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Bridging the Gap: The Role of Work-Integrated Learning in Graduate Economic Participation in South African Higher Education

Veena Parbo Rawjee[1], Faith Tinonetsana[2], Zakia Jeewa[3], Obed Freedom Chauke[1]

[1]Durban University of Technology, South Africa

Correspondence: Faith Tinonetsana, Public Relations Management, Durban University of Technology, South Africa.

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Abstract

Research on graduate employability often highlights the role of work-integrated learning (WIL), yet understanding remains limited of how such experiences influence students' transition into economic activity and labour market readiness. This study examines the influence of WIL on students' transition into economic activity as economically active citizens. The study adopts a mixed method approach that combines survey data and interviews with third year students enrolled in the Public Relations Diploma programme at the Durban University of Technology in the 2025 academic year. The findings show a significant reduction in students' anxiety about unemployment after participation in WIL-related workshops, with most students reporting less concern about finding work after graduation following Project-Based Learning and Design Thinking workshops. The study also found a statistically significant relationship between students' economic activity status and their confidence in adapting to workplace environments. These results indicate that WIL and related workshops play an important role in strengthening workplace readiness, reducing employment-related anxiety and supporting the transition into economic activity after graduation. The study contributes to existing knowledge by showing the value of experiential learning and highlighting the need for stronger institutional support, industry partnerships and the inclusion of entrepreneurial and design thinking skills as key graduate attributes.

Keywords: work-integrated learning (WIL), project-based learning (PJBL), economically active citizens, business model

1. Introduction

South Africa continues to face one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world among people aged 15–34 despite decades of policy efforts (Yu, 2013). Structural problems, such as a labour market that struggles to absorb new entrants, have been worsened by major events such as the 2008 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, youth unemployment has risen to more than 70% for those aged 15–24 and remains above 50% for the 25–34 age group (Yu, 2013). For many graduates, these statistics reflect their daily reality. Graduates often report limited demand for their skills, qualifications that do not match labour market needs, and a lack of work experience (Mseleku, 2021).

These patterns suggest a broader challenge in turning academic qualifications into meaningful economic participation. To address this, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has gained attention as an approach that helps graduates become economically active by linking academic learning with real work experience. WIL includes approaches such as internships, placements, cooperative education and project-based learning that aim to prepare students for employment. However, project-based learning often takes place on campus and may not involve direct workplace exposure which makes it different from internships or work placements (CHE, 2011). Previous studies show that WIL helps students apply academic knowledge in real settings, build professional networks and develop both technical and transferable skills (Battin et al., 2025). Research also links WIL with improved graduate employability and economic activity. For example, Roze et al. (2025) found that reflective WIL experiences improved graduates' confidence in pursuing employment or entrepreneurial opportunities. In addition, Lasrado (2025) notes that well-supported WIL programmes help prepare students for different career paths and reduce barriers to entering the labour market, especially for underrepresented groups.

Despite this growing body of research important questions remain. While many studies recognise the value of WIL there is still limited understanding of how it directly influences students' economic activity, particularly in the South African context where youth unemployment is extremely high. Emerging work also shows that students from different backgrounds experience WIL in different ways which may influence the outcomes they achieve (Lasrado, 2025).

Understanding how WIL shapes economic participation is therefore important for improving graduate transitions into employment or entrepreneurship.

This study examines the influence of WIL on students' economic activity. It contributes to ongoing discussions on graduate employability and labour market readiness by exploring how practical learning experiences support the transition from education to work. In doing so, the study contributes to current literature on the role of WIL in helping graduates engage in employment, entrepreneurship or other forms of economic participation in South Africa's challenging labour market.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The next section discusses literature on WIL and graduate economic participation. This is followed by the research methodology used in the study. The results are then presented and discussed in relation to existing research. The final section provides conclusions and highlights the implications of the findings.

Literature

Creating economically active citizens

Being economically active encompasses engagement and participation in any form of economic contribution, be it formal employment, entrepreneurship, or self-employment. For South African graduates, achieving this status is central to easing personal financial insecurity and to combat national youth unemployment. The challenge lies in accessing jobs and in developing the capacity to create opportunities through innovation and entrepreneurial thinking. Higher education institutions (HEIs) therefore prepare students with practical skills, financial literacy and entrepreneurial awareness, thus enabling them to contribute meaningfully to the economy post-graduation, either as employees or as business creators.

