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Work-Integrated Learning Special Section

Six Essential Elements of High-Quality Work-Integrated Learning Experiences: A Thematic Analysis of Students' Voices

ABSTRACT

This study identified six essential elements of high-quality work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences through a thematic analysis of interviews with 30 higher education students from a variety of academic disciplines who participated in multiple forms of WIL (co-operative education, clinical placements, community service-learning, internships, and professional experience) at three institutions in three countries. In doing so, the study adds to a growing literature on students' voices in WIL and centers students' perspectives in ongoing discussions about creating quality WIL opportunities. The themes suggested through the analysis also provide direct, practical guidance to WIL practitioners charged with managing WIL programs and relationships between students, educators, and employers.

KEYWORDS

work-integrated learning, quality assurance, student voice, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Work-integrated learning (WIL) can offer benefits that are difficult for students to achieve in traditional classroom settings (Jackson and Cook 2023). As such, many post-secondary institutions now offer various WIL experiences. While the WIL community welcomes the growth of these offerings, it also cautions that quality assurance is integral to program success (Campbell and Pretti 2023). Consider this recent anecdote: as part of a university's plan to increase energy efficiency on campus, the university hired two co-operative education (co-op) students. They asked one student to create a computer software application that visualized opportunities for increased efficiency. The other student counted the number and kind of lightbulbs in every office in multiple campus buildings. While both students had the same employer and worked on the same team, only one is likely to report that their experience was a high-quality experience.

This anecdote begs a fundamental question: what are the essential elements of a high-quality WIL experience? So far, the literature has not fully addressed this question. While there are several models of quality WIL (Campbell et al. 2023; Smith, Ferns, and Russell 2016; Winchester-Seeto 2019), they represent institutional perspectives, focusing on program elements such as reflection, debriefing, and assessment activities. Yet, students subjectively construct their WIL experiences (Eames and Cates 2011), meaning students should help identify the essential elements of high-quality experiences. As Eady, Drewery, Burney, Li, and Livingstone (2025) suggested, the institutional perspective on quality WIL experiences "sidelines students and their insights about quality WIL" (223). An emerging line of research identifies several elements that may be salient to students' conceptions

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of quality WIL experiences (Drewery, Pretti, and Fannon 2022; Drewery, Eady, Burney, Li, and Livingstone 2024), but additional research would help establish the essential elements.

This study identifies six essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences from students' perspectives. It addresses the research question: what do students identify as the essential elements of a high-quality WIL experience? The theoretical orientation behind the question was one of student voice, which reinforces that students offer important insights into the quality of their learning experiences. We adopted this orientation in order to address the call for more attention to student voices in WIL (Eady et al. 2025). We addressed the research question through a thematic analysis of a multi-institutional and transdisciplinary dataset collected from students with various WIL experiences in three countries. Findings from the study reveal the features of experience that matter most to students in WIL opportunities to post-secondary institutions and WIL hosts. Further, the findings build on the scholarship of teaching and learning by emphasizing student voices (Matthews and Dollinger 2023).

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical orientation

Student voice served as the theoretical orientation for the study. This orientation assumes that students' perspectives on their educational experiences are insightful, legitimate, and valuable to developing educational policies and curricula (Cook-Sather 2006; Fielding 2012). This orientation also proposes that students are co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of predefined curricula. It contrasts the dominant discourse about WIL that highlights institutional and industry views about what successful experiences look like (Bovill 2020; Campbell, Russell, McAllister, Smith, Tunny, Thomson, and Barret 2022; Smith et al. 2016; Winchester-Seeto 2019). Our research, therefore, advocates for students by elevating their lived experiences and narratives, especially with regards to how they distinguish between high-quality and low-quality WIL practices. This approach aligns with the call by Eady et al. (2025) for more inclusive and participatory models of educational practice within educational research.

Data collection

We collected data via 30 one-on-one semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students in various academic disciplines at three institutions in three countries. The students experienced five different types of WIL (co-op, clinical placements, service-learning, internships, and professional experience). We recruited participants at the University of Waterloo through invitation letters to a random sample of co-op students' university-affiliated email accounts. We recruited participants at Elon University and the University of Wollongong through similar invitation letters posted to course management sites in selected programs. Though we recruited these students through courses, participation in the study was entirely voluntary and had no bearing on students' courses in any way. This approach provided a novel, multidisciplinary, and multinational dataset in which we could explore students' conceptions of quality WIL. We asked participants to describe what a high-quality WIL experience meant to them and to elaborate on their descriptions with examples of lived experiences. We audio recorded and transcribed verbatim all interviews. Depending on the institution, participants received either nominal remuneration or a certificate of completion in appreciation for their time. The study received clearance from institutional review boards at all three institutions (Waterloo IRB 45051, Elon IRB 00002430, Wollongong HREC2022/304).

