

“Highlight of my year” – Student insights on work-integrated learning in fisheries and aquaculture science studies in the Arctic

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) is vital in higher education, enabling students to apply and enhance their knowledge and skills in real-world settings. This study explores WIL experiences and outcomes within a Bachelor’s program in Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, emphasizing what students find important for their learning. Based on focus-group interviews, four key themes emerged: WIL curriculum design, host organization, the student themselves, and contextual factors. Overall, students valued WIL for its role in skill refinement and providing professional insights. While most students expressed enthusiasm about their work placements, some critiqued the university and host company, highlighting issues such as learning design, onboarding and supervision. This study provides valuable insights into managing WIL in challenging rural and remote coastal environments. By employing experimental and situated learning theories, this paper offers a comprehensive understanding of how students, as co-creators of WIL quality, navigate their WIL experiences to improve learning.

Keywords: Fisheries and aquaculture science, multidisciplinary studies, student voices, experiential and situated learning theory, rural communities

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a vital component of contemporary pedagogy in higher education, engaging students in authentic work practices to apply and refine their skills and knowledge within a real-world context (Ferns et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023). WIL encompasses various forms aimed at bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, facilitating a smoother transition from academic studies to professional workplaces (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Ferns et al., 2024).

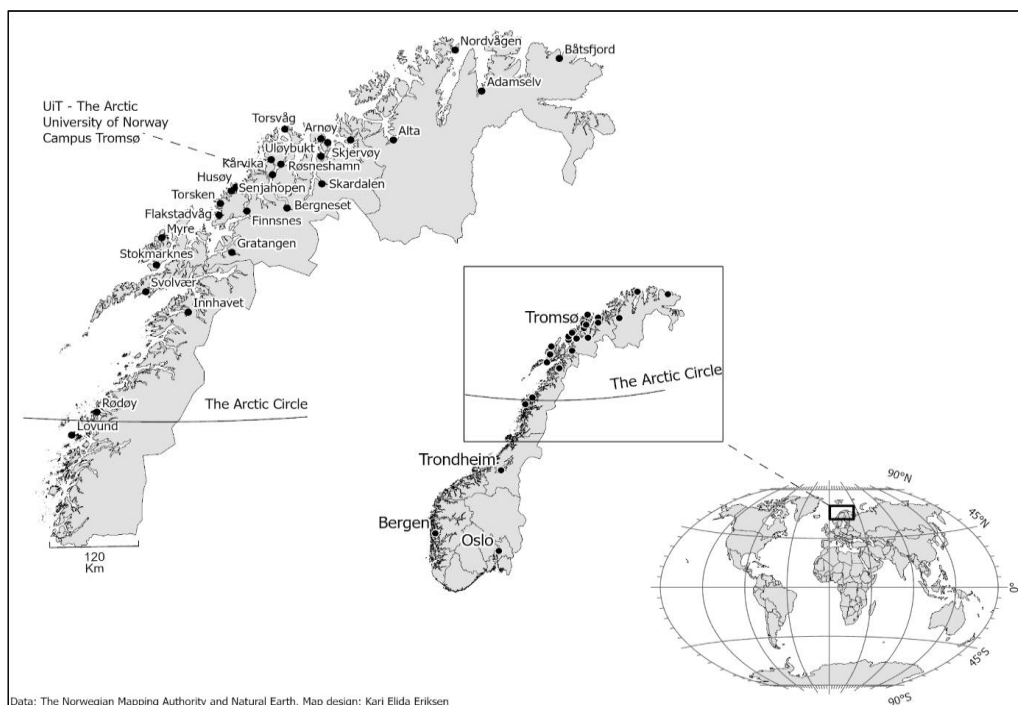
Professional programs in fields like medicine, nursing and teaching have long integrated WIL into their curricula. However, WIL has expanded beyond these traditional fields (Trigwell & Reid, 1998) and is increasingly important in new subject areas, providing workplace insights that academic settings alone cannot provide (Lasen et al., 2018). Literature highlights WIL’s benefits for all stakeholders, including students, host organizations, and academic institutions (Sundset et al., 2025; Zopiatis et al., 2021). For students, WIL connects university coursework with real-world settings, fostering deep learning (Fleming & Haigh, 2018). It offers learning contexts (Lizzio & Watson, 2004), introduces workplace culture, aids the transition to professional work (Alderman & Milne, 2005), and enhances reflective practice (Schön, 1983). A WIL curriculum should be structured into stages of learning and development: pre-WIL, WIL, and post-WIL (Ferns et al., 2024). Pre-WIL prepares students for the WIL experience. During WIL, students engage in work tasks, integrating theory with practical experience relevant to their field of study or professional growth. Post-WIL focuses on reflecting and integrating learning through methods like reflection and debriefing (Ferns et al., 2024). Pre- and post-WIL are not WIL themselves but are learning activities associated with the WIL experience (Ferns et al., 2024;

