

Don't assume, just ask: Student perspectives and expectations of work-integrated learning in a business course decision

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This qualitative case study, prompted by design assumptions in a work-integrated learning (WIL) capstone course, sought to examine and leverage student voice for learning design beyond traditional means of course surveys and instructor perceptions of quality in evidence of learning. While previous iterations of a capstone WIL course incorporated student feedback during and after the WIL experience, this study sought to proactively understand third-year students' perspectives and expectations prior to their enrollment decision between practicum or capstone. This study offers insights involving the student perceptions around practicum (paid) and capstone (unpaid) WIL experiences. The results of this study also offer insights into the student expectations of the role of student, instructor, institution, and industry partner in WIL experiences. By exploring student insights and raising student voice, we offer course design considerations for more informed decision-making and to enhance the quality of WIL experiences.

Keywords: Student voice, student expectations, capstone, experiential learning, work-integrated learning

Post-secondary educators strive to iterate and modify course designs to continually improve student experience and conditions for learning. Through the lenses of critically reflective practice, peer review, student feedback, administrative strategic priorities, and external stakeholder perspectives, redesign is often executed following the completion of a course in preparation for the next offering. This study examines the importance of student voice as an integral element of designing quality work-integrated learning experiences, emphasizing perspectives that go beyond instructor perspectives and perceptions to actively shape the learning experience. The study contributes to an understanding of student perceptions and expectations of two WIL options, practicum and capstone, in this context. How student perspectives and expectations provide insight and guidance into the redesign considerations of a WIL learning experience in a capstone course is explored.

Guided by the provincial Ministry of Advanced Education and Post-secondary Learning act, a Western Canadian polytechnic's institutional mandate is to serve students in the geographical region, and "provide learners with the skills and knowledge required to serve the employment needs of key industry sectors" (Government of Alberta, n.d., p. 5). To enact this mandate, the institution is "committed to providing a learner-centered environment that embodies the principles set out in the Campus Alberta framework" (Government of Alberta, n.d., p. 5). Applied learning as hands-on (experiential) and responsive to industry needs and labor market demands, underpins course design across apprenticeship, certificate, and diploma programs for technical vocations, and some applied and baccalaureate degrees in specific areas in the context of this case. The benefits of WIL as a pedagogical practice for student growth, development and work-readiness (e.g., Smith et al., 2014) are recognized, while also speaking to the call for understanding barriers to engagement by students especially in unpaid WIL (e.g., Stirling et al., 2021). In this paper, redesigning a capstone course as an intervention

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to reduce student barriers (Stirling et al., 2021) and raising student voice, is focused on. The insights gained will help to improve alignment of the course design decisions with student perceptions of WIL opportunities in a Bachelor of Business Administration degree in a School of Business, through the focus on student voice.

Skills Challenge

Ongoing consultation and research between the institution, new graduates, hiring employers, and industry leaders, as well as sector reports and trends, inform program delivery. These insights guide strategic and operational decisions regarding academic programs and impact the design and iteration of courses. The *Future of Jobs Report 2023* identified the transformational changes that are reconfiguring skills and jobs moving forward (World Economic Forum, 2023). The present research responds to the challenge of aligning graduate competencies with employer expectations in a post-secondary institution designed for applied learning and support of local labor forces. While the skills gap, or misalignment between industry demands or expectations and new graduate capabilities, is of escalating concern (e.g., Lapointe & Turner, 2020; Radin et al., 2020) it must not be the primary consideration in reactively making decisions about designs for learning. The course curriculum is only one component in a complex learning system. In the local context, organizations such as the LearningCITY Collective explore system level collaborations to enact different learning communities for citizens across Calgary and a changing world (LearningCITY, n.d.). This systems approach considers the approach of a skills challenge versus skills gap so that collaborative solutions can be achieved. To consider design iterations in a culminating capstone course in the Business degree, a systems thinking lens was adopted and a systems-based approach to improve designs for learning was developed.

Systems Thinking

Arguments for change in management learning and education use a social-ecological approach to “recognize the interdependence between environment, society, and business; emphasizing that business schools must be centered on the promotion of human and ecological flourishing, as business survival *depends* on social and ecological systems” (Colombo et al., 2024, p. 207). At its core, work-integrated learning (WIL) is “the involvement of the three stakeholders: the student, the educational institution, and the external stakeholder” and connects each contributing stakeholder “to the learning experience with the goal of benefiting all stakeholders,” especially in applied learning (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023, p. 5).

In this case study context, the team of capstone instructors gathered each semester since 2018 to review and reflect on design and implementation of the course structure. Course modification decisions were determined as a team, such as adding resources, changing assessments, revising assignments, adjusting grading allocations, and so on. Meetings considered student feedback in the course, instructor and industry-perceived quality of student generated work, student course evaluations, and feedback documented by instructors throughout the semester. Over time, some modifications seemed to be well received, such as micro-credential learning through an institutional license with a third-party platform for recognition of learning activities; however, prescribing the credentials for all learners was generic and not relevant or valuable to all students. A critical document analysis and examination of capstone course iterations (Johnston, 2024) determined that faulty assumptions made by the instructional team had influenced perceptions and decisions about course design. This was an important realization throughout the doctoral research and dissertation involving this study (Johnston, 2024). One example

of such an assumption was the belief that students found micro-credential learning through the third-party valuable because they had a high rate of completion. However, another explanation is that students appreciated that if they had to complete a task, it was preferred to be one with a credential. The topic may or may not have been perceived as valuable or useful.

