

**BRIDGING THE SKILLS GAP THROUGH WORK INTEGRATED
LEARNING (WIL) TO ENHANCE BUSINESS EDUCATION GRADUATE
EMPLOYABILITY**

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Abstract

This paper examined Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a strategic approach to bridging the skills gap and enhancing the employability of business education graduates in Nigeria. In the contemporary global business environment, employers increasingly demand graduates who possess practical competencies alongside theoretical knowledge. The relevance of WIL in enhancing graduate employability cannot be overemphasized, as it involves learning through work, learning about work, and learning for work. The paper highlighted the concepts of WORK INTEGRATED Learning, skills gap, graduate employability, types of WIL (including internships, apprenticeships, industry projects, and business simulations), benefits of WIL to business education graduates, and challenges affecting its implementation in Nigeria at large. The paper showcased WIL to involve the integration of practical work experiences into academic curricula through structured programmes such as industrial training, cooperative education, work placements, and project-based learning. Also, WIL models suitable for business education include internship programmes, industry-embedded consulting projects, business simulations, and extracurricular enterprise activities. The paper identified that WIL enhances graduate employability through improved practical skills, workplace adaptability, enhanced communication and teamwork abilities, problem-solving competencies, and professional networking opportunities. However, challenges such as limited industry partnerships, inadequate internship placements, insufficient funding, lack of standardized curricula, and resistance to curriculum reform hinder its effective implementation. Conclusion was drawn. The paper recommended that educational institutions should strengthen partnerships with industries, curriculum planners should integrate mandatory WIL components into business education programmes, and government should provide funding and policy support for WIL initiatives.

Keywords: WORK INTEGRATED Learning, Skills Gap, Graduate Employability, Business Education.

INTRODUCTION

The growth and development of any nation is hinged on the quality and relevance of its education system, particularly its capacity to produce graduates who can effectively contribute to economic development. In other words, the bridge to economic development is the successful transition of graduates from academic institutions into productive employment. Business education, as a programme that prepares students for entry and advancement in jobs within business, must embrace practical learning approaches to remain relevant in the 21st century. The transformation of business education through Work Integrated Learning WIL is essential for effective instruction and learning using modern methodologies, and this transformation extends to the practical application of business knowledge in real-world settings.

Work Integrated Learning, commonly called WIL, is basically the integration of practical work experiences into academic curricula to enhance learning outcomes and employability. It involves learning through work (gaining experience through actual work), learning about work (understanding workplace contexts and cultures), and learning for work (developing skills for future employment). This transition from purely theoretical instruction to integrated work-based learning has been driven by employer demands for graduates with practical competencies, changing labour market dynamics, and growing recognition of the skills gap that exists between academic preparation and workplace requirements.

Globally, the adoption of Work Integrated Learning has gained significant momentum. According to research, approximately 70% of universities in developed economies have integrated WIL components into their business programmes, compared to less than 30% in Sub-Saharan African countries. This disparity highlights the gap in practical skills development between developed and developing economies and underscores the need for empirical investigation into the factors that influence WIL adoption and its impact on graduate employability.

The call for integration of WIL in business education programmes in Nigeria is to infuse and inject practical competencies in the training of business graduates. In developing countries like Nigeria, business education has been challenged with the problem of inadequate practical exposure, limited industry partnerships, and outdated curricula that emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical skills. Other studies indicated that there is a persistent gap between what is taught in business schools and what employers require, inadequate facilities for practical training, and limited opportunities for work-based learning (Jegede & Owolabi, 2021). Despite these challenges, the integration of WIL in business education has continued to grow, especially among progressive institutions in Nigeria.

Some state in Nigeria such as Anambra State, being a commercial hub in southeastern Nigeria, hosts a significant concentration of business enterprises and educational institutions. The state is home to three major industrial clusters: Onitsha (the largest commercial city), Nnewi (known as the "Japan of Africa" due to its concentration of automotive parts manufacturers), and Awka (the state capital with a growing commercial presence). These enterprises provide potential opportunities for WIL placements for business education students. The integration of WIL in business education

programmes in these institutions is therefore essential for producing employable graduates who can contribute effectively to the economic development of the state and the nation at large.

