk, Imjai, & Aujirapongpan, 2025; & O'Connor, 2023). In particular, WIL refers to a range of structured learning activities, including internships, co-op education, clinical placements, service-learning, and project-based work collaborations that provide a pedagogical platform for connecting theoretical knowledge with practical work involvement (Ferns and Zegwaard, 2014). Such activities provide students not only with the necessary skills and knowledge in a discipline but also, the authors further allude that, opportunities for developing professional identity, workplace confidence, and reflective awareness. This has become particularly important in contemporary higher education, which faces increasing pressure to provide graduates equipped for a dynamic and technology-based labour market.

The increase in worldwide participation in WIL has been closely tied to other changes in higher education. This reflects, as effectively suggested by Jackson (2015), who highlighted the growing and acknowledged concern of employers that students graduating from higher education courses also need to be able to evidence their work-readiness adequacy, soft skills, and malleability, in addition to their subject knowledge. This argument has been reinforced similarly by authors such as Zegwaard and Rowe (2019), who suggest that, in a similar way, institutions in higher education are addressing this concern by increasing experiential learning modules. Moreover, the Fourth Industrial Revolution has further emphasized the importance of Work-Integrated Learning in the context of higher education. Because of the technological advancements, a generation of graduates is needed who possess a deep awareness of how technology operates in their professional realm, and a resurrected focus on problem-solving skills in this context is imperative in the present era. This further emphasizes that Work-Integrated Learning is a platform for students to develop a complex skill set, thereby facilitating an easy entry into a paradigm shift in the labor market in this respect. This is in line with Dwesini (2017), Dzansi & Jacobs (2015); Ngwane (2016); Mathebula, Zwane, & Letsoalo (2025), who claim that learning that takes place in a work environment enhances a person's employability. Nonetheless, in spite of this universal acceptance, there have been several challenges identified in the literature regarding the efficient adoption of Work-Integrated Learning, such as a lack of supervision, placement, etc.

According to Kay, Ferns, Russell, Smith, & Winchester-Seeto (2019), for example, it is important to note that the successful application of WIL involves a partnership between HEIs, industry, and governments. However, in practice, these partnership programs are faced with various challenges. In this regard, other challenges that affect the effective application of WIL are highlighted by Curto-Reverte, Peguera-Carre, Cobos-Rius, & Vidal-Marti (2025), including a lack of consistent mentoring, differences in quality of work, as well as inequalities in access to suitable workplaces, placement, mentorship, etc. Recent literature has also highlighted the significance of preparedness and reflective participation of students to make WIL outcomes meaningful. According to Coll, Zegwaard, and Hodge (2021), student preparedness, both in terms of their academic as well as their affective preparation, has a major influence on how much students can learn in a work experience. On the other hand, Kaider et al (2017) suggest that reflection has a major role to play in allowing students to make connections between their experiences in employment and their understanding of their own discipline. This indicates that for a successful outcome of WIL, it also depends upon how much preparation in terms of curriculum takes place before, during, and after the experience.

For instance, within a South African context, WIL is a crucial aspect in bridging the skills divide and making graduates employable, particularly since HEIs are also involved and committed to development within this country, which is facing unprecedented youth unemployment challenges. According to a report by Mabungela and Mtiki (2024), WIL is an important aspect since it ensures that graduates are work-ready and ready to be integrated into the mainstream of the country's economy. However, Okolie (2022) and Chowa, Masa, Zulu, & Manzanares (2025), argues in support of this discussion, suggesting that through workplace learning, students develop confidence, flexibility, and an awareness of employer requirements. Consequently, in this regard, there is a need for enhanced WIL, which in effect becomes an important priority for HEIs, but is now an important aspect of this development necessity, which must necessarily be met. Consequently, WIL plays a significant role for HEIs, including improving the relevance of curricula, improving industry links, and ensuring that graduates meet the requirements of the work world. Given that all this is well considered, this paper aims to offer a critical review of the subject of WIL by: (1) clarifying any of the challenges that may exist for HEIs in this regard concerning the implementation of WIL practices, (2) clarifying any of the practices by which WIL practices can also succeed, and finally, by (3) clarifying the degree to which this WIL is also successful in developing graduates to meet employability requirements. This review of this topic, including this latest subject, aims to offer HEIs with practical subject knowledge that must exist and which can assist in the development of successful practices of WIL.