In this case, students in their degree pathway select between capstone and practicum for the culmination of their degree through a WIL learning experience. The practicum is a 450-hour paid work experience within a four-month semester that aligns to a student's major of study (i.e., accounting, financial services, human resource management, management, marketing, or supply chain management). Capstone is an unpaid project experience within a six-credit hour WIL course (six hours of scheduled instruction per week) that students complete in one four-month semester. The goal of capstone is for students to gain real-world experience through a project that is centered on an industry partner along with mentorship and coaching from the course instructor. Traditionally, instructors' assumptions, based on their experiences around assessment and about the student, have been the primary influence on course redesign, rather than evidence and voice from students. Feedback was most often acquired through (a) student dialogue in class, student course evaluations after the completion of capstone, and quality of learning assessments as evaluated by the instructor, and (b) assumptions as to whether students made informed decisions or defaulted to capstone if a work placement for practicum was not achieved. This information was gathered by instructors during the teaching of capstone from student conversations, and anecdotal feedback from program advisors that meet with students throughout their program – but after students had made their WIL selection. It was through this process of document analysis that the need for student voice in curriculum change (Ngussa & Makewa, 2021) and reform (Flynn & Hayes, 2021) was identified.

Student Voice

An incorrect assumption was that student voice was meaningfully considered in course design through this approach. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) argue for an ecosystem of student participation and warn against tokenistic involvement. Although not intended to be token, the feedback was filtered through instructors and gained from students during and after completion of capstone, rather than before the student's decision was made about enrolling in capstone or practicum. It was not known whether students were making an active choice, or whether they enrolled in capstone by default, or from a perception of no other option. The instructional team was making assumptions about student decisions, perceptions, and expectations prior to enrolling in capstone or practicum, but relevant data had not been collected on student perspectives (specifically third-year students). Guided by recommendations for all stakeholders of WIL to be meaningfully engaged (Garant-Jones et al., 2024) and Eady et al.'s (2025) reflections of quality (RoQ) model, which draws on ecological systems theory and wayfinding rock formations, student voice was sought to inform capstone redesign as an integral cornerstone of the learning design. The researchers identified that the instructor synthesis and assumptions from student feedback was not authentic student voice and instead fragmented our system formation. The goal was to explore how students could have more influence on quality WIL considerations and voice in shaping expectations and capstone design.

This case study especially explores third-year students' perceptions and expectations in making the decision to select either a business capstone or practicum as the culminating WIL experience at the end of a business degree. Further, the focus was to design for learning using student perspectives. Third-year students' insights and expectations were utilized to inform design considerations for capstone that address skills challenges previously overlooked, given the absence of this critical student perspective.

Exploration is framed by RoQ considerations (Eady et al., 2025) with a social-ecological systems approach that prioritizes recognition of student voice.

The research question guiding this case study is what are the expectations, assumptions, and perspectives of third-year students that inform quality WIL and design? The purpose of this research was to understand students' perspectives on an upcoming decision point between the two WIL choices: practicum or capstone and determine how student decision making informs their transition into and through capstone. The insights from this work would support further steps to address barriers for students in WIL through attending to intervention and design considerations from the perspective and expectations of students.

METHOD

Research Design

This qualitative case study is part of a larger design-based research study on systemic reframing and redesign of capstone to address the system-problem of skills gap (Johnston, 2024). In this case, the aim was to understand third-year students' perspectives and decision-making processes approaching selection of capstone or practicum, along with perceptions of preparedness and career readiness. The case study explores the design considerations realized through the third-year student voice and the impacts that were used to inform subsequent course design requirements and decisions (Johnston, 2024).

Ethics Approvals

The data and information reported were approved with certification of two institutional ethics review boards that include the Institutional Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) under Ethics Certificate #REB22-0759 and the Institutional Research Ethics Board (REB) certificate issued under Project #2016-100118.

Participants

This study involved purposeful sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) to gather insights from third-year business students who had completed at least 90 of 120 credit hours towards their degree and were able to select between practicum or capstone to complete degree requirements.

