

Special issue on Work-integrated learning for global engagement and societal development

Editorial on Work-integrated learning for global engagement and societal development

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Introduction

This first special issue of CIWIL concerns research that contributes to an extended understanding of work-integrated learning (WIL) with a particular focus on global engagement and societal development. Research on WIL is growing, although the term WIL mostly has been used as an umbrella concept for different pedagogical models related to students' academic learning in relation to working life (e.g. Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024). However, some recent trends of diversification of WIL research into different directions and contexts can be seen (Areskoug Josefsson et al., 2024; Rafiq et al., 2024). A more inclusive approach to WIL is today formulated as a transdisciplinary research field, defined by issues focusing on the relationship between work and learning. (Lundh Snis et al., 2025).

In the light of the increasingly global and rapidly changing world, the importance of learning and knowledge creation for societal development is a critical consideration for a more sustainable future. There is a need to reframe the roots of working and learning to make them simultaneously relevant in the context of the current global challenges. The ultimate focus shifts towards understanding how to effectively weave these diverse challenges and experiences. There is a call for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to fostering inclusive collaboration, and to opening the door for non-academic partners to co-create questions and knowledge. By doing so, we create relevant knowledge and learning both locally and globally—not only for students but also for academia and other stakeholders in the WIL ecosystem. Both students and professionals in their immediate practices are subjects to learning and both educational and workplace contexts are key environments for learning that is intertwined with different knowledge forms, practices, and cultural norms. This democratization of knowledge creation and learning ensures that diverse perspectives inform research and learning, making outcomes more relevant and applicable to real-world and societal challenges.

WIL in a global engagement perspective means to developing collaborative frameworks that incentivize research aligned with societal needs. To address the complex societal challenges of today and the future, it is imperative to develop new methodologies for learning and knowledge creation that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. Such interdisciplinary approaches are vital for cultivating adaptive solutions to intricate societal problems. The WIL field is

well-positioned to address these global challenges by fostering engagement, collaboration, and innovation (e.g. Bernhard & Olsson, 2023; Billett, 2012; Hernández et al., 2025; Silvestre, & Tîrcă 2019; Snis et al., 2025; Sunnemark et al., 2024). For instance, by adopting innovative approaches to learning and knowledge dissemination, WIL research can enhance processes that sustain social resilience and sustainability (Olsson et al., 2021). By prioritizing collaboration, community engagement, and organisational learning this research can be integrated with various domains related to education or professional practices. Hence, WIL contextualized in a global engagement perspective can address crucial global challenges by bridging the gap between education and employment, fostering skills relevant to an evolving job market. Continued exploration and adaptation of WIL practices will enhance relevance and effectiveness in preparing students for the future workforce. Furthermore, it encompasses the advancement and synthesis of theoretical frameworks and practical methodologies that address real-world challenges.

The articles in this special issue

Previous versions of the articles in this special issue were all presented at the 2nd International Conference on Work-Integrated Learning, WIL24, 3-5 April 2024 which took place at Central University of Technology, South Africa. The conference was arranged by University West, Sweden in collaboration with Central University of Technology, South Africa. The articles collected in this special issue entitled: “Work-integrated learning for global engagement and societal development” bring up several important aspects regarding the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) in these aspects. The first article focuses on extracting the learning on WIL for enabling global engagement. The next article concerns work-integrated learning from the perspective of social sustainability. The third contribution is based on empirics from a company over time with a research design from WIL and engaged scholarship approach, whereas the last article develops implications for a quality framework for WIL directed for both private and public contexts.