Objectives

The paper was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To determine the challenges involved in implementing WIL programs in HEIs.
2. To identify strategies have been utilized in improving WIL in HEIs.
3. To assess the effect of WIL on the employability of graduates in HEIs.

Problem Statement

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) plays a crucial role in linking theoretical learning with professional practice and in enhancing graduate employability (Jackson, 2018; Stirling, Kerr, Banwell, Macpherson, & Heron, 2016). Despite its recognised value, evidence indicates that WIL is unevenly and inequitably implemented across higher education

institutions, limiting its effectiveness (Jackson, 2018; Ajjawi, Tai, Huu Nghia, Boud, Johnson, & Patrick, 2020). Many institutions continue to face weak industry partnerships, inconsistent supervision quality, and limited placement opportunities, which restrict students' access to meaningful workplace learning experiences (Govender & Wait, 2017; Maseko, 2018; Winberg et al., 2022). These challenges disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds, reinforcing existing inequalities in access to quality placements and employability outcomes. In addition, WIL assessment practices often remain task-focused, with insufficient emphasis on professional development and the articulation of employability skills. Although there is agreement on the need to strengthen industry collaboration and supervisory support, there is limited consensus on effective, equitable, and sustainable models for implementing WIL (Jackson, 2018).

If these issues remain unaddressed, WIL will continue to produce graduates who are academically qualified but insufficiently prepared for the labour market, while perpetuating socio-economic disparities. This highlights the need for more coherent and equitable approaches to the design and implementation of Work-Integrated Learning in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was underpinned by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory and Human Capital Theory, which provide strong pedagogic and economic lenses, respectively, through which students' experiences in learning and employability outcomes within work-integrated learning could be understood (Jullien & Kolb, 1984; Kolb, 2014). Integrating these theories enhances the analytical depth of this paper by linking the process of learning with labour-market value, a concept increasingly advocated in higher education research (Billett, 2011; Jackson, 2018).

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), developed by Kolb (1984), defines the learning process as a cycle involving concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation. The theory states that learning occurs when students can actively participate in all the stages of the cycle. ELT has often been practiced in professional and disciplines, like Library and Information Science (LIS), wherein the development of competency requires a balance between theory and practice (Eraut, 2004; Billett & Choy, 2013). There is consensus among researchers on the importance of experiential learning. Researchers point out the factors that impede such learning. According to Billett & Choy (2013), experiential learning requires the facilitation that allows individuals to actualize the tasks that they contribute in, whereas Kolb & Kolb (2005) emphasize the process that guides individuals during the phase of their reflection. In relation to the aforementioned theories, the current paper argues that the process of experiential learning is impeded if the opportunity for experience or the opportunity for learning through that experience, respectively, is interrupted.

Importantly, criticisms of experiential learning models have been identified as neglecting structural inequality in experience (Masego, Venacio, & Kappo-Abidemi, 2024). Fenwick (2001) notes that experiential learning theory offers equal opportunities for experience yet overlooks the fact that socio-economic contexts influence learning opportunities. This is particularly a concern in the context of South African higher education, in which students from disadvantaged socio-economic contexts experience unequal opportunities to engage in experiential learning in the online learning context. The present study expands experiential learning theory in this context to consider structural limitations to experiential learning instead of viewing it as a boundary. In light of this, some principles of good practice in ELT can be identified. Kolb (1984) states that learning can be facilitated through carefully planned experience. On this basis, Jackson (2018) has argued that simulation, reflection, and supervision can be used to facilitate learning in higher education. As a result, this paper proposes that simulation, on-line mentoring, and blended WIL programs can to some extent mitigate this dysfunction in the learning cycle when physical placements are restricted. The paper, therefore proposes that it is strategic university preparation that should be regarded as more significant than delivery modality in this process.

Human Capital Theory (HCT)

Human Capital Theory was proposed by Schultz in 1961, Becker (1962), and by Becker in 1964 (Caire, 1967). This theory considers education and training as investments in one's productive capacity as an individual and thus their employability. Based on this theory, the employability of a university graduate would be the sum of skills and experience gained by them. There is no disagreement in academia regarding the fact that the main tool for the conversion of academic learning into employable human capital is WIL.

