

# Business students and work-life: Mind the gaps!

CM Govender

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This paper aims to identify challenges in business school and business collaboration when implementing work-integrated learning (WIL) as a vehicle to enhance student work-life realities and possible employability opportunities.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper adopts a five-step literature synthesis method. In-depth review and analysis of the existing literature of WIL challenges during the period 2009 to 2018 was conducted.

**Findings:** The literature review revealed five major gaps identified in WIL projects, resulting from a lack of: institutional support; monitoring and assessment; student readiness; curriculum relevance; and host motivation. These challenges were related to differences or gaps in the business school and business domains. Seven propositions are suggested as a starting point to manage the five gaps when initiating WIL as a successful learning project.

**Practical implications:** Our syntheses of challenges hampering WIL projects is highly relevant for deepening business school awareness and when planning to launch WIL projects. The Mind the WIL Gaps model and propositions deepen host-firm commitment and presents a realistic view on school-business interaction involving WIL students.

**Originality/value:** The paper contributes by enabling WIL practitioners to gain a systematic overview of WIL challenges and pitfalls in the Mind the WIL Gaps model. Negative factors impacting on business school and business domains are highlighted in the model and paper propositions. Awareness, mindfulness and avoiding the pitfalls and gaps facing WIL students, schools and participating businesses ensures effective, efficient and successful WIL experiences and projects.

**Key words:** *Work-integrated learning, WIL, work-life, business schools, business students, host-firms, challenges.*

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## INTRODUCTION

WIL projects are designed to bridge the divide between academic knowledge and industry expertise, providing workplace experience and practical skills to students, while simultaneously creating trust relations, graduate recruitment and research collaborations with business (Bowen, 2018; Govender and Taylor, 2015). Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2012) reveal that fewer employers than educators believe that recent graduates were ready for the labor market. What is the mismatch between expectations of universities and businesses in preparing WIL students and graduates for the workplace? If business indicates that graduates are not ready for the workplace, then perhaps business schools and WIL projects are lacking in producing knowledgeable and experienced graduates.

Business schools have an increasing interest in work integrated learning or WIL in boosting the relevance of their programmes and the employability of their students (Rampersad, 2015). WIL activities add an important practical component to academic learning, where the curriculum consists of both theoretical and practical learning and assessments. WIL is sometimes an umbrella and sometimes a specific element within other concepts such as university-industry linkages (Vaaland and Ishengoma, 2016); industry-university-collaboration (Ankrah and Omar, 2015; Hemmert, Bstieler and Okamuro,

2014); university-business collaboration (Rampersad, 2015); work-based education, cooperative education, practice-based learning (Sattler and Peters, 2012).. The implications for successful WIL implementation is that future graduates get to meet approved industry partners who get to mentor them, providing them with experiential, practical workplace learning that is aligned to theoretical academic outcomes (Taylor and Govender, 2017).

Whereas the student and the university are appreciative of making a connection with the real-life environment and future employers, businesses are reluctant to allocate time and attention to WIL students, as they take time away from production (Rook and McManus, 2016; Agevall, Broberg and Umans, 2018). Business recruitment bases are satisfactory due to their access to pools of qualified employment seeking graduates, fueled by existing high numbers of unemployed graduates (Govender and Taylor, 2015). Students in an authentic learning environment require intra-business mentor resources, which represent a workload beyond the primary activities of a cost conscious and competitive business. It is argued that the business motivation to allocate human resources to WIL projects have to be strongly aligned with business benefits as perceived from the businesses. These benefits may differ across various business segments, branches, company size, intra-business mentor capacities, and student profiles in terms of theoretical competence. Contextual differences between businesses operating in developed and emerging economies are also relevant (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto, 2009).

WIL and 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 and 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 (ibid). Whereas the student and educator perspective are justified by recent studies (e.g. Taylor and Govender, 2017; Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016), the business perspective is less scrutinized. Furthermore, the body of literature seem to lack a critical view on challenges and impediments from the host-firm perspective.

