

# Transfer of Knowledge to the Future Workforce Through Optimizing Work-Integrated Learning

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**Abstract:** The effective transfer of knowledge in a workplace setting is critical to ensuring continuity and gaining a competitive advantage. Work-Integrated Learning is one of the strategic options commonly used to facilitate knowledge transfer from experienced industry practitioners to university graduates who are the future workforce. The aim of the study was to investigate stakeholders' perspectives of the effectiveness of Work-Integrated Learning in transferring knowledge to university graduates who are to join the real-world or workplace settings. Work-Integrated Learning is a partnership between different stakeholders working together to address graduate unemployability. The main concern is the misalignment between the university curriculum and the skills required in real-world settings. There is need for experienced employees to transfer their knowledge to university graduates who are being prepared for the real-world or workplace settings. A qualitative research approach was used to achieve the objectives of the study. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used to collect data. Participants were selected from relevant stakeholders in the Work-Integrated Learning programme. Stakeholders included lecturers, WIL co-ordinators and industry WIL supervisors. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. This study adopted a cross-sectional design and was conducted in a selected university of technology, focusing on a specific academic department, namely Business and Information Management (BIM). Overall, the findings revealed that the Work-Integrated Learning programme was an effective option to transfer knowledge to university graduates to join the real-world or workplace settings and become productive. However, participants highlighted a need to continuously review and align the university curriculum with the skills needs of the real-world environment. In addition, participants highlighted some challenges, the main challenge being that the Working-Integrated Learning programme was viewed as an additional workload. This study provides the necessary insights to develop policy and decision-making to foster the transfer of knowledge to university graduates as part of preparing them for the workplace through WIL.

**Keywords:** Knowledge transfer, Work-integrated learning, Workplace skills, University curriculum, University graduates, WIL stakeholders

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## 1. Introduction

Universities are under pressure to produce graduates equipped with the requisite abilities for an ever-evolving economic landscape (Mkhize and Reddy 2025). The workplace and society require graduates who possess a comprehensive set of pertinent skills and are prepared for the workplace. According to McKay *et al.* (2023), there is a prevailing concern that university graduates are inadequately equipped for the workplace. Consequently, the WIL programme was established to prepare students for the workplace. This phenomenon aims to effectively connect theoretical knowledge with industry practices or real-world applications, addressing concerns that higher institutions continue to produce graduates who are unprepared for the workplace. Hence, Brewer, Lewis and Ferns (2022) emphasise that given the rapidly changing world, universities place more importance on graduate employability than ever before. Succi and Canovi (2020) assert that institutions continue to be criticized for producing graduates deficient in pertinent abilities. Additionally, Tan, Laswad and Chua (2022) posit that there is evidence of existing gaps between real-world skills needs and the skills acquired by graduates at universities. To facilitate learning and the transfer of skills, WIL stakeholders must be aware of their roles and responsibilities. This study investigates the transfer of knowledge to the future workforce through optimizing Work-Integrated Learning. The results of this study provides insights for higher education institutions and industry stakeholders on the importance of strengthening collaboration in the design and implementation of WIL programmes as a tool for knowledge transfer.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Stakeholders involved in students' work preparedness must understand their roles in the teaching and learning of university students. This study was grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). The importance of learning through experience was highlighted by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984), which makes it particularly pertinent to the WIL curriculum. This theory was relevant to the knowledge

transfer and work preparedness of students as it emphasises the importance of learning through practical experience, reflection, conceptualisation and active experiments. It is also aligned with the aim of preparing students for the workplace by fostering a deep, experiential understanding of the professional environment. Experiential learning and knowledge transfer flourishes when theoretical knowledge is purposefully integrated with active, student-centred learning. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory remains central to this approach, advocating a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

### **3. Literature Review**

The literature highlighted that knowledge transfer facilitated through the WIL programme was a broad concept encompassing various curricular, teaching approach and assessment strategies within a given academic discipline (Winberg *et al.* 2022). Harilal (2023) asserts that higher education and training institutions have a responsibility to produce graduates with the knowledge and skillsets required by society and the economy.

