

## Research Paper

# **Are Tourism Training Institutions Doing Their Job in Optimising the Work-Integrated Learning Process in Tourism Programmes in Vietnam? A Say from the Tourism Industry**

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**Abstract:** This study highlights the role of tourism training institutions in the mediation of the work-integrated learning (WIL) initiative embedded in tourism training programmes in Vietnam from the perspective of tourism practitioners. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 13 human resource managers and 5 internship mentors in 13 tourism companies, this research shows that the tourism institutions are negligent in their central role as optimised WIL enablers before, during and after the WIL experience. The tourism companies, albeit being proactive in the WIL procedure, are unable to maximise its efficacy without having a well-conceived WIL programme with adequate linkage, support and supervision from the institutions and academic supervisors. The findings are then translated into practical recommendations, calling on the tourism institutions for more sustainable partnerships, explicit and transparent WIL guidelines prior to WIL, sufficient support during WIL, and recognition of workplace supervisors' voice in students' reflection after WIL.

**Keywords:** Tourism education, Vietnam, work-integrated learning, internship

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## **Introduction**

As a vehicle to provide students with employability skills, work-integrated learning (WIL) is considered an integral aspect of academic programmes (Ring, Dickinger & Wober, 2008). The term WIL encapsulates diverse types of learning, namely experience-based learning, professional learning (Lawson, Fallshaw, Papadopoulos,

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Taylor, & Zanko, 2011); cooperative education, work-based learning (Groenewald, 2004); practice-based learning (Hodge, 2008); work placements, internships, field work, sandwich year degrees and job shadowing (Von Treuer, Sturre, Keele, & McLeod, 2010). Internships or placements taken off-campus are considered “ubiquitous” (Gardner & Bartkus, 2014, p. 46) and “the most widely reported and accepted form” of WIL (Rowe, Winchester-Seeto & Mackaway, 2012, p. 246). This paper accords focus on the internship as a WIL experience.

Students who have WIL experience or a skill-development component during their study programmes are more likely to have a positive reflection on their university life and to be employed within their discipline after graduation (Weisz & Chapman, 2005). These benefits can be achieved because they have had opportunities to develop both professional and personal attributes. In academic terms, when students are exposed to authentic learning with real contexts and activities and have opportunities to experience various roles, to work collaboratively and reflectively in the construction of knowledge and to apply theory to solve real problems, they can reinforce and consolidate their university learning (Franz, 2008). Their real world learning will enable them to understand the culture and the discourse of the profession and help them to develop the necessary skills and competencies for their employment and a better appreciation of the world of work (Gamble, Patrick & Peach, 2010; Wilton, 2012). Through an understanding of their employer’s business, students gain an appreciation of operational practices and the wider business environment within which the tourism industry functions. The student’s career prospects, hence, are enhanced by having established a range of contacts and having undertaken industry-related work experience (Gamble et al., 2010). Personal attributes such as self-esteem, self-confidence, maturity and responsibility can be well developed after a work placement, thanks to the transition from the role of a student to that of an employee, which results in improved academic performance during their programmes (Bates, 2005; Billett, 2011; Weisz & Chapman, 2005).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that student satisfaction with the placement will be enhanced if both academic and workplace mentors mutually support their learning (Fleming, Zinn & Ferkin, 2008; Fleming & Martin, 2007). The WIL experience requires close links within the key triad of institutions, companies and students in order to function effectively. These three parties need to agree on the learning goals, the conditions of the work placement and the duties of each party (Collin & Tynjala, 2003; Reeders, 2000). Three essential aspects of successful placement preparation identified by Ring et al. (2008) include organisation, communication and documentation. These elements are to ensure that “all parties are clear [regarding] what is expected of them, and the objectives of the work experience, so that students are not just thrown in at the deep end” (Long, Larsen, Hussey, & Travis, 2001).