This paper contributes by synthesizing the body of knowledge on WIL project challenges related to the business (host-firm) domain and the business school domain. The paper consists of the introduction, methodology, literature review and discussion, implications before the paper is concluded.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A five-step approach for conducting literature review (Vom Brocke *et al.*, 2009) was employed. In the first step, the review scope was directed towards the research outcomes to identify challenges, impediments and constraints related to WIL and its related concepts. The context for identifying WIL gaps comprise the business school, the business student and the host-firm. In the second step, the review was conceptualized in terms of identifying elements hampering WIL to the host-firm domain and the school domain. In the third step, the literature search was conducted by inclusion of literature from two available search engines, Emerald and Academic Search Premier. In addition, a snowballing approach expanded the number of articles selected in the design phase of this study, compensating for possible weaknesses in the two search engines employed.

The database search for relevant articles employed the following first set of keywords: *Work integrated learning, work based learning, work based education, student placement, practicum, field experience and internship in business*. A second search criterion was added including these keywords: *business, business school and business student*. Both sets of keywords either in the abstract or author supplied keywords, had to be met for selection in the sample and analysis. Only peer reviewed articles published between 2009 and 2018 were included, which lead to a sum of 159 articles. By excluding identical articles appearing more than once, articles applying a non-business (student- and school-) context and part-time students, the number was reduced to 84 articles.

In the fourth step, 84 articles were further scrutinized in full text to identify only the challenges impediments or constraints to WIL. This process materialized 46 articles of high relevance to the research question, namely challenges, impediments or constraints to WIL in a business school/student/host-firm context. Furthermore, the words *barriers*, *impediments* and *constraints* are included in the word *challenges*. In the final step, step five, the 46 articles were analysed to extract the WIL gaps from a variety of contexts and countries. Five articles could be considered conceptual or reviews based on secondary data, and the remaining 41 articles were based on empirical studies. The body of research originated from a narrow geographical concentration. The vast majority of articles were Australian (47%) followed by an even number of studies from South Africa, United Kingdom and USA (34%), and the final 19% shared between 9 countries. Considering all 84 articles focusing on different aspects of WIL, there is no clear trend with respect to the number of articles published each year, varying between 5 and 14, leading to an average of 8 articles published annually.

The sample consisted of a large variety of journals. Out of a total of 84 articles, 56 or 2/3 were published in educational profile journals and 1/3 in non-educational journals. Among the top WIL journals, the journal of Education + Training represents by far the most publications (17%). There are seven journals that published three or more WIL articles, amounting to 41% of the total publications. For the purposes of this study, the WIL project challenges and impediments were focused on; hence the final analysis and trends synthesis was conducted on 46 articles.

This finding implies that almost half of the published WIL articles surveyed for this study (46 out of 84) contain critical or challenging issues on WIL. The other half of the WIL articles indicate that WIL are success stories. Besides being an interesting finding, it is significant that slightly more than half of the surveyed articles reflect critical challenging aspects of WIL, indicating that WIL projects may suffer from failure due to undetected challenges and unresolved challenges. This finding is significant in identifying the undetected gaps that lurk in WIL collaboration between the business school and businesses.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

This study was focused on an in-depth analysis and synthesis that highlighted the WIL project challenges for business schools and businesses. Table 1 reveals the analysis of the findings on WIL challenges, presented in chronological order from search latest (2018) to search earliest (2009), per author, per study. Searches within these articles revealed that there were specific WIL project challenging areas that clustered together and resulted in specific WIL gaps. This paper spotlights these gaps that impede the success of WIL projects.

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An analysis of the sampled articles produced five specific themes resulting from specific WIL project challenges, risks, barriers and hindrances noticeable in both the business school and business domains. The five areas are the following: lack of institutional support (IS); lack of monitoring and assessment (MA); weak student readiness (SR); relevance of curriculum issues (C); and lack of host motivation (HM). Some articles covered all 5 aspects, others less. Based on the categories (referred to as CODE in Table 1) the 46 articles were allocated to the different categories. In sum, 97 category items were allocated to the articles. The category “curriculum issues” and “lack of institutional support” were most frequent with 24% and 23% respectively. The codes “poor student readiness” and “lack of monitoring and assessment” gained both 20%. The remaining category “host motivation” gained 14%. In sum, the content analysis of the articles indicated a relatively even distribution of challenges when implementing and managing WIL projects in the selected business context.

The literature synthesis revealed five themes emerging as WIL project gaps. Each of these challenges will be presented and discussed in the following subsections.

