

Exploring retail work-integrated learning in higher education: Perspectives from graduates and employers

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This study explores work-integrated learning (WIL) within the retail environment, drawing on the perspectives of Retail Business Management (RBM) graduates and their host employers to identify key developmental outcomes and challenges. Conducted within the RBM diploma at Sol Plaatje University, South Africa, the research used a qualitative research design, drawing on open-ended questionnaires responses from 28 graduates and five retail employers. The thematic analysis revealed that retail-based WIL contributed meaningfully to students' employability development, particularly in areas such as customer communication, confidence, task planning, problem solving, and professional responsibility. However, several challenges emerged, including mismatched expectations regarding entry level roles, communication barriers, and limited structured mentorship in some workplaces. The study provides context-specific insights into retail WIL delivery and highlights considerations that may help higher education institutions and industry partners strengthen the quality, relevance, and overall value of future retail WIL placements.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, retail; graduate employability, employer perspectives, South Africa

Ongoing concerns about undergraduate learning outcomes and graduate preparedness have prompted sustained debate about the purpose and effectiveness of higher education. Researchers have highlighted persistent gaps between academic learning and workplace expectations, particularly the limited development of transferable employability capabilities among graduates (Arum & Roksa, 2011, 2014; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). In response, higher education systems internationally, and particularly in South Africa, have increasingly prioritized pedagogical approaches that integrate theoretical learning with authentic workplace experience. National policy frameworks, including the New Growth Path (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2011), National Development Plan 2030 (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012), and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013), position work-integrated learning (WIL) as a key mechanism for supporting employability and economic participation. Within this policy environment, the retail sector represents a particularly important yet under-examined context for work-integrated learning, given its role as a major employer of graduates and its service-intensive, entry-level learning structures.

Within this landscape, Sol Plaatje University (SPU), a regional university in the Northern Cape, has adopted WIL as a strategic mechanism to support graduate employability and regional socio-economic development. One such initiative is the Retail Business Management (RBM) diploma, which includes a compulsory WIL component intended to expose students to the operational realities of the retail sector. Through partnerships with local businesses, including supermarkets, retail franchises, festivals, and service enterprises, SPU facilitates WIL placements for RBM students across Kimberley and the wider Northern Cape province.

The RBM qualification is designed to support learning progression from foundational retail and business principles to applied theoretical and practical competence. A defining feature of the program

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is a third-year WIL placement requiring three months of full-time industry engagement. This placement is credit-bearing and assessed through reflective journals, workplace reports, portfolios, and evaluations by both students and employers. Despite the central role of WIL in the RBM curriculum, there is limited empirical evidence examining how retail-based WIL is experienced by graduates and employers, particularly within South African and regional university contexts.

Work-Integrated Learning and Employability

Work-integrated learning originated in engineering education in the early twentieth century and has since expanded across disciplines and geographical contexts. Broadly, WIL refers to curricular, pedagogical, and assessment practices that intentionally integrate academic learning with workplace experience to support applied learning and skills development. International bodies such as the World Association for Cooperative Education conceptualize WIL as a deep learning model that bridges formal education and work (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Zegwaard et al. (2023) define WIL as:

an educational approach involving three parties—the student, the educational institution, and an external stakeholder—comprising authentic work focused experiences intentionally embedded within the curriculum, through which students engage in purposeful work tasks that integrate academic theory with meaningful practice relevant to their discipline and professional development. (p. 29)

In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2011) frames WIL as an umbrella concept encompassing workplace learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and simulated work experiences.

Across the literature, WIL has been linked to the development of employability capabilities valued by employers, including communication, teamwork, adaptability, confidence, and problem-solving (Jackson, 2013; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Employers frequently prioritize these transferable attributes over discipline-specific knowledge alone, reinforcing WIL's role in preparing graduates for complex and dynamic workplaces (Bell et al., 2003; Coll et al., 2009). While WIL is not positioned as a universal solution to labor market challenges (Ferns & Moore, 2012); it is widely recognized as an effective mechanism for strengthening connections between education and employment.

Retail Work-Integrated Learning as a Distinctive Context

Despite extensive WIL scholarship, retail-focused WIL remains under-represented, particularly in comparison with professional fields that feature clearly structured developmental pathways. Retail placements typically involve customer-facing and operational tasks such as point-of-sale operations, stock control, merchandising, and routine administration, especially during the early stages of WIL. These roles are often perceived by students as “low-level” or misaligned with managerial aspirations (Jackson et al., 2017; Roberts, 2013).