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Zegwaard et al., 2023). Together, these three components form the WIL curriculum. From an industry perspective, WIL programs enhance employability (Fallows & Steven, 2000) and introduce new ideas and innovative approaches (Fleming et al., 2023). For academic institutions, WIL serves as an effective community engagement and pedagogical strategy, fostering complex learning, reflective processes, and the development of technical and transferable skills, professional relevant identities, and values (Brown, 2010). Despite its importance, research on WIL in both discipline-based and multi-discipline-based higher education programs is fragmented and underrepresented in the literature (Sundset et al., 2025). Additionally, there is a significant gap in studies focusing on students' perceptions of quality in WIL (Eady et al., 2025).

This study examines WIL from the perspective of students in a multidisciplinary Fisheries and Aquaculture Science Bachelor program at Norway's northernmost university. WIL is a mandatory part of the program, initially introduced as an elective course in 2015 and made compulsory in 2018. The course is designed to prepare students for careers within the diverse, resource-intensive, highly competitive Arctic seafood sector. This industry plays a significant role in economy and employment, particularly in northern Norway. Despite its modest population of 5.55 million, Norway is the world's largest producer of Atlantic salmon from aquaculture and the second-largest seafood exporter (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2024). The Arctic seafood industry faces challenges in recruiting skilled personnel that can contribute to achievement of profitability and sustainability, with most production in small, remote coastal communities characterized by harsh weather and climate conditions. In more urban areas, the host organizations consist of trading companies, stakeholder organizations, management institutions and research institutes focusing on fisheries and aquaculture. Throughout their WIL experiences, students might be placed in companies located in either rural regions or urban areas. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of these host organizations.

FIGURE 1: Distribution of host organizations: main location remote coastal communities above the Arctic Circle, some in Norway's largest cities.



When addressing quality in WIL, the focus is often on educational institutions, external stakeholders and employers, which can overlook the role of students as co-constructors of quality (Drewery et al., 2026; Eady et al., 2025). Incorporating students' perspectives is essential to further improve WIL practices (Drewery et al., 2026; Eady et al., 2025). This study explores students' experiences and outcomes within Fisheries and Aquaculture Science WIL in the Arctic. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the research question is intentionally broad: What do students consider important for their learning during WIL? By centering on students' perspectives, we emphasize their role as co-creators of WIL quality (Eady et al., 2025). Additionally, this study provides insights into how students navigate WIL in challenging rural, remote, coastal environments.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A variety of learning theories such as cognitive development theory, social learning theory, and transformative learning theory underpin WIL, offering a foundation for implementing, developing and exploring WIL practices while addressing their complexity and variation (Ferns et al., 2024; Rowe et al., 2023).

Inspired by Feldmann (2016), this study uses experiential theory and situated learning theories to explore the research question, providing a comprehensive and systematic foundation for WIL.

Experiential learning theory, as articulated by Kolb and Kolb (2009), is a dynamic approach to learning that builds on works of Dewey (1938/1997), Piaget (1975/1985) and Lewin (1951). It seeks to transform existing knowledge and generate new knowledge through experience. However, experiences do not inherently possess educational value, their significance largely depends on reflection, which involves deliberate considerations of beliefs or knowledge based on supporting evidence and conclusions (Fleming & Haigh, 2018; Kolb, 2014). This constructivist theory, often applied in WIL, involves a learning cycle with four stages: experiencing, reflection, conceptualizing, and active experimenting (Kolb, 1984, 2014). The cycle begins with concrete experience, where learners encounter new or reinterpret existing experiences. Next, learners reflect on these experiences from different perspectives before forming abstract concepts and generalizations. Finally, they test these new concepts in different situations, leading to new experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). The circle is recursive, meaning learners continuously move through these stages, adopting and refining their understanding based on new experiences and reflections.

Kolb (1984, 2014) emphasizes learning as a process rather than focusing on outcomes, viewing all learning as relearning. According to Kolb and Kolb (2009), learning emerges from interaction between individuals and their environment, with stable learning patterns developing through consistent engagement. Kolb (1984, 2014) further suggests that this model offers a framework to strengthen connections between education, work, and personal development. However, experiential learning theory faces criticism for its focus on individual learners, often overlooking the dialogical, mediated and socially embedded nature of learning within a social-cultural context (Feldmann, 2016; McRae, 2015).