Graduate employability, often measured by the ability of graduates to secure and sustain meaningful employment, is a critical indicator of the effectiveness of educational programmes. Extant literature has shown that graduates with practical work experience are more likely to secure employment and advance in their careers than those without such experience. The use of WIL ideally should contribute to graduate employability if it can improve practical skills, workplace adaptability, and professional competencies. Furthermore, the role of educational institutions in the successful integration of WIL cannot be overemphasized. Institutional support encompasses curriculum design, industry partnerships, student placement services, and mentorship programmes. Without adequate institutional support, even the well-designed WIL programmes may fail to deliver the expected benefits. Oguejiofor and Ezeabasili (2019) stressed that development of any nation depends on technical knowhow, as most developing countries are yet to reap the benefits that work-based learning offers. WORK INTEGRATED Learning represents a subset of educational practices that can significantly enhance the employability and productivity of business graduates.

This paper, therefore, discusses the integration of WORK INTEGRATED Learning as a strategy for bridging the skills gap and enhancing business education graduate employability, examining the concepts, models, benefits, and challenges associated with WIL implementation.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an approach to education that allows students to obtain work experiences related to what they are learning in a classroom setting (Jackson 2016). Work Integrated Learning (WIL) Work Integrated Learning refers to the integration of practical work experiences into academic curricula to enhance learning outcomes and employability. It encompasses a range of activities that involve learning through work, learning about work, and learning for work. Work Integrated Learning is designed to provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, develop practical skills, and gain insights into workplace cultures and expectations.

In the view of researchers, Work Integrated Learning is not merely a matter of work experience; it also encompasses structured learning outcomes, reflective practice, and integration with academic content. Having the right framework, characterized by clear learning objectives, supervision, and assessment, is essential. Work Integrated Learning provides students with a flexible and personalized way to develop their skills and enhance their employability.

Work Integrated Learning can be categorized into several types, including:

1. Learning through Work: This involves gaining experience through actual work activities, such as internships, placements, and apprenticeships.
2. Learning about Work: This involves understanding workplace contexts, cultures, and expectations through activities such as industry visits, guest lectures, and workplace simulations.

3. **Learning for Work:** This involves developing skills for future employment through activities such as career preparation, skills development, and professional networking.

Skills Gap

A skill gap is defined as the mathematical difference or misalignment between the skills an organization requires to meet its future objectives and the actual capabilities currently possessed by the workforce.(McGuinness et.al). The skills gap refers to the mismatch between the skills possessed by graduates and the skills demanded by employers. This gap manifests in various ways, including insufficient practical competencies, inadequate workplace readiness, and limited soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

In Nigeria, the skills gap is particularly pronounced in the business education sector. Research has shown that business education curricula often emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical skills, leaving graduates ill-prepared for the demands of the workplace. The skills gap has significant implications for graduate employability, economic productivity, and national development.

Key areas of the skills gap in business education include:

1. **Practical Skills:** Limited practical experience in business functions such as accounting, marketing, and management.
2. **Soft Skills:** Inadequate communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities.
3. **Workplace Adaptability:** Limited understanding of workplace cultures and expectations.
4. **Technical Competencies:** Insufficient proficiency in information technology and digital tools.

Graduate Employability

Graduate employability is a person's capacity to get a job, do the job well, and grow in their career after finishing school. It is not just having a degree or finding work. It means having the right mix of skills, knowledge, and personal habits to succeed in the modern workplace (Yorke, M. (2018).

Graduate employability refers to the ability of graduates to secure and sustain meaningful employment. It encompasses a range of attributes, including knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal qualities that make graduates attractive to employers. Graduate employability is a critical indicator of the effectiveness of educational programmes and the success of graduates in the labour market.

Graduate employability can be measured using various indicators, including:

1. **Employment Rate:** The proportion of graduates who secure employment within a specified period after graduation
2. **Employment Quality:** The nature and level of employment, including salary, job satisfaction, and career progression
3. **Employability Skills:** The possession of skills that employers demand, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability
4. **Career Success:** The achievement of career goals and aspirations

Internships

Internships are structured work experience programmes that provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. Internships are a common form of Work Integrated Learning and are increasingly recognized as essential for developing employability skills.