Data Collection

Throughout this paper, any references made to Johnston (2024) speak to insights gathered throughout a multi-year process and captured in the unpublished dissertation. The focus of this paper highlights one very important voice – and raises the necessary voice of third year students. The use of researcher journals and logs, as well as other insights utilized and referred to, stems from this larger body of work. To better understand design assumptions the fact that there was little data on student rationale for making capstone and WIL decisions (before they had to make them), was identified. Recognizing this gap led to identifying that it would be important to gain voice from third-year students –just how imperative the insights would be was not . anticipated

An online survey was created, distributed, and facilitated through the institution's Qualtrics software. An invitation to complete an anonymous, online, 18-item survey (select choice and open-ended items) was distributed by email to third-year students (Johnston, 2024, Appendix C, p. 321-322). The survey

design was informed by literature on the importance of student voice in inclusive and responsive course design (Sun & Holt, 2022) that looked specifically at expectations around the primary role of instructor, industry, institution, and student; sources of formal and informal mentorship (Lutz & Paretti, 2017); context of prior work experience relevant to courses designed for WIL (Lutz & Paretti, 2017), and perceptions of paid versus unpaid WIL (Stirling et al., 2021). Of the 990 eligible third-year Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) students, 57 respondents consented to participate in the survey overall, but not all participants completed all survey items. Where relevant, the number of respondents to a particular survey item will be noted. Demographics for the respondents (n=53) by major of study and anticipated selection between practicum and capstone as WIL choice for degree completion (n=51) are shown in Table 1. The percentages shown are representation by major of the survey participants and the BBA student population respectively. Given the small number of participants, the constituents of the sample and population are of interest by major, but no claim is made about the representativeness of the population.

TABLE 1: Demographics by major for survey participants and BBA student population.

Characteristic		Survey Participants		BBA Population 2022-23 (N=990)	
Degree	Accounting	20	37.7%	336	33.9%
Major	Financial Services	2	3.8%	153	15.5%
(n=53)	Human Resources Management	10	18.9%	81	8.2%
	Management	4	7.5%	156	15.8%
	Marketing	9	17.0%	118	11.9%
	Supply Chain Management	8	15.19%	146	14.7%
WIL	Business Capstone (MNGT4990)	19	37.3%		
Choice	Business Practicum (ACWE4990)	32	62.7%		
(n=51)					

One interest to explore was if there was a trend that certain majors may have had a stronger interest in one WIL option over the other and that there may be impact by years of work experience. In Table 2, responses are displayed by the number of respondents in a major that selected capstone or practicum as their intended WIL choice, with the average number of years of work experience for that particular respondent group (e.g., of the 16 respondents that identified as accounting majors that were anticipating selecting practicum, they had an average of 5.3 years of work experience).

TABLE 2: Survey respondents' intended course selection by major of study and mean work experience and workplaces.

WIL Choice Selection	Major of Study					
	Accounting (n=20)	Financial Services (n=2)	Human Resources (n=10)	Management (n=4)	Marketing (n=8*)	Supply Chain (n=7*)
Capstone	4	2	4	3	5	1
Work Experience (years)	2.5	3.0	4.0	6.5	5.4	3.0^
Different Workplaces (number)	3.0	2.5	3.5	4.0	5.2	2.0^
Practicum	16	0	6	1	3	6
Work Experience (years)	5.3	--	6.3	3.0^	3.7	3.3
Different Workplaces (number)	4.5	--	5.2	6.0^	4.0	3.3

Note: *There were 9 participants that identified marketing as their major, but only 8 that identified work experience and number of workplaces. This also occurred with 8 participants that identified supply chain as a major, but only 7 indicated work experience and number of workplaces. ^ Where n=1 in a category, it should be cautioned on the value for average work experience and workplaces.

By major, most of the respondents who intended to choose practicum over capstone were in Accounting, Human Resource Management, and Supply Chain Management. Each of these majors involves an industry recognized designation or as part of a credential pathway (i.e., accounting majors towards Chartered Professional Accountant Level 1, human resources bypass the national knowledge exam for the Chartered Professional in Human Resources, and supply chain has opportunities for Six Sigma belt certification). Most respondents, by major, that chose capstone were from financial services, management, and marketing. Although management and marketing do not have embedded designation pathways, students in financial services have access to complete investment and licensing exams. It had been expected that a strong preference for selecting practicum (62.7% from Table 1) would be present across all majors as the focus of applied learning in this program is job acquisition after credentialing (illustrated through the employment rate as a declaration of program success; SAIT Graduate Employment Survey, 2023). Another interesting finding from these respondents was that for each of the six majors, the average number of years of work experience was higher for those intending to select capstone. Due to the small sample sizes, these trends are of interest, but no generalized claims can be made. However, these trends do challenge prior assumptions noted by instructors (Johnston, 2024) that capstone is more of a fallback plan for not accessing practicum or being successful in gaining employment; instead, there are students at the choice point who intentionally select capstone.