### 1. Lack of institutional support (IS)

Around ¼ of the studies, well spread among national origin, identified institutional support a major challenge for successful WIL. The challenges are described and discussed on different levels, ranging from more fundamental level, such as differences in the value system between the school and the host-firm, to practicalities and effects such as logistical problems and communication barriers.

The literature addresses two fundamental challenges when introducing and maintain WIL. One is related to capabilities available in the school domain. Studies by Costa (2009), Smith, Poppitt and Scott (2013) and Xia, Caulfield and Ferns (2015) clearly emphasize the need for sufficient program support particularly in the school domain to enable students to enter the host-firm and to enable the host-firm to handle inexperienced students. Other studies found that successful industry-university collaborative partnerships involved engagement such as having qualified WIL contactable staff in schools and businesses (Jackson, Ferns, Rowbottom and McLaren, 2017).

A second group of fundamental challenges are related to value differences between the school and business domains. Pavlin (2016) suggest that WIL stakeholder motivational differences are compounded by institutional value differences. Smith *et al.* (2013) emphasizes these value differences embracing attitudes and ability to build long-term commitment based on a true understanding and acknowledgement of host-firm needs. Nikolova and Andersen (2017) points out that understanding the client needs, and mechanisms to support outcomes for the host was imperative in order to enable student learning in the host-firm domain. More commitment required from universities to breed long-term relationships with industry (Shooshtari and Manuel, 2014). But businesses should also be open to allocate time for WIL tasks (Xia *et al.*, 2015). Thatcher, Alao, Brown and Choudhary (2016) found differences in attitudes and focus between university and small businesses. Such differences can lead to engagement barriers. Gómez, Aranda and Santos (2017) support this view, stating that universities and host-firms have different cultures and objectives, which in turn require a more comprehensive understanding of firms by universities.

Fundamental challenges between the school and host-firm domains lead to various effects highlighted by many of the studies. Weaknesses in communication linkages between the host-firm and the school are hampered by organizational bureaucracy according to findings from e.g. Papadimitriou and Mardas (2012), Smith *et al.* (2013), Jeffries and Milne (2014); Pavlin (2016) and Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016). Another challenge is to find the right host-firm to involve in WIL, secure placement and reduce the student entry barriers. Alpert, Heaney and Kuhn (2009), Lee, McGuiggian and Holland (2010), Xia *et al.* (2015), Wedekind and Mutereko (2016), Taylor and Govender (2017) and Jackson, Rowbottom, Ferns and McLaren (2017) all address these set of challenges.

While the WIL students are included in the program and trying to accomplish the tasks within the host-firm a new set of challenges prevails. These includes such as legal risks associated with student placements, health and safety issues, and handling host-firm confidentiality. These were empirically addressed by Alpert *et al.* (2009), Simola (2009), Pavlin (2016), Wedekind and Mutereko (2016), Cameron (2017), Taylor and Govender (2017) and Cameron, Freudenberg, Giddings and Klopper (2018). Important practicalities such as student logistics and projects management have to be solved as highlighted by e.g. Lee *et al.* (2010). One of these are related to differences in the time cycles in the school calendar and the host-firm, which leads to misaligned time horizons between universities and industry as addressed by Alpert *et al.* (2009), Heaney and Kuhn (2009), Xia *et al.* (2015), Pavlin (2016) and Jackson, Rowbottom *et al.* (2017). WIL imply a significant investment both in the school domain and in the host-firm. The significance and the importance of escalating management costs related to WIL were addressed by Alpert *et al.* (2009) and Lee *et al.* (2010). Facing student problems, failing student support and lack of relevant workplace information were addressed by empirical studies by e.g. Simola (2009), Alpert *et al.* (2009) and Eljido-Ten and Kloot, (2015). In addition funding challenges to support WIL projects was addressed by Riley (2017).

The review of literature leads towards the first gap that needs to be closed.

#### Gap 1: Lack of institutional support

Involving students in a WIL initiative requires significant support systems from partnering school, business, student and other stakeholders. Ineffective communication lines, for example, displays a lack of institutional support that disables the smooth, effective and efficient interaction between the business school and businesses in WIL projects.

