

The role of institutional policies in embedding meaningful work-integrated learning in higher education curricula in Uganda

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Significance importance continues to be attributed to inclusion of work-integrated learning (WIL) in Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) curriculum with acknowledgement of the role it plays in enhancing students' learning experiences. However, in Uganda, HEIs implement WIL without stipulated policies to guide its implementation and inclusion. This study, therefore, set out to determine the role that HEI policies play in embedding meaningful WIL. The research used mixed methods and targeted 302 participants. The study found that offering WIL without well-articulated policies renders WIL uncoordinated, unregulated, and subjective, making it less beneficial to students' learning experiences. The study considered instituting policies to guide WIL for resource mobilization, strengthening partnerships with host organizations, and setting procedures. In addition, findings confirmed that clarifying the responsibilities of the key stakeholders involved in WIL is critical to successful outcomes.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, policies, Higher Education Institutions

There has been growing interest in work-integrated learning (WIL) in Higher Education (HE) arising from the appreciation of the complementary and supplementary roles it has in enhancing students' learning process. In Uganda, WIL is included in Higher Education Institution's (HEIs) curricula as industrial training, industrial placement, internship, practicum and community engagement (Kalanda et al., 2021). The understanding and implementation of WIL in Uganda was described as underdeveloped and scarcely explored (Mulder & Gulikers, 2011) contrasting the study that was expounded in Europe where it was described as being well-developed and highly accepted (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2011). There is also agreement of the role that HE plays in contributing to human capital development as exhibited in a study that identified strategies for closing the skills and technology gap in South Africa (Fisher & Scott, 2011). The relevance of the systemic legislation in facilitating WIL inclusion and its value in HE was addressed in a study carried out in Uganda (Kalanda et al., 2021).

HEIs play a pivotal role in the implementation of WIL through deliberate procedures, organized resource mobilization, and coordination in a predetermined manner that address working policies rather than relying on ad hoc practices. Policy-makers in HEIs were encouraged to acknowledge the intricacies of WIL and formalize this form of learning with the view of making it more legitimate, effective, reliable and consequential through introducing relevant regulation (Boud & Garrick, 1999). In their assessment of the design, implementation and effectiveness of WIL in East Africa, Mulder et al. (2011) detected inadequate consideration of WIL. Policy-makers at the institutional level were advised to prioritize WIL in HEIs. HEI WIL policies can set criteria and procedures that outline the obligations

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of stakeholders, specify the liaison between the HEIs and hosting organizations, and facilitate the mobilization of WIL funds. In the context of this study, institutional policy is taken to include approved details of the different aspects of WIL that are developed through formal processes that guide the implementation of WIL beyond inclusion in academic programs. In Uganda WIL continues to be haphazardly implemented where the hosting organizations receive placement requests from students, with no contracts with HEIs, no verification of the capacities of the hosting organizations and no monitoring of the safety provisions for the wellbeing of students (Kalanda et al., 2021). In the absence of intentional policies by HEIs to determine how WIL is implemented, dependence on the quality of practices of individual stakeholders could be impacting on meaningful and successful WIL in Uganda. Whereas some professions like medicine and surgery, nursing, and dentistry require students to undertake WIL for certification, other programs include WIL as an academic course requirement to boost their skills acquisition and prepare students for transition to the world of work (National Council for Higher Education, 2014). This study, therefore, set out to determine the role that HEI policies play in embedding meaningful WIL practices in HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The motivation for including WIL in HEIs is driven by internal institutional missions or philosophies or external traditions for specific professional areas, employment practice and systemic requirements (Brennan et al., 2006). The inclusion of WIL in Higher Education (HE) is one way of changing from the traditional view of HEIs providing general education or qualifications to the training of students with very specific skills required in the work world (Maclean & Pavlova, 2013). Institutional policies are reliant on a well-articulated national policy environment regarding WIL. Existence of the appropriate national policies may facilitate planning, financing and quality assurance for WIL (Mthembu, 2013). The consequences of the lack of comprehensive national policy for WIL were highlighted as critical and influential on the implementation of WIL in Uganda (Kalanda et al., 2021). Relatedly, Makerere University in Uganda in their field attachment guidelines specify the objective of WIL as a scheme that enables students to test real life experience in the world of work to which they are destined (Makerere University, 2014). To achieve the expectations of WIL, HEIs have to appreciate the role that policies on WIL play in informing how WIL is implemented.