Leading off, the paper, entitled “*Professional socialisation of diagnostic radiography students: influence on global engagement*”, by Yanda Peter, Penelope Engel-Hills and Kathleen Naidoo, concerns research aimed to explore the professional socialisation of diagnostic radiography students in a clinical learning environment and how this could influence global engagement. Professional socialisation of students takes place in academic and clinical learning environments. Health professions education involves both integrated education and work integrated learning, to intentionally integrate academic and clinical learning. The focus of their study was on the diagnostic radiography clinical learning environment due to the clinical learning environment dominates with regards to its significance for professional socialization. A qualitative research design was employed, and data was assembled from final year diagnostic radiography students and clinical diagnostic radiographers through focus groups and one-on-one interviews. The findings generated three themes. Effective professional socialisation is essential for the development of a diagnostic radiography community that is well prepared for engagements with patients and other healthcare professionals, locally and globally. Their research provided insights into important aspects of professional socialisation, which will assist with the development of guidelines for the facilitation of effective professional socialisation of diagnostic radiography students with a focus on extracting the learning on work-integrated learning for enabling global engagement.

The second contribution, entitled: “*Work-integrated learning for social sustainability: Insights from the Nordic textile industry*” by Misheelt Gankhuyag, Livia Norström and Julia Zetterström, draws on theories of WIL, collaboration and boundary crossing. It explores how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Nordic textile industry engage in collaboration and learning to address social sustainability in the context of complex global supply chains and emerging regulatory frameworks. Their study conceptualizes social sustainability as a dynamic and relational practice shaped through interaction among diverse actors. Using a qualitative case study approach, the contribution analyzes interviews with stakeholders from Nordic textile SMEs, industry associations, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The findings show that collaboration—internally and externally—is essential for building capacity, navigating regulatory demands, and fostering situated learning. Shared tools such as certifications, supplier manuals, and legal frameworks function as boundary objects that support coordination and mutual understanding across organizational and sectoral boundaries. This piece of research suggests a model of work-integrated learning for sustainable development, illustrating how boundary crossing around shared artefacts enables collaborative learning and knowledge creation. Time, trust, and territory are

identified as key preconditions for these processes, highlighting how SMEs can move beyond compliance and engage in continuous learning to strengthen their social sustainability efforts.

The third article, entitled: “*Co-workership rebooted for digital transformation: highlighting employees’ reflection and learning*” by *Linnéa Carlsson, Anna Karin Olsson and Kristina M. Eriksson* address how employees’ perceptions of organizational and technological aspects of digital transformation in manufacturing contexts contribute to understanding co-workership. To answer this, the research design is rooted in an engaged scholarship approach and WIL in close collaboration with a case company to understand organisational and digital transformations over time. The study consisted of five focus groups with a total of 25 participants and applied the framework of the co-workership wheel to contribute to the understanding of inclusion of co-workers in digital transformation processes. The results show the need for learning and reflection as an additional conceptual pair and thus propose an extended co-workership wheel for the manufacturing context.

The final contribution to this special issue is entitled: ‘*Who is sitting in the learner’s corner? Implications for a quality framework of work-integrated learning*’ and is written by *Helena Wallo Hult, Hanne Smidt Sodergard, Urban Carlén, Kristina Johansson, Ulla Fredriksson Larsson, Marie Pässe, Ingrid Tano, Johan Linder and Ulrika Lundh Snis*. This qualitative study explores how WIL is understood and practised in work-life settings, extending beyond the higher education context. The aim of the study is to examine how WIL manifests in work-life settings and what implications can be derived for conceptualising a quality framework for WIL directed at both higher education institutions and work-life partners. Guided by sociocultural learning theories, a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted on empirical data collected from focus group interviews with teachers, managers, and supervisors at a university and at a strategic partner organisation, as well as responses to open-ended student surveys. Three overarching themes were identified as key when conceptualising a quality framework for WIL: i) Enhancing WIL understanding; ii) Managing resources and supporting culture; and iii) Strengthening stakeholder engagement. Based on the findings, the study contributes a concept sketch of a WIL quality framework and four guiding principles for advancing the quality dimension in WIL. The main argument is to sustain a holistic perspective that gears a unified, integrative approach to accommodate the dynamic interrelationships and responsibilities that WIL poses on both higher education institutions and working life partners.

With this special issue, we thank all authors, reviewers and other contributors, and hope that the issue will inspire both researchers as well as practitioners to develop the field of work-integrated learning with a particular attention paid to global engagement and societal development.

Ulrika Lundh Snis (Editor-in-chief)

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