In the school domain, routines and capacity to communicate with the host-firms is not prioritized in school, which causes coordination challenges for faculty members involved in WIL. This challenge is further related to the assumption that businesses are organised with same bureaucracy and routines, which are often organised differently, requiring cross-functional, cross-disciplinary interaction. Hence, different organisational structures and school bureaucracy easily increases the administrative cost for the host business and hampers further involvement in the WIL project. Support is also related to the student placements in which the school might be eager to place students in host-firms, but the faculty orientation may hamper the design of realistic student tasks of interest and relevance for a host-firm (Hollis-Turner, 2015) with poor selection of unprepared student cohorts as a result. Furthermore, the ambitions to allocate students to outplacements might exceed the capacity to follow up on student performance. An issue related to support systems in the school domain is the lack of handling the legal risk factors by outplacing students in host-firms (Cameron, 2017) ensuring confidentiality disagreements between business and university.

In the business domain, host-firms seems to suffer from unnecessary time-consuming interaction with the school, including difficulties to find the appropriate support-person at the school (Pavlin, 2016). Weak support systems at the school is particularly problematic as they require more input, advice and support from the school in a situation in which the learning goals and assigned projects are outside the purpose of the business. In parallel to the school context the host-firm finds it difficult to meet a school organised in separate disciplinary silos and suffers from lack of transdisciplinary coordination across the subjects. Finally, the students' abilities to handle sensitive information such as 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. The question that arises from this WIL project gap is: How does the school and business support system ensure student confidentiality in the workplace?

In summing up, challenges on institutional support are significantly connected to capacity required for supporting the WIL interaction. A diverging focus between the host-firm and the school on the learning process and support systems are challenges leading to the first glaring gap in WIL.

## **2. Lack of mentoring and assessment (MA) capabilities**

Following up students while on a WIL project requires both capacity and competencies. According to Alpert *et al.*, (2009) and Gilbert (2012) staffing issues have resulted in lack of monitoring and supervision capacity. Govender and Taylor (2015) and Nikolova and Andersen (2017) indicated unrealistic time allocation for WIL monitoring and assessment. Capacity issues are related to motivation and incentives for supervising students which is addressed by e.g. Byrom and Aiken (2010) and Holyoak (2013) and motivation to engage in industry partnerships (Brundiars, Wiek and Redman, 2010; Shooshtari and Manuel, 2014) in which WIL takes place. But capacity and motivation among mentors and assessors are not sufficient for successful follow-up. Xia *et al.* (2015) and Jackson, Rowbottom *et al.*, (2017) reveals the challenge of monitoring WIL student progress and performance. One element here is addressed by Coll, Eames, Paku, Lay, Hodges, Bhat, Ram, Ayling, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma, and Martin (2009) pointing out that the training of supervisors as WIL mentors and assessors was problematic. Jackson (2017, 2018) suggested that the workplace supervisor role must be scrutinized to identify factors hampering the mentor role in WIL projects in line with Cameron *et al.* (2018) suggesting poor or non-existent supervision of students. Nikolova and Andersen (2017) found that recruiting industry coaches to the school's WIL project can add new capabilities to improve effectiveness of mentoring. Uncertainty around assessment criteria and performance evaluation are addressed by Byrom and Aiken (2010), following up in a later study by Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015) revealing that the

quality of WIL student supervision, performance evaluation and regular performance reviews was lacking and called for capacity to design proper assessment instruments. Jackson and Wilton (2016) found that poor mentoring and guidance were challenging factors. In a USA based study Dommeyer, Gross and Ackerman (2016) claimed that inadequate instruction on how to perform the internship duties and irregular periodic reviews from supervisors significantly hampered the learning process.

### Gap 2: Unauthentic student mentoring and assessment

A WIL project requires the authentic monitoring of student progress, developmental supervision and the mentoring of students while WIL students are being hosted in the firm. The dilemma is whether and how much the school or the host-firm should define or influence the student via mentoring and guidance. School based versus host-business based mentorship 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. As stated by Elijido-Ten and Kloot (2015), school based versus host-business based mentorship represent two opposite competencies and priorities. This diversity easily creates incompatibility in the WIL focus and on 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 (Jackson, Rowbottom *et al.*, 2017). The same dilemma applies to how student performance should be evaluated in WIL, both in the academic and workplace contexts, with specific performance assessment criteria in both domains.