### **4. Work-Integrated Learning as a Mechanism for Knowledge Transfer**

Work-Integrated Learning is an educational approach that integrates academic learning with authentic workplace experience to enable the transfer of theoretical and practical knowledge, thereby preparing students for professional practice (Briant *et al.* 2023). According to Fern, Rowe and Zegwaard (2022), an intention of WIL is to use placement experiences to support students to develop domain-specific dispositions and capabilities. However, to maximize student learning outcomes, it is important to understand and appropriately apply educational thinking to learning within WIL contexts. Allen (2022) states that one of WIL's goals is to help students build domain-specific skills and dispositions through placement experiences. The role of workplace exposure in transferring knowledge to graduates is widely recognised as central to bridging the gap between theory and practice as it provides students with opportunities to engage in real-world tasks, interact with experienced practitioners, and acquire tacit knowledge that cannot be fully developed through classroom-based learning alone (Jackson 2022).

### **5. Curriculum Alignment with the Required Workplace Skills**

The collaboration between WIL stakeholders enables the exploitation of complementary skillsets; facilitates knowledge transfer; and assists in preparing graduates for employment (Mayombe 2022). As the world navigates economic transitions towards a more sustainable future, collaboration between academic research units and industries becomes paramount, leading to diverse outcomes. The role of university support in fostering an entrepreneurial university culture and influencing the collaboration behaviour of academic staff with industry has been a subject of increasing scholarly attention. Jackson (2022) states that academics play a key role in curriculum design and learning facilitation, whilst industry partners provide practical exposure, mentorship and real-world context, and students actively participate in applying and integrating knowledge in workplace settings. Furthermore, strong university–industry partnerships are essential for co-creating relevant learning experiences and ensuring that graduates develop competencies aligned with labour market demands (Zegwaard *et al.* 2023). However, persistent challenges remain, particularly the misalignment between university curricula and workplace skill requirements, which contributes to skills mismatches and graduate unemployment (Nwaikpo 2025). This mismatch is often exacerbated by weak stakeholder co-ordination and insufficient integration of experiential learning into academic programmes, resulting in graduates who are inadequately prepared for the world of work (Singh and Blessinger 2024). Consequently, scholars emphasise the need for continuous curriculum review, strengthened collaboration amongst stakeholders and the intentional integration of WIL to enhance graduate employability and effective knowledge transfer (Selamat *et al.* 2025).

### **6. Opportunities and Challenges of WIL**

Recent studies affirm that WIL is an effective approach for enhancing graduate employability, as it enables students to develop practical skills, workplace competencies and professional identity through direct exposure to real-world environments (Rowe and Zegwaard 2023). Despite these benefits, the effectiveness of WIL in facilitating knowledge transfer is often constrained by several barriers. Mayombe (2022) states that these include a lack of structured learning frameworks to guide student experiences, poor coordination and communication among key stakeholders such as universities and industry partners and the perception of WIL as an additional workload by both academic staff and workplace supervisors. Furthermore, gaps in the implementation of WIL programmes persist, particularly in the inconsistent integration of experiential learning into curricula and limited institutional support for mentorship and supervision (Avelar *et al.* 2023). As a result,

whilst WIL holds significant potential to improve employability and support knowledge transfer, its impact is often undermined by systemic and operational challenges that require strategic alignment, better planning and stronger stakeholder collaboration.

## 7. Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the study, qualitative research and an inductive approach were adopted. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), when qualitative research is used, data is collected in the field and setting where participants experience the problem under investigation. This research approach provides a deep understanding, meaning and richness of contexts of the phenomenon being investigated (Pregoner 2024). Moreover, the qualitative research approach is underpinned and rooted in a constructivism philosophical worldview (Subrahmanyam 2025). The study adopted a cross-sectional design as it was conducted at a single point in time. Participants in the study were stakeholders with first-hand experience through their involvement in the WIL programme. Additionally, 17 participants were purposively selected, including 10 BIM programme lecturers; 5 industry WIL supervisors from five different sectors hosting WIL students; and 2 BIM WIL co-ordinators that facilitate the placement and evaluate WIL programme feedback. Tajik *et al.* (2024) describe purposive sampling as an intentional process to select participants because they can help the researcher to gain deeper insight into the phenomena being investigated. Furthermore, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) accentuate that the sample size in a qualitative study is more about the ability of data to provide a rich account of the phenomenon being investigated and less about the number of participants. Hence in this study, the data collection instrument used was unstructured face-to-face interviews. Creswell and Creswell (2023) state that interviews are used to ask open-ended questions to elicit views and opinions from participants.