WIL occurs in diverse contexts, with learning emerging from situational enactments rather than solely from the individual. From a situated perspective, learning is inherently linked to its context and cannot be separated from it. It is a process deeply rooted in its surroundings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In a community, practice is shaped by the shared knowledge of its members regarding participation methods and related artefacts (Fleming & Haigh, 2018), often exchanged during informal interactions (Viskovic, 2006). Participation depends on experience, community position, and involvement level.

Learning is thus situated within these interactions and the surrounding social and physical environment, with newcomers moving from legitimate peripheral participation to full participation, enhancing their learning opportunities. When learning is context-specific, transferring it to other contexts becomes challenging, raising questions about its role in WIL. An extreme view of situated learning theory argues against knowledge transfer (Billing, 2007). A more balanced perspective suggests that learning is cumulative and can be applied in new contexts (Feldmann, 2016). For this study, a situated perspective implies that learning can be re-conceptualized or reinterpreted to fit a new context. The ongoing discussion emphasizes that the interaction between the learning context and the application context is crucial for understanding knowledge transfer. Feldmann (2016) argues that experiential and situated learning theories need to be interlinked to explore WIL. While experiential learning highlights the benefits to individual students, situated learning underscores the importance of context. Building on these two perspectives, this study aims to provide a more holistic understanding of WIL, recognizing both the personal development of students and the critical role of the learning environment in shaping educational outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Context for the Study and Work-Integrated Learning Design

The study is situated within the Fisheries and Aquaculture Science Bachelor program at UiT The Arctic University of Norway (UiT), the northernmost university in Norway. This multidisciplinary program integrates natural sciences, social sciences, and economics to prepare students for careers in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. WIL is a key component of the Sustainable Seafood course, which is offered in the program's final year, enrolling 45-50 students annually. This course is worth 10 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), equivalent to approximately 250-300 hours of total student effort.

Placements occur in various relevant host organizations, including fishing and aquaculture companies, research institutes, stakeholder organizations, resource management, and governmental bodies. Most students are placed far from the campus, where most of the seafood industry is located (Figure 1).

The university covers travel and accommodation costs for placements, which span three separate weeks. The curriculum is developed in close cooperation with industry stakeholders, focusing on transferable skills, employability, and the seafood industry's efforts towards more production. Students investigate the sustainable practices of their host organizations and present their findings. As part of the pre-WIL preparation, students develop their CVs and applications for desired placements, allocated by the course leader and WIL coordinator (Table 1). Following WIL (post-WIL), students complete a reflective assignment related to their learning process (Table 1). Assessment is conducted through a portfolio, including sustainable analysis of the host organizations. These elements optimize learning outcomes and provide a holistic learning experience.

Host organizations are required to appoint a leader who holds overall responsibility for the student during the placement. Additionally, host organizations should provide a supervisor responsible for ensuring students engage in appropriate daily work activities and receive guidance and feedback throughout their placements (Table 1). The relationship between the host organization and the university is governed by an ongoing contract. Furthermore, a three-part agreement must be signed by the host, student and university, outlining specific responsibilities. Students also have access to a WIL coordinator at the university, who offers support and helps resolve any problems or challenges.

TABLE 1: The WIL curriculum in the Arctic Fishery and Aquaculture Science program from the perspectives of the different stakeholders.

WIL curriculum	Teachers and WIL coordinators	Host organization	Students
Pre-WIL	Collaborate with industry stakeholders to develop curriculum. Focus learning outcomes on transferable skills, employability, and sustainable seafood production. Conduct workshops on application writing. Seminars on employee rights and obligations in the seafood sector. Allocate work placements based on student applications. Sign contracts and three-part agreement with hosts, department, and students regulating responsibility, insurance, confidential statements. Address practical issues like travel and accommodation for placements. Provide feedback on students' CVs and applications.	Develop job ads with description of tasks during WIL, and desired and required qualifications for the students. Prepare the organization for WIL, including a plan for the student. Sign three-part agreement.	Get an overview over placement alternatives, develop CV and write applications. Contact host after allocation. Prepare for WIL week 1. Sign three-part agreement.
WIL week 1	Follow up on students and host organizations.	Welcoming, introducing and informing the student at the placement, including tasks, HR, security. Mentoring.	Active engagement in purposeful work tasks within the seafood industry. Explore host organizations.
In-between WIL	Adjust the plan based on feedback from students and hosts. Seminars on sustainability challenges in fisheries and aquaculture. Discuss how hosts implement sustainability in strategy and daily operations. Hold a seminar on ethics and crime in the seafood industry.	Preparing for WIL week 2 emphasizing sustainability.	Preparing for WIL week 2 (mapping of the host' sustainability work).
WIL week 2	Follow up/meetings with students and hosts.	Give input to students' sustainability reports. Continuation with mentoring.	Focus on hosts' approaches to sustainability, including interviews with the leader/person in charge of the sustainability work.