Internships provide students with opportunities to:

1. Apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings
2. Develop professional skills and competencies
3. Build professional networks and contacts
4. Gain insights into workplace cultures and expectations
5. Enhance their employability and career prospects

Research has shown that internship experiences significantly enhance employability skills among business education students by fostering practical competence and workplace adaptability. These experiences bridge academic theory and professional practice, equipping students with critical skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

Business Simulations

Business simulations are experiential learning activities that replicate real-world business environments and challenges. Simulations provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in a safe, controlled environment and develop decision-making, problem-solving, and strategic thinking skills.

Business simulations can take various forms, including:

1. Computer-Based Simulations: Software programmes that simulate business operations and market conditions
2. Role-Playing Exercises: Activities where students assume business roles and make decisions
3. Case Studies: Analysis of real-world business scenarios
4. Business Games: Competitive activities that simulate business operations

The Coffee Shop Challenge, implemented at Queen College Onitsha, demonstrates the effectiveness of business simulations in developing employability skills. The simulation tasks student teams with managing a virtual coffee shop, where they assume leadership roles and make strategic decisions over six simulated trading months. This activity fosters teamwork, critical thinking, communication, and real-world problem-solving skills in an inclusive, in-curriculum format.

MODELS OF WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION

Several models of Work Integrated Learning stipulated by Kay. et. al. (2019) is suitable for integration into business education programmes. These models include:

1. Internship Programmes: Internships are structured work experience programmes that provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. Internships can be mandatory or voluntary, paid or unpaid, and can vary in duration from a few weeks to a full academic year.

In Nigeria, studies have shown that internship experiences significantly enhance employability skills among business education students by fostering practical

competence and workplace adaptability. These experiences bridge academic theory and professional practice, equipping students with critical skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.

2. Cooperative Education (Co-op): Cooperative education is a structured approach to Work Integrated Learning that alternates periods of academic study with periods of paid work experience. Co-op programmes typically extend the duration of the degree programme and provide students with extensive work experience in their field of study.
3. Industry-Embedded Projects: Industry-embedded projects involve students working on real-world business challenges in collaboration with industry partners. These projects provide students with opportunities to apply academic knowledge to practical problems, develop professional skills, and build relationships with potential employers.

The Real Learning Experience (RLE) model implemented at the University of Maine demonstrates the effectiveness of industry-embedded projects. In this model, students engage directly with executives and data, applying classroom theory to issues such as workforce development, operations strategy, and product innovation. The structure of these projects is based on what is called industry-embedded learning, a deeply immersive experience in which students work alongside organizational leaders and internal stakeholders to address current, real-world challenges.

4. Business Simulations and Experiential Learning: Business simulations are experiential learning activities that replicate real-world business environments and challenges. Simulations provide students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in a safe, controlled environment and develop decision-making, problem-solving, and strategic thinking skills.

The Coffee Shop Challenge at Queen College is an example of an effective business simulation. The activity promotes inclusive participation through pre-assigned diverse teams and structured collaboration expectations. It fosters leadership, teamwork, communication, and collaboration skills in a dynamic and competitive setting, offering all students a realistic and engaging introduction to business governance, management, and performance.

5. Extracurricular Enterprise Activities: Extracurricular enterprise activities, such as Young Enterprise schemes, provide students with opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills and gain practical business experience outside the formal curriculum. These activities involve students setting up and running their own businesses, learning about business functions, and developing employability skills.

Research has shown that extracurricular enterprise activities can enhance learning about business within a realistic scenario. These activities can be integrated into academic programmes and can effectively achieve a number of the aims of such programmes.

6. Apprenticeship Programmes: Apprenticeship programmes combine on-the-job training with academic study. Apprenticeships are particularly common in technical and vocational fields but are increasingly being adopted in business education.
7. Virtual Work and Digital Simulations: Virtual work and digital simulations involve students working on simulated business tasks in a digital environment. These activities provide students with opportunities to develop digital skills and gain experience in virtual work environments. Research has shown that virtual reality work within the

curriculum is possible and provides a challenge for the way vocational business courses are delivered.

