

Industry engagement in work-integrated learning - Exploring the benefits, challenges and realities

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to identify benefits and challenges for businesses serving as hosts for business students involved in work integrated learning (WIL) initiatives. A student and educator perspective on WIL targeting businesses is also identified. A literature review is applied for analyzing work integrated learning in a business perspective. This perspective is supplied with statistical data from a survey of business students and business educators revealing the extent and relevance of connectedness to businesses within curriculum and learning process. Four gaps between business schools and businesses are identified, which should be closed for a successful WIL. These are related to institutional support systems, the student mentor at the business school versus the host firm mentor, the student versus the host firm mentor/business peers, and gaps between curriculum and business cases/tasks. The findings have primarily implications for the business school both on institutional level and on mentor level. It is assumed that WIL has a marginal focus within businesses unless students are directly contributing in solving real business problems. Literature employing a business perspective on WIL is limited, and calls for further empirical research in order to design realistic and relevant WIL assignment in a business context.

Introduction

Many countries suffer from rising unemployment, even by well-educated graduates. Whereas unemployment among young graduates can be related to macroeconomic conditions and low economic growth, it can also be related to gaps between their competencies gained from their studies and work-life needs. One pertinent question arises; how to make university graduates more employable? Or more specifically, how can educational programs and curriculum be aligned with the tasks of real-life? Whereas students at medical schools, nursing schools and students at teacher's colleges seems to have work practices integrated in curriculum and programs, students at business schools seems to be less frequently integrated in formalized work practice during their studies. This might have a negative effect on their employability, but also delay work-life effectiveness for the employer when finally recruited. This paper is about the business school, the business student and the businesses as their potential employer.

The notion of “school” is applied and embraces business schools within university systems and independent business schools which provide academic and theoretical skills to students.

The phenomenon of making students employable is conceptualized in several ways. University-Industry Linkages UIL (e.g. Brimble & Doner, 2007; Vaaland & Ishengoma, 2017), Industry-University-Collaboration IUC (e.g. Ankrah & Omar, 2015; Hemmert, Bstieler & Okamuro, 2014), University-Business Collaboration UBC (e.g. Rampersad, 2015) are all related to reducing the gap between work-life and the knowledge sector. Brimble and Doner (2007) divide UILs into three modality groups: service and consulting activities; research; and training and education activities. The latter modality group includes the concept of Work-Integrated Learning, better known as WIL (e.g. Taylor & Govender, 2017; Wait, 2014) or the equivalent of Learning Integrated Work LIW (e.g. Jonsson, Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2016), which will be focused on in this paper. Furthermore, WIL applied as a construct, is the expression of the challenges and benefits of integrating the business student within work-life before final graduation and potential employment.

Work integrated learning -WIL is defined as an academic unit of learning that integrates discipline specific, professional knowledge, values, skills, qualities, behaviours and standards aimed to increase employability and professionalism (Govender & Taylor, 2015). Since WIL is not purely just practical learning, but is connected with university curricula, it is sometimes called curricular internships (Della Volpe, 2017). The purpose of WIL is to add skills, attitudes and abilities to academic curriculum in order to enhance student employability. The implications for the successful implementation of a WIL partnership is that future graduates meet approved industry partners who will mentor them to gain experiential, practical workplace learning to complement theoretical, classroom lectures (Taylor & Govender, 2017).

There is increasing discussion in literature on the skills gap which simply put is the perceived mismatch between the employers’ need and the skills possessed by the available workforce. A study by Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2012) showed that 42% of the employers and 72% of educators believed that the recent graduates were ready for the labor market, a difference of 30 percentage points. For the business organization, WIL is supposed to increase its capability to enable workplace changes, and keep abreast of new learnings, policies, models, strategies and best practices (Jonsson, Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2016). Hemmert, Bstieler and Okamuro (2014) argue that WIL should aim at bridging the cultural divide between academics and industry

experts in order to create trust relations, graduate recruitment and research collaborations. While universities aim to create future-fit graduates with relevant knowledge, skills, values, attitude and workplace experience; industry seeks talented, work-ready graduates with the right skills set to fit the right job.

Whereas the student and the university have reasons to be highly appreciative of a connection with a real-life environment and future employers, the firm might be reluctant to allocate necessary time and attention to students for several reasons. Firstly, the recruitment base is already satisfactory because the firm has access to a large number of qualified employment seeking graduates, fueled by a high number of unemployed graduates (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). Secondly, having students in an authentic learning environment requires intra-firm mentor resources, which represent a workload beyond the primary activities of a cost conscious firm. Hence, it can be argued that the firm's motivation to allocate human resources to WIL programs has to be strongly aligned with firm benefits as perceived from the firm. These benefits may differ across various business segments, branches, company size, intra-firm mentor capacities, and the student profiles in terms of theoretical competence. Contextual differences between firms operating in a developing country versus in a full-industrialized economy might also be relevant. For example, recent UIL research in Tanzania indicates that international oil companies operating in the country are primarily motivated to include students in their in-house activities in order to display CSR towards license awarding authorities (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). In an industrialized economy (e.g. Norway) the motivation for investing capacity in WIL can be very different, since the payoff from engagement is less visible, and the supply of both national and international qualified students is high.