Participants

Eleven participants attended the University of Waterloo in Canada. Six were in arts or social sciences programs (e.g., psychology, sociology, legal studies), and five were in engineering or mathematics (e.g., computational mathematics, management engineering, mechanical engineering). These eleven students were in co-op, a structured program alternating between classroom learning and paid work experience related to a student's field, each experience typically lasting four months long. Ten participants were from the University of Wollongong in Australia. Half ($n = 5$) of these individuals were in a teacher education program that featured a professional experience ("PEX") common to most teacher education programs globally. The PEX is a structured opportunity for students to gain real-world experience in their field of study. The other half were in a nursing program where students completed clinical rotations typical of the applied health professions. Clinical rotations involve supervised, hands-on training that allows students to apply classroom knowledge while rotating through various health specialties. Nine participants attended Elon University in the United States. These individuals were enrolled in a human services program, which is like social work. They participated in unpaid internships and service-learning experiences. The internships offered practical work experience, and the service-learning involved community service activities that complemented academic content and promoted civic responsibility. Participants from all three institutions were typical undergraduate age, roughly 18 to 24 years old.

Data analyses

We analyzed interview transcripts through thematic analysis, using steps that are typical of this approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, all three authors became familiar with the data by reading each transcript multiple times over several weeks. The team met briefly after that to share initial impressions and confirm readiness for the next step. The first and second authors of this paper completed the remaining steps. Second, the researchers generated an initial set of codes by summarizing phrases, sentences, or sometimes paragraphs. This step produced 59 codes. Examples of these codes include "better than when you started," "feeling included," "supervisor competence," "opportunity to learn," and "workplace friendships." Third, the researchers sought out themes using a card-sorting activity. The researchers printed each code on a piece of paper, placed them on a desk, and then sorted into themes such that codes within a theme were like one another and codes between themes were dissimilar to one another. Fourth, the researchers reviewed the created themes (groups of paper). This step involved discussion, explanation, and debate. The researchers changed some themes as a result. Some were relabeled, and others were amalgamated. Last, the researchers formally defined each theme. The results of the thematic analysis are presented in the next section of this paper.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis produced six themes in response to the research question, namely: (1) they have a learning mindset, (2) they maintain balance, (3) they make a difference, (4) they grow, (5) they belong, and (6) they receive competent support and mentorship. Each theme begins with the word "they" in reference to the interviewed students. This reflects a focus on students at the center of the experience and how the quality of experience is dictated by what happens to them. The themes and their sub-themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Six themes representing students' views about essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences

Theme	Description
They have a learning mindset	The student is motivated to learn and is invested, absorbed, and engaged in the experience.
They maintain balance	The student's work is in harmony with other domains of their life.
They make a difference	The student perceives that they are contributing to something bigger than themselves, positively impacting others.
They grow	The student recognizes that they are developing both personally and professionally.
They belong	The student feels that they belong in the social context of their work (e.g., their team or organization).
They receive competent support and mentorship	The student receives support from their host (typically from a competent supervisor) and institution, receiving mentorship that goes beyond a specific work role.

Theme 1: They have a learning mindset

The first theme reflected that the quality of a WIL experience is influenced by students' pre-determined mindset, that is the beliefs, motivations, and attitudes that they carry into the experience. One participant (Wollongong P10) summarized that whether a student experiences high-quality WIL "depends on what the student brings to the placement." They shared how they demonstrated such interest at work and how this led to a valuable experience:

If they want to learn what they want to get out of the placement, basically. So I wanted to go to ED [Emergency Department] and just dive into everything and get my feet wet and just do everything. So I went there and I would tell my nurses that. And they would be, "Right. Let's go. Let's do this. I'll show you this. If you want to do it, we'll do it."
(Wollongong P10)

The notion of the mindset emerged as a label that characterized this sentiment. For example, one participant (Elon P1) described such a mindset in the following way:

They need to go in there with the idea that they want to develop more than just getting the check. So they need to go in there saying 'I'm taking this job to learn more things and further develop myself.' Of course, there are times where you just need the check. But even those times, there's still something that you could learn. So coming in with that mindset.