As socio-economic realities evolve, so must the higher education systems. Curriculum development and reform should reflect broader shifts in the economy, but this cannot simply be limited to updating content to mirror current labour trends. A deeper, structural transformation is required that embraces the principles of Education 4.0, which integrates digital technologies with real and virtual learning environments (Caballero-Morales et al., 2020). Such approaches ensure that students acquire relevant knowledge and support the development of graduates who are adaptive, tech-driven and entrepreneurial and who possess the skills needed to navigate and thrive in a dynamic economic landscape.

While students largely view higher education as a route to financial independence, doubts persist about its ability to prepare them for real economic engagement. Many value entrepreneurship but lack the confidence to pursue it, citing barriers such as skills gaps, limited industry exposure, and weak support networks (Ncube & Lekhanya, 2025). Previous research shows that persistent labour market constraints, especially for those without experience, amplify this uncertainty (Mseleku, 2021). Further, entrepreneurship is often perceived as a last resort or fallback rather than a deliberate career choice, due to economic inequality, limited access to capital and little or no institutional guidance and support (Anos et al., 2025). While universities aim to foster employability and entrepreneurial intent, structural barriers continue to hinder students' transition from education to economic activity.

Pathways to Economic Participation - Work Integrated Learning

WIL integrates academic learning with real-world, practice-based experiences to strengthen student development and employability. It includes a variety of methods such as project-based learning, internships, and simulations that align classroom and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and employers (Council on Higher Education, 2011). In South Africa, where nearly 70 per cent of the population is under the age of 35, persistent youth unemployment has made education, training, and skills development central to national strategies. Within this context, WIL has emerged as a crucial partnership model designed to provide students with practical work experience and thereby increase their chances of employment and entrepreneurship. Evidence from Taylor & Govender (2017) indicated that more than 90 per cent of students found WIL rewarding and reported tangible employment opportunities.

At its core, WIL aims to operationalise the link between theory and practice, inspiring students to translate their academic knowledge into applied skills and competencies to create a professional identity that embraces economic growth and innovation. Higher education institutions in South Africa are mandated to integrate WIL into curricula to support student career development. However, implementation has been uneven, as many academics perceive it as an increased workload, despite evidence of its benefits for student employability. Govender and Wait (2017), found that students in both Marketing and Human Resource disciplines enjoyed their WIL experiences, acquired additional skills, and were exposed to career opportunities through transdisciplinary WIL projects. WIL (and similar approaches) is widely recognised as important for students' professional development and employability by both employers (e.g., Confederation of British Industry, 2009) and the higher education sector (e.g., Higher Education Group, 2008).

The benefits of WIL extend across academic, personal and professional domains. WIL is linked to improved academic performance, stronger interdisciplinary thinking and greater motivation to learn. It also supports the development of communication skills, teamwork, leadership and cooperation. Professionally, WIL helps students develop career clarity,

professional identity, better employment opportunities and salaries, along with positive work values and ethics. It also strengthens competence and technical knowledge.

WIL is not a quick solution to the lack of competitiveness in national industries.
It also cannot by itself turn a low-skills society into a high-skills one in a short time. WIL can, however, play a role in preparing graduates to enter and contribute meaningfully to South African society and the world of work (CHE, 2011). According to the CHE (2011), WIL is appropriate for career-focused three-year diplomas at HEQF Level 7, where it supports the integration of disciplinary knowledge with professional practice. Approaches such as project-based learning and workplace exposure are especially relevant in the final year and align well with the level and purpose of the qualification.

Comparative research illustrates how cooperative education models elsewhere can inform WIL in South Africa. International modules can provide insight for strengthening WIL; for example, Reinhard (2016) describes the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University in Germany as the first to formally combine academic study with on-the-job training through partnerships with more than 10,000 companies. Students in this model are employed and remunerated for the duration of their studies, ensuring both financial stability and employment security, long with continuous professional development. By contrast, South Africa and Namibia, while having long traditions of cooperative education, often lack strong industry commitment, resulting in inconsistency and leaving students to take unpaid practical semesters to gain work exposure. This gap underscores the need for deeper university-industry collaboration to develop sustainable WIL models that ensure graduate readiness and long-term employability. University-industry partnerships are essential for connecting higher education with industry. These collaborations encompass a wide range of activities, including research, innovation initiatives, entrepreneurial ventures and educational programs such as WIL to strengthen graduate employability (Lasrado, 2025).