Nevertheless, the current literature also cautions against the idea of a linear interaction between the accumulation of human capital and the labour market. For instance, Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) argue that the interaction between education and the labour market is channelled through structural disparities and the rising saturation of the labour market. The current study aligns with this critique in that impaired human capital development and the consequent diminished employability potential follow despite attaining education qualifications because the students' experiential learning had been. Nonetheless, despite such challenges, HCT remains one of the most fundamental justifications for the strategic investment of institutions in the quality of education. According to Becker (1964), the return on investments in education depends on the relevance and quality of the training.

In the context of WIL, the views of authors such as Jackson (2018) and Tomlinson (2017) suggest that programmed WIL, quality supervision, and curriculum designed with employability needs play a critical enabling role in improving the labour-market prospects of graduates. In this regard, the argument in this paper is that investments by the institution in the capacity for supervision, industry partnerships, and technology infrastructure are fundamental investments in the human capital of students. More specifically, the framework of ELT and HCT is useful in this context because, on the one hand, while ELT illuminates' deficiencies in skill development in students as a function of experiential learning interruption, on the other hand, the deficiency in skill development potentially offers a justification vis-a-vis diminished graduate employability. Thus, there is a conceptual link between challenges identified in this context, namely deficiencies in placement opportunities, supervision, and infrastructure, and strategic solutions in the form of a Blended Learning WIL framework, a focus on learning facilitators, and partnerships, leading to graduate employability. In this context, the concept of graduate employability is placed in a macro context to address challenges in resilience, equity, and graduate employability in a crisis in the wider world of higher education.

Literature Review

The section below discusses the reviewed literature on challenge, strategies, and impact of WIL on employability.

Work-Integrated Learning Challenges in HEIs

Higher education institutions are increasingly invested in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as part of their mainstream endeavour. It appears that many institutions are being hampered in their endeavours by structural issues that affect, in a negative way, both the quality and equity of their work-related endeavors. WIL aims at bridging academic theories and working practices within the HE sector, but still experiences challenges regarding implementation, equity, and institutional support. Findings from recent research indicate that unfavourable industry partnerships, scarcity of placement opportunities, and workplace supervision obstacles are currently impacting the relevance and importance of WIL within HE institutions (Jackson, 2018; Kay et al., 2019). By sustaining inequities based on student background, opportunities within WIL remain limited, continuing to hinder disadvantaged student groups and limiting them to less equal and better-placed placements, thereby perpetuating HE inequities within the higher education sectors (Stirling, et al. 2016; Garant-Jones, 2024). Moreover, strict assessment methods focus on task completion and overlook reflective and professional development, thus limiting WIL efforts to making marginal gains in employability skills and practices (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Billett, 2020).

It thus represents an ever-growing challenge that needs to be tackled with better industry collaboration for WIL. It requires collaboration and supervision arrangements involving an academic and an industry supervisor, as well as placement structures that ensure all have equal chances to benefit from them. Should these issues not be resolved, it would result in higher education offering degree holders who are knowledgeable but ill-equipped, thus contributing to more employability gaps and sustaining social and economic inequality within South Africa.

Strategies to Enhance Work-Integrated Learning in HEIs

To effectively tackle issues on Work-Integrated Learning in tertiary institutions, a series of approaches is needed that, in a synchronized manner, enhance instruction, industry partnership, and individual development (Penman, Tai, Evans, Brentnall, & Judd, 2024; Wang, Gill, & Lee, 2023; Singh & Mahomed, 2013). An effective strategy widely promoted in this area involves mentoring, in which students are paired with industry experts. According to Jackson (2015), not only does this help acquire practical skills for a given profession, but it also involves tacit knowledge that cannot easily be transferred in a classroom setting. This correlation has been reinforced by Billett & Choy (2013), who argue that this form of mentoring assists in facilitating contextualized learning in a reflective manner. While there appears to be an agreement between these findings concerning mentoring, a discrepancy arises concerning the extent of support that institutions should offer in this area. Jackson (2015) believes that even unofficial mentoring can be sufficient for campuses, yet Billett and Choy (2013) recommend that merely functional mentoring programs are sufficient. Reflective practice has been suggested as a useful complement to this, allowing students to critically synthesize their

experiences in the workplace with theoretical knowledge from their studies. Ferns and Zegwaard (2014) suggest that reflection enhances cognitive and metacognitive skills, enabling students to apply their knowledge in a wide range of professional situations. Not all research agrees that reflection is adopted in a consistent and deep manner, suggesting a lack of reflection to some degree unless it is specifically incorporated in a structured way into a course of study.