There are many models of WIL practice in HEIs worldwide, and across the professions. Differences are based on the predetermined objectives for undertaking WIL (Reinhard et al., 2020). In a study that examined student placement in Uganda, the standard procedures guided by established policies were not emphasized but rather the study focused on the phases for the implementation of WIL (Kalanda et al., 2020). Furthermore, although Kay et al. (2019) highlighted and defined different models, the differences in the institutional policies and the role such policies play in effecting WIL were not addressed. In their study that examined innovative models of WIL in Australia, they observed that there is a particular need for adaptability in HEIs, known for their rigid policy environment in relation to WIL. How such flexibility can be implemented in the organization of WIL through legitimate practice was not well reflected.

In the likelihood of discrimination and other prejudices, HEIs have been encouraged to ensure fair access to WIL for all students (Hora et al., 2020). Unfortunately, the means of achieving equitable students' experiences and outcomes in WIL were not clearly associated with HEI policies. Yet HEI policies could be useful for mitigating such inequalities. Furthermore, WIL assessment was observed as a challenge that requires well-defined institutionalized parameters so that assessment outcomes are reliable and unbiased (Scholtz, 2020). Similarly, observation of discrimination against students with

disabilities (Andrew et al., 2024) and diverse backgrounds (Hay & Fleming, 2024) in accessing WIL may be overlooked without policy guidelines.

In addition, supervision of students on WIL by HEI supervisors is identified as essential support for students to optimize the benefits of WIL. Effective supervision also benefits host organizations and HEI supervisors as it provides the avenue to exchange and collaborate on HE curricula and establish mutually beneficial partnerships (Brennan & Little, 1996). Furthermore, for supervision to be effective it needs to be constructive and frequent (Costely, 2011). Adequate supervision of students undertaking WIL can effectively take place if the HEIs set out clear policies to guide the students and supervisors in meeting the requirements of WIL. The obligations of the host organizations and HEIs in supervision are key priorities for inclusion in WIL policies to ensure effective practices. The policy should outline the roles and responsibilities of participants to minimize the likelihood of assumptions, apprehension in WIL, and miscommunication (Blom, 2014).

Furthermore, WIL institutional policies inform students' expectations in terms of privileges, sustenance and assistance, thereby ensuring clarity and limiting contestations in circumstances where the students expectations may not be met during WIL (Brennan et al., 2006). In the absence of clear guiding policies in HEIs for WIL, stakeholders, especially students, continue to demand unspecified privileges from host organizations and HEIs (Kiriri, 2019). Clarifying expectations for students and host organizations prior to WIL facilitates optimal benefits for all stakeholders.

As discovered by Kalanda et al. (2020) while studying the organization of WIL in Uganda, emphasis during WIL is mainly on assessment and assessment guidelines, neglecting the critical details of students' learning, thus regarding WIL as simply fulfilling the requirements of an academic programme. Also the availability of documentation intended to provide clarity for the host organisation regarding WIL and information for students was reported as being inadequate, an indication of possible lack of attention to the importance of communicating stakeholder expectations during WIL implementation. Such incidences are potentially a consequence of the absence of institutional policies to guide well intentional WIL in HEIs.

Partnerships between HEIs and workplaces is a key aspect that can significantly improve the WIL experience for all stakeholders (Boud & Garrick, 1999). Institutional policies are perceived as a mechanism that specifies the intentions of HEIs in engaging host organizations to support WIL, especially the small and medium enterprises that do not readily participate in WIL, yet they form the bulk of potential avenues for providing real world learning for HE students (Brennan et al., 2006). Concerns of sustainability, and legal and contractual mechanisms of WIL have also been raised as affecting liaison between HEIs and hosting organizations (Fleming et al., 2018; Lasrado et al., 2024). Many HEIs hold a dominant position as regards to WIL over the host organizations. This partnership dynamic needs to be managed through adequate policy guidelines, such that the pivotal role HEIs play in WIL implementation can be realized (Brennan & Little, 1996). Similarly, in some circumstances HEIs have not assessed the efficiency of their WIL policy contexts to evaluate their efficiency (Sewell et al., 2017). WIL institutional policies from inception, formulation and implementation, need to be cognizant of the legalities of WIL.