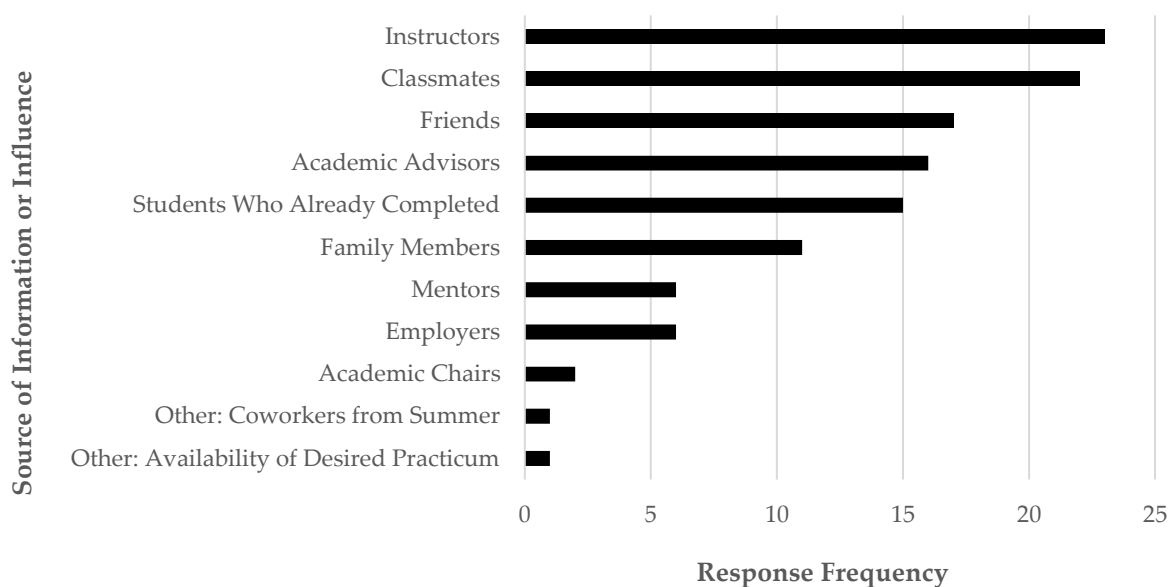
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Findings indicate that students primarily seek course selection guidance from instructors, classmates, and friends, rather than program advisors or institutional materials. Many students lacked clear information about capstone and practicum, reinforcing the need for targeted communication and decision-support structures.

Student Perspectives on Course Selection

Participants were invited to identify the sources of information or influence that inform course selection decisions, such as choosing between capstone and practicum. The three most frequent sources were instructors, classmates, and friends, representing 51.7% of all responses (see Figure 1). The three least frequently mentioned sources of information or influence on students' decision making were academic chairs, employers, and mentors (workers from summer employment and availability of desired practicum were single responses under "other").

FIGURE 1: Influences on third-year students' decision making for course selection.



A key challenge with students relying on prior instructors, classmates, and friends is the risk that course enrollment decisions are informed by outdated information and past course designs. To make informed capstone decisions, students need accurate, up-to-date details about capstone. While capstone instructors shape course designs, our survey shows that prior instructors significantly influence student choices. Identifying these information sources can help improve program communication pathways and ensure better guidance.

Work and Workplace Experience

Although capstone involves an industry partner, it is unpaid and does not follow a work-based compensation model. Prior work experience and number of prior workplaces, may have a relationship with student decisions regarding practicum or capstone. The survey results (see Table 2) showed that

there was a range of work experience across all majors and the WIL choice selection. Respondents could select from zero to ten years. As there are mature students in the program, there was a concern that there may be identifiability for those that identified well beyond 10 years of experience. This would suggest that the actual means represented could be higher than reported. In this sample, for students selecting practicum from the majors of accounting and human resources, the mean years of work experience and number of workplaces was higher than for those in the respective majors that were selecting capstone. The reverse trend was demonstrated for marketing majors. For those in financial services, management, and supply chain, it is difficult when one of the WIL choice categories had zero or one respondent. This might be indicative of a connection between work and workplace experiences influencing major of study and WIL selection, but this cannot be determined without further investigation.

It is important to note that two-thirds of the respondents indicated that they intended to select practicum over capstone. This contrasts with the last four years of institutional records of course registrations (excluding lockdown during the pandemic) where the number of capstone students exceeds the number of practicum students. Although respondents were not followed up to see if their selection of WIL choice enrolment matched their anticipated selection, this would be interesting for future research. One respondent's quote raised an important consideration when they stated that "I feel like I don't have knowledge on how to enter the workforce in my major, simply how to do the job, but not how to get it" (Student38). This highlights the need for mentorship and coaching through connection to help familiarize students with pathways to work and not just work experiences.

Perceptions of Advantages and Disadvantages of Course Selection

Two items on the survey targeted the benefits (item #6) and challenges (item #7) students associated with capstone and practicum. A summary of simplified responses (repetition is limited so that the range can be seen) shown in Figure 2 illustrates participant perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages to the course selection between capstone and practicum. All responses regarding the benefits or advantages of capstone identified aspects of the course structure and scheduling. Responses indicated that the ability to take capstone with other courses, as well as the ability to work while taking capstone, were advantages. Additional advantages of capstone included flexibility, attainability, and manageability as a course option, and not having to apply to jobs. Responses about benefits or advantages of practicum were condensed to real-world experience, paid employment, connection to job prospects through networking and references, and working was perceived as easier than school.

FIGURE 2 Perceived advantages and disadvantages of WIL selection by third-year students.