Early approaches to work-integrated learning

Dewey (1938) was among the earliest educational theorists to strongly believe that people learn by doing and that all genuine education is achieved through experience. Dewey believed in learning through experience, but he also saw a vocation as more than just doing a job. He described it as a meaningful and ethically grounded identity linked to one's career and role in society. Kolb (1984) later explained that while experience is important for learning, it is not enough on its own. Learning requires reflection and active thinking about those experiences.

Similarly, Biggs (1999) argues that in higher education, effective learning requires a knowledge base, a motivational context, learning activities, and interaction. Students need to reflect on their experiences, develop understanding from them and apply that knowledge in new situations. Bamberger and Schön (1983) highlight the importance of reflection in developing professional practice. However, more recent views suggest that experience alone does not lead to learning unless it is supported by critical thinking and personal engagement. If learning is treated only as a way to gain workplace information or apply technical skills, it does not achieve its full value.

2. Method

The study employed a mixed-method research design to evaluate the impact of an educational intervention aimed at enhancing entrepreneurial competencies among students. The target population consisted of 147 3rd year students enrolled in a Public Relations (PR) Diploma at the DUT. The intervention consisted of a structured workshop designed to increase understanding of economic activity within the PR context. Data was collected through online surveys administered at two stages, once before the workshop (pre-intervention) and again after the workshop (post-intervention). The surveys included identical or closely aligned items to enable direct comparison of responses and measurement of change over time.

Qualitative data was collected through open-ended survey questions. For the pre-workshop survey, the response rate was 61.9%. After the workshop, the response rate was 46.3%. A total of45 students responded in both surveys, representing 30.6% of the total sample. This indicates that 49.5% of first survey respondents and 66.2% of second survey respondents participated consistently across both surveys. Quantitative data was analysed using the latest version of SPSS. All participants gave informed consent before data collection. They were also told that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. All data were anonymised and securely stored to protect participant confidentiality. The study adhered to all relevant ethical guidelines and institutional ethics committee protocols governing research with human participants.

3. Results and Discussion

This section outlines the study results. The findings are based on data collected from surveys and interviews with third year PR students at DUT.

Economically active

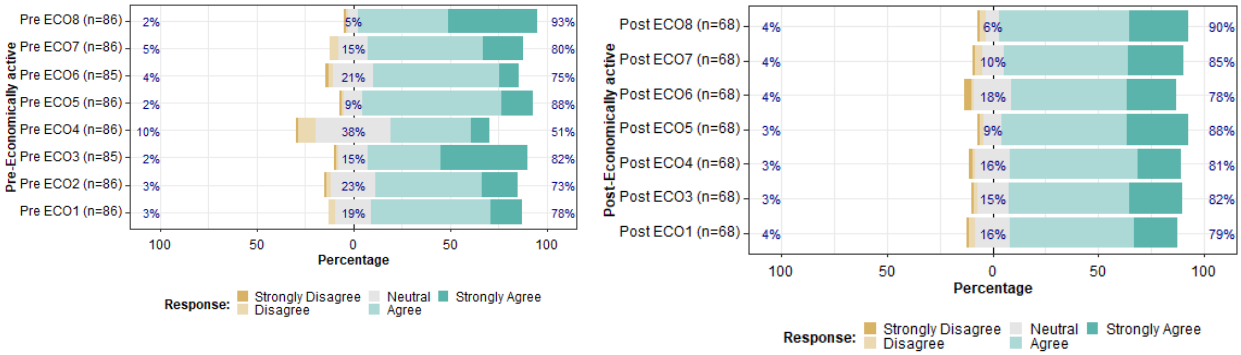


Figure 1. Economically active

ECO1 = I understand what it means to be an "economically active citizen."

ECO2 = I believe my PR qualification will allow me to generate an income for myself and contribute meaningfully to the economy.

ECO3 = I am concerned about unemployment after graduation.

ECO4 = I feel confident that I could support myself financially after completing my qualification.

ECO5 = I understand the importance of financial literacy = financially savvy: Like Personal finances and Business finances (budgeting, saving, investing) in my career.

ECO6 = The concept of entrepreneurship taught to me in my diploma has equipped me to consider alternative forms of employment after graduation.