In tourism education training, the WIL initiative is also considered an intervention in the process of transforming students in terms of specific employability skills in the tourism arena ((Bell, Crebert, Patrick, Bates, & Cragolini, 2003; Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009; Yorke, 2006). In Vietnam, WIL has become a compulsory component of tourism training programmes at most educational providers (Khuong, 2015). As the WIL stakeholders are in the provision of required skills for tourism graduates to survive and thrive in the world of tourism work, apart from several studies on the WIL practice in higher education or cross-border education in Vietnam (Bilsland & Nagy, 2015; Bilsland, Nagy & Smith, 2014; Tran et al., 2014; Tran, 2014), there has been a paucity of literature discussing the roles of WIL stakeholders in tourism education, particularly in the Vietnamese context. This paper aims to bridge the gap, addressing the following research question:

What are the perspectives of human resource managers and internship mentors in tourism companies towards the roles of tourism training institutions and academics in enabling WIL efficacy across pre-, during- and post-WIL phases?

This paper also aims to provide empirical insights into the tourism training institutions' initiatives and their cooperativeness with other WIL stakeholders, and propose that these key WIL players lobby changes in their strategies and practices to enhance the WIL effectiveness. For the purpose of this paper, all future references to tourism refer only to tour and travel services, and do not include other areas of tourism such as accommodation or food and beverage services, etc.

### **Central Roles of Institutions and Academics in Pre-, During- and Post-WIL Experience**

As the central stakeholder of WIL, institutions are expected to carry out systematic activities before, during and after the WIL experience to enable positive upshots. Given the significant need for industry engagement in all WIL activities (Lawson *et al.*, 2011), training institutions should create and maintain a close relationship with workplaces and industry employers. Building a rapport with the workplaces is a key part of the design stage of WIL. Relationships between institutions and workplaces can be based on personal relationships and established networks of people (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Alumni are also reliable sources for establishing relationships with employers (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010; Orrell, 2004). In order to maintain strong and long-term relationships, it is advisable that training institutions offer privileges and rewards as incentives and send messages of appreciation to workplace personnel (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010). Before the

implementation of the internship, it is also the responsibility of the institutions to contact the workplaces and arrange with the workplaces to take in students.

Contracts between the training institutions and the workplace, outlining key requirements of each party, need to be taken into account at the design stage (Bates, 2005; Cooper et al., 2010; Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Preto, 2008). They need to be explicitly and transparently designed to provide a clear guide for the various WIL practitioners (Cooper et al., 2010). Many companies may not agree on the necessity of signing a contract, but this written record is considered essential to facilitate the WIL practice. When preparing a contract, the interests of all parties need to be taken into consideration through communication. Some elements of the contract encompass names of all parties; aims of WIL, assessment requirements and intended outcomes; length and timing of WIL activities; insurance information; confidentiality and privacy issues; legal requirements; procedures to settle conflicts and to deal with unsatisfactory performance; roles and responsibilities of all parties including the WIL coordinator, student and workplace mentors; the validity duration of the contract; and signatures of all parties (Cooper et al., 2010).

Academic supervisors assume an important role as internship coordinators (Harvey, Geall & Moon, 1998). An academic as a coordinator can bring a deeper understanding of the curriculum and the missions of institutions, and can provide an integration of theory into practice (Cooper et al., 2010). However, the changing roles of staff as educators and coordinators are of concern to several researchers who recommend a continual need for professional development to make such initiatives instrumental in developing and maintaining a quality curriculum (Fleming et al., 2009; Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012). Before the internship, the coordinator is supposed to identify, negotiate and coordinate learning opportunities with the workplace and provide induction to students, mentors and others involved in the workplace WIL programmes (Cooper et al., 2010).

During the internship, academic staff working as internship coordinators need to give both learners and workplace mentors appropriate support (Cooper et al., 2010; Fleming et al., 2008). Specific activities of academic staff suggested by Cooper et al. (2010) are:

- Working alongside and providing educational support for students and workplaces to provide quality experiences for all parties.
- Monitoring, assessing and reviewing student learning to ensure that the learning outcomes are achieved.
- Resolving any problems arising between students and other parties at the workplace while maintaining the interest of all parties involved.
- Managing academic administrative work associated with the programme.