Capstone		Practicum
1. Can be taken with other courses (4) 2. Availability to work (2) 3. Not having to apply for jobs (1) 4. Flexible, attainable, manageable (1)		1. Real-world (9) 2. Get paid (5) 3. Network, reference (4) 4. Working is easy over school (1)
1. Not work experience (4) 2. Not real world/life (2) 3. Just a major group project (1) 4. Simpler option (1) 5. Schedule (1)		1. Find your own job (13) 2. Course/coursework attached (5) 3. Scarcity of opportunities (2) 4. Hard work, a lot of hours (2) 5. Need connections to get job (1)

Note: Responses are listed in rank order, with frequency indicated in brackets

Respondents contributed 33 responses for capstone, 23 responses for practicum, and one that was “uncertain which may be better fit” (Student26). The most frequent response regarding capstone identified a lack of work experience or real-life relevance. Three quotes highlighting this perspective included: “taking the capstone feels like it is a major group project. I believe the disadvantage when taking it opposed to the practicum is that you lose out on a lot of work experience” (Student10), “Capstone simply does not create a bridge to the workforce in the same way the practicum does” (Student23), and “practicum is real experience where capstone is just a class. More desirable to future employers if you have real experience” (Student1). Three key challenges or disadvantages associated with practicum included 1) finding a placement, 2) course requirements, and 3) the issue of time. Two quotes regarding the challenge of finding a placement include that the “challenge of practicum is to find a job position. Capstone is just an alternate option if I can’t find a job” (Student24) and the “challenges of practicum is finding an employer to give you a shot and to find an employer that has managers that will actually teach students and not treat them badly” (Student29). One respondent identified that the “disadvantage of practicum is that by doing course work I expect to enjoy my work term less because of it. I also expect that most of the benefits I get will be from the work term itself and not from the course work. The course work detracts from the nature of what the practicum is supposed to be - practical” (Student3) and the identification of “having to find your own job and it takes up a lot of time trying to find” (Student31).

Overall, the advantages and disadvantages third-year students associated with practicum tended to coalesce on the perceived value of paid work experience, networking, and real-world experience compared to concerns with doing coursework alongside practicum, the scarcity of positions, and finding a work position. When considering capstone, respondents focused on the flexibility and availability of the *course* and not having to apply for jobs, versus unpaid work experience or real-world learning. One respondent positioned practicum and capstone as: “Practicum: getting paid, networking, receiving references, real work experience; Capstone: not having to go to the effort of applying to jobs” (Student5). Considerations for time included: “I chose [capstone] simply based on my scheduling due to my employment” (Student30). Two responses that highlight perspectives of accessibility and flexibility include that capstone is “flexible, attainable, manageable in a busy work, school, and life schedule” (Student18) and “the Capstone benefits my school schedule as I’ll be looking to take it along with other courses” (Student10). The challenge and complexity of this course decision came through student responses (e.g., Student10) where the advantages and disadvantages of an anticipated choice were not simple (benefit of practicum for work experience, benefit of capstone for timing and convenience). Future studies to explore decisions made and reflections on course selection would be valuable to look at anticipated and lived experiences. No responses highlighted skills or competencies that would be an advantage nor how either experience might shape or create career paths. The value or awareness of WIL in capstone as real-world learning through partnership with industry was unknown or not recognized in the responses received in this sample.

Preparedness to Start Careers

Participants were invited to rank their preparedness to start careers (item #8). Using a four-point, Likert-type scale, most of the 33 respondents selected somewhat prepared (68%). Responses for extremely well-prepared (13%), somewhat unprepared (16%), and extremely unprepared (3%) comprised the remaining responses. Thirty-three respondents provided comments in response to an open-ended question. The majority of respondents felt somewhat prepared for career entry, with concerns centered around the transition from education to employment. Four respondents who felt

extremely well-prepared to start their careers highlighted diverse strengths for transitioning to employment after graduation as follows:

1. I am a mature student... that went back to school to get my degree. I have over 20 years of experience in my career and my education has added value to my employment" (Student44).
2. I already have plenty of work experience. I am just waiting to complete my degree before shifting into the accounting field (Student9).
3. Classes and projects have prepared me well. After my internship I'll be even more prepared (Student19).
4. I already have a career, so I'm already prepared (Student45).

Of the 23 responses from those who felt somewhat prepared, four themes emerged that related to:

a) the relation of choice to the major (too many electives or wanting to focus on the major), and b) retained learning (concerns for the volume of material or capability to retain coursework to bring into work situations). Quotes from three respondents to demonstrate this include:

1. [I feel] somewhat prepared. But I haven't had any true [major-related] classes in a semester or two. There are too many electives (Student31).
2. I have a poor retention of what I have learned during covid which makes me feel less prepared (Student3).
3. I felt more prepared after taking the diploma course than I have taking the degree. Half the courses in the degree didn't have anything to do with business or my major, it seemed like (the electives). I was advised to take the degree to be able to move up in the business world, but it seems like I am less prepared than before since scheduling was a bit of a mess and dividing my focus from business to electives. Since the diploma was such a long time ago (almost 3 years) I struggle to remember much of what I learned back then that can be applied to my career, so I'll have to review a lot of the coursework from years ago to be able to do my work (Student16).

c) student-to-employee transitions (identifying the transition from learner to worker, or transition from school to career), and d) workplace relevance (identification that school learning is different from workplace experience). Perspectives shared by three respondents include:

1. I feel like I don't have knowledge on how to enter the workforce in my major simply how to do the job but not how to get it (Student30).
2. I've focused on getting some positive work experience while I'm in school, but would still like to find a job in my field before I finish school so I can apply what I'm learning (Student20).
3. I feel like I have the tools I need to succeed but feel a bit anxious about taking that next step in my career (Student27).