In-between WIL	Adjust the plan based on feedback from students and hosts. Provide feedback on students' sustainable report drafts. Seminar on presenting and reflecting on experiences and learning outcomes.	Preparing for WIL week 3.	Student conference with presentations from each student with focus on the host, tasks, sustainability report, and reflection on learning outcome (student peer-feedback).
WIL week 3	Follow up/meetings with students and hosts.	Internal seminar with student presentation. Summing up three WIL weeks with feedback and response.	Presentation for the host based on the presentation at the student conference.
Post-WIL	Assess and grade portfolios (final exam, evaluation committee consisting of teacher and external sensor). Evaluate the WIL from the perspectives of the hosts.	Internal evaluation of WIL, with focus on learning points.	Hand in the final portfolio with reflection notes and sustainability analysis.

Method and Analysis

Data were collected in November 2021 through four focus group interviews (Creswell, 2003) with 20 out of 50 students in the program, aligning with the emphasis on capturing students' voices (Eady et al., 2025) and the exploratory nature of the research. All students were invited to participate via email, and additional recruitment efforts made by the student assistants, who engage directly with their peers. To motivate the students to participate, we offered pizza after the focus group interviews. Each focus group had 5 students who experienced different host organizations in WIL. Participants were mostly aged 21-25 years, with a roughly equal gender distribution. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to the interviews.

Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted by two student research assistants, along with the first and last authors, using an interview guide. The questions were developed by the authors and subsequently reviewed with key stakeholders involved in the program, including teachers, an administrator, industry representatives, and students. To ensure clarity and relevance, the questions were also piloted with the student assistants, both of whom had been students in the WIL course the previous year. The interview guide began with descriptive questions aimed at encouraging students to reflect on important aspects of their learning during placements. Key questions included:

- What was the best part of WIL?
- What did you learn during your placement?
- What were the challenges with WIL?
- What could be done differently to strengthen WIL in your program?
- What type of guidance/follow-up did you receive during your placement?

The interviews, lasting 45-60 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis focused on students' placement experiences and key learning

elements. An interpretive approach with inductive initial coding was used. Authors reviewed the transcripts multiple times to identify themes and patterns, generating initial codes from text segments related to students' WIL experiences. They collaboratively refined, defined, and (re)-named categories in an iterative, dynamic process involving deep engagement and reflective distance.

The second author, as the course leader, provided valuable contextual insights. To mitigate insider bias, the first and the third author, who were not directly involved in the program, offered outsiders' perspectives. These roles are crucial for maintaining critical distance, allowing for a detached perspective and the posing of naïve yet challenging questions (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (permit number 486760), confirming that the processing of personal data complies with legal requirements based on the submitted notification form.

Findings from the study are presented below.

FINDINGS

Overall, the students recognized the benefits of WIL, noting it allowed them to practice and refine skills while gaining insights into professional life within their discipline. Many expressed enthusiasm about their placements: "I had the best week of the year during my internship, that is, throughout my studies the university deserves incredible praise for being able to provide 50 positions to over 30 companies" (Participant 4, P4).

Some students also provided critical feedback on their placement, focusing on how the university and host organization organized the placement. Additionally, they reflected on their own roles in WIL and discussed contextual factors like the harsh climate and remote company locations. Four main themes emerged as influential on student learning: WIL curriculum design, host organizations, the students themselves and contextual factors. These themes are detailed below.

In presenting the findings, all responders are referred to using gender-neutral terms (they / them / their) to anonymize the data, as gender was not a focus of the analysis. Additionally, the terms "host organization" and "company" are used interchangeably for the external WIL partner.

Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum Design

The first theme involved factors controlled by the university, related to WIL curriculum design, including pre- and post-WIL activities and an assignment during placements (WIL activity). See Table 2. The assignment required students to write a report on the host organization's sustainability efforts, which was presented to colleagues there. Several students found pre-WIL activities, like CV and job application preparation, beneficial for their careers: "Considering that we actually had to write a job application and a CV. Not everyone has done that before. Getting good guidance as well, I learned a lot" (P16).

Most students found writing a report about their WIL experiences beneficial for post-WIL reflection. This report was part of the final portfolio assessment. However, some noted the lack of an organized plenary session to exchange experiences with peers, missing out on learning from others. One student suggested that sharing experiences could enhance knowledge: "Then you hear about different things, you hear about reports, of political documents that you've never heard about before. And I can bring that with me to the final assessment – into the exam" (P1). Some students felt that there was insufficient

dialogue between the university and host organization, leading to misunderstandings about their presence. One student remarked: “Not everyone fully understood why I was there. [...] And I wish, perhaps, that the university was better at informing about ... why I was there. So - I didn’t need to feel like an intruder” (P10).