However, research indicates that learning in retail environments is contextual, informal, and cumulative, emerging through repeated customer interaction, operational problem-solving, and participation in workplace routines (Roberts, 2013). South African studies similarly suggest that retail WIL requires intentional curriculum design and structured reflection to transform routine operational work into meaningful learning experiences (Truman et al., 2017). International research further highlights how organizational structures, cultural norms, and labor market conditions shape access to

responsibility and progression during retail-based learning (Gómez & Fares, 2024; Iannilli & Penati, 2019).

Within the South African retail sector, WIL placements are further characterized by high customer volumes, labor-intensive service delivery, and linguistic and cultural diversity. Customer service, therefore, becomes a central site of learning, requiring emotional labor, adaptability, and intercultural communication capabilities increasingly recognized as core employability attributes (Patrick et al., 2022; Roopnarain & Akoobhai, 2014). Without structured support and reflection, however, students may struggle to recognize these competencies as legitimate professional learning.

Research Gap, Aims and Contribution

Although WIL literature broadly documents benefit for students, employers, and institutions, retail-based WIL remains insufficiently theorized and empirically under-examined, particularly within South African and regional university contexts. Existing studies often focus on single stakeholder perspectives and provide limited insight into how graduates and employers jointly interpret learning, expectations, and progression within retail placements. Responding to this gap, the present study explores the WIL experiences of Retail Business Management graduates and their host employers at Sol Plaatje University. Specifically, the study aims to:

- Examine graduates' perceptions of their retail WIL experiences, including perceived benefits and challenges;
- Explore employers' perspectives on graduate performance, readiness, and development during retail WIL placements; and
- Identify design features such as support mechanisms and expectation-setting that may enhance learning quality and stakeholder experiences.

Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study offers analytic depth by triangulating graduate and employer accounts with international WIL synthesis literature. In doing so, it contributes context-sensitive insight into how employability capabilities, professional identity, and learning progression are developed within retail-based WIL, positioning retail as a distinctive and socially situated learning environment within contemporary higher education.

METHODS

Research Approach and Context

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, which is well-suited to exploring individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their lived social experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach enabled an in-depth examination of how Retail Business Management (RBM) graduates and retail employers experienced work-integrated learning (WIL) within retail settings. Qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding rather than representativeness, and the relatively small sample size in this study is therefore consistent with its interpretive focus (Henning et al., 2004).

The target population comprised graduates who had completed the WIL component of the RBM program at Sol Plaatje University (SPU), as well as retailers in the Northern Cape province who had hosted these students during their WIL placements. Graduates were approached after completion of the program to enable reflective accounts of their WIL experiences. In total, data was collected from 30 RBM graduates and five retail employers.

Sampling Strategy

Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who had direct experience of retail-based WIL and were therefore well positioned to provide rich, relevant insights (Suri, 2011). Initial email invitations were sent to both graduates and retailers, followed by reminder emails to improve response rates. Word-of-mouth referrals from early respondents further supported recruitment. Retail employers were contacted directly via email after obtaining approval from relevant managers. This sampling strategy ensured that data were drawn specifically from participants with firsthand experience of the RBM WIL program.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two qualitative, open-ended questionnaires: one for RBM graduates and one for retail employers. Open-ended questions enabled participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, generating rich and detailed qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The questionnaires were distributed electronically following an introductory email outlining the study's purpose and ethical considerations.

The graduate questionnaire focused on experiences of WIL in relation to communication skills, confidence, task organization, and problem-solving and critical thinking. The employer questionnaire explored perceptions of graduates' workplace readiness, skill development, contributions to the organization, and the perceived value and challenges of hosting WIL students. All data were stored securely on a password-protected computer and backed up on an external storage device.

Justification for the Focus on Selected Skill Areas

The selection of communication skills, confidence, task organization, and problem-solving and critical thinking was theoretically and empirically grounded in WIL and retail-focused literature. These capabilities are consistently identified as core employability attributes developed through WIL, particularly in service-intensive sectors characterized by interpersonal interaction and operational complexity.