Another area of common recommendation regards the co-design of the WIL curriculum/program with industry. This was suggested by McRae & Johnston (2016), Kay, Furney, and Mac anully (2019), who suggest that a better match between academic goals and real-world work will enhance skill development and work readiness. There seems to be a general agreement on this matter; however, criticism suggests that a sole focus on work needs might affect academic insight and critical thinking, as suggested by Rai (2023). Lastly, technology integration in WIL has been reported to be a revolutionary step, especially in terms of increasing access and resilience. This is because technology, such as online placements, online internships, and simulation placements, can offer solutions to issues like a lack of placement opportunities as well as issues that come with a pandemic, among other issues, as cited by Bowen (2020) and Rai et al. (2023). Although most articles are positive, there are concerns that technology cannot provide a total substitute for experience, as per Bowen (2020). Conclusively, with that, it becomes apparent that literature confirms that for WIL to be effective, it has to be done in a way that integrates structured mentoring, reflection, co-curricular development, and technology integration. Nonetheless, it has been noted in literature that there exist tensions and gaps in relation to mentoring that needs to be structured, reflection that has to be supported, a curriculum that has to manage industry and HE needs, and technology that has to support, rather than substitute, actual industry experience.

Work Integrated Learning on Graduate Employability

Work-Integrated Learning aims to improve the employability of graduates by providing students with effective skills, work attitudes, and knowledge of industries that are essential in a dynamic work environment (Adegbite & Hoole, 2024; & Dwesini, 2017). Empirical evidence has shown that students who participate in WIL develop critical professional skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and flexibility (McRae, & Johnston, 2016; Jackson 2018). Although most authors concur that graduates acquire skills beyond technical skills, a debate remains as to how extensively and uniformly students are inculcated with these skills in different areas of knowledge. Additionally, apart from providing students with technical skills, WIL also supplements students with social and professional capital. This occurs as students are actively involved in professional networks, learn about corporate culture, and develop knowledge of professional practices and expectations, among other benefits that stem from their involvement in the working world (Bowen, 2020; Kay et al., 2019). While it has long been recognized that enhancements in social capital are valuable, there are concerns that certain groups of students are denied equal opportunities in placement, which underlines that HEIs must remain focused on offering students opportunities that are equitable in nature.

Notably, the literature shows that employability is not merely confined to skills acquisition. Employability skills acquired through WIL practices enhance graduates' attitudes of confidence in decision-making, adaptability in response to a dynamic labour market, and their potential to effectively contribute to organizational goals (Jackson, 2015; Rai et al., 2023). Scholars agree on the transformative nature of WIL approaches, but some of them present a counterargument that the results of employability, to some extent, are contingent upon guidance, reflection, and industry relevance. Despite these successful outcomes, the practices of evaluation in WIL are a matter of debate. Billett and Choy (2013), as well as Ferns and Zegwaard (2014), assert that conventional practices of evaluation are merely confined to task attainment and lack a comprehensive perspective in terms of professional development, reflective learning, and employability skills. This creates a significant contradiction in that, despite experiential experience, unless comprehensive evaluation structures are taken into consideration, professional development in terms of cognitive development and professional efficiency would not be attained. In this regard, a careful analysis of literature asserts that with effective design, support, and evaluation, WIL offers a powerful approach to develop graduates' employability and help bridge the divide between higher education and preparedness for the workforce and provide students with the skills and attitudes needed for success in their chosen career paths. However, researchers identify that critical review, merit-based access, and reflective practices are important considerations for all students to benefit maximally from WIL.

Methodology

A literature review method was used in this study for a comprehensive collection of contemporary knowledge available in the literature on Work-Integrated Learning in higher education institutions, covering strategies, challenges, and findings related to graduate employability. A literature search of publications from journals, peer-reviewed articles, and institution-level studies. The articles searched were those published from 2015 to 2025. To make a comprehensive

sweep of all available literature, a search was conducted in four prominent academic databases, which are Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The choice of these databases was informed by their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed articles, proceedings, and grey literature in relation to educational studies, work-related learning, and employability. The search methodology employed a search of keywords, as well as Boolean searching, using “work-integrated learning,” “experiential learning,” “internship,” “graduate employability,” “higher education,” “WIL challenges,” and “WIL strategies” as search terms, with all results limited to articles that are in English. Further articles were found by searching the bibliography of articles that were deemed relevant.