Six respondents who reported feeling somewhat or extremely unprepared were more "nervous to get into the field" (Student18), "nervous to be leaving school and entering a career-oriented lifestyle" (Student10) or that "all practical learning is forgotten after courses end" (Student13) and "it's tough to find a job these days" (Student4).

Primary Role of Key Figures

Respondents were invited to identify their perspectives around the primary role for instructor, industry, student, and institution in capstone and practicum. These four figures are common to both

capstone and practicum, so the differentiation was by role, rather than by selection of course pathway. For each stakeholder question, the responses were condensed, simplified, and the emerging codes from the content are presented in Table 3. The most frequent two roles are quite strong within each category.

TABLE 3: Primary role of key figures from the perspective of third-year students.

Instructor (27)	Industry (25)	Student (28)	Institution (19)
Direct/Assess (12)	Guide/Mentor/Coach (12)	Meet Requirements (12)	Support/Guide (7)
Guide/Support (9)	Provide Experience (12)	Accountable/Responsible (10)	Course Design/Execute (6)
Coach (5)	Assessment (1)	Learn (4)	Career Ready (3)
No Role (1)		Network/Connect (2)	Facilitation (2)
			Expert Faculty (1)

Note: The bracketed number following each figure is total responses for that category, with the frequency of responses indicated by the bracketed number within a particular code. The number of responses for each of the four figures was not uniform.

Within the responses, categories emerged during the first cycle coding that clustered to roles that were directive and transactional in nature (i.e., information transfer; teacher, instructor), or facilitative and relational in nature and even transformational (i.e., guide, lead, mentor, coach). In Table 4, each role is shown with the frequency of transactional or relational responses with the most common responses. Except for the role of student, the other three roles had nearly an equal number of responses within transactional-directive (TD) or relational-facilitative (RF) categories. For the role of student, there was a higher frequency of responses within the transactional-directive category.

TABLE 4: Type and frequency of themes for each role from third-year student survey.

Role	Transactional-Directive (TD)	<i>f</i>	Relational-Facilitative (RF)	<i>f</i>
Instructor	Direct/Assess No Role	13	Guide/Support Coach	14
Industry	Provide Experience Assessment	13	Guide/Mentor/Coach	12
Student	Meet Requirements Learn	15	Accountable/Responsible Network/Connect	12
Institution	Course Design/Execute Provide Expert Faculty	9	Support/Guide Career Ready	10

Graduate Workplace Readiness

Respondents were invited to list the qualities, skills, or characteristics that were necessary for graduate workplace readiness. Students overwhelmingly identified technical skills, teamwork, leadership, and resilience as key competencies for employment. Comments were aggregated and listed in an excel document. Similar versions or permutations of characteristics (e.g., resilient and resilience, teamwork and working in teams, leader, and leadership, etc.), were simplified and counted as repeats. The frequency counts were collected and displayed in a word cloud (see Figure 3). The most frequent responses were technical skills (n=8), teamwork and experience (n=5 each), resilience, leadership, hardworking, confidence, communication (n=4 each).

FIGURE 3: Third-year students' perspective of characteristics needed for graduate workplace readiness.



The question about characteristics was the penultimate item of the inventory and responses were more dynamic and detailed than we had anticipated. Respondents identified a breadth of skills and range of characteristics that highlighted student recognition that interpersonal skills such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, and resilience are needed by graduates in readiness for the workplace. The highest frequency of characteristics were technical skills which included technical ability, familiarity with technology and applications, technical skills and knowledge through courses taken.

Additional Insights and Questions

Respondents were asked if there was anything else they wanted to share regarding the BBA student experience when facing the decision between capstone and practicum, graduate workplace readiness, and career preparation. Twelve responses were condensed into three themes: 1) Course Structure - limited knowledge or awareness to make informed decisions (75%); 2) Work Placements – to be provided with work, industries, or options for practicum placement (17%); and 3) Beliefs - that the circumstances for options resulted in the perspective that there was not a choice (8%).