Communication skills are central to retail WIL due to the customer-facing and relational nature of retail work, which requires effective interaction with customers, supervisors, and colleagues (Jackson, 2013; Jackson et al., 2017). Confidence is widely recognized as a transitional outcome of WIL, reflecting students' developing professional identity and workplace self-efficacy as they navigate new roles and expectations (Dwesini, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Task organization and time management are critical in retail environments that demand multitasking, prioritization, and responsiveness to fluctuating customer needs (Jackson, 2013; Jackson et al., 2017). Problem-solving and critical thinking are likewise essential, as retail work often involves responding to customer complaints, operational disruptions, and time-sensitive challenges.

Together, these skill areas reflect core employability capabilities emphasized across WIL scholarship and are particularly salient within retail workplace contexts.

Guiding Research Questions

This study was guided by the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1. How do Retail Business Management graduates experience work-integrated learning within retail settings?

RQ2. How do graduates perceive the development of communication skills, confidence, task organization, and problem-solving during retail WIL placements?

RQ3. How do retail employers perceive graduates' workplace readiness, performance, and skill development during WIL placements?

RQ4. What challenges and opportunities do both graduates and employers identify in relation to retail-based WIL experiences?

The survey questionnaires were developed by the authors and informed by the study's research questions, and a review of existing work-integrated learning literature. The identified themes derived from the literature were used to guide the construction of survey items, ensuring alignment between the conceptual framing of WIL and the empirical data collected. Questions were designed to capture graduates' and employers' perceptions and experiences in relation to these themes. These questions informed the design of the questionnaires and ensured alignment between the study's aims, data-collection instruments, and analytical focus.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen phenomenological method as outlined by Moustakas (1994). This approach facilitated systematic organization and interpretation of participants' accounts. The analysis process involved:

- identifying and recording significant statements relevant to WIL experiences;
- grouping similar meaning units into themes; and
- integrating these themes to develop rich descriptions of participants' experiences, supported by illustrative quotations.

Graduate and employer data were analyzed using a consistent thematic framework, enabling comparison across stakeholder perspectives. Findings were synthesized to identify shared patterns, points of convergence, and areas of divergence in experiences of retail-based WIL.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is preferred over positivist concepts such as validity, reliability, and generalizability (Guba, 1981; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This study addressed trustworthiness through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was enhanced through the inclusion of two stakeholder groups (graduates and employers) allowing cross-verification of themes, as well as using open-ended questions that captured authentic participant perspectives (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Transferability was supported through thick, contextualized descriptions of the institutional setting, retail environment, and WIL structure,

enabling readers to determine relevance to similar contexts rather than implying statistical generalization (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Dependability was ensured through transparent documentation of the research design, sampling, data-collection procedures, and analytical approach, allowing the research process to be traced and evaluated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confirmability was supported through the maintenance of an audit trail, reflexive engagement during analysis, and systematic linking interpretations to participants' accounts and scholarly literature (Shenton, 2004).

Triangulation

Triangulation in this study was employed as an analytic strategy to enhance trustworthiness rather than as a claim to methodological robustness based on sample size (Denzin, 1978; Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Three sources were used for triangulation: graduate accounts, employer perspectives, and comparative synthesis literature on WIL.

Graduate and employer perspectives were compared to identify convergence and divergence in perceptions of skill development, workplace readiness, and challenges. To strengthen triangulation beyond participant data, findings were also interpreted in relation to established WIL synthesis literature, particularly review-based analyses in *The Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning* (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). This third comparative layer situates the findings within well-documented international patterns while remaining attentive to the contextual specificity of retail-based WIL in South Africa. Through this approach, triangulation enhanced credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of the Free State Faculty of Education Ethics Committee under ethics clearance number UFS-HSD2022/1611/22. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, provided written consent, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and individuals were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Ethical principles were upheld throughout all stages of the research process.

Summary

This study employed a carefully designed qualitative methodology to examine retail-based WIL experiences from graduate and employer perspectives. Through purposeful sampling, open-ended data collection, systematic analysis, and a robust trustworthiness framework, the research provides a transparent and credible account of RBM graduates' WIL experiences. While context-specific, the findings offer analytically valuable insights for educators, WIL coordinators, and employers engaged in retail-based work-integrated learning.

RESULTS

This study drew on qualitative questionnaire data completed by Retail Business Management (RBM) graduates and retail employers to explore experiences of retail-based work-integrated learning (WIL). Findings are presented thematically and structured around key skill areas that informed the research design. Throughout the section, convergence and divergence between graduate and employer perspectives are highlighted to make triangulation visible.