As this paper focuses on making business students more employable in businesses, the host firm is therefore the crucial actor. Hence it is imperative that the school, as initiator of WIL, understands business realities and drivers behind successful business. These drivers are found in the business model in terms of three components; (i) resource base, (ii) activity system and (iii) product offerings (de Wit, 2017) and have the following basic features:

- A resource base, including competent human resources supporting business activities.
- Business activities forming the production system (or value chain) which enable offerings or deliverables to the customer.

- Product offerings, which the firm has to produce and deliver to the market, in terms of superior product/service quality or in terms of lower cost, exceeding its competitors.
- The fundamental goal of the firm is to make profit through competitive deliverables by means of effective activities supported by means of a strong resource base.

The firm can reach its fundamental goals by either improving the deliverables (products and services) and/or reducing the cost base (ibid). A firm involved in WIL therefore has to take into consideration these two important questions when inviting business students into their “real business life”:

1. How can business students reduce cost and locked up capital?
2. How can business students improve the deliverables (i.e. increase sale)?

The relevance of the questions may vary across company characteristics. For example an SME may have a short time perspective to benefit from WIL, whereas larger firms may have resources enabling allocation of WIL costs to “corporate social responsibility” or as “image/PR/marketing” cost, and thus accept a longer time perspective on their WIL investments.

The aim of this paper is to identify factors related to involvement in WIL programs as perceived from the firm’s perspective. Whereas the student and educator motivation are justified by recent studies (e.g. Taylor & Govender, 2017; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016), the firm’s perspective is less scrutinized; albeit crucial in order to attract the most valuable learning arenas for the students.

The paper is organized in four sub sections. Firstly, the methodology followed to retrieve the literature base and statistical support is explained, followed by a literature review and discussion before the paper is concluded.

Methodology

In order to reveal student and faculty perceptions of work-life connection in business studies, statistics were retrieved from a database containing responses from an annual survey targeting students at Norwegian higher learning institutions (studiebarometeret.no). Around 400 responses from MSc students in business/-administration were included for each year between 2014 and 2017. This dataset was supplied with a recent (2017) survey of faculty perceptions of work-life relevance of curriculum and teacher resources within all business related programs in

Norway, including 233 faculty members. The host's perceptions of involving business students were based on a review of empirical research articles addressing various WIL initiatives. Firstly, the keywords for the literature search were established. The key words *work integrated learning* AND *business* were included in the search. Secondly, the search domain was limited to the abstract or author supplied abstract and/or keywords. Thirdly, the search databases were identified, which included Academic Search Premier, Business Source Complete, Science Direct and Web of Science. Fourthly, the range and boundaries of the document search was set to peer reviewed research articles from 2009-2017. In the fifth step, the documents for analysis were selected. 28 possible relevant articles involving a business perspective/dimension out of 165 were selected for the analysis. Finally, the document selection was narrowed down to suit the research question. In this study, the new review round elicited relevant data on empirical articles including WIL perceptions from a business perspective/dimension, amounting to 15 articles (9%). For the purpose of this paper, the conceptual/theoretical articles are waived in this round.

Literature review

This section begins with a review of how business students and educators perceive work relevance of existing programs based on a Norwegian survey. This is followed by literature study of empirical research articles focusing on how organizations perceive students involved in various WIL initiatives.

1. Perceptions of work life relevance –the student and the teacher perspectives

One important question related to WIL initiatives is the perceived level of work-life relevance in existing programs and courses within business schools. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, which is an independent expert body under the Ministry of Education and Research, has implemented a student and faculty survey measuring, amongst others, perceived level of work-life relevance of existing business programs in Norway (Studiebarometeret, 2018). By extracting MSc (full-time) in business/ -administration/ -management at Norwegian business schools from the database (ibid) one can identify the students' perceptions of work life relevance of programs in which they are enrolled. Work-life relevance is a comprised variable including the program's relevance to 'natural' occupational fields, to the extent it provides good career opportunities and competencies that is useful in occupational life, and to the extent it is aligned with the labour market. Table 1 indicates that

on a scale of 1-5 (a high degree of) working life relevance scores 4,1 for 2017. The most interesting evidence here is that cooperation with workplace is ranked lowest (3,7) on the scale of 1-5.