In a report to the department of higher education in South Africa it was observed that in the absence of a national policy, HEIs were inadequately integrating WIL within their practices with limited funding and informal arrangements that led to poor resource mobilization (Blom, 2015). HEIs were implored to mobilize and allocate both financial and human resources in the formulation of WIL policies (Blom,

2014). HEIs were called upon to invest in WIL activities to gain intended benefits (Mathews, 1999; Weible, 2009) but the avenues through which HEIs raise revenue to invest in WIL were highlighted as unsatisfactory. Without understanding the role that institutional policies play in the implementation of WIL, calls for finance mobilization could be ignored.

Institutional policies and implementation guidelines for WIL play a crucial role in the successful and efficient implementation of WIL (Taylor & Govender, 2013). The existence of WIL policies in HEIs are an indication of how WIL is valued in the institution and the relevance of HE to students, workplaces and the future workforce are prioritized. The extent to which such policies shape the organization of WIL and mitigate the challenges of undertaking WIL is not fully understood within the context of Uganda. Appreciating the usefulness of policies on WIL practice, has the potential to improve the effectiveness of WIL implementation in HEIs in Uganda and elsewhere.

Theoretical Framework

The experiential learning theory (ELT) was used to guide the study. Supported by studies by Dewey (1974) and Piaget (1985), the learning by doing concept seeks to advocate for integrating theory and practice (Kolb, 1984). The description of experiential learning as spirals in Dewey's (1915) 'learning by doing' and the notion of experience-based learning as outlined by Wolfe and Byrne (1975), emphasize that for learning in the real work situation to take place, conditions necessary to the application of concepts, ideas and theories are paramount. Experiential learning, in this case WIL, is based on the assertion that learning is a process by which knowledge is created by transforming the experience within appropriate conditions and environment (Sharlanova, 2004), the success of which is partially determined by institutional policies.

Study Objective

The aim of the study was to determine the role of WIL policies in embedding meaningful WIL in HE curricula in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The study utilized triangulation mixed methods research design where both quantitative and qualitative data were concurrently collected, analyzed, interpreted and results merged (Creswell, 2007). The application of mixed methods in studying WIL was appropriate (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018), and observed as prevalent in WIL (Cameron, 2018).

Context

The study was carried out in Uganda, where HEI staff and students from nine universities were selected.

Sampling Method

The study participants comprised of students involved in WIL, academic staff who had facilitated WIL, and coordinators and HEI officers responsible for coordinating and decision-making for WIL. Students were selected to ascertain how, as key stakeholders in WIL, they perceived the role of policies in the implementation of WIL. Student participants were randomly selected from different faculties of the

selected nine HEIs. Academic staff, WIL coordinators and HEI officials that had experience working in WIL, were purposively selected from the targeted HEIs, to explore their understanding of the role policies play in operationalizing WIL in their institutions to expedite meaningful implementation and to ensure quality practice.

Data Collection

The data from the students and HEI academic staff were collected using a questionnaire of close-ended and Likert scale questions. Hard copies of these questionnaires were distributed manually and later collected from the respondents. This method increased the likelihood of collecting data from a large sample size (Amin, 2005).

Interviews were conducted with HEI WIL coordinators and officers in person and were an hour to an hour and a half in duration. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain in-depth understanding of the influence of WIL policies on practice. According to Dawson (2002), Mugenda (2013), and Sekaran (2003), the flexibility of the questions made it possible to clarify the responses by rephrasing and repeating them. With permission of the interviewees, interviews were audio recorded to capture the responses accurately for transcribing at a later stage.

Sample Size

Quantitative data via the questionnaire was collected from 302 respondents comprising 205 students who had undertaken WIL and 97 academic staff who had facilitated WIL. The sample size was drawn from the target population of 2,000 that included the HEI staff involved in supervision of WIL and students who had undertaken WIL during their study. The confidence interval of 5% and confidence level of 95% was considered (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). To explore ideas in more depth, nine officials involved in decision-making for WIL at an institutional level, and 18 WIL coordinators across nine HEIs were interviewed for qualitative data collection. As recommended, the saturation sample for the qualitative sample for this study was 20 respondents (coordinators for WIL & HEIs officials; Claser & Strauss, 1967; Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994).