Experiences of RBM Graduates

Of the 30 RBM graduates invited to participate, 28 (93%) returned completed questionnaires, indicating a high level of engagement with the study. Graduates provided detailed reflections on their WIL experiences, offering insight into team interaction, communication and confidence, task organization, and problem-solving and critical thinking.

Interaction with Teammates

Most graduates reported largely positive interactions with co-workers and teammates during their retail WIL placements. Participants emphasized adaptability, respect, and role clarity as central to effective teamwork. As one graduate explained: "I learned mainly about my ability to adapt to different people and personalities, and how easy it was to work together when I knew my specific roles and what was expected of me." [Participant 9]. Many graduates noted that working within diverse teams contributed to both personal and professional growth, particularly in environments characterized by cultural, linguistic, and personality differences. Respect for colleagues and a willingness to seek assistance were frequently cited as essential to productive collaboration.

However, teamwork experiences were not uniformly positive. Some graduates encountered challenges such as cliques, uneven support, and strained interpersonal dynamics. One participant offered a more critical reflection: "Not everyone is willing to help or train you. Some people will love you; others will hate you for no reason... be careful how and with whom you interact." [Participant 28].

Taken together, graduate accounts suggest that while retail WIL can foster strong collaborative skills, workplace relationships are shaped by organizational culture and interpersonal dynamics, requiring students to develop tolerance, emotional regulation, and professional judgement.

Communication Skills and Confidence

Graduates consistently reported significant development in communication skills and confidence over the course of their WIL placements. Improvements were particularly evident in customer interaction, telephone etiquette, multilingual communication, and workplace engagement. One participant described a clear shift in self-expression: "I am naturally a shy person; I don't usually say much, but during WIL I was able to speak for myself and communicate well with my co-workers and customers" [Participant 8].

Increased confidence was often linked to being entrusted with responsibilities such as presenting, arranging meetings, and contributing ideas. Supervisory encouragement played a crucial role in supporting this development. Nevertheless, some graduates reported constraints on confidence development, most notably language barriers in multilingual retail settings: "Yes, communication was good. However, my confidence was not as good due to the language barrier [Afrikaans]." [Participant 3].

Planning and Organization of Tasks

Graduates described learning to plan, prioritize, and organize tasks effectively, particularly in fast-paced retail environments requiring multitasking and time management. Many highlighted the role of goal-setting and adherence to timelines: "Through these experiences, I developed skills in planning, prioritizing, and organizing tasks efficiently." [Participant 24].

High-pressure conditions were frequently cited as catalysts for developing organizational discipline, especially when balancing multiple responsibilities such as stock management, merchandising, and customer service. Supervisors often guided this process, helping graduates structure their workload.

However, planning autonomy was sometimes limited by hierarchical retail structures. One participant noted: “My planning skills were dependent on my supervisors. I’m able to organize the task I’ve been given and work with time.” [Participant 12].

Problem-Solving and Critical Thinking

Graduates reported developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills through real-world retail challenges, including stock shortages, customer complaints, and operational disruptions. One participant described applying analytical thinking to improve business outcomes: “We were given a task to clear out the stock in the warehouse. I came up with a plan to sell the stock at a very cheap price to ensure that the organization makes some sort of revenue.” [Participant 1].

Many participants indicated that problem-solving capacity increased as they gained confidence and learned to apply organizational policies and university-based knowledge in practice. Supervisory support was frequently cited as instrumental in developing independent decision-making.

Conversely, not all placements afforded equal opportunities for critical engagement. A minority of graduates reported limited exposure: “I was not really challenged in this area; there was no task that required problem-solving or critical thinking.” [Participant 11].

Retailer Perspectives

Employer findings reflect the perspectives of a small number of retail supervisors and are therefore presented as contextual insights rather than representative employer views. Some retailers reported that many students initially struggled with entry-level role expectations, particularly when entering highly structured retail environments: “Almost every candidate interviewed wanted a management position ... starting at the bottom did not seem to be an option.” [Retailer 1]. Across employer responses, students were described as initially hesitant in customer interactions, with confidence improving over time through support and encouragement. However, confidence typically improved with time and support: “Very few students initially had the confidence to speak their minds ... encouragement and giving students the chance to speak improved confidence levels.” [Retailer 3].