ECO7 = I would consider pursuing entrepreneurship activities after grad

ECO8 = I am aware of the economic challenges young graduates face in South Africa.

The survey assessed students' perceptions of economic activity before and after the workshop, focusing on financial independence, entrepreneurship and broader economic awareness. Responses were grouped into Agree, Neutral and Disagree. Understanding of economic activity (ECO1) was high at 78% and remained stable post-workshop (79%). Concern about unemployment (ECO3) also stayed high, rising slightly from 82% to 88%. Financial confidence (ECO4) showed the largest shift, increasing from 51% to 81%. Understanding of financial literacy (ECO5) remained unchanged at 88%.

Interest in entrepreneurship increased modestly. Agreement that the workshop prepared students for alternative employment (ECO6) rose from 75% to 78%, and willingness to pursue entrepreneurship (ECO7) increased from 80% to 85%. Awareness of graduate economic challenges (ECO8) declined slightly from 93% to 90%, possibly reflecting greater optimism, though further data is needed. ECO2, which was included only in the pre-survey, indicated that 73% of students believed their PR qualification would support income generation and economic contribution. The findings suggest that while overall awareness of economic activity remained high, the workshop's most meaningful impact was strengthening students' financial confidence.

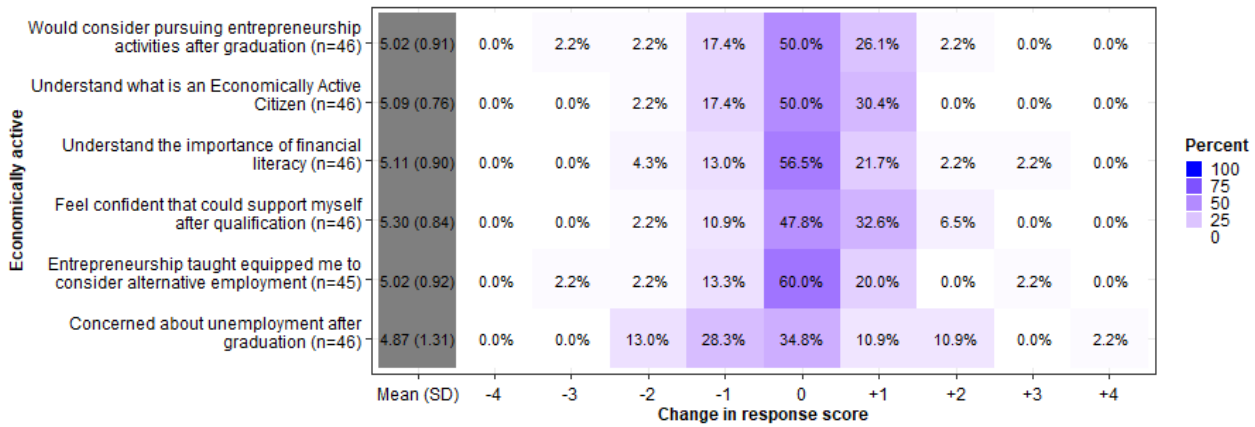


Figure 2. Heat map: Economically active

The results in Figure 2 reflect how individual students' responses changed between the pre- and post-workshop. Each response was classified as an increase (a more positive score after the workshop), a decrease (a shift toward a less positive response, such as from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), or no change. Overall, the intervention led to moderate but meaningful improvements across most areas, with 24% to 39% of students showing positive changes in areas like financial confidence, understanding of economic activity, and openness to entrepreneurship. In contrast, decreases were less common, averaging around 18–20%. The most significant shift was reduced anxiety about unemployment: 41.3% of students reported feeling less concerned about finding work after graduation, suggesting the workshop offered real reassurance for many. While responses to items like financial literacy and readiness for alternative employment remained largely stable, the overall direction of change was positive, indicating that the intervention successfully influenced students' perceptions of their economic future.

A key finding was the significant reduction in students' anxiety about unemployment. After participating in the workshop, 41.3% of students reported feeling less concerned about finding work after graduation. This suggests that the workshop intervention provided genuine reassurance and helped build students' confidence in their ability to transition into the workforce. This outcome is especially notable when considered alongside previous research. For example, Ncube and Lekhanya (2025) found that while students often see higher education as a path to financial independence, many remain uncertain about its ability to prepare them for real economic engagement. Their findings pointed to barriers such as skills gaps, limited industry exposure and weak support networks, which often lead to a lack of confidence in pursuing entrepreneurial or professional opportunities. The current findings suggest that by exposing students to perspectives on economic activity and structured, practical experiences- like those offered in the workshop, these barriers can be addressed. By reducing concerns about employability, the workshop appears to have supported students in ways that directly counter the doubts raised in earlier research.