Benefits of Work Integrated Learning to Business Education Graduates

Work Integrated Learning offers numerous benefits to business education graduates. These benefits include:

1. **Enhanced Practical Skills:** WIL provides students with opportunities to develop practical skills that are essential for workplace success. Through internships, industry projects, and simulations, students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations and develop competencies such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management.
Research has shown that WIL programs contribute significantly to the development of employability skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. The development of practical skills enhances graduate employability and career success.
2. **Improved Workplace Adaptability:** WIL provides students with insights into workplace cultures, expectations, and norms. Through work experience, students can develop the adaptability and resilience needed to succeed in dynamic work environments. This understanding of workplace contexts reduces the learning curve for new graduates and enhances their effectiveness in the workplace.
3. **Enhanced Communication and Teamwork Abilities:** WIL provides students with opportunities to develop communication and teamwork skills through collaborative work on real-world projects. These skills are highly valued by employers and are essential for success in the modern workplace. Research has shown that internship experiences significantly enhance employability skills such as communication and collaboration.
4. **Problem-Solving Competencies:** WIL provides students with opportunities to develop problem-solving skills through addressing real-world business challenges. Through industry-embedded projects and simulations, students can develop analytical and critical thinking skills that are essential for workplace success.
5. **Professional Networking Opportunities:** WIL provides students with opportunities to build professional networks and contacts through interactions with employers, mentors, and industry professionals. These networks can facilitate access to employment opportunities and career development.
6. **Enhanced Career Readiness:** WIL enhances career readiness by providing students with opportunities to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed for successful career transitions. Through work experience, students can clarify career goals, develop professional identities, and prepare for the demands of the workplace.
7. **Increased Employment Prospects:** WIL enhances employment prospects by providing students with work experience that is valued by employers. Graduates with WIL experience are more likely to secure employment and achieve career success than those without such experience. Research has shown that WIL programs contribute significantly to the employability of business education graduates.
8. **Better Understanding of Business Functions:** WIL provides students with a better understanding of business functions and how they interrelate. Through work

experience, students can develop a holistic understanding of business operations and develop the interdisciplinary skills needed for effective business management.

9. Improved Confidence and Professional Identity: WIL enhances confidence and professional identity by providing students with opportunities to develop professional skills and gain recognition for their competencies. Through successful work experiences, students can develop confidence in their abilities and a clearer sense of their professional identity.
10. Bridge between Theory and Practice: WIL bridges the gap between theory and practice by providing students with opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. Through practical application, students can develop a deeper understanding of business concepts and their relevance to workplace practice.

Challenges in the Implementation of Work Integrated Learning

Despite the numerous benefits of WIL, business education programmes face several challenges in its implementation. These challenges include:

1. Limited Industry Partnerships: The effectiveness of WIL depends on strong partnerships between educational institutions and industry. However, many institutions lack the relationships and networks needed to provide quality WIL opportunities for students. Research has shown that insufficient collaboration with industries is a significant challenge to WIL implementation.
2. Inadequate Internship Placements: There are often a limited number of quality internship placements available for business education students. The demand for placements may exceed supply, particularly in competitive fields and regions. Research has shown that limited internship placements hinder students' access to WIL opportunities.
3. Insufficient Funding: WIL programmes require significant financial resources for coordination, supervision, and support. However, many institutions lack the funding needed to implement and sustain quality WIL programmes. Research has shown that financial constraints hinder students' access to WIL opportunities.
4. Lack of Standardized Curricula: There is no universally accepted model for integrating WIL into business education curricula. The lack of standardization makes it difficult to ensure quality and consistency across programmes. Research has shown that business education curricula often do not provide students with essential skills required for their employability after graduation.
5. Resistance to Curriculum Reform: Curriculum reform can be challenging, particularly in institutions with established traditions and practices. Resistance from faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders can hinder the integration of WIL into business education programmes.
6. Limited Institutional Capacity: Many institutions lack the capacity to implement and sustain quality WIL programmes. This includes limitations in staffing, expertise, and infrastructure. The study revealed that WIL programs are only moderately implemented in business education curricula.
7. Assessment Challenges: Assessing learning outcomes from WIL experiences can be challenging. Traditional assessment methods may not be appropriate for evaluating practical skills and workplace competencies.