Employer participants described varied levels of planning and organizational ability among students at the start of WIL placements, with improvement noted as placements progressed: “From the beginning, the students did not seem to be organized ... with practice, students showed improvement.” [Retailer 1]. Several employer respondents indicated that students initially required guidance to resolve problems independently, particularly in customer-related and operational situations: “Problem-solving will be taught through conversation, training, and practical work in the retail workplace.” [Retailer 3]. Some employers noted that while responsibility was not always evident at the outset, accountability and professional focus developed as students became more familiar with workplace expectations.

Triangulation of Findings

Triangulation across graduate data, employer perspectives, and WIL synthesis literature reveals strong convergence among stakeholder accounts. Both graduates and retailers identified improvements in

communication, confidence, task organization, and problem-solving core employability capabilities widely documented in international WIL reviews (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

At the same time, areas of divergence such as uneven support, limited autonomy, and constrained learning opportunities highlight how retail WIL outcomes are shaped by placement design and organizational context. By situating local findings within established WIL literature, this triangulated analysis strengthens the credibility and transferability of the results while foregrounding how global WIL patterns manifest within a South African retail context.

Overall, the retail-based WIL program played a meaningful role in shaping the professional and personal development of RBM graduates. Through authentic workplace engagement, graduates developed employability-related skills essential for retail environments, while employers recognized WIL as a developmental and recruitment tool. Although learning opportunities varied across placements, triangulated findings from graduates, employers, and established WIL literature confirm the value of retail-based WIL in supporting graduate readiness for work in service-oriented sectors.

DISCUSSION

This discussion builds on the earlier description of retail work-integrated learning (WIL) placements, highlighting the service-intensive, entry-level character of retail work, contextual variation across organizations, and the gradual sequencing through which more complex learning opportunities emerge. Interpreted through situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), these conditions position retail WIL as a context in which students move from legitimate peripheral participation in routine customer-facing tasks toward fuller participation as trust, competence, and responsibility accumulate.

Developmental Challenges and Workplace Realities

Graduate accounts of navigating diverse personalities, fast-paced service environments, and language barriers, alongside employers' observations about readiness, resonate with WIL scholarship that views early workplace tensions as transitional rather than exceptional. These tensions underline the relational nature of retail learning—where collaboration with supervisors and peers is pivotal—and the need to prepare students for entry-level realities and emotional labor rather than immediate managerial roles (Jackson et al., 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Explicit expectation-setting, as recommended in national and institutional WIL guidance, mitigates dissatisfaction by framing routine tasks as foundational participation that scaffolds later responsibility (Council on Higher Education, 2011; Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2013).

Identity Development and the Role of Supervisory Support

Consistent with research that positions WIL as a bridge between academic and professional identities, graduates commonly described a trajectory from hesitation to growing confidence, responsibility, and professional self-definition (Brewer et al., 2020; Ruskin & Bilous, 2022; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). In situated terms, mentors mediate movement from peripheral to central participation by structuring access to tasks, modelling practice, and providing timely feedback (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Empirical studies in WIL similarly show that intentional, formative supervision amplifies learning and accelerates capability development—patterns reinforced by our graduate and employer accounts (Ruskin & Bilous, 2022; Wingrove & Turner, 2015).

Interpersonal, Cultural and Linguistic Dimensions

Retail placements in multilingual, culturally diverse settings surfaced both constraints (e.g., initial communication confidence) and opportunities (e.g., intercultural competence, emotional intelligence). These capabilities are consistently identified as core employability attributes in globalized service sectors and are explicitly noted in WIL good-practice literature, underscoring the value of targeted preparation (language support, conflict-resolution) and team-building to convert diversity into a learning resource (Council on Higher Education, 2011; Jackson, 2013, 2015; Patrick et al., 2022).

Task Complexity, Multitasking and Operational Learning

Students frequently learned through authentic participation in inventory control, customer complaints, and stock disruptions—contexts that demand planning, prioritization, and adaptive problem-solving. This aligns with WIL evidence that durable learning often arises from authentic participation and repetition with feedback, rather than isolated “high-status” tasks (Ferns & Moore, 2012; Linn, 2015). Where task complexity was unevenly distributed, clearer learning progression maps can help students see how initial operational tasks are stepping stones to more complex judgement work, consistent with both quality guidance and employability literature (Council on Higher Education, 2011; Jackson et al., 2017).