Another participant (Wollongong P8) emphasized that quality WIL experiences depended on "your mindset, and how you experience it will be better." Yet another participant (Elon P5) said "no matter what that is, you have to have an interest in it, so I guess to me I think that a lot of bad internships could have been good with someone with the right mindset and interest and personality." To support

this further, one participant (Elon P2), who was describing a negative WIL experience, spoke about boredom: “you’re not learning anything and you’re bored even doing work. [. . .] what’s being given to you, you’re not interested in, you’re not trying.” This insight suggests that when the student is not interested in the experience, the WIL would be unsuccessful.

Theme 2: They maintain balance

The second theme reflected students’ recognition that the quality of a WIL experience is influenced by the integration of the experience and other domains of life at the time of the experience. Domains of life could include social relationships with friends and family, academic work, care obligations, paid work, and more. One participant (Waterloo P2) claimed that “when you have a proper work-life balance, I think it is one of the main ones that contribute to having a positive workplace experience.” Students experience high-quality WIL when the work experience is in harmony with other domains of life.

In contrast, several participants mentioned that their WIL experiences conflicted with other domains of life and that this resulted in a negative evaluation of the experience. For example, one participant (Waterloo 2) shared that their experience was negative because “it started affecting my life outside of the workplace. I was unable to have, like, a proper work-life balance because I was always stressed about the next day.” Similarly, a participant (Elon P4) whose WIL experience and academic coursework occurred in the same period said that academic demands can conflict with work and reduce the quality of the WIL experience. Specifically, they said “having the ability to make time in your schedule to go, not only like, attend the internship or the practicum or whatever, but spend time and be able to ask questions and not be like you’re just rushing through it.” Another participant (Elon 8) shared that some other students “have had less of an opportunity” to participate in WIL, including “one of my friends from the class only gets to volunteer two hours a week.” This presents a conflict between the desire to immerse in the WIL experience and the availability of an experience that fits with one’s schedule. Together, these quotes detail that maintaining a balance between the experience and other domains of life is an essential feature of a high-quality WIL experience.

While compensation did not emerge as a sub-theme per se, it was present in the dataset and seemed related to the notion of balance between work and life. We mention this here, given the WIL community’s ongoing discussion about the complexities of compensation in WIL (Hoskyn, Cameron, Lucas, Trede, Yuen, Rae, Capocchiano, and Eady 2023). One participant (Elon P9) who had participated in both paid and unpaid WIL experiences was especially vocal about this topic. They told us that “being paid would help as well. It makes it a little difficult sometimes to wake up, you’re like, ‘What am I doing this for?’” They also added that they would like to receive “something to help supplement, kind of, the different needs you have throughout the semester, especially like when your internship is a farther distance, like gas and your meals.” They suggested that unpaid WIL created financial stress that other students (but not they themselves, thanks to support from their family) would have to address through other paid work.

Theme 3: They make a difference

The third theme reflected that students want to make a positive contribution or impact during their WIL experience. When asked to describe what a high-quality WIL experience means to them, one participant (Elon P3) answered “I always come back with the feeling of ‘I’m making a difference here, and it shows.’ A thing that I’m doing here matters to somebody.” Another participant (Waterloo P2) shared a similar response, specifically “a difference that’s actually made, I think that’s one of the big things that make your workplace a more positive experience.”

For some students, making a difference meant having a positive impact on the host organization. For example, one participant (Waterloo P11) recalled that “at my previous co-ops at Questrade and Loblaws, I was actually working on projects that delivered value to the company” and added, “to me that means like a higher quality co-op.” Another participant (Elon P7) shared a similar sentiment as they spoke about performing a basic task at work: “doing paperwork might be something that you don’t feel as impactful, but we’re helping an organization run, function the way that it needs to help other people.” For this student, the opportunity to help the host organization contributed to the quality of their WIL experience.

For others, making a difference meant having a positive impact on others, typically those served by the host organization, such as clients, patients, or community members. One participant (Waterloo P6) clearly articulated this sentiment, “I think what makes for a high-quality work experience is that impact that I do have on others.” In this case, they referred to the clients of a start-up company in which they worked. The participant later added, “when I get to accomplish that, it kind of makes me feel like, ‘OK, I’ve done a good job. OK, this was like a fruitful experience.’”