Inclusion criteria were set in such a way as to focus only on studies that specifically referred to WIL in HEI, as well as explored at least one of these aspects: challenges of implementation, enhancement, and/or outcomes of employability. Only studies published in English were taken into consideration, in order to avoid misunderstandings in the interpretation of their results. The exclusion criteria were studies that were related to secondary education, internships in K-12 education, as well as other kinds of work experience that are not related to HEI, as their nature and goals are profoundly different. Extraction of data was done through coding of the important features of studies, which involved authors, date of publication, country and setting, study design, type of WIL, population, and findings. Next, data analysis was done using this coding, where findings were brought under different themes, which were divided into three areas: challenges faced in relation to the application of WIL, how efficiency of WIL can be improved, and how WIL affects the employability of graduates. This was a form of thematic analysis that helped in determining what data was missing using different contexts. Lastly, every literature that has been reviewed has been determined in terms of its rigor of methodology, significance in relation to HEI's WIL programs, and in relation to its objectives.

The sample size for this paper for the literature search resulted in a total of approximately 90 records, out of which 58 sources were found to be relevant after screening and were included for the final review. Most of these sources consisted of peer-reviewed journals along with a few policy documents and core books. The sample size for this study was determined based on its relevance, quality, and thematic saturation rather than its numerical representativeness, which is appropriate for literature review research. In total, 58 sources were used for the study, mostly comprising peer-reviewed journal articles for academic rigor and credibility. Sources used for this study cover the period from 2015 to 2025, thus allowing for contemporary developments in Work Integrated Learning (WIL). It is worth noting that the sample for this study was deemed adequate after thematic saturation was achieved, whereby no significant themes were obtained from the sources. Additionally, the inclusion of both global and South African sources allowed for increased contextualization and application of the themes in the study. Some foundational and policy sources were included for increased depth in terms of theory and understanding. As such, the sample for this study has been deemed adequate for credible, comprehensive, and relevant conclusions.

To ensure the rigour and credibility of this literature review, techniques were used to reduce the possibility of any bias that might have been encountered in the process of data collection from the literature. Firstly, a transparent and systematic search strategy was adopted to search the databases using specific keywords relevant to this paper. These databases included Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Therefore, this reduced the possibility of any bias that might have been encountered in the process. Secondly, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to reduce the possibility of any bias. This is because the criteria were used to ensure consistency in the inclusion of relevant studies. Thirdly, the use of a structured framework (PRISMA) to guide the analysis of the study reduced the possibility of any bias. To further promote the rigour and credibility of this literature review, a comparative analysis was used to reduce the possibility of any bias. This is because the findings were compared to establish convergence and divergence. Moreover, the researcher's preconceptions were also taken into consideration to promote the rigour and credibility of the literature review. Lastly, the use of credible sources (peer-reviewed) was preferred to reduce the possibility of any bias.

Results and discussions

The section below discusses interpreting and discussing the findings of the study as per the set objective.

Challenges in WIL Implementation

The findings revealed that WIL challenges are systemic, interrelated, and extensively documented in the literature. This is an indication that these challenges continue to exist despite continued scholarly attention. The lack of partnerships between HEIs and industry appears to be the most cited challenge in the literature. This indicates a high degree of convergence on the need for improved partnerships between higher education institutions and the industry with regard to limiting placement opportunities. It is generally contended within the literature that a lack of

partnerships with industry leads to a lack of alignment, fragmentation within the placement arrangements, as well as a lack of belief in genuine workplace learning experiences (Kay et al., 2019; McRae & Johnston, 2016; Peach et al., 2012). This is further complicated within the South African sector by the different levels of development within the economy, as well as the inability of the organisations to support students (Maseko, 2018; Govender & Wait, 2017; Ojo, 2019). It is evident from findings that the relationship with industry, within the context of WIL, has continued to lack strategic value, with limited potential within the sector towards developing skills on a sustainable basis.