Procedure

The study followed the concurrent mixed methods research design where qualitative and quantitative data were simultaneously collected, processed, and analyzed, and then results merged and concurrently presented (Creswell, 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted using interview guides for the WIL coordinators and HEI officials responsible for WIL decision making. Interview guides were a set of open-ended questions related to WIL policies in HEI used by the researcher to guide the flow of the interviews and ensure relevant data was captured. The interview guide questions were instrumental in probing and generating in depth perceptions and ideas regarding WIL policies in HEIs (Mugenda, 2013). Ethics approval (MUST) (04/05-19) and a research permit (SS 5069) were obtained. The consent of the respondents was obtained in writing and codes were used to ensure anonymity of respondents. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondents could withdraw as and when they wished.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 23 software to conduct descriptive analysis. The qualitative data gathered during interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify the emerging themes (Creswell, 1998).

FINDINGS

Demographics including gender, age, qualifications and experience in WIL were gathered from survey respondents (See Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4).

As shown in Table 1, although the study attracted slightly more males than females, the representation of females was helpful in gathering data that were gender sensitive and minimized biases.

TABLE 1: Gender of survey respondents.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Male	157	52
	Female	145	48
Total		302	100

As shown in Table 2, most respondents were in the age range of 20 to 30 years. The representation of all age groups solicited data from respondents of a wide age range, thereby providing credibility to the findings.

TABLE 2: Age range of respondents in years.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Below 20 years	15	5.0
	20-30 years	216	71.5
	31-40 years	37	12.3
	41-50 years	23	7.6
	51 years and above	11	3.6
Total		302	100

Table 3 shows the academic programs in which the students were enrolled when they undertook WIL and the qualifications of academic staff.

TABLE 3: Academic programs that include WIL and academic qualifications of HEI staff respondents.

			Frequency	Percentage
HEI Students	Valid	PhD	2	1.0
		Master degree	6	2.9
		Bachelor	156	76.1
		Diploma	27	13.2
		Certificate	14	6.8
Total			205	100
HEI academic Staff	Valid	PhD	22	22.7
		Master degree	50	51.5
		Bachelor	22	22.7
		Diploma	3.0	3.1
Total			97	100

As shown in Table 3, the majority of students that participated in the study had undertaken WIL during their undergraduate degree programme. However, the representation of the different levels of students at PhD, masters, diploma and certificate level academic programs was an indication of how WIL has been embraced by HEIs across different academic programs. Collecting data from students studying at different levels further enhanced the study as it incorporated the views of students with varying needs. The majority of HEI academic staff that participated in the study had masters or PhD degrees, an indication that the respondents possessed the appropriate qualifications to understand the focus of the study and provide valuable contributions.

Table 4 presents the duration of the experience of academic staff participants. This established the extent of their involvement and provided a basis of their knowledge regarding WIL policies in their HEIs.

TABLE 4: Academic staff experience in work-integrated learning.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Less than one year	16	16.5
	1-2 years	20	20.6
	3-5 years	21	21.6
	5 years and above	40	41.2
Total		97	100

As indicated in Table 4, 41.2% of the academic staff who participated in the study had been involved in WIL activities for more than five years. This enhanced the credibility of the data as the findings are based on respondents with adequate knowledge and experience about WIL and its guiding policies.

POLICIES FOR WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN HEIS

The findings from the questionnaires and the interviews are presented concurrently under the following themes: Awareness of WIL policies, and Relevance of the policies for embedding WIL in HE curricula. The following sub-themes were incorporated: setting procedures for WIL, responsibilities and expectations of WIL, stipulating the relationship between HEIs and hosting organizations, and providing for resource mobilization and allocation.

Awareness of Work-Integrated Learning Policies

In order to underscore the role HEI WIL policies play in embedding meaningful WIL, the study sought to find out from the respondents if they were aware of WIL policies in their HEIs. Table 5 shows the breakdown of participants' responses regarding awareness of the existence of HEI policies for WIL.

TABLE 5. Awareness of work-integrated learning policies.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Yes	189	62.6
	No	109	36.1
	Total	298	98.7
	Non response	04	1.3
Total		302	100

As indicated in Table 5, 62.6% of respondents were aware of the existence of policies that regulate WIL in HEIs. This could be attributed to the possibility that participants assumed that policies around WIL existed because WIL was included in the student experience. However, data from interviews clearly indicated that HEIs continue to implement WIL without well-established policies as shown by staff comments below:

I am not aware of any policy regarding work-integrated learning at university. What we have are practices that we follow while executing the activities of work-integrated learning (KICo02).

There are practices that have been in place that we follow in implementing work-integrated learning. The documented policy doesn't exist per se. (KICo08).

There are just practices that we have followed over a long time (KICo06).