Theme 4: They grow

The fourth theme reflected that students prefer WIL experiences that promote personal and professional development. This theme contained three sub-themes: (1) they grow as a person, (2) they gain new direction, and (3) they learn through challenge. The first sub-theme related to a personal sense of growth, as though the self improved because of the experience. One participant (Wollongong P8) described this sentiment when they said a high-quality WIL (clinical rotation, for them) experience involved “being able to leave the day thinking that you are a better nurse than when you started” and added that “if you can recall what you did that day, and being like ‘that is monumental like I’m going to change,’ that is quality.” Another participant (Waterloo P1) shared that this sense of personal growth meant preparing for the future of work. Specifically, they said:

I think a high-quality work experience would be one where you actually see yourself gaining more . . . I don’t wanna say knowledge but basically more intuition on how to work. [. . .] So when you see that you’re not feeling threatened whenever there’s a new task, you know, you feel like, OK I can handle this because I’ve handled this in the past and I already have, like, these instincts on how to work.

The second sub-theme contained under the theme of growth was about gaining new direction for their professional future. Participants described high-quality WIL as an experience in which they learned more about the kind of work that they want to do in the future. One participant (Elon P3) described this as a sense that “it’s something that is going to impact the student directly and make them say ‘yes, I want to continue to be involved with this, even after it’s not required of me anymore.’” Other participants similarly stated that “a high-quality work experience is more about what you want to be doing” (Waterloo P7), and that a high-quality WIL experience “[gives] me a better understanding of maybe where I want to go down the road or practical things that I can put in practice in terms of interviews” (Elon P5).

The third sub-theme reflected students’ recognition that their growth occurred when their work challenged their knowledge and abilities and presented situations where their competencies were not enough to overcome the challenge. In these situations, participants described the need to seek new answers and develop new skills and knowledge. Some participants described this place of learning as being pushed beyond their “comfort zone.” For instance, one participant (Elon 2) recalling

their earlier WIL experiences said, “For a lot of my initial experiences, they were all things that I had already done before,” but suggested this was not ideal because WIL is “not supposed to be something you’re familiar with. It’s supposed to push you out of your comfort zone.” Other participants further emphasized the notion of learning through doing (i.e., engaging with a challenge). Participants described this in terms of “having the chance to actually have a go at it” (Wollongong P5) and “a place where I actually get to employ my brain, because otherwise what’s the point?” (Waterloo P4).

Theme 5: They belong

The fifth theme reflected students’ desire to feel connected to others within the WIL experience. Importantly, this theme included the greatest number of codes and had the highest number of associated quotes, which may suggest that this matters most to participants. The theme contained two sub-themes: (1) they belong at work, and (2) their supervisor invests in them. The first sub-theme reflected the importance of positive social relationships between students and others at work. Participants usually described this as feeling comfortable, cared for, and included. For instance, one participant (Waterloo P9) said “I think for me, what would make a high-quality work experience is again to be included in things and to feel comfortable with who you’re working with.” Another participant (Wollongong P5) who felt included in a high-quality experience also offered that “if the staff wasn’t so welcoming to me from the first day, I think that would have altered my PEX very quickly.” Some participants reported quite strong feelings of belonging. One participant (Elon P9) said their coworkers were like family, and another said that their colleagues “actually care about you” (Wollongong P7). Notions of teamwork, support, and camaraderie were also noticeable in this sub-theme.

These quotes demonstrate that participants attributed a sense of belonging to their colleagues, as in specific individuals or groups of people at work. In addition, belonging was connected to a broader organizational culture. Participants suggested that high-quality WIL experiences are situated within organizations that welcome students and consider them capable and important organizational members. One participant (Waterloo P8) said whereas in a previous role, “I didn’t really get to form many relationships cause everyone was just so focused on their work, there was no like sort of camaraderie,” in their current role “it’s the complete opposite, they strive for just, you know, being a team and they check up on me if I like show up a little late because I missed the bus there. It’s just, yeah, it’s just the culture I think that drastically improves my experience.” Another participant (Waterloo P7) described this sub-theme in the following way:

Even if you’re at a great role in like any company, if they have like a very not-so-great work culture where they don’t really engage in team activities or you’re not allowed to give any feedback on any systems without any backlash or anything, you’re not allowed to question design decisions, that can get pretty irritating and pretty unfair and you might not like your work experience.