Another student added:

Well, they were a bit unsure about what I was supposed to learn. Especially when I got out to the fish pen, the question was, ‘why are you here? Are you here to work, or are you here to learn, and if so – what are you supposed to learn?’ (P8)

One student admitted feeling inadequate when some in the host organization expressed uncertainty about the students’ roles:

It made me feel really stupid. Sitting there, I felt like, ‘is there something I’ve missed?’ I felt that maybe the company’s impression of the university was a bit, well, not bad, but with that sustainability report – they really didn’t know what it was about. (P12)

Furthermore, some students suggested that host organizations should be better informed about their curriculum: “That they at least have a small insight into our curriculum, and subjects we have and such” (P19). They also felt the university’s lack of involvement during WIL led to frustration at their workplaces, as exemplified by one student:

Okay, some of us experienced that we met, in the host organization, questions like; ‘what’s going on here?’ So, the university really needs to be clearer that these students are present and interested in what the host organization is doing. We definitely want to gain all the experience we can and participate as much as possible. Not just sit with the same task for three weeks. (P9)

Other students wished that someone from the university could have visited them, as this student stated: “I wish they would visit us since it was the first time this company had WIL-students” (P19). Providing support before and during WIL seemed to be important for the students.

TABLE 2: Summary of students’ perspectives on WIL curriculum design factors.

Learning	WIL curriculum design
Promoting learning	• CV and job application – supervision • Developing and presenting a report on the company’s sustainability efforts • Reflecting on own learning in a report
Limiting learning	• Not sufficient dialogue between university and workplace • No organized possibilities to exchange experiences with fellow students • University not closely enough involved

Host Organization

The second theme from the student interviews focused on conditions encountered at host organizations, the most frequently discussed topic (Table 3). Experiences varied widely, from

enthusiasm to criticism, reflecting differences in host organizations' size, work tasks, and geographical location (Figure 1).

Students with positive experiences felt welcomed and included:

I felt very, very welcomed. It didn't take long before I could relax, you know, just go and grab a coffee and feel at home. And you could talk about pretty much anything [...] they really included us. It's nice to feel that you are part of the community. (P17)

Another student noted:

They welcomed us warmly, and they took us seriously. They recognized our academic expertise, we're allowed to prepare cases and work with regulation, I don't think that's usual. But we were allowed to work with this regulation, to comment and write because we have the knowledge we have from the program. (P20)

The company seemed to facilitate professional benefit for both parties, offering relevant work while some students felt they also contributed positively:

We didn't get crappy tasks; we got really cool decision to look into. I think we were actually given more responsibility than we might have thought we could handle. But we managed quite well, and I think it was great. I'd rather have too much than too little. (P16)

Another student added: "I learned a lot of new things during my placements" (P15). They emphasized the importance of having a plan for their work: "I was given a specific task to solve, and that was really nice because it was very well connected to my studies" (P20). While this student stated: "I almost got a checklist of what was going to happen. So, it was. I knew what was going to happen" (P3).

Students who critiqued the host organization highlighted different challenges during WIL that limited learning. Some were given irrelevant tasks, like creating a new web site which was not covered in their curriculum: "I didn't know how to develop a web site" (P17). Others noted a lack of work variety, finding repetitive tasks boring over three weeks. Addressing this, one student suggested more variety:

It could have been fun to join a few more meetings and listen to what other people in the company had to say about different things, instead of just that one guy talking about sustainability, since that was the only thing they understood, we were supposed to learn. (P1)

Some students struggled to get in contact with their company liaison before starting their placement, despite university recommendations. One student described: "I had trouble getting in touch with the contact persons in the company, they didn't respond to emails, phone calls, or SMS. Finally, I got in touch, and then everything went well. Until he left on holiday" (P13).

Another challenge was that some students felt left on their own during their placement:

I asked for a bit of freedom, but not total freedom. Because they didn't really notice if I was there or not. So, the follow-up.... they weren't really present. I've also felt like they wouldn't notice if I wasn't there, you know. [...] And it's like, you do see some people when you come into the office. But it was kind of like...yeah, I could have gone home, and they wouldn't have really noticed. There is a balance between freedom and too much freedom. It is nice to take

responsibility for your own learning, I was supposed to do that. But there was too little support from the company. (P7)

However, several students noted that while their company leader or supervisor emphasized open communication, they found it challenging to approach them for minor questions: “It is not always easy to get in touch or call them if you just have a small question. It is more about having the conversation around the table, you know” (P8). Without structured meetings, they often worked independently. Some students rarely met their appointed supervisor. One student described:

My supervisor went on sick leave at the beginning of the first day of my stay because he had a stomach ache. So, well, I ended up sitting at the control center for the rest of the time the first week, watching the fish. (P10).