The data collected from participants was analysed using NVivo version 12. This is a user-friendly computer software package used to sort, organise and analyse qualitative data (Dhakal 2022). Thematic analysis was employed, which Naeem *et al.* (2023) describe as a popular technique used by researchers to analyse qualitative data.

## 8. Results and Discussions

This section offers a presentation and discussion of the findings.

### 8.1 Profile of the Participants

The study population comprised stakeholders with firsthand experience who are involved in the Business and Information Management programme facilitation of the WIL programme for knowledge transfer. Presented in Table 1 below is a profile of the participants.

**Table 1: Profile of Participants**

| Participants             | Total number |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| Lecturers                | 10           |
| Industry WIL supervisors | 5            |
| WIL coordinators         | 2            |

### 8.2 Identification of Themes

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data for the purposes of identifying the themes or patterns therein. According to Winberg *et al.* (2022), thematic analysis is the method used by researchers to analyse qualitative data. The themes drawn from the study results are presented below.

### 8.3 Theme One: Work-integrated Learning and Knowledge Transfer

This theme explores how WIL facilitates the transfer of knowledge and prepares graduates for workplace environments. Drawing on principles from knowledge transfer models and Experiential Learning Theory, these results indicate the importance of learning through experience and contextual application. Participants of the study reported that the “WIL programme gives students an opportunity to learn the physical work in a practical setting and to apply their theoretical knowledge in practice”, and “WIL as a strategic tool to transfer both tacit and explicit knowledge from experienced practitioners to students”. The findings further revealed that WIL plays a significant role in bridging the gap between theory and practice. This was drawn from participants who reported that “the WIL programme provides students with industry required skills that assist them in the world of work and it a good tool and platform for the knowledge sharing” and “Work-Integrated Learning is one of the

*strategic options commonly used to facilitate knowledge transfer from experienced industry practitioners to university graduates*". These results show that the WIL programme plays a significant role in shaping students for the workplace, and it revealed that students who participated in WIL programmes were better equipped to adapt to workplace demands and became productive more quickly. The majority of study participants emphasised that *"WIL bridges the gap between academic learning and industry expectations"*. This suggests that WIL is an effective strategy for enhancing graduate employability and supporting the transition from university to the workplace.

The role of workplace exposure in transferring knowledge to graduates is widely recognised as central to bridging the gap between theory and practice as it provides students with opportunities to engage in real-world tasks; interact with experienced practitioners; and acquire tacit knowledge that cannot be fully developed through classroom-based learning alone (Jackson 2022). Work-Integrated Learning is an educational approach that integrates academic learning with authentic workplace experience to enable the transfer of theoretical and practical knowledge, thereby preparing students for professional practice (Briant et al. 2023). According to Fern, Rowe and Zegwaard (2022), an intention of WIL is to use placement experiences to support students to develop domain-specific dispositions and capabilities. However, to maximize student learning outcomes, it is important to understand and appropriately apply educational thinking to learning within WIL contexts. One of WIL's goals is to help students build domain-specific skills and dispositions through placement experiences (Allen 2022). Overall, participants' responses revealed that the WIL programme was a critical mechanism for facilitating knowledge transfer by integrating theoretical learning with workplace experience, thereby enhancing graduate employability and aligning with the study's objective of optimising knowledge transfer to the future workforce.