In the school domain the school-based WIL assessor and mentor typically has a masters or doctorate degree, is focused on a career of research and academic based teaching, and has limited or no prior business experience, to the frustration of the business host supervisor or mentor. In the business domain the host-business mentor is a pragmatic generalist focusing on achieving business goals. The host mentor may have a higher academic degree, but may lack understanding of curriculum and research based literature exposed to the student. As perceived from the host, supervising the students is time consuming and represents significant logistical and administrative costs (Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015). The differences in mindsets and work experience can spark the dilemma of the appropriateness of applying a business-style performance evaluation rather than the conventional university-style grading system (Nikolova and Andersen, 2017). This may be difficult as the student and school mentor are accustomed to reflective written reports, rather than the business-style oral presentation and communication as well as procedural reports.

In summary, there are latent challenges in WIL projects when appointing either academics or business managers as mentors and assessors to WIL students. Both represents a tension between two opposite domains, leaving a confused student in between. Challenges in student monitoring and assessment are identified as the second glaring gap in WIL projects.

### **3. Lack of student readiness (SR)**

Several studies point out that students in WIL projects lack soft skills in terms of oral and written communication and abilities to make business presentations. Alpert *et al.* (2009), Swanson and Tomkovick (2011), Spowart (2011), Dommeyer *et al.* (2016), Nikolova and Andersen (2017), Gómez *et al.* (2017) and Cameron *et al.*, (2018) emphasize that students should be better trained and prepared in softs skills prior to entering the host-firm. This also include language proficiencies (Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015) for foreign students enrolled in a different language setting. Another aspect on a more individual personal level is student's lack of self-confidence, self-esteem and proactivity (Junek, Lockstone and Mair, 2009; Jackson and Wilton, 2016), lack of team-work skills (Gómez *et al.*, 2017), which again may have a negative impact on interactiveness with other employees and problem-solving abilities (Alpert *et al.*, 2009; Spowart, 2011; Della Volpe, 2017). These personal traits also raise the issue of student selection criteria for WIL outplacements especially in the pre-placement processes (Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015; Gribble, Blackmore and Rahimi, 2015).

The need for more preparedness on practical skills beyond the more generic competencies is emphasized by several studies. Subject specific skills such as computer literacy, updated knowledge on social media, and modern computer software and analytical tools (Swanson and Tomkovick, 2011; Pavlin, 2016) and more general business skills (Della Volpe, 2017) should be better included in pre-entry to the host-firm. A final group of studies on students readiness calls for improved interpersonal skills such as dealing with other employees and with superiors and common courtesy and business etiquette (Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015; Gribble *et al.*, 2015; Govender and Taylor, 2015; Hollis-Turner, 2015; Dommeyer *et al.*, 2016).

### Gap 3: Student are not ready for the WIL project

Students should be prepared and empowered to make use of the WIL project as a temporary vehicle to gain business experience and to understand and apply core issues from in-school learning. The literature trends clearly indicate weaknesses in the school and business domains in providing soft skills to the students prior to the WIL experience.

In the school domain, the students' soft skills are enhanced through oral and written presentations, discussions and active learning processes. The soft skills are easily connected to specific course contents and theoretical problems, yet lacks a more integrative problem solving approach characterizing a business environment. The student is confused by differences between how subjects are organised and learned, and the actual business assignment. Themes such as business culture, handling difficult people, business courtesy and body language are far away from the classroom experience and curriculum (Rampersad and Jarvis, 2013).

Businesses indicate that many students suffer from a lack of communicative and collaborative skills or are unprepared for the assignments in the business (Hollis-Turner, 2015) leading to 'practice shock'. Businesses also express challenges with identifying suitable projects beneficial to WIL students (Jackson, Ferns *et al.*, 2017). An initially relevant student project may also easily lead to 'scope creep' where either the host or the student adds in a broader project assignment than that anticipated, especially if the WIL project planning is weak (Nikolova and Andersen, 2017).

In summing up, it is fair to assume that students in the school domain are not provided with sufficient soft skills to balance with the business domain's expectations and requirements, thus hampering the WIL implementation process. This can be related to a more fundamental dichotomy between academic versus business orientation in the learning process.