Participants associated belongingness with a high-quality WIL experience, and attributed that belongingness both at an interpersonal level, with specific colleagues or within a given team, and at a more general level of organizational culture.

The second sub-theme within this theme was about students’ supervisors. The key characteristic of this sub-theme was that students who had a high-quality experience also perceived that their WIL supervisor cared about them, invested in their success, and attended to their needs. We coded this sub-theme under the theme of belonging and not under the theme of support/mentorship

because it was emotional and relational, carrying with it a sentiment of feeling personally connected to the supervisor. Participants shared statements such as “I think a quality internship in large part comes from interest of the supervisor” (Elon P2), “would [the supervisor] notice if you were gone?” is the most important thing” (Waterloo P10), and claimed that a “good one-on-one experience with your boss” (Waterloo P1) is essential to the quality of a WIL experience.

Another defining feature of the supervisor sub-theme pertained to the notion of the supervisors’ mindsets, specifically that the supervisor invested in the student’s development. Several participants offered that having a supervisor who cares about students’ learning is an essential feature of a high-quality WIL experience. One participant (Elon P1) described this sub-theme as:

The supervisor has to have that mindset, that’s not “I just need somebody to help me with a few things.” They have to be open to communicate, open to advice, open to help, and it might take more effort on their end, right at the front end to help develop that. But the quality over time will be exponential growth.

Participants described supervisors with this mindset as those “who you trust and someone who has your best interest in mind, and who is willing to give you those customizable experiences” (Elon P4) and those “who have the patience to be able to recognize these [students], they’re just learning” (Wollongong P6). By contrast, one participant (Wollongong P3) described a supervisor without such a mindset:

[They] might either just make you sit there the whole time and pretend that you taught for the hours, or even if you do teach the hours, they just not going to say anything. You know, just give you very general feedback. Nothing specific. Just make it very easy on themselves.

Theme 6: They receive competent support and mentorship

The sixth theme reflected participants’ recognition that high-quality WIL depends on support and mentorship provided by competent workplace supervisors and mentors at students’ post-secondary institutions. Behind a sense of belonging, students discussed this theme the second most in the interviews. There were four sub-themes within this theme: (1) their supervisor is competent, (2) their supervisor supports them, (3) they receive mentorship, and (4) they receive institutional support. The first sub-theme reflected the importance of having a supervisor who demonstrates professionalism and is knowledgeable about best practices in their field. Participants suggested competent supervisors were key to high-quality WIL. For example, one participant (Wollongong P10) said, “you have to have nurses on the floor that are willing to teach students who want to learn, and you have to have nurses who are competent in their skills to teach you the right way as well.”

The student complemented this mention of skills with the acknowledgement of professionalism. Participants wanted to see that their supervisors demonstrated the kind of professionalism that they came to expect because of the emphasis on professionalism articulated by their course instructors. Yet some participants found disagreement between the professionalism they expected and what they observed. For example, one participant (Elon P5) said “we did the heavy lifting and he got all the credit because he is the assistant director versus we’re just student coordinators. So that kind of definitely decreases morale in terms of we feel like we’re doing everything.” Another participant (Wollongong P10) working in a patient care setting shared that their supervisor:

Wasn't very person-centered. It was completely different from what we were learning in class as to what mental healthcare should be. And yeah, it's just really sad to see [. . .] the most people-centered job needed and they're not doing what you're expecting. Yeah, that was the worst.

The second sub-theme described the support received from the supervisor. Within the general theme of support and mentorship, this sub-theme was the most prominent, as reflected in the number of codes associated with it. Participants said that “your boss can kind of make or break the position for you” (Waterloo P5), and “definitely that good supervisor or boss, that would really make a co-op experience for me” (Waterloo P6). They (Wollongong P8) further emphasized the importance of:

. . . the degree of support that you would have on a day-to-day basis, because at the end of the day you're an undergraduate student, and 99% of the time [you] have no idea what you're doing, and you need someone to guide you [. . .] encouraging you and saying that you are doing the right thing, you're doing a good job.