Relevance of Policies for Embedding Work-Integrated Learning

In the endeavor to consider the role of HEI WIL policies, the study sought to establish how HEI policies dictated the inclusion of WIL in curriculum, set the procedures for WIL, established responsibilities and expectations of WIL, stipulated the relationship between HEIs and hosting organizations, and provided for resource mobilization and allocation.

Inclusion of work-integrated learning

In order to determine how the institutional policies inform the inclusion of WIL in curriculum, respondents were asked in the questionnaire to rate the importance (from very important to not important at all) of including WIL in the curriculum through well-established policies. The responses obtained from the questionnaire are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6: Importance of HEIs work-integrated learning policies for informing curriculum .

Category of Respondent			Frequency	Percentage
Students	Valid	Very important	84	41.0
		Important	49	23.9
		Rather unimportant	1	0.5
		Non responses	71	34.6
		Total	205	100
Academic Staff	Valid	Very important	31	32.0
		Important	21	21.6
		Rather unimportant	1	1.0
		Not important at all	1	1.0
		Non Responses	43	44.3
		Total	97	100

Findings in Table 6 suggest that the majority of respondents in both categories indicated that policies were very important or important to ensure the inclusion of WIL in curriculum. To emphasize the importance of WIL policies, respondents were asked how their programs included WIL during the interviews. Findings indicated that it was a general requirement for academic programs to include WIL to boost student outcomes, and to help students relate the theory learnt to the requirements of the world of work. This perspective was substantiated by staff responses:

When we are developing the curriculum, we make sure that we follow the mission, and the philosophy of the university which is community engagement. This is done by including industrial training, our form of work-integrated learning. (KIAr05)

I may not say I know of any policy but students who do engineering programs must do work-integrated learning (industrial training) that is, they must be able to do hands-on learning and it is part of the requirements for the academic programme that means the real field work which is not offered at the university but in industries. (KICo03)

Procedures for work-integrated learning

In seeking to find out how HEI policies set the procedures for undertaking WIL, the respondents were asked to rate the influence of the policies on the regulation of WIL procedures on a 5-point scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. The responses are shown in table 7.

TABLE 7: Influence of HEIs policies on the quality of *work-integrated learning*.

Category of respondent			Frequency	Percentage
Academic Staff	Valid	Strongly agree	39	40.2
		Agree	55	56.7
		Disagree	5	0.05
		Strongly disagree	1	0.01
Total			97	100
Students	Valid	Strongly agree	92	44.8
		Agree	99	48.3
		Disagree	8	5.5
		Strongly disagree	6	1.4
Total			205	100

The findings in Table 7, show that respondents strongly agreed or agreed that WIL policies in HEIs inform the procedures of WIL. Interviewees were asked how WIL policies are relevant in informing WIL procedures. A respondent commented that: "To regulate our internal mechanisms, yes, it [the policy] is necessary to streamline the practice. Such a policy would also provide a good start for the process for predictable results" (KICo06).

Responsibilities and expectations of work-integrated learning

While seeking to determine the relevance of HEI policies in setting the responsibilities and the expectations of WIL, the respondents were asked whether HEI policies for WIL were necessary for clarifying roles and expectations of stakeholders. Responses are shown in Table 8.

TABLE 8: Necessity of HEI policies for clarifying roles of key stakeholders.

Category of Respondent			Frequency	Valid Percentage
Academic Staff	Valid	Yes	87	89.7
		No	10	9.3
Total			97	100
Students	Valid	Yes	175	85.5
		No	30	14.5
Total			205	100

The findings in Table 8, reveal that the majority of respondents believed it was necessary to have policies or guidelines in place to streamline the roles of different WIL stakeholders. The need for HEIs to develop and utilize policies for WIL was supported by the following responses: “The policy is very much needed to answer some of the concerns in work-integrated learning” (KICo01).

Another added that

... we have different faculties you might even find that the way it is done is not uniform within the university but we don’t have a general guidance and I believe if we had one it would be helpful so that we all know like it’s a standard. (KIAr05)

A WIL coordinator from a HEI without a WIL policy explained the potential benefits of a policy: “It would spell out the responsibilities of different stakeholders for the execution of industrial training” (KICo04).

Correspondingly another coordinator said: “It [WIL] is an activity that is within the programs but it involves so many stakeholders that means they need guidelines” (KICo01) and another stated that “Yeah, there should be a policy to provide for checks and balances for the stakeholders”(KIDit01).