## **4. Lack of relevant curriculum (C)**

Student preparedness for WIL is closely connected to the profile, structure and content of curriculum. Studies by Coll *et al.*, (2009), Thatcher *et al.*, (2016) and Della Volpe (2017) address that curriculum for preparing students for work-life experience suffer from unclear learning objectives and teaching methods. Academical organization of subjects might be relevant in a traditional faculty life but lack the cross-functional aspect describing the realities when students meet business (Shooshtari and Manuel, 2014).

Another aspect hampering WIL is the weak program integration between curriculum and workplace realities (Coll *et al.*, 2009; Wedekind and Mutereko, 2016) resulting in what Taylor and Govender (2017) describe as *theory-practice misalignment*. Papadimitriou and Mardas (2012) and Sangwan and Garg (2017) goes further by claiming that a too strong academical focus in curriculum hampers practical application in the business domain. This is in line with Costley and Abukari (2015) indicating that business students lack business understanding. Dommeyer *et al.* (2016) suggest that this understanding should be enhanced by means of more and stronger business cases employing modern business software and analytical tools. Other scholars questioning the suitability and relevance of curriculum as support to WIL emphasize the weaknesses of communication skills (Juneke *et al.*, 2009; Spowart, 2011; Gómez *et al.*, 2017) and practical applicable content (Byrom and Aiken, 2010; Hollis-Turner, 2015).

In a more general level the quest for curriculum and course adjustments implies partnerships and collaborative arrangements between the school and business domain, which is easier said than done (Nikolova and Andersen, 2017). Simola (2009) even claim that universities have become ivory towers excluding themselves from the rest of society. Choy and Delahaye (2011) and Baker, Peach and Cathcart (2017) describe this barrier as power imbalance in disfavor of work-life preparedness. Shoostari and Manuel (2014) go further in questioning the faculty motivation to change course content and curriculum in line with enabling students to practice within the host-firm.

The literature leads towards suggesting gap 3; Curriculum is not relevant

Curriculum basically serves two purposes: to ensure that students learn theory and critical reasoning, and to ensure the ability to apply the knowledge in order to create value for future employers and justify employment for the student. The emphasis on these two purposes is always under discourse both within faculty and businesses, and in between the two domains. Curriculum in a business school and the real-life business tasks may not be fully aligned (Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015). Imbalance between the two domains is sometimes referred to as the *curriculum-practice misalignment* between what theoretical learning the student experiences in the classroom versus the practical learning s/he experiences in the workplace. Another aspect related to the curriculum gap is the time cycle incompatibility, in which different time horizons exist between the school and the host-firm when involving students in practical problem solving or analytical tasks. These challenges are identified in both the school and business domains.

In the school domain curriculum should bring in new elements not yet adopted in work-life, which in the long-run impacts positively on business practice. As Pavlin (2016) states, the school has a curriculum developed over time and is highly influenced by academics within a theory-based system more or less independent of market signals. The danger here is that the school easily misunderstands business needs and realities when scoping the WIL project (Nikolova and Andersen, 2017). They avoid practical assignments in curricula, choosing to apply only classroom theory in a real-world business context. Academics refuse to adapt and update their curricula and assessment practices to include WIL projects (Simola, 2009).

Businesses also impact on the learning institution as objects for research and knowledge creation. WIL projects experience challenges when integrating students loaded with the curricula knowledge elements into a business environment which is loaded with real-life tasks and challenges that must be solved (Hollis-Turner, 2015). In the business context short-term core business activities and practical problem solving are emphasized rather than the critical thinking and reasoning for impact in the long-term perspective. Curriculum misalignment highlights challenges in identifying suitable projects beneficial to WIL students (Jackson, Rowbottom *et al.*, 2017).

In summing up, the curriculum irrelevance issue presents the fourth glaring gap in WIL projects, embracing the tension between the school emphasis on theoretical reflection rather than practical business problem solutions. Furthermore, discrepancies in time frames and scheduling between academic and business calendars imposes constraints that need to be aligned if WIL projects are to succeed.