Other participants recalled negative WIL experiences in which their supervisors were unsupportive. One participant (Wollongong P4), an education student, said “we've done assignments on how to do lesson plans and submitting lesson plans of our own for assessment tasks in classes, [but that] doesn't necessarily mean the same in a classroom setting.” They reminded us that the supervisor supports integration into an authentic work setting and that this is critical to the success of WIL. Likewise, another participant (Elon P4) said that supervisors support “gradual integration into the workplace” and shared that “I definitely had experiences where I've just been chucked in somewhere and said ‘good luck’ and it's challenging, and it's character building on the one hand, on the other hand, it's terrifying and it's not always safe.” Several other participants (Elon P6, Waterloo P1, Waterloo P6, Wollongong P2) stated that supervisors show support by checking in and building a personal relationship with their students and that these kinds of support-showing behaviors contribute to high-quality WIL.

The third sub-theme was about mentorship. Participants shared that “mentorship is a big piece” (Elon P7), and that “having that mentor or teacher that wants to help you learn and do the best you can while you are there” (Wollongong P2) is an essential part of a high-quality WIL experience. It seemed that such mentorship could be delivered by a direct supervisor or by someone else. For instance, one participant (Waterloo P11) said that “in my best experiences I've had both a manager and a mentor for my co-op program” and added that their manager “kind of tells me what I should be working on and provides me those opportunities, and at the same time I would typically have a mentor who answers any questions that I have really.” For that student, having a person to help guide them through the work experience mattered.

The fourth sub-theme was about the support students receive from their institutions. Several participants acknowledged that institutions provide support before and during a WIL experience, and that this enhances the experience for students. One co-op student (Waterloo P8) shared that, when they were struggling to find a co-op job, their co-op advisor “sort of coached me through how to do it and she relaxed me because I was stressing, and it was really nice to get that support from my co-op advisor.” That same participant appreciated their co-op advisor's support in terms of “check-ins to see how everything's going. They contact your supervisor, they contact you just to see how everything's running, and then they just ask you to routinely do updates about like how things are

going and things like that.” Another participant (Wollongong P5) shared “I was able to have one of my subject coordinators for my advisor, just having someone like check in with main office support was really helpful.” Similarly, one student (Waterloo P6) in a program that hired student advisor staff said:

just that support from other people as well like the co-op person or co-op advisor—I have a great one right now, but a poor one last time which, like, really showed a difference between how they can support us. And following up with you so much, actually remembering and caring about what you told them.

In contrast to this, one participant (Wollongong P3) suggested that “if your lecturers at uni just gave you no tips, no information, they just kinda you know throw you in there with nothing, I think that would create a lot of nerves.” Institutional support, from an advisor or academic position, depending on the kind of WIL program, helped establish a high-quality WIL experience.

DISCUSSION

Building on Eady et al.’s (2025) call for more research on student voices in WIL, this study aimed to explore how students perceive quality in their WIL experiences. Our multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary data provided rich insights from students’ perspectives.

Students’ perspectives on the essential elements of high-quality WIL experiences

Interviewed students identified six essential elements of a high-quality WIL experience: (1) students’ interest in learning during the experience, (2) a balance between the experience and other domains of life, (3) a positive impact on others, (4) some sense of growth or development, (5) a sense of belonging tied to people in the experience, and (6) support and mentorship from competent professionals. Some of these themes align with earlier research (Aprile and Knight 2019; Cant, Ryan, Hughes, Luders, and Cooper 2021; Eady et al. 2025; Ngonda, Shaw, and Kloot 2022), and some were novel. For instance, Drewery et al.’s (2022) research in a co-op context revealed that WIL students associate the quality of their experiences with the quality of their development, impact on hosts and other partners, and connection between the experience and both academic and career paths. Additionally, Eady et al.’s (2025) systematic literature review labeled perceptions of the work environment (e.g., cultural safety and tolerance of error) as important to students’ perceptions of quality WIL experiences. All of these experiential aspects emerged in the present study.

While previous literature already established that students want to grow, make a difference, belong, and receive support, the present research identifies students’ mindsets and the notion of balance as essential to high-quality WIL experiences. The notion of balance was mentioned peripherally by Eady et al. (2025), but the present study suggests this is an essential element of students’ WIL experiences. The notion of a mindset focused on learning appears to be a new theme. Of course, the literature already indicates that mindsets are important to student intentions for taking charge of their own learning (e.g., Jiang, Liu, Yao, Li, and Li 2023). Our data uncover a link between such mindsets and the success of students’ WIL experiences. This suggests the quality of students’ experiences is affected by students themselves and by events that occur outside of the work opportunity, both temporally and across domains of life.