Work Integrated Learning

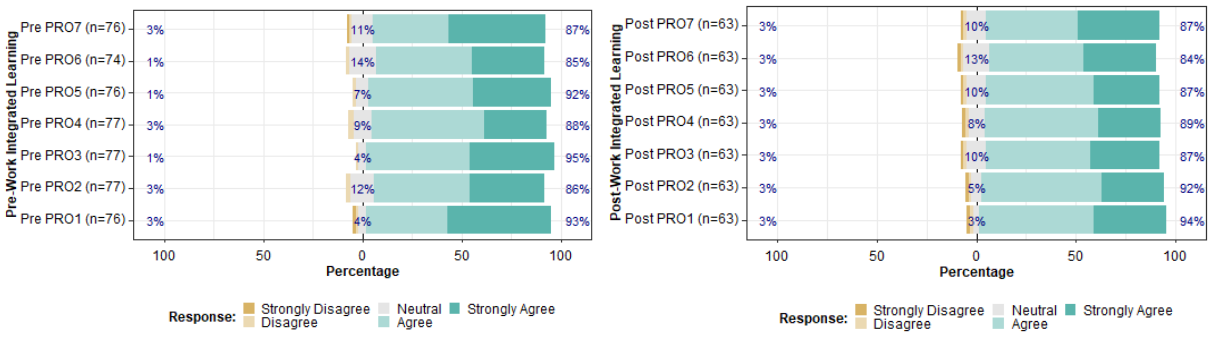


Figure 3. Work Integrated Learning

PRO1 = I understand the purpose of Project Based Learning (PBL) in preparing me for the workplace.

PRO2 = I feel confident that my coursework so far has prepared me for practical workplace scenarios.

PRO3 = I have had opportunities to apply my PR skills in real-world or simulated projects.

PRO4 = I understand the expectations that employers have of PR graduates.

PRO5 = I feel confident that I can adapt to a workplace environment.

PRO6 = I know how to present myself professionally (CV writing, LinkedIn, personal branding).

PRO7 = I believe PBL is essential for developing my employability skills.

A comparison of pre- and post-workshop survey responses revealed both stability and shifts in student perceptions related to project-based learning (PBL) and workplace readiness. Most notably, confidence in applying coursework to practical scenarios increased from 86% to 92% (PRO2), suggesting a positive impact of the workshop. A slight increase was also observed in students' understanding of the purpose of PBL (93% to 94%, PRO1) and employer expectations (88% to 89%, PRO4). However, agreement decreased in areas such as opportunities to apply PR skills (95% to 87%, PRO3) and confidence in adapting to the workplace (92% to 87%, PRO5), possibly indicating greater critical awareness post-intervention. Perceptions around professional presentation (PRO6) and the value of PBL in developing employability skills (PRO7) remained largely unchanged. Overall, the workshop reinforced some existing perceptions while encouraging more nuanced reflection in others.