Another student reported that their supervisor met them on the first day and then left on holiday without assigning anyone else to supervise them. The student also mentioned a coordinator within the host organization but noted minimal interaction with them:

And then, yeah, I wasn’t really with the actual coordinator. So, I was quite free, but in a way, I kind of missed seeing, being a bit more in their everyday life then. How, and what they work with, and so on. (P14)

In some companies, there was poor communication between leaders in contact with the university and the employees working with students. As a result, some employees were unaware of the students’ tasks. One student observed that the leader who had written the job advertisement was only present for three days: “Well, I needed to find something else to do, had to manage myself to a certain extent” (P5).

Overall, student experiences with host organizations varied widely. Despite some critical comments about their host organizations, students emphasized significant learning achieved during their three weeks of WIL.

TABLE 3: Summarizing the sub-themes regarding the host organizations.

Learning	Host organization
Promoting learning	• Good welcoming/reception • Structured and good plan • Followed up in the company • Benefits both parties • Students seen as a recourse • Included
Limiting learning	• Left on their own • Lack of plan • Lack of communication between leadership and employees • The industry / workplaces not informed enough about the program

The Students Themselves

The third theme focused on students' attributes, such as personality, mastery experience, and connecting education to work life (Table 4). This theme explored what students brought to their placements and how various WIL experiences influenced their learning.

Some students reflected on how their personalities affected their WIL experiences. One student, describing themselves as restless, wondered if this made their placement seem boring. Another student shared how their personality impacted their WIL experience:

I'm very shy, and initially, I didn't want to take part in anything. But then I was sent out, luckily with another student. I think it really helped that there was another intern with me. We were encouraged to introduce ourselves, both in front of the entire staff and the national board. Just to get up and say, 'hey, my name is bla, bla, bla and I'm so and so old'. This was very out of my comfort zone. But okay, I did it. So that was good. Yeah. (P7)

Others observed that the placement highlighted the connection between their education and professional workplaces, increasing their awareness of future job opportunities:

I have learned that the education we are pursuing can generate different types of jobs than those I have seen highlighted. I hadn't realized that before. But I learned that I can apply for many more positions than I thought, and those jobs that I really want actually exist. (P16)

This realization may impact their motivation for future studies.

Several students mentioned the importance of experiencing how theories learned at the university are applied in practice:

It is so good that we have gone through a lot of theories at the university and then get the opportunity to see how things are in practice - how things are being done in real business life. Linking the practice to the theory, in that way you get a better holistic understanding of the industry. At least I felt it. (P4)

Another student added: "You get a new insight that you cannot get on the school bench, no matter how much theory you learn. There is something about getting into practice and see how it works" (P3).

This experience gave them confidence in their abilities and competence:

I felt that I implemented a lot of what we have learned [...]. They - in the company - didn't expect that I and the other student could bring in any relevant knowledge [...]. So, it was very easy to impress them. I felt I got a lot, a lot back - for what I brought in. After a while, we became more involved, in preparing cases and proposals for regulations and things like that. Because we showed that we had relevant knowledge. (P15)

Some students felt like outsiders due to unwritten social rules they did not fully understand. One student noted the stress of seating arrangements at lunch: "There was something about how the colleagues were seated around the lunch table, I tried to avoid taking a seat from anyone" (P17). It can be stressful to try to behave in the "right manner" without understanding these social rules. Workplace language and jargon also posed challenges, as one student remarked: "You need to talk the fisherman's language" (P9). Both jargon and social rules can unintentionally lead to social exclusion.

TABLE 4: Summarizing the sub-themes regarding the student themselves.

Learning	The students themselves
Promoting learning	• WIL motivates students: ○ Discovers job opportunities ○ Mastering / self-efficacy ○ Builds confidence in their own abilities and competence ○ (Self-efficacy)
Limiting learning	• Social exclusion ○ Language / jargon ○ Unwritten social rules

Contextual Factors

The fourth theme, contextual factors, refers to conditions influencing WIL outcomes, such as harsh weather conditions, remote locations, and host organization size (Table 5).

Several students were placed in rural, remote districts, but they did not express specific concerns about these placements. However, they acknowledged the logistical effort this involved. One student praised the WIL coordinator: “There’s quite a bit of logistics to manage, but I think it has gone reasonably well. The WIL-coordinator at the university deserves massive praise for the work they have put into it” (P12). Another student mentioned:

There are many who have travelled far and stayed away for several weeks. Yes, there is very good support from the university for us who are sent out on WIL [...] The WIL-coordinator handles everything, send an email and then they fixed everything in two minutes, you know, even in the evenings and on the weekends. They are available, you know. ‘My flight is cancelled, call them. Fantastic, yes. (P1)

This quote highlights the variety of WIL experiences, contrasting those who declared that the university should have been more involved, as mentioned under “Curriculum Design.”