Most responses indicated that students had insufficient information or awareness to make an informed decision about capstone versus practicum. One survey respondent stated that:

As a first-year student, you're a bit lost and don't really understand what you don't understand yet. Every year after that you seem to get busier and busier with coursework and recruiting and don't have the time to go to all the information sessions, so you just pick up info here and there from other students or instructors. That is why I have limited knowledge of what I will have to do in the Practicum class. I didn't realize there was a class component to Practicum until this fall. I also only recently found out that Practicum jobs don't have to be a co-op or intern position, but just in your field. Many people have said the same. (Student47)

Another respondent, indicating pragmatic reasons about how and why information is shared has an impact or could be helpful, provided more detail:

... the difference between capstone and practicum are not shared easily. I had to look online to find my answer. Normally, since first year, I would get [two] emails per semester about the capstone and practicum, even though it didn't apply to me. Because of this, I have ignored every email about them since I know I'm not qualified to apply yet. I feel like schools should have the difference between the two stated on their website somewhere so that ALL students can be prepared (for example, if a first-year student wanted to take the Practicum, they can start looking for jobs if the market is rough like it was during COVID. But since they didn't know about it until 6-8 months before they must have one, they could be more stressed about having to find a job if the market is still bad. (Student45)

A third respondent identified the ways that they had tried to get information, including a capstone information session event, and the perspective that they were left with afterwards as they were trying to decide between Capstone and Practicum. They stated that:

Capstone sounds like a lot of work that doesn't apply to the major. You're in a team of 5 where most people don't do the work. You can't take the course with 4 other courses. The info session on the capstone was intimidating and unrealistic and did not provide an accurate picture of what to expect. It was too focused on people who went onto Dragon's Den or to make multi-billion-dollar companies. Practicum, you must apply early and there is no help or guarantee to get a job. Coursework on top of the practicum seems redundant. (Student1)

Responses highlight how targeted and timely communication and information about course structure, and timely planning for work placements, are key to supporting students in making informed and intentional decisions about capstone or practicum.

DISCUSSION

These findings align with Zegwaard and Pretti's (2023) argument that high-quality WIL requires the active participation of students, institutions, and industry partners. Student voice must inform not only course content but also program structures, decision-making processes, and real-world applications of WIL. Prioritizing student voice was key to generating high quality findings in this study. The survey results reveal a majority of third-year student respondents preferred the choice of practicum, but identified the largest challenge or disadvantage was finding their own jobs and managing the coursework attached to WIL experience. Students considered graduate readiness as a mix of skills and stakeholder roles, but a gap exists between these ideals and their course enrollment decisions. This mismatch creates tension between student expectations and instructor course designs. For example, responses from the students highlighted the primary roles of providing direction, guidance, and coaching for both instructors and industry, with the most frequent student roles being that of meeting requirements and being accountable and responsible (which may not necessarily mean to be coached or be coachable). In one of the researcher's journals from data collection, it was noted that from the perspective of instructors who were determining course changes the graduate workplace readiness characteristics (most frequent being technical skills, teamwork, experience, resilience, leadership, hardworking, confidence, and communication) were not in alignment with the rationale and advantages of selecting capstone versus practicum from the student voices in this case study. Instead, the focus of student respondents was on finding a job, being paid, ease of scheduling, and simply fulfilling degree requirements.

The disconnect between ideal characteristics for graduate readiness, the primary stakeholder roles, and course choice advantages and disadvantages, led us to consider where students sought information to make course enrollment decisions. Students seek information or influence mostly from prior instructors, classmates, and friends. This was unexpected and led to consideration of assumptions around information sources and preparing students for decision making and mindset.

An improved communication strategy in the School of Business is needed, one that includes instructors, advisors, academic chairs, program guides, newsletters, documentation, and so on, to better inform and help prepare students for the specific details, objectives, and alignment of fit in selecting capstone or practicum. Better informed student decisions can create stronger alignment to perceived advantages, stakeholder roles, desired graduate competencies, and option selection. This recommendation only addresses communication pathways and is one of many considerations in the ecosystem for redesign. Ongoing insight and feedback from students are an essential input for the network of connected stakeholders. It was found that using a systems thinking approach helped to identify nuances and assumptions within the interconnected aspects of this ecosystem that were unveiled with the voices of third-year students in this context. Future research, especially in this context, will need to explore the support necessary for each of the primary roles involved in the WIL courses (including the students, institution/instructors, and industry partners). Additional research is needed on the instructional sources of information or influence on student decision making. For example, future research needs to explore what the approach or understanding of capstone and practicum is for the instructors who are so heavily influencing students' decisions.

Instructors and programs, no matter how well intentioned in making design decisions, need to go beyond teaching experiences and observations, and intentionally gather student feedback and insights to inform ongoing curricular improvements. The design considerations of the capstone experience are centered on quality WIL for students. This research builds on the call from Eady et al. (2025) for more research on students' voices on WIL. How students' expectations of WIL in this choice context are situated, was explored. The six themes identified by Drewery et al. (2026) represent students' views about essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences. A synthesis of student perspectives in the research aligned with Drewery et al.'s (2026) themes of balance, and competent support and mentorship. Some participants highlighted competencies such as a learning mindset, making a difference, growth, and belonging, but these did not surface as the most frequent expectations associated with course choice. Although the other themes have been present through perspectives from current capstone students, faculty, instructors, and administration (Johnston, 2024), they were not priorities for the third-year students that were surveyed. This finding suggests that the challenges should be addressed in ways to prepare and develop all stakeholders (especially students, instructors, and industry partners) for mutual engagement and shared expectations in WIL. Once students are engaged in the WIL experiences, through reflective practices, goal setting, experience orientation, and coaching, these themes would be expected to emerge with a stronger presence. However, the aim was to understand whether third-year students were better positioned and more aware going into the decision, if this could improve experience, outcomes, and overall quality. The value of the third-year student voice cannot be understated as it challenges faculty and industry partner assumptions and presumptions about the capstone/practicum decision after it had been made, rather than being informed going into the student decision.