Heatmap of change in response score - WIL

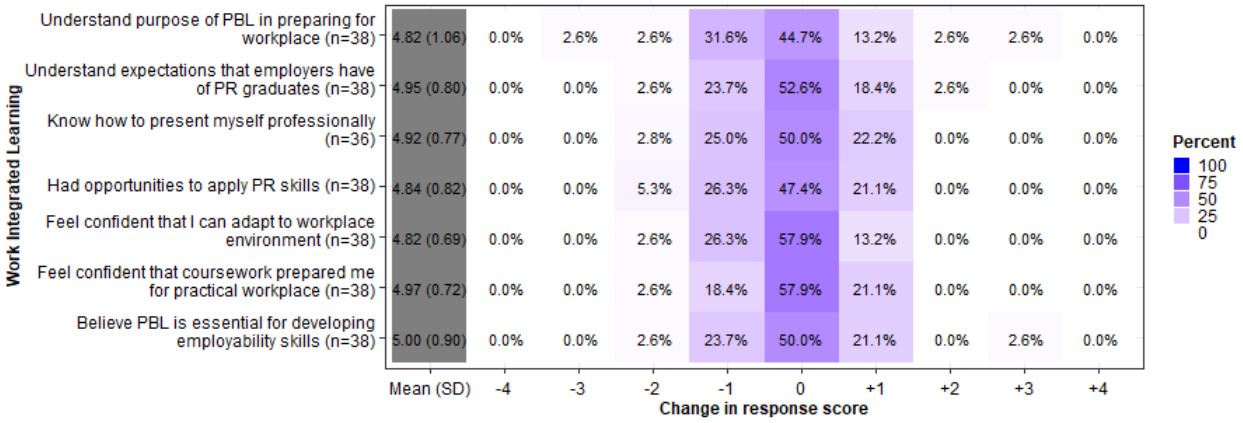


Figure 4. Heatmap of change in response score - WIL

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PRO5 = I feel confident that I can adapt to a workplace environment.

PRO6 = I know how to present myself professionally (CV writing, LinkedIn, personal branding).

PRO7 = I believe PBL is essential for developing my employability skills.

An analysis of matched pre- and post-workshop responses, focusing only on students who completed both surveys, revealed varied shifts in perception regarding PBL and workplace preparedness. For most items, the majority or highest proportion of students reported *no change* in their views, suggesting relative stability in perceptions over the course of the intervention. For instance, the majority of students reported no change in their confidence that coursework had prepared them for practical scenarios (57.9%, PRO2) and in their belief that they could adapt to a workplace environment (57.9%, PRO5). Similarly, (52.6%) reported no change in understanding employer expectations (PRO4), while half remained consistent in their views on professional presentation (PRO6) and the value of PBL for employability (PRO7).

However, certain areas did see notable shifts. Most students (44.7%) showed no change in their understanding of the purpose of PBL (PRO1), but a sizeable portion (36.6%) reported a decrease, suggesting some recalibration in perception following the workshop. A similar trend was observed for perceived opportunities to apply PR skills (PRO3), where 31.6% reported a decrease and 47.4% remained unchanged. Across all items, the proportion of students reporting increased agreement was generally lower, ranging from 13.2% (PRO5) to 22.2% (PRO6). These patterns may indicate that while the workshop helped consolidate existing perceptions for many, it also prompted more critical reflection among others, leading to perceptual decreases in some domains.

Table 1. By Economically active

Economically active	No change/Decrease (N=37)	Increase (N=9)	p-value	Overall (N=46)
Understand purpose of PBL in preparing for workplace			Fisher's, p = 0.771	
Decrease	11 (37.9%)	2 (25.0%)		13 (35.1%)
No change	13 (44.8%)	4 (50.0%)		17 (45.9%)
Increase	5 (17.2%)	2 (25.0%)		7 (18.9%)
Feel confident that coursework prepared me for practical workplace			Fisher's, p = 0.544	
Decrease	5 (16.7%)	3 (37.5%)		8 (21.1%)
No change	18 (60.0%)	4 (50.0%)		22 (57.9%)
Increase	7 (23.3%)	1 (12.5%)		8 (21.1%)
Had opportunities to apply PR skills			Fisher's, p = 1.000	
Decrease	10 (33.3%)	2 (25.0%)		12 (31.6%)
No change	14 (46.7%)	4 (50.0%)		18 (47.4%)
Increase	6 (20.0%)	2 (25.0%)		8 (21.1%)
Understand expectations that employers have of PR graduates			Fisher's, p = 0.377	
Decrease	9 (30.0%)	1 (12.5%)		10 (26.3%)
No change	16 (53.3%)	4 (50.0%)		20 (52.6%)
Increase	5 (16.7%)	3 (37.5%)		8 (21.1%)
Feel confident that I can adapt to workplace environment			Fisher's, p = 0.017	
Decrease	11 (36.7%)	0 (0.0%)	all pwc p.adj ns	11 (28.9%)
No change	17 (56.7%)	5 (62.5%)	reduced Type I	22 (57.9%)
Increase	2 (6.7%)	3 (37.5%)		5 (13.2%)
Know how to present myself professionally			Fisher's, p = 0.583	
Decrease	9 (32.1%)	1 (12.5%)		10 (27.8%)
No change	13 (46.4%)	5 (62.5%)		18 (50.0%)
Increase	6 (21.4%)	2 (25.0%)		8 (22.2%)
Believe PBL is essential for developing employability skills			Fisher's, p = 0.199	
Decrease	9 (30.0%)	1 (12.5%)		10 (26.3%)
No change	16 (53.3%)	3 (37.5%)		19 (50.0%)
Increase	5 (16.7%)	4 (50.0%)		9 (23.7%)