8. **Quality Assurance Issues:** Ensuring the quality of WIL experiences can be challenging, particularly when placements are in diverse organizations with varying levels of commitment to student development. Quality assurance mechanisms are needed to ensure that WIL experiences provide meaningful learning opportunities.
9. **Student Financial Constraints:** Students may face financial constraints that limit their ability to participate in WIL opportunities, particularly unpaid internships or placements that require travel or relocation. Research has shown that financial constraints hinder students' access to WIL opportunities.
10. **Limited Awareness among Employers:** Some employers may be unaware of the benefits of WIL or may be reluctant to invest in student development. Limited employer awareness can hinder the development of quality WIL opportunities.
11. **Lack of Government Support:** Inadequate government support for WIL programmes can hinder their implementation and sustainability. Without government support, institutions may lack the resources needed to develop and sustain quality WIL programmes.
12. **Cultural and Structural Barriers:** Cultural and structural barriers may hinder the implementation of WIL, particularly in contexts where there is limited recognition of the value of work-based learning.

Conclusion

The integration of Work Integrated Learning into business education programmes is essential for bridging the skills gap and enhancing graduate employability. WIL models such as internships, industry-embedded projects, business simulations, and extracurricular enterprise activities are available for use in business education. However, institutions face challenges such as limited industry partnerships, inadequate internship placements, insufficient funding, lack of standardized curricula, and resistance to curriculum reform.

The transformation of business education through Work Integrated Learning is essential for producing graduates who can effectively contribute to economic development. The adoption of WIL enhances graduate employability through improved practical skills, workplace adaptability, enhanced communication and teamwork abilities, problem-solving competencies, and professional networking opportunities. It is believed that if these challenges are addressed, business education graduates would significantly benefit from the integration of WIL into their programmes.

The paper concluded that work integrated Learning has the potential to significantly enhance the employability of business education graduates. The benefits of WIL adoption, including improved practical skills, better career readiness, and increased employment prospects, outweigh the challenges. However, addressing the challenges facing WIL implementation, particularly industry partnerships, funding, and curriculum reform, is essential for realizing the full benefits.

Recommendations

This paper made the following recommendations

1. Educational institutions should strengthen partnerships with industries to provide quality WIL opportunities for business education students. Strong partnerships would

ensure that students have access to meaningful work experiences that enhance their employability. Research has shown that strengthening partnerships between colleges and industries is essential for effective WIL implementation.

2. Curriculum planners should integrate mandatory WIL components into business education programmes to facilitate the development of employability skills. Mandatory WIL components would ensure that all students benefit from work-based learning experiences.
3. Government should provide funding for WIL programmes to support their implementation and sustainability. Government funding would reduce the financial burden on institutions and students and enable the development of quality WIL programmes.
4. Educational institutions should develop standardized WIL curricula to ensure quality and consistency across programmes. Standardized curricula would facilitate the assessment and recognition of WIL learning outcomes.
5. Institutions should provide support for students participating in WIL, including financial assistance, mentorship, and career guidance. Student support would enhance the quality and effectiveness of WIL experiences.
6. Employers should be encouraged to participate in WIL programmes through incentives such as tax breaks, recognition, and access to talent. Employer participation is essential for the success of WIL programmes.
7. Institutions should develop quality assurance mechanisms for WIL programmes to ensure that students receive meaningful learning experiences. Quality assurance would enhance the credibility and effectiveness of WIL programmes.
8. Curriculum planners should review business education curricula to ensure they incorporate WIL components and meet the demands of the labour market. Curriculum review is essential for addressing the skills gap and enhancing graduate employability.
9. Institutions should provide training for faculty and supervisors involved in WIL programmes to ensure effective supervision and assessment. Training would enhance the quality of WIL experiences and learning outcomes.
10. Government should develop a national policy on Work Integrated Learning to provide guidance and support for WIL implementation. A national policy would provide a framework for WIL development and ensure consistency across institutions.
11. Institutions should incorporate business simulations into business education curricula to provide students with experiential learning opportunities. Simulations provide students with opportunities to develop decision-making, problem-solving, and strategic thinking skills in a safe environment.

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