#### 8.4 Theme Two: Stakeholder Roles and WIL Programme Optimization

This theme highlights stakeholders' responsibilities and curriculum alignment in optimizing the WIL programme. The collaboration between WIL stakeholders enables the exploitation of complementary skillsets, facilitates knowledge transfer and assists in preparing graduates for employment. As the world navigates economic transitions towards a more sustainable future, collaboration between academic research units and industries becomes paramount, leading to diverse outcomes. Participants' responses indicated that *"WIL is a partnership between different stakeholders misalignment between the university curriculum and skills required in the real-world settings"*. Furthermore, participants explained that the *"role of university support in fostering an entrepreneurial university culture and influencing the collaboration behaviour of academic staff with industry has been a subject of increasing scholarly attention"* and *"Academics play a key role in curriculum design and learning facilitation, while industry partners provide practical exposure, mentorship and real-world context and students actively participate in applying and integrating knowledge in workplace settings"*. Furthermore, *"a strong university-industry partnerships are essential for co-creating relevant learning experiences and ensuring that graduates develop competencies aligned with labour market demands"*, which was affirmed by Zegwaard et al. (2023). However, persistent challenges remain, particularly the misalignment between university curricula and workplace skill requirements, which contributes to the skills mismatch and graduate unemployment. This mismatch is often exacerbated by weak stakeholder co-ordination and the insufficient integration of experiential learning into academic programmes, resulting in graduates who are inadequately prepared for the world of work. Consequently, scholars emphasise the need for continuous curriculum review; strengthened collaboration amongst stakeholders; and the intentional integration of WIL to enhance graduate employability and effective knowledge transfer (Avelar et al. 2023).

#### 8.5 Theme Three: Work-Integrated Learning Challenges

A successful WIL programme enhances knowledge transfer and the employability of university students. All involved stakeholders encountered difficulties in delivering and supporting programmes designed to prepare students for employment. Their feedback highlighted several key obstacles, namely *"students need more guidance on expectations before WIL programmes resume and structured support afterwards to debrief and grow"*. These results show how significant knowledge transfer is to students. Another challenge was *"insufficient time for student interaction, demanding workloads and unfavourable student-to-staff ratios"*. These factors collectively hindered their capacity to provide consistent supervision, mentorship and sharing the knowledge required in-depth. Participants further indicated that they struggled to secure enough suitable placement opportunities, noting that *"student demand frequently surpassed the availability of host companies"*. They also faced operational hurdles, such as *"insufficient institutional resources and a restricted ability to properly oversee student work preparedness"*, further highlighting *"inadequate communication with universities is a barrier in the chain of knowledge transfer"*. Most participants expressed concern that *"certain host organizations viewed WIL*

students primarily as extra help rather than as a platform to develop professionals with knowledge sharing for better employment opportunities", which consequently diminished the educational benefit of these experiences. This sentiment was echoed by the majority of stakeholders, who explicitly stated: "*We have more students than companies willing to take them and not all hosts treat WIL as a learning opportunity*". These findings suggest that whilst initiatives aimed at enhancing workforce preparedness were operational, their overall efficacy was significantly contingent upon both entrenched systemic and structural impediments and the degree of active stakeholder engagement. Scholars such as Du Plessis, Botha and Van Wyk (2021) and Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2020) emphasize that structured educational interventions, most notably WIL placements, simulations and career development workshops, are essential mechanisms for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and professional practice. However, the efficacy of these interventions is often contested by systemic challenges. Mabotja and Breier (2023) contend that the long-term sustainability and equitable delivery of such initiatives in South Africa are severely hampered by limited financial resources, time constraints and fragmented university-industry partnerships. The repercussions of these institutional failures are significant because when WIL programmes lack consistent support or subject students to disparate placement experiences, the intended outcomes of knowledge transfer and experiential growth are compromised. Consequently, as Ngwenya and Mtembu (2023) suggest, these inconsistencies fundamentally undermine students' readiness for the transition into professional environments.

The findings reveal that whilst stakeholders have introduced various initiatives to bolster knowledge transfer and student readiness, their effectiveness is hindered by structural and institutional barriers. Specifically, these efforts are undermined by limited placement opportunities, high student-to-staff ratios, resource scarcities and poor communication between universities and industry partners. Recent literature confirms that such systemic barriers significantly affect the successful implementation of WIL and career preparation initiatives, particularly in contexts where universities face increasing enrolments without proportional growth in industry partnerships and supervisory capacity (Jackson 2023; Mabotja and Breier 2023). Furthermore, ineffective co-ordination and unclear expectations between academic institutions and host organisations often result in students being assigned routine or administrative tasks rather than meaningful learning experiences that promote professional competence (Ndlovu 2024). The researcher contends that deficient communication and inadequate stakeholder involvement can undermine mentoring initiatives, which serve as a vital conduit for transitioning students from theoretical academic frameworks to practical professional competencies and identity formation.