## **5. Lack of host-firm motivation (HM)**

Host-firm contribution to the student learning process is not cost free and requires motivation within the firm. Juneke *et al.* (2009) identified a low motivation in host-firms to engage in WIL. Uncertainties to what to expect from the students and how to structure the WIL placement are two reasons hampering motivation (Xia *et al.*, 2015; Elijido-Ten and Kloot, 2015; Jackson and Wilton, 2016). More specifically many host-firms face problems to identify suitable projects and tasks for students to complete WIL assignments effectively (Jackson, Rowbottom, *et al.*, 2017; Jackson, Ferns *et al.*, 2017). And when the host-firm tries to solve these challenges they meet bureaucratic hindrances when trying to communicate with the school (Pavlin, 2016) which further hamper motivation. Brundiers *et al.* (2010) argue that the

timing of WIL project in the school plans does not easily fit in with business cycles. Business operates on a short term time horizon and apply a pragmatic approach to problem solving, different from the rigorous and long term perspective in the school domain (Costley and Abukari, 2015; Thatcher *et al.*, 2016) This incompatibility easily leads to changing host-firm requirements and objectives frustrating school, students in addition to the host-firm (Choy and Delahaye, 2011). In other words, the real world complexity in the business domain is not fully conceptualized in the school domain, which further reduce host-firm motivation. Some scholars indicate that the motivational gaps suggest a renegotiation of school-business power relations in order to build and strengthen a collaborative self-interest (e.g. Brundiers *et al.*, 2010; Choy and Delahaye, 2011). A weak understanding of business environment and culture in the school domain (Brundiers *et al.*, 2010) calls for renegotiation of host-firm needs, scope of the WIL, selection of students and partnerships (Nikolova and Andersen, 2017). One final aspect of host-firm motivation is related to economic factors in the host-firm environment. Wedekind and Mutereko (2016) suggest that economic downturn in economy in general and the firms fight for being competitive and survive in a fierce market easily leads to cutting cost and downsizing hamper motivation to invest scarce capacity in handling students.

This brief review leads to the fifth gap; host demotivation

The school hampers business collaboration in WIL projects when claiming that their knowledge is adequate for graduates. Academics present this argument: So why dilute an academically sound knowledge base with practical business realities? One possible effect of this is that the school does not fully understand the concept of WIL and its implications for business success, employability and driving the future economy (Costley and Aabukari, 2015). The school may well decide that business interaction is a strategic goal, but the goal is not aligned with the host business interests, in which case the WIL student is primarily a burden drawing on limited internal human resource for a very uncertain business future gain.

The business motivation may also hamper WIL projects by being exposed to students allocated to designed project tasks and WIL content, ignoring the fact that what is meaningful for the novice student is not necessarily beneficial to the business. Other businesses may ignore the fact that future business innovation can be found in the research-based, knowledge base of the school and in students reflecting upon trends and emerging potentials of technological and business growth. A final blow to the host-firm and school motivation is related to the high availability of skilled graduates in the recruitment market which makes it unnecessary to invest money and time in training student cohorts in-house to access employable candidates.

## IMPLICATIONS

The challenges (including barriers, impediment and constraints) discussed above address a gap between domains; specifically in the university or business school domain and the business or host-firm domain. The way challenges are interpreted might well be similar on both domains, for example, lack of communication capacity between the parties; however the solutions might differ between the domains, therefore justifying the identified gaps. In the following Figure 1, the gaps are between the domains are illustrated as a tool for reducing barriers to WIL.

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An analysis of the literature and the five gaps hampering WIL between the business school and the business domains lead to seven propositions affecting business school-student-business collaboration as follows:

*Proposition 1: Cost of coordination for the host-firm is mainly determined by the schools organisational and relational capabilities.* This is related to both the first gap in which the importance of institutional support is emphasized, and the fifth gap addressing the motivational aspect of WIL for the host-firm.

Recommendation: Enhance institutional support on school level by establishing a “single-point-of-contact” for the host-firm, ideally an academic with business experience with decision power.

*Proposition 2: Most host-firms, with the exception of some large enterprises, are not configured for engaging students in their ongoing business operations.* This is related to the first and fifth gaps and addresses the importance of realism in recruiting and maintaining WIL relationships with host-firms.

Recommendation: Design WIL according to host-firm size and characteristics. An SME is very different from a MNE and WIL should adapt to these differences.