Expectation Gaps and Reflective Practice

A persistent theme was misalignment between student aspirations and industry realities, especially reluctance to start in entry-level roles—an issue widely recognized in WIL (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). To address this, pre-placement orientation should surface and reset expectations, articulate transparent progression pathways, and connect routine tasks to program outcomes (Council on Higher Education, 2011). Equally, the study suggests underutilization of reflection; while journals and portfolios were present, reflection was not always structured to convert experience into explicit learning. Drawing on Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle, embedding guided reflection before, during, and after placements would prompt description, evaluation, analysis, and action planning that make tacit learning visible—an approach supported by WIL syntheses emphasizing structured reflection as a quality marker (Ferns & Moore, 2012; Linn, 2015; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

Curriculum Alignment and Regional Significance

Findings reinforce the need for curriculum co-creation with retail partners so that assessment tasks, feedback cycles, and on-the-job learning are deliberately aligned (Ruskin & Bilous, 2022). In the Northern Cape context, retail WIL functions as place-based education, contributing to regional participation and employability while giving students meaningful exposure to local labor-market realities (Brewer et al., 2020). Designing assessments that mirror shop-floor operations and sequencing responsibility (e.g., from POS and stock routines to merchandising decisions or shift coordination) can make progression visible and credible to both students and employers (Council on Higher Education, 2011; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

Situating the Findings within Work-Integrated Learning Synthesis

Finally, the patterns here align with international syntheses reporting benefits for students (skills, confidence, identity), hosts (talent pipelines), and institutions (alignment, outcomes), while also echoing persistent challenges around supervision and preparedness (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). The

contribution of this study, therefore, lies less in generalization and more in contextual nuance—showing how global WIL dynamics are situated in the social, linguistic, and operational specificities of South African retail, and how mentoring plus structured reflection can convert routine service work into sustained professional capability (Gibbs, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Recommendations for Work-Integrated Learning Coordinators

WIL coordinators play a crucial role in strengthening the quality and developmental value of retail-based WIL placements. To enhance outcomes, coordinators should develop clear guidelines that articulate expectations and responsibilities for students, employers, and the university, particularly given the frequent mismatch between student aspirations and the operational realities of entry-level retail work noted in both graduate and employer accounts (Jackson et al., 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Effective supervision and regular formative feedback are equally important, as mentorship has been shown to significantly influence confidence, communication, and professional identity development during WIL (Ruskin & Bilous, 2022; Wingrove & Turner, 2015). Coordinators should therefore ensure that retailers are prepared to provide structured guidance and evaluations. Embedding reflection throughout the WIL cycle is also essential, since guided reflection helps students recognize tacit learning and transforms routine operational tasks into meaningful knowledge—a principle well-supported in WIL literature (Ferns & Moore, 2012; Linn, 2015; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). In addition, coordinators would benefit from providing retailers with the necessary tools and training to supervise students effectively and to understand program expectations. Finally, strong partnerships between academia and the retail industry are essential to ensure curriculum relevance and alignment between academic requirements and real-world practice, reinforcing the central role of WIL in employability development (Brewer et al., 2020; Council on Higher Education, 2011).

Limitations

The inclusion of graduates who were at different stages of personal, academic, and professional development may have influenced their perceptions of WIL, as students mature at varying rates in terms of confidence, workplace readiness, and their ability to interpret and make meaning from learning experiences (Billett, 2015; Jackson, 2016). For example, graduates with stronger prior work exposure or higher initial confidence may have been better equipped to recognize learning opportunities, whereas those with limited workplace experience may have perceived everyday operational tasks as less developmental. In addition, the scope of the findings is limited by the fact that all graduates participated in only one type of WIL activity – retail-based workplace placements. Because WIL can take multiple forms—such as project-based learning, service learning, simulated environments, or non-placement WIL—relying solely on a single WIL modality restricts the ability to compare how different structures, levels of task complexity, or degrees of autonomy might shape learning outcomes. For instance, a student engaged in a non-placement consultancy project may develop analytical or strategic skills that differ substantially from the operational, customer focused learning typical of retail placements. As a result, the findings reflect the specific learning conditions of retail workplaces and cannot be generalized to other forms of WIL that may provide different developmental opportunities.