Table 1 Working life relevance of MSc in business – student perceptions

<i>To what extent do you think that the study programme: (1= To a low degree 5= to a high degree)</i>	2017 N=418	2016 N=367	2015 N=476	2014 N=437
Working life relevance	4,1	4,2	4,3	4,3
• Is relevant to ‘natural’ occupational fields	4,3	4,3	4,4	4,4
• Provides good career opportunities	4,2	4,3	4,4	4,4
• Provides competence that is generally useful in occupational life	4,3	4,3	-	-
• Cooperates well with workplaces in the labour market	3,7	3,7	-	-

The numbers indicates that there is a potential for further alignment with work-life realities, and that the perceptual relevance indicates a weak decline during the last 4 years. It is, however, worth noting that student perceptions of work life relevance can be differently identified with the “real work-life” perception of business practitioners. The student survey is supplied with *the teachers survey* covering all programs and institutions within business administration. The first year of the survey was in 2017, involving 233 faculty members as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Working life relevance in business studies – teacher perceptions

<i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements? In this course ... (1 = hardly at all, 5 = to a very high extent)</i>	2017 (N=233)
The theory and practice components are well integrated in the study programme	3,8
I discuss the theory – practice connection in the programme with the practice teacher	3,5
The students achieve the intended learning outcome from practice training	4,2
I am well informed about the students’ experience in their practice periods	3,8
The college/university provides good follow-up for our students in their practice periods	3,8
The students are well prepared for what they will encounter in their practice periods.	3,4
Our practice teachers are well qualified for their task	4,1
The curriculum is up to date and in line with developments in public and working life	4,2
I cooperate with external agents in public or working life	3,3

When business school teachers assess aspects of work-life relevance of curriculum, the learning process and teacher competencies, the figures indicates a larger gap towards work-life than student perceptions. It is of particular interest that the item related to cooperation with working life is considered lowest (3,3 out of a maximum of 5). Taking the Norwegian survey together, from both students and faculty perceptions, there is a clear potential for further alignment with work-life realities for the business students.

2. What do we know about the “business” as host?

Table 3 presents an overview of studies including a host firm perspective on WIL. The overview is limited to articles published the last decade, 2009-2017.

Table 3: Empirical findings on the business as host in UILs and WIL projects

Author	Host perspective on WIL	Major findings
Cameron (2017)	The strategic and legal risks of work-integrated learning: An enterprise risk management perspective.	The confidentiality and legal risk of students
Della Volpe (2017)	Assessment of internship effectiveness in South Italy Universities. (Survey, N=732 students involved in Italian internships).	Students need to be better prepared for internships. Must improve teaching methods to breed student real life work engagement and more involving interaction in the business environment.
Jackson, Rowbottom, Ferns and McLaren (2017)	Employer understanding of work-integrated learning and the challenges of engaging in work placement opportunities. (Survey, N=112 Australian firms).	Challenges in identifying relevant and suitable projects for business placements. Lack of shared understanding of what WIL entails or what it offers, capacity to mentor/supervise, paperwork and formalities burden, university bureaucracy, lack of soft skills, timing structure of placements of students.
Nikolova and Andersen (2017)	Creating Shared Value Through Service-Learning in management Education (Case/survey, N=56 Australian community/host organizations)	Positive assessments on student professionalism and value received in host organizations. Challenges on understanding of the hosts’ needs and realism, and lack of university resources to follow up and support. Challenges in performance evaluation criteria.
Riley (2017)	Work-based learning for the creative industries: A case study of the development of BA (Hons) web design and social media.	WIL as a vehicle for enhancing the SMEs competitiveness.
Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016)	Can university-industry linkages stimulate student employability? (Survey, N=69 Tanzanian and international company respondents).	Strong industry opinion on employability. Two strategies for internships. University liaison officers to reduce support gap.
Pavlin (2016)	Considering University-Business Cooperation Modes from the Perspective of Enterprises. (Survey, N=397 European businesses).	Students as a resource for R&D and innovation. WIL as a long-term strategic and developmental process. University-firm organizational incompatibility, different time horizons and confidentiality challenges.
Vaaland and Ishengoma (2016)	University-industry linkages in developing countries: perceived effect on innovation. (Survey, N=69 Tanzanian and intl. company respondents).	Students and faculty exhibited a relatively weak interest in WIL compared to businesses.
Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015)	Experiential learning in accounting work-integrated learning: a three-way partnership. Case study, N=12 company informants	Student enthusiasm and “eager-to-learn” attitude reinvigorate the firm’s atmosphere. The cost factor and quality of supervision, challenges in performance evaluation criteria. Challenges in solving specific business problems and lack of soft “people” skills.
Govender and Taylor (2015)	A work integrated learning partnership model for higher education graduates to	Positive response in support of HRM as an academic subject, discipline and profession