Challenges also arose from the seafood industry structure, with many small workplaces and few employees. Some students received significant responsibility, as one noted: “Well, you get a placement somewhere there are very few people working. And then you get an entire project, it almost becomes yours. You do it” (P6). This student also felt that working independently might reflect real workplace conditions, suggesting it was very authentic:

So, in a way, it was real. I worked a lot alone. Very much alone. That can be a bit boring sometimes. But at the same time, I see – that’s how everyday life often is in this business. You are not sitting there with a football team working. In real life, you work alone. (P6)

Weather conditions also affected WIL, as one student pointed out:

The last week turned out a bit different; we were supposed to go on a control tour with a boat, but there was bad weather and little fishing, so it was cancelled. But still, they managed to turn around and create a proper program for us in the last week, even though it wasn't all planned out when we stood there on Monday morning ready to head out (*laughs*). But then, it turned out very well regardless. (P15)

Several workplaces were resource-based production companies reliant on seafood sourcing to maintain production. Some students found this problematic due to downtime: “It was a bit boring, especially the last two weeks, I just went around asking if people needed help. There was so much downtime in the production, so there was nothing to do” (P8). One student noted poor timing for the WIL period in the fish industry: “It’s just bad timing now. I mean, being in Lofoten [most important fishing region in the Arctic, known for the seasonal Lofoten fishery from January to March] in October, like, there isn’t a single boat there” (P9). However, some students felt supported by their companies trying to help them: “They would drop by and ask if everything was going okay. It was also because we had a lot of downtime [...] they were there, and they did their best. So that was fine” (P19).

Overall, students did not express significant concerns about WIL in these Arctic rural areas as long as host organizations found alternative solutions.

TABLE 5: Summary of students’ perspectives on contextual factors.

Learning	Contextual factors
Promoting learning	• Practicalities well organized by the university • Host organization trying to find other duties when the production is down
Limiting learning	• Season-based; lack of resources (fish, seafood) • Few employees

DISCUSSION

This article explores what students find important for their learning during WIL in the Arctic seafood sector, as part of a multidisciplinary Bachelor program. Four key themes emerged as important for learning: WIL curriculum design, host organization, the student themselves, and contextual factors. These themes align with findings from other studies on essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences (Drewery et al., 2026; Ngonda et al., 2022; Rowe et al., 2023).

WIL involves students in authentic, work-focused experiences as part of the curriculum (Ferns et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023), integrating theory with practical experiences relevant to their disciplines and professional development. According to experiential learning theory, experiences do not inherently possess educational value: “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Reflection is crucial in WIL curricula, allowing personalized learning. Ferns et al. (2024), drawing on Schön’s (1983) work on reflective learning, emphasize that reflection can occur before, during and after WIL through iterative processes. Students are regarded as active participants, transforming experiences into new knowledge through observation and reflection (Kolb, 1984).

Students in our study valued structured pre- and post-WIL activities, aligning with research highlighting their role in optimizing learning outcomes and ensuring a holistic learning experience (Ferns et al., 2024; Zegwaard et al., 2023). CV preparation and job application exercises enhanced employability skills. Developing and presenting a report on the host organization’s sustainability efforts was also positively viewed for applying theoretical knowledge practically. However, students noted the lack of organized opportunities to exchange experiences post-WIL. Structured debriefing sessions could enhance reflection and understanding of diverse workplace contexts.

Theoretical frameworks like experiential learning often assume that learning experiences are predictable and methodical, but WIL typically involves unpredictable, messy and non-linear dynamics (Ferns et al., 2024; Twomey & Pretti, 2023). While experiential learning theory can be critiqued for overlooking the social and cultural background that shape individual thinking and actions, situated learning theory focuses on contextual influences (Feldmann, 2016). In our study, the role of the host organization was a prominent theme, including how students were welcomed, the nature of their work, and supervision quality. Some students felt included and valued, while others struggled to connect or felt isolated.