Inconsistent supervision/mentoring practice is also a significant theme identified within the literature as cited in the literature. Where a consensus clearly exists that the quality of supervision is a fundamental critical modulator of the overall effectiveness of WIL. Clearly, consensus exists that, in order for deep learning within a workplace setting to be facilitated, there has to be a consistent supervisory structure that provides ongoing coaching, feedback, and alignment with academic expectations (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; Fleming, 2019). However, a tension identified within the reviewed literature, which identifies the lack of educational supervision skills within workplace supervisors, exists alongside academic supervisory workload, as a barrier to ongoing mentoring (Mugwari, Van Wyk, & Lavhelani, 2025; Soniassy, Martin, & Kruger, 2025). Moreover, literature has expanded upon this theme, identifying the growing fragmentation of supervision standards within a digitally supported, as well as a mixed-mode, WIL environment (Macqueen, Ferguson-Patrick, Waters, & Zhang, 2025; Winberg, 2022).

Readiness issues are also identified in a considerable number of sources in the literature, reflecting that students are typically ill-prepared when going on a WIL placement. Kotze

(2022) argues that socio-economic factors are highly contributory to workplace readiness. Furthermore, equity of access to WIL experiences remains a significant challenge, as cited in most articles. It is generally agreed that equity of access is impacted by the advantage of a particular sector of the population over another as a result of inherent inequalities (Cheetham et al., HE, 2011; Stirling, et al. 2016). The more contemporary literature, within the past few years, reinforces this interpretation, with research illustrating that rigorous competitive, unpaid, or informal experiences are most likely to advantage highly capitalized students (Brooks & Timms, 2023; Garant-Jones, 2024). Hay and Fleming (2025) propose that the shift from physical WIL experiences brought on by the pandemic has introduced contemporary equity issues. It appears that, from an equity perspective, WIL experiences are contributing to existing inequalities within HEI systems as they exist worldwide.

The limitations of assessment are considered an on-going educational challenge cited in articles. It is suggested in a number of articles that reliance on reflective reports and supervisor assessment is far too subjective, inconsistent, and tenuously linked to learning (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Maseko, 2018; Young et al., 2024). There are suggestions that competency-based programming models, and assessment models, are the solutions appeared in many articles. Beyond this, agreement is forthcoming on best practice models that might address a set of diverse educational needs (Brook et al., 2024; DUT/OpenScholar Review, 2023), within which assessment practice appears to be one of the most dynamically unresolved. Overall, the findings from the literature support a need for a more integrated, evidence-informed, and context-sensitive approach to WIL implementation, design, and practice, commensurate with the full educational potential of WIL.

Strategies to Enhance WIL

It is evident from the literature that there is a collective understanding that structured mentoring is integral to the effectiveness of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). Authors suggest that “supervision by experienced practitioners in the workforce allows students to gain tacit knowledge, professional ideals, and problem-solving skills that are difficult to gain in a learning setting” (Jackson, 2015; Billett & Choy, 2013; Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; McRae, & Johnston, 2016; Kay et al., 2019). Although these authors support mentoring, it is furthermore suggested that their effectiveness is significantly dependent on the pedagogical expertise of the workforce supervisors, who lack training as a constraint of learning (Billett & Choy, 2013; Jackson, 2015). A broad degree of agreement is evident concerning the importance of learning by reflection to enable students to connect theory with practice, with the development of higher-order thinking skills (Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; McRae, & Johnston, 2016). However, some authors suggest that poorly structured reflection sessions or the lack of support for reflection can “result in superficial description of process, or analysis of limited depth” with students engaged in more routine activities (Billett & Choy, 2013; Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014). Industry collaboration concerning curriculum design is collectively agreed to improve alignment with academic offerings and industrial demands (Kay et al., 2019; McRae, & Johnston, 2016), with South African literature further stressing the importance of ensuring that it is relevant to the context by developing sustainable WIL partnerships (Bitzer, 2009; Govender & Wait, 2017; Maseko, 2018). However, power disparities are suggested by some authors who propose that automated levels of influence by industries could “potentially undermine educational purposes of

WIL (Billett & Choy, 2013; McRae, & Johnston, 2016). While responding to labor shortages on a scale, the vast majority of authors support technology-mediated WIL as an additional approach for work-integrated learning (Bowen, 2020; Rai et al., 2023), while evidence points out that inequity in access to devices as well as internet access widens the inequality gap (Mthethwa et al., 2021; Naidoo & Govender, 2022). Overall, and as posited by this study, it is clear that no one of the factors mentioned is or could be sufficient to address the complexities of WIL by themselves, requiring high-quality WIL to result from the integrated application of multiple factors (Jackson, 2015; Billett & Choy, 2013; Ferns & Zegwaard, 2014; McRae, & Johnston, 2016; Kay et al., 2019).