	gain employment. (Focus groups, N=30 SA industry respondents).	
Hollis-Turner (2015)	Fostering employability of business graduates. (Delphi analysis, N=23 South African business professionals, 15 students, 15 academics).	Students as a talent pool of work-ready skilled graduates. Students' weaknesses on communication and soft skills.
Woodley, Burgess, Paguio and Bingley (2015)	Technology mentors: enablers of ICT uptake in Australian small business. (case study, N=6 Australian company informants)	WIL benefits for the firms. Students acting as technology mentors for business managers in SMEs to breed application of ICT.
Jeffries and Milne (2014)	Communication in WIL partnerships: the critical link. (case study, N=63 Australian host organization informants).	Six problematic patterns related to communication with university.
Alpert, Heaney and Kuhn (2009)	Internships in marketing: Goals, structures and assessment – Student, company and academic perspectives. (Survey, N=20 Australian firm marketing informants).	WIL aids the firm in recruiting and selecting new full-time employees. Challenges in identifying relevant and suitable projects. Logistical and administrative costs. Differences in performance evaluation.
Junek, Lockstone and Mair (2009)	Two perspectives on Event Management Employment: Student and Employer Insights Into the Skills Required to Get the Job Done! (Survey N=71 host appraisals from Australian firms).	Weaknesses in input, advice and support from university. Student weakness on written and oral communications skills, confidence and proactivity.

The body of research listed above provides perceptions of relevance when understanding WIL in a business context. Business involvement in WIL is justified primarily as a vehicle for making students generally more employable, and in one case; directly useful for improving business (Woodley *et al.*, 2015). The studies also indicates challenges for the firms when engaging in WIL, related to the student cohorts and their level of applicable skills, mentor resources and weak support systems from the school. Whereas these issues will be further discussed, there seems to be particularly one question that is lacking in the current research and should be further explored:

How can WIL specifically contribute to business development beyond contributing to generally more employable students in the future? This boils down to two sub questions:

- (i) *What characterizes a “good” WIL assignment for the host firm?*
- (ii) *Which firm segments (e.g. size and business area) should be matched with which student segments (e.g. type of skills and personal traits)?*

The positive perceptions of WIL

Several prior studies employing a host organizational perspective indicates a positive experience with engaging students in their day-to-day business activities. Nikolova and Andersen (2017) reports significant positive assessments on student professionalism and value received in host organizations involving business consultancy students. The students provided

access to high quality and independent advice to a small community that could be applied in planning and operations. The Woodley *et al.* (2015) study of Australian students as ICT technology mentors for SMEs is one further example of WIL benefits for the firms. In this case, students directly supported small business owners in developing digital literacies, rather than businesses training the students. A similar study of students supporting SMEs with technical and digital skills in Riley (2017) were reported to affect and enhance the SMEs competitiveness. By involving students, R&D and innovation can also be stimulated, since students might represent new and different lines of thoughts and perceptions of market opportunities and product offerings (Pavlin, 2016). The empirical study of Crumbley and Summers (1998) suggest that involvement of students in WIL arrangements stimulates existing staff reflection and development of operations and procedures. This positive effect of WIL is further supported by Eljido-Ten and Kloot (2015), who found that student enthusiasm and “eager-to-learn” attitude within WIL reinvigorate the firm’s atmosphere. Watson (1992) argues that WIL provides the host with access to enthusiastic, knowledgeable and inexpensive workers bringing new ideas to the workplace. Host benefits can, however, vary across business subjects. Jackson *et al.* (2017) emphasize *human resource management (HRM), marketing & public relations, finance & accounting* as particularly relevant for business placements as perceived by the employer host. Govender and Taylor (2015) report significant positive response in support of HRM as an academic subject, discipline and profession, especially since the WIL Partnership Model promotes employability via industry-academic-student partnerships.

The majority of studies indicating the value of WIL, however, related to long term benefits. Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) studying Tanzanian firms expressed a strong opinion on employability through university-industry linkages and student traineeships. WIL represents a talent pool of work-ready skilled graduates (Jackson *et al.*, 2017; Pavlin, 2016; Hollis-Turner 2015;) and aids the firm in recruiting and selecting new full-time employees (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009; DiLorenzo-Aiss & Mathisen, 1996), making it possible to screen and preselect future candidates (Govender & Taylor 2015; Ellis 2000), and thus reducing hiring and training costs for new employees (Maslen, 1996). Through WIL the potential recruiter can “try-before-you-buy” in a risk free manner (Eljido-Ten & Kloot, 2015).

Challenges of WIL

Studies of WIL arrangements is, however, not without challenges and drawbacks as perceived from the host perspective.