Future Research Directions

Future research on retail-based WIL could extend the findings of this study in several meaningful ways. Longitudinal studies that follow Retail Business Management graduates beyond the completion of their WIL placements would provide insight into the sustained effects of retail-based WIL on employability,

career trajectories, and the development of professional identity, recognizing that identity formation often evolves over time within workplace communities. Larger scale or mixed methods research across more diverse institutional and geographic contexts would help determine whether the developmental patterns identified in this study are consistent across different regions, retail formats, and higher education settings. Comparative studies examining retail WIL alongside sectors such as finance, logistics, digital commerce, or hospitality could further illuminate how differing workplace structures and disciplinary environments shape learning opportunities and student progression. Given the central role of reflective learning in WIL, future studies could also apply Gibbs (1988) reflective cycle to empirically test how intentionally scaffolded reflection enables students to interpret routine retail tasks as meaningful learning experiences, and to articulate the tacit skills developed during service intensive work. Additionally, research drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning could examine how supervisory support, mentoring relationships, and access to responsibility influence students' movement from peripheral to full participation within retail communities of practice. Finally, future work could evaluate the effectiveness of expectation setting interventions—such as preplacement briefings and clearer communication of career pathways—to assess whether improved alignment between institutional, employer, and student expectations enhances learning quality, satisfaction, and workplace readiness.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to illuminate how WIL is experienced within the retail context by drawing on the perspectives of RBM graduates and their host employers at a regional South African university. Read alongside international WIL scholarship, the findings confirm that retail-based WIL can be a developmental bridge between university and work: Graduates reported growth in communication, confidence, task organization, and problem-solving/critical thinking, while employers identified WIL as a mechanism for skills development and early talent identification. At the same time, the study shows that these outcomes are not automatic. In retail, learning is embedded in entry-level, service-oriented work and unfolds progressively through trust-building, mentoring, and reflective sense-making rather than through immediate managerial responsibility.

Two cross-cutting insights emerge. First, expectation-setting matters. Misalignment between students' aspirations and the realities of entry-level retail roles can dampen motivation and obscure the learning value of routine tasks. Clear pre-placement briefings, transparent progression pathways, and consistent supervisor feedback help to reframe early operational work as purposeful preparation for more complex responsibilities. Second, contextual supports amplify learning. Retail workplaces in South Africa are linguistically and culturally diverse, fast-paced, and customer-intensive; structured reflection, intercultural/language support, and supervisor development (including guidance on scaffolding responsibility) enable students to recognize tacit learning and to convert everyday problem-solving into durable professional capability.

For curriculum and program design, the implication is to make the retail specificity of WIL explicit. This means aligning assessment and reflection with the realities of shop-floor operations; sequencing responsibility to make progression visible; and co-creating learning activities with employers so that students experience a planned escalation from operational tasks to supervisory exposure (e.g., stock decisions, promotions planning, team coordination). Strengthening these design features not only supports individual student development but also advances the place-based mission of regional universities by deepening industry partnerships and enhancing graduates' readiness for regional labor markets.

The study's insights should be read as analytically transferable rather than generalized. They are grounded in a single program, in one province, using a qualitative design and modest, uneven cohorts. To extend and test these claims, future research could include multi-site comparisons (small independents vs. large chains), longitudinal designs that track graduates beyond placement, mixed-methods studies that integrate performance or employment data, and comparative work on remote/digitally mediated retail WIL. Such studies would deepen understanding of how progression, mentoring, and reflection can be orchestrated across different retail formats and institutional contexts.

Overall, the contribution of this study is to position retail WIL as a distinctive, socially situated learning space; one in which employability is built less through immediate managerial tasks, and more through authentic participation, guided responsibility, and structured reflection within service-intensive operations. By making these dynamics explicit, and by offering practical levers for expectation-setting, supervisor support, and curriculum alignment, the study provides actionable guidance for educators, WIL coordinators, and employers seeking to enhance the educational value of retail-based WIL and, in turn, to strengthen graduates' transitions into meaningful work.

DISCLOSURE OF THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors used Microsoft Copilot (GPT-based version, accessed during 2025–2026) to assist with language editing, text refinement, formatting, and the preparation of manuscript revisions in response to editorial and reviewer feedback. Generative AI was not used to analyze research data, develop themes, interpret findings, or generate conclusions. All analyses, interpretations, and scholarly arguments were developed and validated by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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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](#).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

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

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

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

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

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

Reference

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