The structural and co-ordination challenges identified in this study further constrain the effective functioning of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Limited placement opportunities restrict access to concrete experiences and knowledge transfer, whilst poor communication and weak supervision reduce opportunities for reflective observation and feedback. Consequently, students' ability to translate experience into learning and apply it through active experimentation is significantly compromised. This study extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence that systemic and co-ordination challenges not only affect the implementation of WIL initiatives as a mechanism for knowledge transfer, but also directly impede the effectiveness of the experiential learning processes essential for graduate employability.

#### 8.6 Theme Four: WIL Programme Stakeholder Collaboration

The assessment of the efficacy of knowledge transfer and student work preparedness using Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of experiential learning based on Kolb's four-stage model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, all of which was accessed under this objective. Responses from participants indicated that classroom learning and the WIL programme prepared students for real-world expectations, "*information sharing was prioritised and emphasised during the duration of the WIL programme*". The integration of theory and practice emerged as a relative strength, indicating that certain WIL placements enable students to effectively connect classroom-based knowledge with workplace application. Such integration was critical for strengthening adaptability and reinforcing conceptual understanding, aligning with Govender and Valand's (2021) assertion that strong theory-practice linkages are central to graduate employability. However, the absence of structured and systematic reflection mechanisms limits students' ability to internalise and critically evaluate these learning experiences. According to Nabi and Somerville (2024), intentional reflective practice is fundamental for transforming work-based experiences into enduring insights and transferable competencies.

Stakeholders' involved in the WIL programme emphasised the importance of knowledge transfer. The responses from participants when assessing whether students received sufficient hands-on experience both practically and in theory during the WIL programme and on how the current learning approach prepares students for real-world

work agreed that the “WIL programme provided valuable hands-on exposure to all students participated in the WIL programme”. This reflects Kolb’s (1984) concept of Concrete Experience, which is fundamental to experiential learning but which must be substantive to be transformative. Despite expressing moderate confidence in the existing learning approach, responses also emphasised the need for “stronger post-WIL engagement and more robust industry partnerships” to improve knowledge and experience sharing amongst graduates. The majority of participants reported that students were assigned authentic workplace tasks. However, the depth and complexity of these experiences varied, depending on students’ levels of preparedness and the operational demands of host organisations: “As an organisation we give meaningful tasks to students and share information with them to optimise the effectiveness of the WIL programme”. Overall, these findings suggest that although elements of Kolb’s model are evident, particularly concrete experience and aspects of conceptualisation, the absence of structured reflection and limited experimentation restrict the full developmental potential of WIL. Therefore, more substantial alignment between academic staff, institutional co-ordinators and industry partners is needed to ensure that all stages of experiential learning are consistently supported, thereby optimising students’ readiness for the workplace.

### 8.7 Practical Contributions

By situating Work-Integrated Learning within the discourse of knowledge translation, this study clarifies how higher education institutions can better equip graduates for the transition into the workforce. This study discusses WIL from a knowledge transfer perspective. From a practical standpoint, this research offers critical insights for higher education institutions and industry partners regarding the necessity of robust collaboration in the design and execution of WIL initiatives. By functioning as a nexus between tacit, context-specific knowledge and explicit academic theory, WIL ensures that knowledge acquisition is transformative rather than merely cumulative. Consequently, this prepares the future workforce to navigate and adapt to the increasingly fluid requirements of contemporary professional environments.

### 8.8 Study Limitations and Future Research

The study findings are based on a specific institutional and contextual setting, which may limit the generalisability of the results to other contexts. The use of a cross-sectional research design suggests that the findings represent a snapshot of stakeholder perspectives at a single point in time, which precludes the ability to track the long-term professional development of BIM students as they transition fully into the labour market. Future research should explore the effectiveness of WIL programmes as a mechanism for knowledge transfer using more than one university. In addition, future research should investigate this phenomenon using a mixed method.

## 9. Conclusion

This study investigated the transfer of knowledge to the future workforce through optimizing Work-Integrated Learning. The study findings demonstrated that WIL programmes play a critical role in bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, whilst also highlighting the challenges related to curriculum alignment with industry required skills.

**Ethics Declaration:** The researchers adhered to ethical principles at every stage of the research process. The researchers applied for ethical clearance, which was granted by the university ethics review committee before the study was undertaken. The rights of the participants were protected and participation was on a voluntary basis. The identities of participants were not revealed and the data collected was used for research purposes only.

**AI Declaration:** Artificial intelligence tools were not used in the process of writing this paper.

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