Lack of shared understanding of what WIL entails and offers

WIL involves various stakeholders and interests leading to a lack of a shared understanding of what WIL entails or what it offers (Jackson *et al.*, 2017) and represents misalignment in university and host expectations when engaging in WIL (Patrick *et al.*, 2009). For the host, the cost of training, mentorship and supervision of students represents a significant cost factor, which the hosts are unable to directly retain (Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015). Furthermore, WIL is not directly related to the hosts' short-term core business activities, rather to a long-term strategic and developmental process (Pavlin, 2016). It is therefore crucial that the university gains a better understanding of the hosts' needs and realities when scoping the project (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). This challenge is illustrated by the study of Vaaland and Ishengoma (2016) which found that students and faculty exhibited a relatively weak interest in engaging in university-industry linkages. This finding corresponds with Bruneel *et al.* (2010) which indicates reluctance among faculty and students to actively involve industry in university activities. This indicates that the university has a significant responsibility for understanding the host realities of what student involvement in business life implies when pursuing WIL projects.

Identification of suitable projects

What is a suitable project for WIL? Jackson *et al.* (2017), Alpert *et al.* (2009) and Toncar and Cudmore (2000) identified challenges in identifying relevant and suitable projects for WIL as perceived from the host's perspective. What is meaningful for the novice student is not necessarily beneficial to the firm. An initially relevant student project may also easily lead to "scope creep" in which either the host or the student adds in a broader project assignment than anticipated if WIL planning is weak (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). Literature often assumes mentors as the professionals and the industry experts for the novice student (Riley, 2017). This might be the opposite, for example when young students are mentoring senior business staff such as when students provide technical and digital skills to SMEs (Woodley *et al.*, 2015). This is similar to Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) suggesting two strategies for internships (i.e. one type of WIL); *internship adoption strategies* in which the students' role is to learn from the host (e.g.: an international oil company operating in a developing country) and *internship diffusion strategies* in which competent students change and professionalize indigenous local businesses. Hence, it seems crucial to define projects that can be clearly beneficial to the host, rather than a weak and general *corporate social responsibility* issue in favor of the university.

Allocation of mentor/supervisor resources in the host organization

Jackson *et al.* (2017) emphasize the importance of the host allocating sufficient and suitable capacity to mentor/supervise WIL students. This is supported by findings indicating lack of organizational capacity, particularly within SMEs, hampering necessary support for student and staff learning. This challenge is supported by Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015) emphasizing that the quality of supervision and the supervision structure is crucial for effective benefits from WIL, but varies depending on structural factors such as firm size. As perceived from the host, supervising the students is time consuming (Watson, 1992) and represents significant logistical and administrative costs (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009), which implies that WIL calls for university awareness of the resources needed when inviting a host organization into WIL (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). The importance of sensitivity towards the host from the university is strongly related to the next issue, namely criteria to apply when assessing a student practicing in a business.

Assessment of students

What principles should be followed when assessing the student performance in the host organization? Alpert, Heaney and Kuhn (2009) argues that it is appropriate to adopt a business-style performance evaluation rather than university-style grading. Whereas the host emphasizes a “business-style” oral presentation and communication, the student and university might favor a formal written reflective report. In most cases, the university grading system is even unknown to the host supervisor (Alpert, Heaney & Kuhn, 2009). Both Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015) and Nikolova and Andersen (2017) address the challenges in performance evaluation criteria for effective learning in WIL and the need for design of assessments reflecting the purpose of WIL.

University liaison and communication

Host organization (i.e. the firm) and the university may differ significantly in culture. Whereas the business may have short administrative lead times and a practically oriented decision processes, the business school can be characterized by employing a long-term perspective with less emphasis on direct measurable outcomes of processes. This challenge in terms of organizational incompatibility is addressed by Pavlin (2016), which claims that host organizations find it difficult to find the appropriate support-person at the associated university. This can be related to barriers related to different modes of communication and language between university and host (ibid) but it could also be related to practicalities such as the burden of handling paperwork and formalities when host firm deals with the university (Jackson *et al.*,

2017). This is particularly relevant when the SME, having limited administrative capacity, has to deal with the large university bureaucracy.

In the study by Junek *et al.* (2009) the suggestion is that more input, advice and support from university to host is necessary, and communication practices needs to be strengthened. Jeffries and Milne (2014) continue by suggesting that universities should listen more to the hosts and provide appropriate support when needed. They further suggest six problematic patterns related to communication between host and universities: (i) absence, (ii) uncoordinated communication, (iii) non-consultative approaches in which influence over WIL sometimes has a one-way direction, (iv) gaps in communication over student support, (v) incomplete feedback from university to the host, and (vi) variability and lack of consistency in information. Liaising and communication with university bureaucracy is a challenge (Jackson *et al.*, 2017) which can be reduced by establishment of university liaison officers (Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016). In general, academics involved with WIL need to be provided with sufficient resources to manage the needs of the host (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017; Coll & Chapman, 2000), yet still maintain a WIL based on mutual benefit and “collaborative self-interest” (Smith & Betts, 2000).