Across most items, there were no statistically significant associations between changes in students' WIL-related perceptions and reported increases in economic activity. For example, understanding the purpose of PBL ($p = 0.771$), confidence in coursework preparing them for the workplace ($p = 0.544$) and opportunities to apply PR skills ($p = 1.000$) showed no meaningful differences between economically active and non-active groups. Similarly, no significant differences were observed in students' understanding of employer expectations ($p = 0.377$), professional self-presentation ($p = 0.583$), or beliefs about PBL's role in employability ($p = 0.199$).

In line with the study's aim to examine the influence of WIL on students' economic activity status, a statistically significant difference was found in responses to the statement "I feel confident that I can adapt to a workplace environment" ($p = 0.017$). This suggests that confidence in adapting to workplace environments is associated with higher economic activity, reinforcing WIL's role in supporting students' transition into real-world work settings. Jackson & Dean (2023) highlight the value of global WIL in developing highly sought-after adaptive skills in new graduates, particularly in diverse and cross-cultural settings. While the current study did not focus on international experiences, the findings indicate that even locally delivered, structured WIL such as project-based learning can also foster workplace adaptability. This reinforces the broader argument that WIL, regardless of setting, can meaningfully contribute to preparing students for real-world work. Further, the findings of this study align with Jackson & Bridgstock (2021) in recognising the importance of real-world experience in enhancing graduate employability. Both studies highlight that practical activities such as internships and extra-curricular engagement contribute meaningfully to skill development and workplace readiness. However, this study contradicts findings by Jackson & Bridgstock (2021) that extra-curricular internships are more valuable than WIL. While their research found that students rated extra-curricular internships more positively, this study suggests that WIL can significantly increase students' confidence in adjusting to the workplace. This indicates that well-structured WIL programs can be just as effective as extra-curricular internships in building key employability skills. Thus, the current study challenges the assumption that extra-curricular experiences within formal academic programmes are inherently superior and instead

highlights the potential of course-integrated learning experiences to support students' transition into the workforce.

Open-ended questions

Students were asked to provide examples of opportunities they may plan or consider after completing their diploma. Responses included starting a business, applying for internships, pursuing further studies, freelance work, and roles in communication or public relations. These aspirations highlight a clear interest in practical, career-oriented paths, reinforcing the value of WIL in preparing students for diverse, real-world opportunities beyond traditional employment.

When reflecting on what they gained from the workshops, students pointed to a variety of new skills ranging from communication and teamwork to innovation, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial thinking. These responses illustrate how exposure to hands-on, applied learning environments supports the development of competencies closely aligned with WIL principles, closing the gap between academic theory and workplace expectations. In reflecting on their confidence to enter the workplace or start a business, students frequently mentioned increased readiness, practical skills, and a clearer understanding of business opportunities. Responses highlighted growth in communication, planning, and hands-on experience, all central to WIL.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide insight into how WIL shapes students' perceptions of workplace readiness and employability. Notably, the results indicate a significant reduction in students' anxiety about unemployment, as most participants reported feeling less concerned about finding work after graduation after attending the workshop. The results showed a statistically significant relationship between students' economic activity status and their confidence in adapting to the workplace. These findings suggest that WIL and related workshops play a critical role in strengthening and enhancing students' workplace readiness, reducing employment-related anxiety, and supporting their transition into economic activity after graduation. Curriculum interventions and design should prioritise experiential learning that builds confidence in opportunity recognition and fosters empathy-driven innovation. Techniques such as live client projects, hackathons, and simulation-based assessments can operationalise these principles. Further, universities should establish incubators and mentorship programs within communication faculties, leveraging industry partnerships to provide real-world exposure and reduce perceived risk associated with entrepreneurship. Finally, advocate for national higher education frameworks to recognise entrepreneurial and design thinking competencies as graduate attributes, ensuring systemic alignment with the ever-evolving realities of the labour market.

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Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the study, including the study design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of the findings and preparation and revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Obtained.

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The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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