Impact of WIL on Graduate Employability

There is consensus from the literature that WIL is central to the development of graduate employability, but there is a continuing disagreement between scholars about the degree to which WIL should be developed as a means of building skills per se or as part of a more holistic process of professional socialisation. Additionally, a key congruence from the literature is that WIL significantly enhances core employability competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability (McRae, & Johnston, 2016; Jackson 2018). These competency dimensions are increasingly required in labour markets and cannot be fully developed via classroom learning alone. The point of convergence in the two stances further underpins the assertion that WIL bridges theoretical knowledge and practical capability.

Beyond the development of technical and soft skills, a number of authors stress the role of WIL in developing social and professional capital. Bowen (2020) suggest that professional networks established during placement provide students with insider knowledge of expectations in the workplace and, therefore, directly impact hiring decisions. This view is supported by Kay et al. (2019), who identify strategic benefits of being exposed to the culture of organisations. Not all authors, however, accept this position and suggest that access to networking opportunities may be less than uniform. Garant-Jones (2024), for example, advises that the social capital benefits of WIL may elude students who are placed in under-resourced organisations, reinforcing unequal employability outcomes. This disagreement thus reveals a critical tension: while WIL builds employability, it may be structural inequalities that determine whose employability is enhanced most.

Regarding the development of career readiness and adaptability, the findings are consistent that WIL enhances graduates' confidence, resilience, and ability to respond to changing labour-market requirements (Rai et al. 2023; Jackson 2015). However, there is disagreement about how and why this improvement occurs. For Rai et al. (2023), adaptability arises mainly from exposure to varied challenges at work, while for Jackson (2015), it arises from the reflective and self-assessing character of experiential learning. The contrast in their emphasis points to two underlying theoretical positions—one based on learning from experience and the other on learning from reflection would imply that high-value WIL must include elements of both. One of the persistent concerns in the literature is that assessment practices are not up to date. Billett and Choy (2013) argue that the traditional task-based evaluation misses professional identity formation, while Ferns and Zegwaard (2020) believe that insufficient reflection mitigates WIL's capacity to produce transformative learning. In this respect, authors agree in their critique of existing assessment frameworks yet disagree on how these should be improved. Competence-based rubrics have their backers, as do reflective and portfolio-driven models. This debate attests to how employability benefits will not happen of their own accord rather they heavily rely on robust, multidimensional assessment.

The literature shows that well-designed WIL programs significantly enhance graduate employability, but the overall benefit and the equity of these benefits depend on the quality of the program, conditions during placement, and assessment design. Therefore, WIL needs to be reconceptualized not as a discrete pedagogical intervention but as a cohesive, integrated ecosystem—one that melds experiential exposure with reflective practice, equitable access, and professional mentorship. Lacking such an integration, WIL has the risk of spewing out fragmented outcomes that might privilege some students while underserving others. Hence, developing graduate employability more holistically requires a more equitable WIL model, one purposefully aligning skills development, professional socialization, and critical reflection within an embedded framework.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the reviewed literature proves and emphasizes the relevance and importance of Work-Integrated Learning as a paradigm-shattering learning method that bridges academic learning and real-life experiences. Although there appears to be an agreement on its relevance, as it enhances graduate employability and smooth workplace transition for new university graduates, as argued by Kay et al. (2019). Amongst others, specifically McRae, & Johnston, (2016), there appear to be challenges and complexities associated with its full implementation in HEIs as

argued by these researchers. Although Billett and Choy (2013) stress the cognitive and experiential values and advantages of WIL, the author appears more conservative compared to other scholars, as the author does not appear to assume that it will be learning-friendly at the learning workplace. It appears that there is some dichotomy amongst researchers.