Timing and business cycle

Jackson *et al.* (2017) claim that the preferred timing structure of placements of students are often different between host and university. The university may prefer “one-day-per-week” whereas the business may prefer a more focused “block format” for the student involvement. It is further argued that the university semester and course structure is different from the firm’s business activity cycle, which may hamper the WIL activities. Different time horizons between university and host are therefore a challenge (Pavlin, 2016).

Lack of quality from students

Sattler and Peters (2012) address the challenge of locating suitably skilled students to take on work. Jackson *et al.* (2017) and Hollis-Turner (2017) mention problems such as weak oral presentations, grammar, spelling, attention to details and report writing; as well as presenting academic reports rather than practical recommendations. Student performance and courses passed by the student are sometimes misaligned. Junek, Lockstone and Mair (2009) suggest that students’ performance indicates weakness on written and oral communications skills, lack of confidence, and no proactivity. The lack of skills can also be related to the lack of core courses or lack of alignment when sequencing technical courses to the time of WIL. This may

hamper the students in solving specific business problems, e.g.: dealing with taxation issues as accounting interns (Elijido-Ten & Kloot, 2015). Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015) argue that some WIL students lack confidence and are unable to perform even simple tasks. Other weaknesses include lack of soft “people” skills such as dealing with superiors and exhibiting common courtesy. Other students are mentally unprepared for industry placements related to weak pre-placement processes. The Alpert, Heaney and Kuhn (2009) study of internships in marketing addresses the “intern-making-photocopies” syndrome in which students for various reasons, including lack of student quality, are allocated to limited learning activities.

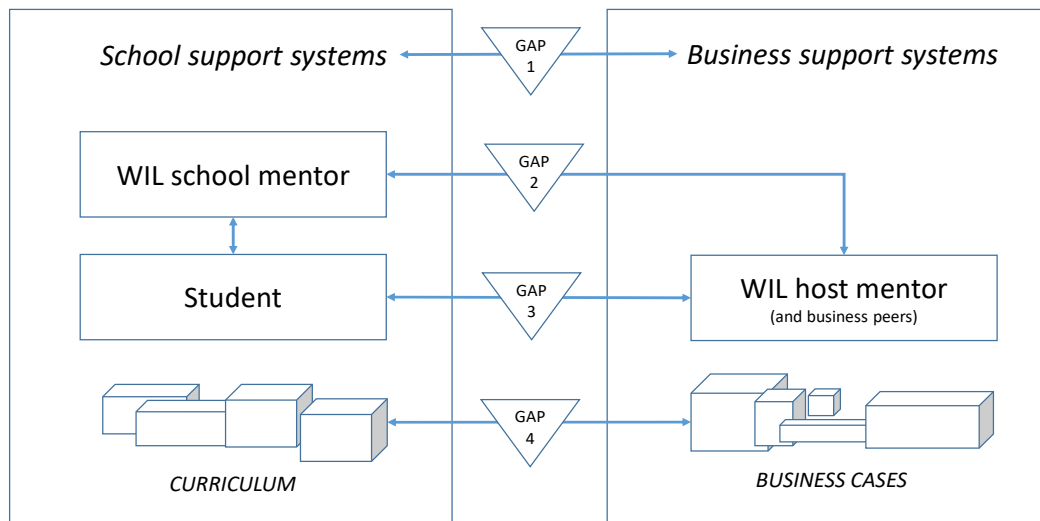
Client confidentiality

Pavlin (2016) addresses the challenge of confidentiality when involving students in a host organization. Sensitive issues from the HR department or accounting function can easily create legal issues. Cameron (2017) addresses this issue specifically by articulating the legal risk by involving students in-house, which have to be handled both by the university and by the host firm.

Discussion

The review of articles indicates several gaps or misalignments between the business school domain and the business domain in which the students are hosted as part of the WIL initiative. One of these gaps is at the institutional level and relates to the “WIL support systems” at the business school aimed to support faculty members, the academic mentors following up on their students assigned to the WIL initiative. In the business domain, support systems enable host mentors and collaborating peers to practically involve students in business tasks. This is the first gap illustrated in Figure 1. A second gap pertains to the connection between the business school mentor (i.e.: student supervisor) and the business mentor, and possibly other business peers associated with students within the firm. This gap is closely related to a third gap, that between the student and the host mentor, and has considerable impact on the WIL outcome for the student and for the firm. The fourth gap is related to the challenges in aligning curriculum influencing the student skills, and the business cases and tasks available for student involvement in the firm. Figure 1 presents a conceptualized model illustrating the business school and workplace business gaps.