Stipulate the relationship between HEIs and hosting workplaces

While determining the effect of HEI WIL policies on the relationship between HEIs and hosting organizations, the respondents were asked to rate the impact of the absence of specific policies on relationships between HEIs and hosting organizations. The responses generated are shown in Table 9.

TABLE 9: Effect of lack of HEI WIL policies on HEIs and host organizations partnership.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	Strongly agree	46	15.2
	Agree	57	18.9
	Disagree	6	2.0
	Strongly disagree	1	0.3
	Non responses	192	63.6
Total		302	100

The findings in Table 9, suggest that the majority of respondents perceived that a lack of policies to regulate WIL in HEIs affected the relationship between HEIs and host organizations. Similarly, when research participants were asked about the impact of policies on the relationship between HEIs and host organization WIL, they highlighted that policies help to streamline relationships with host organizations. One interviewee commented that: “Yes, the policy for the university would sets out how we relate with the community” (KICo01).

Another added that “work-integrated learning is a complex activity that requires collaboration between institutions of higher learning and the industry. The policy that spells out that relationship should be useful” (KIDit03).

Provide for resource mobilization and allocation

The questionnaire asked students and academic staff whether students were required by their HEIs to pay for WIL. Findings suggested that 54% of students are required to pay their institutions for WIL, while 46% were not. Comparably, when participants were asked in the interview whether students were charged for WIL, they indicated that HEIs were charging students through the established fees

structures. The notable responses were: “as part of functional fees there is some amount which is paid to cater for their industrial training [WIL]” (KIAR05) and “as part of the fees structure the students are required to pay some fees for industrial training [WIL]” (KIDvc01).

Others confirmed that “currently a fee per year is being paid by each student but effective next academic year it is going to be increased” (KIAR08).

Findings revealed that in order to realize the required revenue to fund WIL activities, students are charged fees by HEIs equivalent to between US\$ 27 to US\$ 108 per year. When seeking to establish how the funding allocation for WIL is managed, respondents were asked whether they received any financial support from HEIs. Findings indicated that 51.6% received financial support while 48.4% did not. This raises concerns about how they were executing WIL activities without sufficient funding from the HEIs. When asked about the resource needs of WIL during the interview, the respondents indicated that WIL was expensive as some of the responses show: “financing of work-integrated learning should also be detailed because it is a very expensive process for students, hosting organizations and universities” (KIAR08) and “industrial training [WIL] is a very expensive exercise, the university invests a lot of money in the whole exercise” (KICo02).

In regard to government financial support for WIL, a respondent commented that the government only supports government-sponsored students. Students from privately sponsored HEIs are required to cover the full cost of WIL.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study affirmed the importance of implementing HEI WIL policies to ensure WIL activities are effectively regulated and managed with clear procedures that inform how WIL is implemented. Furthermore, policies were deemed essential for allocating and mobilizing funds for WIL, and ensuring that effective approaches for embedding WIL in curriculum are articulately communicated. WIL policies provide the foundation for robust partnerships with industry, clarify the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and establish guidelines and procedures.

Embedding Work-Integrated Learning in Curriculum

The importance of embedding WIL throughout curriculum for successful implementation and positive student experience is well documented (Brennan & Little, 1996; European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2011; National Council for Higher Education, 2014; Reinhard et al., 2020). However, staff participants in this study commented that WIL policies did not mandate inclusion of WIL in curriculum, nor did they provide guidance on how a WIL curriculum should be designed. This is akin to Brennan et al.’s (2006) observation that WIL was offered by HEIs premised on institutional philosophy and professional traditions rather than established policies. The findings of this study also affirmed the assertions of Maclean and Pavlova (2013) and Makerere University (2014) that HEIs perceive WIL as a way of shifting from knowledge-focused instruction to active application of knowledge and skills in real world scenarios. This shift in the students’ educative experience requires transformation of curriculum design to ensure learning is active rather than passive. However, in the absence of guiding policies for WIL in HEIs and systemic guidelines at the national level, WIL practices continue to rely on unregulated practices (Kalanda et al., 2021; Mthembu, 2013). Without policies to inform the inclusion of WIL in curriculum, WIL pedagogy lacks rigor and results in poorly designed curriculum that diminishes the student experience.