Competent support and supervision are essential for high-quality WIL experiences, with supervisors available, providing guidance and feedback (Daugherty, 2011; Drewery et al., 2026). Supervisors and workplace colleagues are crucial in creating a welcoming, supportive environment that boosts students' confidence and encourages self-directed learning (Fleming & Haigh, 2018; Rowe et al., 2023). Some students reported positive experiences with meaningful work, while others faced challenges like poor communication, lack of supervision, and irrelevant tasks. When students feel valued, they engage more, ask questions, and maximize learning opportunities, adopting an agentic role in their learning closely associated with confidence (Billett, 2015; Trede & Jackson, 2019). Confidence is understood as an individual's perceptions of overall capacity, closely related to self-efficacy, which describes an individual's beliefs about their capabilities concerning a specific task or set of traits (Rowe et al., 2023). Research has primarily focused on how participating in WIL contributes to students' confidence, preparing them for work life (Rowe et al., 2023). However, students also bring with them confidence into WIL, based on lived experiences, goals and agency, influencing their engagement in practical settings (Billett, 2011; Eady et al., 2025). Billett (2011) stresses considering students' readiness, including interest, capability and confidence, when designing experiential learning opportunities. In our study, some students noted how personal traits, like shyness or restlessness, affected WIL outcomes. Confident students managed well despite lacking structured tasks by taking initiative. Proactive students reported satisfaction, task mastery, team socialization and learning during WIL. However, low self-efficacy can lead to low agency (Ngonda et al., 2022). While learning depends on students taking an active role, universities must facilitate diverse student participation. It is precarious if responsibility for extracting learning from placements rests solely on students. Robust systems should include students in the work, aiding companies in unforeseen circumstances, such as a lack of raw materials for production or if the student's appointed supervisor falls ill. Variability in host support underscores the need for a consistent student integration into professional communities. Preparing students for placement is crucial. While students are seen as co-creators of WIL-quality, supporting their proactive behavior is important. Preparing students before WIL could involve providing preplacement training, developing information and feedback seeking skills, and cultivating relationships to handle challenges in the host organization (Ngonda et al., 2022). It seems important to prepare students before WIL, support their experiences, and enrich learning through post-WIL intervention (Billett, 2011; Ngonda et al., 2022).

The students appeared largely unconcerned about participating in WIL in rural, remote Arctic districts, despite extreme conditions. This could be due to the short WIL periods of three separated weeks and many students being familiar with these Arctic conditions, which likely contributed to their confidence. A few mentioned travel challenges, but prompt assistance from the WIL coordinator resolved these issues, preventing significant challenges.

Implications

The study highlights the need for a well-structured WIL curriculum, including pre- and post WIL. Students input is crucial for ongoing curriculum development. In the Fishery and Aquaculture Science program, several modifications were made to the course curriculum. These included expanding post-WIL activities to feature oral presentations for fellow students, teachers and an external evaluator, thereby enhancing reflection and feedback.

To better prepare host organizations, an online course unit was collaboratively developed by the university, students, host organizations, and representatives from both the labour union (LO Norway) and the employer's organization (NHO, The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise). This course provides supervision guidance tailored to the fishing and aquaculture industry, focusing on responsiveness towards students, active listening, and creating a supportive environment. It also outlines course learning outcomes, emphasizing the critical role of host organizations in the success of WIL experiences.

Preparing students for WIL is crucial. Universities should offer preplacement training to develop information and feedback seeking skills and the ability to navigate workplace challenges. Fostering student attributes like confidence and self-efficacy seems important for positive learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

While the geographical and demographic context of this study limits its universal applicability, the findings offer valuable insights for similar regions educating young people in rural areas. By focusing on students' voices, the study highlights the multifaceted nature of WIL in the context of the Fisheries and Aquaculture program, emphasizing curriculum design, host organization dynamics, student attributes, and contextual factors. The challenges faced by students, such as limited supervision or contextual factors like season-based industry and remote locations, underscore the need for robust support systems and clear communication between universities and host organizations. These insights can inform the development of WIL programs in other remote or rural contexts, ensuring that students are well-prepared, supported, and able to integrate into professional communities effectively. By addressing these factors, remote WIL programs can enhance student learning, foster employability, and strengthen connections between academic institutions and local industries.

The findings highlight the value of structured pre- and post-WIL activities, aligning with literature on optimizing learning outcomes and ensuring a holistic educational experience. It illustrates the unpredictable dynamics of WIL, challenging experiential learning theory. By integrating situated learning theory, the study acknowledges the critical influence of social and cultural contexts on learning experiences. Students' personal traits and readiness, including confidence and self-efficacy, significantly impact WIL outcomes, emphasizing the importance of preplacement training and skill development.

Despite the challenges posed by the remote and harsh Arctic environment, students generally felt confident and supported due to effective logistics and familiarity with Arctic conditions. This study enhances understanding of WIL by centering on students' voices, emphasizing their role as co-creators of WIL quality. It offers valuable insights into navigating WIL in challenging environments and recommend enhancing WIL practices to support student learning and professional development. Future research should continue to explore diverse student experiences and contextual impacts on WIL outcomes, bridging academic studies and professional practice.

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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 [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion and conceptual* 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 including recommendations.

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Reference

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