Figure 1: WIL gaps from a business context



GAP 1:

1.1. Organizational capacity enabling long-term mutual WIL commitment

Involving students in a WIL initiative requires human capacity and support systems in the school and in the host firm. The firm’s willingness to host students depends on, among several factors, to avoid unnecessary time-consuming interaction with the school. Jackson *et al.* (2017) and Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015) specifically address this problem, and call for organizational capacity necessary to support host firms and student/school mentors. Host firms also find it difficult to find the appropriate support-person at the school (e.g. Pavlin, 2016), which requires more input, advice and support from the school (e.g. Junek *et al.*, 2009). In order to secure long-term commitment from the host firm, the WIL should be one element in a partnership model that enables effective routines for involvement of the firms. WIL cannot be a strategic goal for the school if not aligned with host firm interests.

1.2. Effective communication lines enabling easy interaction with the school

Weak lines of communication between the firms and school are considered as a challenge for the host firm, and communication practices needs to be strengthened (Junek *et al.*, 2009). Whereas the school usually is organized as separate thematic “silos” and suffers from lack of coordination across academic subjects, the firm is often organized differently and involves cross-functional interaction. Different organizational structures and school bureaucracy easily increases the administrative cost for the host firm and hampers further involvement in the WIL.

The school should understand that for the host firm the WIL student is primarily a burden drawing on limited internal human resource for a very uncertain future gain. A “single point of contact” for the host firm should be considered at the school, possibly as an integrated part of a broader partnership model.

1.3. Choice of student groups and host firm segments enabling useful assignments

This gap includes challenges of selecting and support relevant students cohorts and identifying willing and relevant firms able to support the WIL. Choice of student cohorts for the WIL can include all students, or a selection of students based on certain inclusion criteria for example graduate level marketing students within a specified elective course (e.g. internationalization or social media). This approach provides “specialized” student cohorts that can analyze new markets and thus provide significant value in a short term for the host firm. Thus, marketing challenges in host firms are targeted for the WIL. A different approach is to start with the host firm having business challenges requiring a cross-thematic approach, and then include student cohorts covering several thematic areas.

Inviting firms into WIL, and to keep them as host firms over time, requires awareness of a possible overload of other student requests for firm participation. Data collection and interviews related to bachelor and master assignments easily leads to an over-exposure of students to the firms. This can be reduced by having a WIL strategy that integrates all types of business interaction from students and segment the firms to be approached. The empirical findings are inconsistent regarding profiles of firms attached to successful WIL. It is however argued that large firms have resources available for a long term perspective of investing in a future recruitment base. Smaller firms operate in shorter time perspectives, but can possibly be more adoptive of new skills and competencies offered by students. It can be argued that, regardless of firm size, one needs to assure a shared understanding and expectations between school and firm, which can best be achieved when the host base is segmented. Having a too heterogeneous collection of host firms involved in a WIL project will easily require unrealistic and diversified support from the school.

1.4 Student confidentiality and the host-firm

Any company in a competitive market environment has sensitive information. Pricing strategies, customer base information, cost base, employee information and strategic “war plans” are examples in which students have a potential for revealing sensitive information to

the outside world. Pavlin (2016) and Cameron (2017) addresses the firm's need for confidentiality and handling of legal risk factors. Confidentiality agreements can to some extent reduce the risk, but the student's understanding and ethical attitudes, and the firm's trust in the student, are obvious challenges that need to be managed.

The first gap, on institutional level can be summarized in the following implication for the school:

- *Secure organizational capacity available for the firm at the school and nurture long-term partnership with the host firm.*
- *Strengthen and simplify communication lines between school and host firm.*
- *Select and align student cohorts and host firm segments enabling work relevant assignments.*
- *Handle student confidentiality issues enabling student access to vital business information.*

GAP 2

This gap pertains to how the school mentor and host mentor interact in order to close the gap between the student's academic curricular skills and real business problems. It is assumed that the school and host-firm has at least one mentor with the purpose of following up on the student enrolled in a WIL project. In the firm, students may also interact with business peers associated with the specific assignment.

2.1 School based versus host-firm based mentorship

The school mentor and the host-firm mentor represents two opposite competencies and priorities. Whereas the school mentor has a career within focused research and academic based teaching, the host-firm mentor is a pragmatic generalist focusing on achieving business goals. The school mentor typically has a PhD with limited or no prior business experience. The host mentor, might have a higher academic degree, but nevertheless may lack understanding of curriculum and research based literature exposed to the student. This diversity easily creates incompatibility in the WIL focus and how students should be guided. This incompatibility is almost non-existent in other academic studies, for example in medicine, where medical professors at the medical school usually have clinical practice at a hospital as a parallel activity to teaching and research duties. The same arrangement should be considered in a business

school context. A second way to bridge the gap is to involve business practitioners in teaching activities as formalized part-time lecturers, thus enabling the faculty and students to understand the mindset of the business and ultimately enhance the WIL mentorship provided to the student.