Alignment between students’ perspectives and institutional perspectives

The themes uncovered in this study are different from those mentioned in research on quality WIL that draws from institutional perspectives. Several of the elements identified by students are

absent from previous models. For instance, students emphasized that conflict between life's obligations and the WIL opportunity can reduce the quality of the student experience. This issue did not arise in frameworks of quality WIL available in the literature. This difference highlights that institutions must listen to students' voices and then incorporate those into policies and practices that support student success through WIL. At the same time, students did not mention many of the elements that WIL scholars consider essential to successful WIL. For instance, while the opportunity to reflect on one's work is widely considered a key mechanism by which WIL transforms students into skilled professionals (Trede and Jackson 2021), students did not mention reflection as a key element. This suggests that institutions should not solely focus on providing only what students want. Students also need support from practitioners in ways that they may not fully appreciate.

Students as co-creators of WIL experiences

This previous point highlights the importance of thinking about students not as recipients of an experience but as co-creators of it. This point is further supported by the interview data that suggests high-quality WIL experiences are co-created by students and supportive hosts. Students contribute to co-creation by bringing the right mindset into the experience. This includes a willingness to learn from others and a focus on the work at hand. Members of the host organization, especially supervisors, also influence the quality of the experience by welcoming students into the work environment, demonstrating professionalism, caring for a student's development, teaching specific skills, and offering mentorship. Co-creation is further supported by institutions that prepare students before the WIL experience and mobilize academic and support staff in order to address issues during the experience.

The literature already recognizes the importance of co-creation to the success of WIL (Dollinger and Lodge 2019; Ruskin and Bilous 2020). It states that students, hosts, and institutions must work together to ensure that the experience leads to positive outcomes for students and organizations alike. The present study captures this dynamic and adds new detail about the role of students in the co-creation process, which is often overlooked in the literature. Specifically, the thematic analysis suggests that students themselves recognize that the way they approach the experience influences the success of that WIL. Exceptional WIL experiences require partnerships between students and hosts who are ready, willing, and able to work together. This partnership is enhanced and maintained through institutional support.

The role of others

The student interviews remind us of the importance of others to the quality of students' WIL experiences. Students spoke about connection, belonging, support, mentorship, and learning from others, all of which relate to students' relationships with individuals they meet throughout their WIL experiences. We have long known that WIL is inherently a social experience, involving interactions with a variety of stakeholders, such as supervisors, mentors, peers, and industry professionals. Students' perspectives on quality WIL were deeply connected to their views about their relationships with others. Supervisor-student relationships affect learning and engagement in a variety of ways, such as through the frequency of interactions, the quality of guidance provided, and the ways supervisors assist students in navigating challenges. Students also highlighted mentorship as important, a concept that was covered extensively in previous research. Students also mentioned colleagues and even institutional members, such as support staff and faculty who check in on students during WIL, as having important social influences on the experience.

Given the essential role of others in shaping the WIL experience, we believe that future research should more closely examine the breadth and significance of these relationships. A line of inquiry might focus on the role of each stakeholder in a student's WIL and how these roles contribute to the quality of the overall experience. Additionally, future research could explore the types and sources of support that have the most significant impact on student outcomes, as told by student voices. While supervisors in the workplace are often central to students' support network, research through a student voice lens could identify even bigger (and perhaps more important) actors in a support network, such as family members and close friends, who may seem irrelevant to the WIL experience from the institution's perspective but are essential to the student.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study that could be addressed in future research. First, our student voice orientation centers students' experiences but overlooks alignment between students' views and institutional or employer perspectives. An exclusive focus on student narratives risks overlooking policies and practices that may constrain or enable high-quality WIL experiences. Future research should seek to identify and reconcile differences in the meaning of high-quality WIL between various partners. Second, while the sample size is considered large for our approach to qualitative inquiry, it is not representative. Consequently, we cannot claim the themes presented here generalize across all disciplines, institutions, and types of WIL programs. Future research could increase the generalizability of these themes by replicating the study in other contexts. Third, reliance on retrospective self-reports through interviews may have introduced a recall bias, emphasizing particularly positive or negative experiences. Developing a comprehensive understanding of students' views toward high-quality WIL will require additional methods that capture those views in situ (e.g., experience sampling, ecological momentary assessment, diary or journal studies, ethnographies, and observational studies).