Impact of Policies on Work-Integrated Learning Procedures

WIL policies are integral to the implementation of streamlined and efficient WIL procedures and meaningful integration of WIL in curriculum. The findings of this study attributes appropriate WIL policies to the development and implementation of procedures that inform how WIL is practiced. To accommodate the variation of WIL models and institutional focus, procedures should be informative but retain flexibility to accommodate diversity and mitigate possible risks (Reinhard et al., 2020).

Impact of Policies on the Student Experience

Institutional policies often stipulate criteria for students' participation in WIL, and are instrumental in minimizing biases and inconsistencies in WIL assessment (Hora et al., 2020; Scholtz, 2020). The process of designing educational experiences to support students' learning and sourcing placements are critical in WIL. While these important aspects of WIL are practiced in institutions, locating relevant processes and approaches for guiding how these are enacted are not available given the absence of institutional WIL policies. Furthermore, the much needed support and supervision of students undertaking WIL (Brennan & Little, 1996) and critical monitoring of the rhythm of learning (Costely, 2011) may be forfeited without rigorous policies.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

Clarifying and communicating the roles, responsibilities and expectations of WIL to stakeholders is critical to attaining the benefits of WIL. The findings indicate that the formation and success of partnerships integral to WIL are reliant on negotiating and defining the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. HEI WIL policies provide clarity on the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders. Furthermore, as Blom (2014) observed, potential anxiety of stakeholders, involved in WIL, especially students, is minimized when WIL policies provide direction and guidance on procedural matters associated with WIL (Brennan et al., 2006; Kiriri, 2019).

Impact on Partnerships

Reaffirming and strengthening the relationship between HEIs and host organizations is a key benefit of WIL (Taylor & Govender, 2013). The findings of this study affirmed that WIL staff think there is a need for institutional policies to strengthen the link between HEIs and workplaces (Boud & Garrick, 1999). In growing economies like Uganda, where host organizations for WIL are dominated by inexperienced small and medium enterprises, the suggestion by Brennan et al., (2006) is that HEI WIL policies are pertinent and informative. WIL policies also clarify the pivotal role HEIs play in creating effective partnerships with the host organizations (Sewell et al., 2017). Findings affirm that HEIs without policies to guide WIL, risk inefficient, unsuccessful, unsustainable, and weakened partnerships with host organizations.

Funding of Work-Integrated Learning

Funding for WIL is a key issue that compromises meaningful WIL. Mobilization of the required funding for WIL continues to be a challenge, as indicated by the findings of this study. Irrespective of the absence of comprehensive policies for WIL, HEIs have continued to integrate WIL in their curriculum without necessary financial support. There is an urgent need for improved strategies for allocating funds to WIL beyond the informal arrangement that currently exist (Blom, 2015). In their response to mobilizing resources as advised by Blom (2014), HEIs have introduced fees structures for

WIL. This addresses the call by Weible (2009) and Mathews (1999) for innovative ways of funding WIL. WIL funds can be used to support the placement processes, facilitate supervision, train supervisors, and finance WIL related research. The inclusion of WIL charges for students to contribute to the funding needs of WIL ought to be maintained.

Limitation of the Study

There were several non-respondents to some of the questions in the questionnaire, which may have affected the general views solicited for this study, although this could have been minimized by the data collected from the in depth interviews. The findings of this study were based on the context of WIL in Uganda and, therefore, may not be applicable in other locations where WIL is offered.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to determine the role that policies play in embedding meaningful WIL practices in HEIs. The study concludes that for effective embedding of WIL in HE curricula, WIL policies that spell-out clear WIL procedures, clarify roles responsibilities and expectations of WIL stakeholders, streamline the relationship between HEIs and hosting organizations and mobilize resources, are paramount. WIL policies in HEIs are important for guiding staff and students in the design and implementation of WIL to ensure optimal learning from workplace experiences where the appropriate environment for learning is well set-out as asserted by Kolb (1984) in his ELT.

RECOMMENDATION

HEIs in Uganda should establish and strengthen institutional WIL policies to coordinate, regulate, facilitate and manage WIL to improve WIL practices. This will facilitate inclusion of WIL in curricula, determine procedures, articulate stakeholders' responsibilities, streamline relationships with host organizations, and institute guidelines for financing WIL activities.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Reference

Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., Rowe, A. D., & Ferns, S. J. (2023). Defining work-integrated learning. In K. E. Zegwaard & T. J. Pretti (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of work-integrated learning* (3rd ed., pp. 29-48). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003156420-4>



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