Implications for Future Course-based Work-Integrated Learning Experiences

Implications for course designs that respond to building capacity, development, and coherence across an entire program, and not just WIL experiences or individual courses, will be necessary. It will be beneficial to consider the complexity of student expectations and awareness of purpose when determining and evaluating student learning design. These course designs require proactive student involvement, strengthening industry partnerships, and expanding communication strategies. The ecological systems and wayfinding lens (Eady et al., 2025) are well-suited to this approach. It enables student experiences, perceptions of quality, and the amplification of student voices across micro, meso, and macrosystem levels to holistically inform design and implementation of quality WIL experiences, which should have reciprocating benefits for all involved stakeholders. In this case, this input resulted in a pilot design where capstone was moved from on-campus to an industry partner's downtown service design office site. Through mentorship and team-teaching, the instructor, student, and service design partner, engaged in personal and professional development activities. The focus of these actions identifies expectations, assumptions, and goals through the capstone journey. The project component is an authentic project with an industry partner (in addition to the service design partner involved with team teaching and place-based learning in the city's downtown corporate core). The value of student voice is not limited to informing course design. Students continue to exercise voice through self-reflection, goal setting and pursuit, project selection, and action determination during the course. The focus for the instructors is to take on a coaching and mentorship approach where formative feedback and reception of student insight, perspective and voice is ongoing during the learning experience. Future research will examine the effects and impacts of this coaching and mentoring approach and the necessary preparations and support for those involved (all students, instructors, and industry partners).

Limitations

This case study is situated in an institution and program focused on applied learning. The pressure of work-relevant skills, employment, and workforce preparation may influence narrowed expectations as third-year students approach decision making. Further insights from supports identified by students, such as instructor perspectives, program marketing material, and program advisors may offer ways to better support WIL course design, experiences, and program considerations. The purposeful sampling and survey approach were used so that students could be anonymous and respond openly prior to the decision between capstone and practicum. This case study provided insights directly from the third-year students prior to making course decisions versus feedback after the choice had been made. While the response rate provides important insights, we cannot claim representation or generalizability. Further investigations and systems exploration will be beneficial to generate deeper understanding of student decision making for capstone versus practicum.

CONCLUSION

Student Perspectives and Expectations in Work-Integrated Learning Experiences

Student voice is critical in the design of high-quality WIL – and we argue it is not just for the students within the experience. This study suggests that integrating student perspectives before course enrollment can lead to more intentional decision-making and improved learning outcomes. It is important to engage learner perspectives as students are coming to a decision point to enter the WIL experience. A deeper understanding of students expectations for capstone and practicum, and how they make decisions to enroll in one or the other, assist programs and course instructors to support

informed design and decision making that strengthens students' voice in areas where students have less influences or the influence is on the student (Eady et al., 2025, Figure 2). This figure shows programmatic and contextual spaces especially involving RoQ mesosystem and macrosystem levels.

Future Directions for Student Voice in Designing Work-Integrated Learning Experiences

Future research should continue to explore scaffolded learning and better co-designed pathways for the development of a learning mindset, maintenance of balance, opportunity to make a difference, recognized growth, and belonging (Drewery et al., 2026). These desires were identified as ideals from industry partners, instructors, and administrators (Johnston, 2024) but the visible gap in understanding student perceptions and expectations was an important realization leading to this inquiry. Student perceptions in this study highlight the high value expectations for experience, mentorship, and leadership of all other participating parties, with less expectation for students. This finding contrasts with the expectation of industry partners, instructors, and institutional administration (Johnston, 2024) for students to gain agency and autonomy for growth and leadership. This study reinforces how further demonstration of the critical importance of student voice regarding RoQ, students having agency and choice, and the intentionality to highlight student voice, is paramount.

By using a systems approach to address the skills challenge, a key student perspective that had been previously missed was activated to inform the iterative design considerations in a business capstone course. The third-year student voice brought insights into decision making, understanding assumptions regarding student course choice, timing of the choice (by the time students were enrolled, they were passed opportunities for practicum placements), and the intentionality dimensions of student decision making. We acknowledge that students may appreciate the 'backup plan' that capstone could be an alternate consideration, and not simply a default. The insights gained through third-year student voice brings novel consideration to decision making ahead of choice points in a student's education journey. We learned that we cannot make assumptions about student perspectives and need to ask – but cannot stop at asking. As a systems approach, this voice calls for a collective act. Don't assume, just ask... then build collaboratively for quality student WIL experiences.

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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.

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