Directions for future research

Future research could apply this study's findings to various other WIL models in order to examine the generalizability of the findings. Although we invited students with multiple models of WIL experiences to the study, there was no attempt to compare perspectives across models of WIL. The study treated WIL as a single educational model. Yet, WIL is an umbrella term that refers to various approaches to experiential education so long as they involve authentic work (Zegwaard, Preeti, Rowe, and Ferns 2023). There are several key differences between models of WIL, including the amount of time they take to complete, whether they are paid or unpaid, whether they are mandatory or optional, and the amount of available supervision. These differences may mean that students' conceptions of quality WIL depend on the kind of WIL in question.

Future research could also explore the role of balance in creating exceptional WIL experiences. Participants told us conflicts between WIL and other obligations limited the quality of their experiences. Indeed, many students face difficulties in managing WIL expectations alongside coursework, part-time jobs, and personal obligations. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, WIL scholars have not often listened to student voices regarding this balance (see Drewery, Nevison, Preeti, Cormier, Barclay, and Pennaforte 2016 for an exception). Future research could pause to listen to the students' challenges of balancing WIL with other aspects of life, giving us strategies and support mechanisms that may better assist students in achieving this balance. Research could investigate how time management skills, institutional support, and flexible WIL structures contribute to successful outcomes for students. Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore how various demographic

factors (e.g., age, socioeconomic background, caregiving responsibilities) may impact the ability to balance these demands effectively.

On the more applied end of the spectrum for future research, there is a need to investigate the relationship between job design and students' perceptions of WIL experiences. Job design refers to how employers structure students' tasks and social interactions in terms of novelty, challenge, collaboration, and autonomy. One area of job design has to do with ownership over tasks that are impactful upon others. Given that this was a key theme in the present study, future research could explore how this and related areas of job design affect WIL students' engagement, learning outcomes, and career development. There are exciting opportunities to explore concepts such as empowerment, job crafting, and feedback within WIL experiences. We encourage researchers to ask how WIL roles are crafted in order to ensure that students feel they are making a meaningful contribution. We also call for additional research on feedback, which has long been considered important for student development (Fraser, Worthing, Green, and Eady 2024; Sadler 2014). A more rigorous exploration of how different feedback mechanisms (e.g., peer feedback, supervisor feedback) shape student learning in WIL, derived from students' perspectives, would provide valuable insights.

CONCLUSION

This study amplified students' voices on quality WIL experiences. It offered new insights about how students understand the quality of their experiences, whether their understandings are aligned with institutional views on the topic, and opportunities for co-creating better WIL experiences. Theoretically, the study not only reinforces established concepts like growth, support, belonging, and making a difference, but also introduces the importance of students' mindsets and balance between WIL and other responsibilities. These findings emphasize that quality WIL experiences are shaped by factors both within and beyond the WIL experience itself, highlighting the complexity of creating and sustaining meaningful learning opportunities.

One of the study's key contributions is its identification of discrepancies between institutional and student perspectives on quality WIL. While institutions often focus on formal mechanisms and structures like reflection and evaluation, students emphasize the need for practical support and flexibility to help manage competing demands. This calls for a recalibration of WIL policies and practices so that they better align with the lived realities of students while still ensuring academic and professional rigor. It also calls for a greater adoption of the co-creation concept in WIL. This concept recognizes that students, host organizations, and institutions must collaborate in order to create valuable experiences. While existing literature acknowledges the importance of co-creation, this study highlights students' active role in shaping the success of their own WIL experiences through their personal mindset and approach. This insight invites further exploration into how WIL can be co-created effectively, particularly through strategies that empower students and engage them as equal partners in the learning process.

Looking forward, the findings point to several areas for further research. These include exploring the impact of different WIL models on students' perceptions of quality, investigating the challenges students face when balancing WIL with other obligations, and examining the long-term career impacts of WIL experiences. Additionally, the study emphasizes the need to better understand the roles of job design, mentorship, feedback, and social support in enhancing WIL outcomes. By continuing to center student voices in WIL research and practice, we can develop more responsive and holistic approaches to WIL that meet the diverse needs of all stakeholders.

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