2.2 Performance assessment criteria

How should student performance be evaluated in a WIL? Alpert *et al.* (2009), and Nikolova and Andersen (2017) point out that it may be appropriate to apply a business-style performance evaluation rather than the conventional university-style grading system. This may be difficult as the student and school mentor are used to reflective written reports, rather than the business-style oral presentation and communication. This potential gap should also be included in the planning stage and reflect the purpose of WIL.

The second gap, between the school and host mentor can be reduced by:

- *Involving business practitioners as part time lecturers and to facilitate faculty members practicing in the business environment in order to improve and gain an understanding of the business mindset and WIL.*
- *Apply business criteria when evaluating students enrolled in a WIL activity.*

GAP 3

The third gap relates to the student and the host-firm mentor interaction in which particularly two issues can be highlighted:

3.1 Lack of student soft skills

The firms indicate that many students suffer from a lack of communicative and collaborative skills, or are unprepared for the assignment in the firm (e.g. Hollis-Turner, 2015). A preparation course should be considered as a part of WIL. This could include themes such as business communication, team-working, oral presentation skills, body language, business courtesy and attitudes enabling WIL students to reduce the “practice shock”.

3.2 Lack of student hard skills

The hard skills include the curricular knowledge elements which the student has achieved during the business studies. The challenge here is that the knowledge elements can be difficult to apply in a situation where the business problem comprises a variety of curricular elements. In other words, the student is confused by differences between how subjects are organized and learned and the actual business assignment. This challenge can possibly be reduced by

reorganizing some courses, or design new ones, where specific knowledge elements are targeted towards WIL assignments.

Gap 3 has two identified implications as follows:

- *Introduction of a pre-WIL course in which students are trained in soft skills.*
- *Alignment of existing courses or establish new ones to better fit knowledge elements with WIL assignments in real work-life.*

GAP 4

Curriculum and the real-life business incompatibility

Curriculum in a business school and the real-life business tasks cannot, and should not, be fully aligned, in a broad sense. The school brings in new elements not yet adopted in work-life, which in the long run affects business practice. The school has a curriculum developed over time and is highly influenced by academics developed within a theory-based system more or less independent from market signals. Businesses also affect the learning institution as objects for research and knowledge creation. In a narrow sense, however, WIL raises some challenges when integrating students loaded with the curricula knowledge element into a business environment, loaded with real-life tasks and challenges to must be solved (e.g. Hollis-Turner, 2015) WIL is not directly related to the hosts' short-term core business activities, rather to a long-term strategic and developmental process (Pavlin, 2016). Firms on the other hand have expressed the challenge of identifying suitable projects that can be beneficial with direct application in the firm (Jackson *et al.*, 2017; Alpert *et al.*, 2009). It is therefore crucial that the university gains a better understanding of the hosts' needs and realities when scoping the project (Nikolova & Andersen, 2017). The student's course portfolio should contain elements that could easily be connected with practical assignments in a real-world business context. Different time cycles between sequences and structures in curriculum and business tasks in which WIL students participate is also a challenge which calls for coordination. Different time horizons between university and host are therefore a challenge (Pavlin, 2016). This fourth gap is leads to the following implication:

- *In order to secure a learning process in the firm, curriculum and WIL assignments should be real-world aligned, also in terms of time sequences.*

Conclusion

Based on a recent Norwegian survey of business students and faculty, both groups indicate a potential for enhancing work-life relevance of curriculum and programs at the business schools. This potential can only be realized through carefully and systematically closing the gaps between the school domain and the business domain. The literature review seems to indicate four gaps that need to be closed or aligned for successful WIL in a business context. One gap is related to the institutional level of the firm and the school and their support systems. The crucial point here is the ability to select relevant student segments suitable for WIL and be able to recruit host firms that can benefit from the students and at the same time be able to involve students in real business tasks. Organizational support capacity at the school has to be provided for the school mentor, student and the host mentor.

The second gap addresses mentors following up on the students in the WIL initiative, one from the business school and one from the host firm. One important challenge here is related to criteria to be used for student performance, where we argue that the host should have a significant impact on the criteria for assessing the student. The third gap involves the student and the host firm mentor and firm peers. Challenges in students' soft skills, personal attitudes and readiness for work life experience both address student selection process but also the curriculum, which may call for adjustments to align with specific business cases to be solved by the student. The gap between business school curriculum and the real life business cases and tasks formed the fourth gap, which may call for adjustment in curriculum in order to enable students to analyze and contribute to solve specific business problems.

Further empirical research is recommended to explore how the gaps can be closed from a business host perspective. Research questions could include: To what extent are firms willing to devote resources into WIL, how much and on which premises? It is imperative that the academic business schools realize that a vast majority of businesses (and potential WIL hosts) are not dependent on students to survive in a competitive market environment, whereas the business school does depend on creating future-fit employable graduates who are able to solve real business problems.

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