The literature also firmly establishes a strong degree of consensus on pedagogy components for improving WIL impact, with differing emphases. Thus, Jackson (2015), Ferns and Zegwaard (2014); Jackson, Dean, & Eady (2025) firmly argue an integral role for mentoring and reflective practice. On the other hand, with differing emphases and with a focus on scalable solutions. Bowen (2020) identify curriculum co-design with industry and online learning platforms as perhaps offering better opportunities for relevance and inclusion. Notwithstanding these differing imperatives, they all propose making WIL more successful as an integral and holistic part within and beyond the curriculum, with differing emphases on collaboration and industry and academia engagement. By extension and extension of these theoretical considerations, it would appear that institutions would eventually be required to effect pedagogy and system changes to address cultural and infrastructural complexities associated with WIL implementation.

A very prominent area that will benefit from and accumulate on convergence within the literature regarding employability outcomes will be examined. Scholars such as Jackson and Wilton (2017) and Rai et al. (2023) suggested that WIL contributes to developing professional skills, enhancing work adaptability skills, and enhancing social capital. Nevertheless, within this convergence, there still appears to be an essential gap within the literature regarding measurement within an institutional setting. Within current measurement practice, there still appears to be an excessive focus on technical outputs. Notably, within current measurement practice within an institution, there still frequently appears to be an inadequacy within measurement practice that fails to address reflective learning and employability skills. In regard, it is suggested within this discussion that there is an essential need for comprehensive measurement practices to enhance WIL value within modern-day higher education. Based on these discussions, it is recommended within this review that HEIs should institutionalize and develop these industry partnerships for guaranteed equitable and high-quality placements without leaning towards some sectors, HEIs, and students. It becomes clear from these discussions within the literature review that there is a consensus on the importance and inclusion of skill and practice/mentoring as components within WIL. However, because there seems to be variability within it, it becomes an institutional weakness, thus requiring investment and consideration within programme planning. Reflective practice would also be included as an integral learning requirement within teaching, and learners should have an opportunity to consolidate links between theoretical and practice domains. While considering the issue within widening access and within higher education, there would be an argument and discussion introduced within this article that HEIs should capitalize on virtual and simulated placements as emerging research relates it as an alternative strategy within regions with challenges and constraints, suggesting that applying technologies within WIL would address the shortage within placements without compromising learning standards. Lastly, HEIs would develop holistic and comprehensive models within programmes for an assessment beyond technical skills and would incorporate learning within reflective practice, professional identities, and employability skills. Not only would these address traditional academic reservations, but they would also validate WIL programmes as equal and rigorous elements within HE today.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn in this study, various measures were taken to address the internal biases often associated with literature-based research. One such approach was to draw conclusions based on a process called triangulation, where findings have been compared and contrasted with various literature to identify similarities, contradictions, and gaps. In this study, another approach was to draw balanced conclusions based on a synthesis of literature that offered supporting and opposing views on Work Integrated Learning (WIL), thus avoiding confirmation bias. Furthermore, reflexivity was another approach where the assumptions of the researcher were considered and addressed to avoid biases in the conclusion. In this study, conclusions were drawn based on a vast body of literature, thus establishing credibility and trustworthiness.

Contribution to HEIs and SDGs

Implementing these recommendations enables HEIs to move beyond disorganised forms of WIL to coherent, high-impact programs that demonstrably enhance graduate employability and workforce readiness. The literature revealed that a well-designed WIL strengthens the nexus between academic learning and labour-market demands, particularly when learning outcomes, assessment practices, and workplace experiences are intentionally integrated. However, several authors sound warnings that unless WIL is properly institutionally supported, assured for quality and equitably accessed, placement opportunities, WIL risks reproducing existing inequalities and offering uneven educational value. This review continues this debate by arguing that WIL should be conceptualised not as a peripheral curriculum

requirement but rather as an embedded pedagogy that strategically advances both improvements in educational quality and socio-economic development.

This increases WIL provisions, which directly contribute, from a policy and development perspective, to attaining SDG 4, Quality Education, by making higher education inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the needs of society through its skills-oriented predisposition. Furthermore, it addresses SDG 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, because of increased graduate employability, easier transitions from university to work, and inculcating work-readiness competencies. For the longer term, sustained and mutualistic collaboration between HEIs and the industry can be seen as an indirect contribution to the strengthening of innovation ecosystems, facilitating knowledge exchange, and supporting infrastructure development within both sectors, thereby indirectly reinforcing SDG 9, Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure.

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