*Proposition 3: Host-firm’s involvement in WIL is based on a trade-off between the firm’s perceived benefits from involving students and the cost of coordinating and mentoring the WIL students.* This was addressed in the second, third, fourth and fifth gaps and emphasizes the importance of enabling students to actually solve real business problems, and as a result of this, gain new knowledge in line with expected learning outcomes in school curriculum. Recommendation: Assignments must be useful for host-firm and require involvement from the host-firm when preparing the students, both on soft and hard skills. Acknowledge that many analytical tasks within the firm are suffering from lack of data and ambiguity.

*Proposition 4: Student contribution to the host-firm depends on their individual characteristics and specific analytical skills of value to the firm.* This is related to the third gap, the students’ readiness in terms of soft skills and their ability to create business value by applying theory, tools and concepts to solve real business problems. Recommendation: Students should possess soft skills and a menu of relevant analytical tasks prior to entering outplacement. Student selection should be based on competition, for example through a “WIL fair” or “WIL speed dating” where students are presenting their analytical offerings to potential host-firms.

*Proposition 5: Students learning outcome of WIL depends on the host-firm’s ability to make use of the students’ analytical skills and innovativeness.* The host-firm also has an important role in understanding that the WIL purpose is not solely to solve problems identified by the host-firm alone, but also to enable students to identify new challenges and question existing business practices. This is related to the second and fourth WIL project gaps. Recommendation: WIL is not just a part-time job, but a structured learning process requiring firm participation in WIL design and formulation of relevant tasks and assignments. School might benefit from engaging part time lecturers from businesses and consider formalizing student mentoring in the firm by compensating host-firm mentors as business school part-timers.

*Proposition 6: WIL is dependent upon curricular adjustments to enable relevant analytical capabilities necessary for solving business cases.* This proposition is related to the fourth gap and the need for questioning curriculum in order to balance immediate business needs with more long-term research based academic skills. Recommendation: Curriculum development is more a collaborative activity than a sole intra-faculty task. Focus on application of theory and analytical tools by blending faculty with part-time lecturers or adjunct professors and mentors. Look to the medical students involved in WIL programs at the hospitals where medical professors are also clinical practitioners.

*Proposition 7: Successful WIL requires a match between student cohorts having specific subject specialties and host-firm segments requiring these skills.* This is related to student readiness for entering WIL in terms of soft skills and personal motivation/abilities and what the student is exposed to through the curriculum. This relates to the third and fourth WIL project gaps. Recommendation: Student cohorts within a specific subject should be aligned with adjunct professors from industry within the subject. For example, students specializing in marketing should be connected with marketing director in the host-firm to sustain subject specific relevance.

## CONCLUSION

In Greek mythology *Minerva* was the God of knowledge and science and *Mercury* the God of trade. Successful WIL in a business context requires *Minerva* to meet *Mercury*. Eager business students, an innovative faculty and a fundamental understanding of business value creation, provides significant opportunities for students to enter the domain of *Mercury*. WIL is one way of approaching *Mercury*, but there are challenges on several dimensions. Some are related to a more fundamental philosophical level in which the role of the university is debated, others are more on an operational business level.

The literature analysis included all levels related to challenges of WIL in a business context, i.e. business school, business students and host-firms. Based on the existing body of knowledge, five dimensions of impediments were identified as WIL project gaps: lack of institutional support; lack of monitoring and assessment; poor student readiness; curriculum issues; and lack of host motivation. These five dimensions were discussed in terms of the business school domain and the business domain, and resulted in our Mind the WIL Gaps model. The model led to seven propositions that need to be taken into account when initiating and maintain a WIL relationship with host-firms. The recommendation for further research is that the Mind the WIL Gaps model and propositions should be empirically tested in specific WIL projects to verify whether the challenges that cause the gaps are valid.

We reveal some limitations in this study. We pruned and excluded articles not specifically addressing WIL barriers, challenges, impediments and constraints. This implies that some articles containing normative aspects, thus indirectly expressing factors hampering WIL were not included. The contextual precision of *business* was sometimes blurred when identifying articles, since some studies were based on several contexts. Furthermore, due to access issues, limiting search engines and other factors, many relevant WIL articles may have been unintentionally excluded.

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