After the internship, the capture of workplace supervisors’ feedback on student work is significant (Martin & Leberman, 2005) since the supervisors’ perspectives can provide rich information on the effectiveness of WIL design (Patrick et al., 2008). The role of academics is also to assist and encourage learners in the reflection on their learning experiences. They ensure that the students understand the value or purpose of the reflective process and provide them with appropriate strategies to facilitate reflection (Patrick et al., 2008). In sum, the academics are expected to accompany the students and the workplace employers across all stages of the WIL process.

### Methodology

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the main instrument in data collection. As described by Guba and Lincoln (1981), interviews are “the very backbone of field and naturalistic research and evaluation” (as cited in Clarke & Dawson, 1999, p. 71). This technique can help researchers learn “how people construct the realities – how they view, define, and experience the world” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 110). The group of interviewees included 13 human resources managers and 5 internship mentors in tourism companies providing inbound tour and travel services. The purpose of interviewing these participants was for their appraisal on the roles of institutions and academics in maximising the effectiveness of tourism educational programmes and internships to gain deeper understanding of the experiential learning component of these programmes. The profiles of the participants are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Profiles of human resource managers in tourism companies

Name	Gender	Educational Qualification	Working Experience in Tourism	Company Information
Thu	Female	Bachelor in Tourism Studies	Since 1995	A one-member limited liability company with three branches, established in 1989
Dong	Male	Bachelor in English Teaching, Tour Guiding	Since 1999	A state-owned company, established in 1991
Thy	Male	Bachelor in Tour Guiding	Since 2005	A limited liability company, established in 2005
Sinh	Male	Bachelor in Tour Guiding	Since 2009	A limited liability company, established in 2010

**Table 1** (con't)

Mai	Female	Bachelor in Tourism	Since 2008	A joint stock company, established in 1989
Khang	Male	Bachelor in Tourism Business Administration	Since 2001	Very large joint stock company with many branches, nearly 1000 staff, established in 1995
Minh	Male	Bachelor in Business and Tourism	Since 2000	A member of a corporation with five branches, established in 1993
Chu	Male	Master of Business Administration, graduated in England	Since 1994	A limited liability company, specialising in biking tours for international tourists, established in 2008
Du	Male	Master of Business Administration	Since 1990	A joint stock company with three branches in three large cities, established in 1975
Phu	Male	Bachelor in Foreign Language; Bachelor in Tour Guiding	Since 2002	A large joint stock company with four branches in four provinces, established in 1998
Lan	Female	Bachelor in Tourism Studies	Since 2000	A limited liability company, established in 2007
Thanh	Male	Master of Business Administration	Since 1997	A limited liability company, established in 2001
Nam	Male	Bachelor in Law, Diploma in Tour Guiding	Since 1999	A state-owned tourism company, established in 1975 with five branches in large cities in Vietnam

**Table 2.** Profiles of internship mentors in tourism companies

Name	Gender	Educational Qualification	Working Experience in Tourism	Company Information
Phuong	Female	Bachelor in English and Tour Guiding	Since 2002	A one-member limited liability company with three branches, established in 1989
Phi	Male	Bachelor in Tourism	Since 2009	Very large joint stock company with many branches, nearly 1000 staff, established in 1995
Tu	Male	PhD candidate in Economics	Since 2000	A joint stock company with three branches in three large cities, established in 1975
Hai	Female	Bachelor in Tourism	Since 2007	A limited liability company, established in 2005
Kha	Female	Bachelor in English Teaching, Business Administration and Tour Guiding (short course)	Since 1999	A joint stock company, established in 1989

Only a small number of excerpts from the interviews are presented here, due to the scope of the paper, to construct and illustrate the key arguments rather than to exhibit the broad spectrum of interviewees. The key aspects which this paper focuses upon and the relevant quotes were identified through a thorough process of coding. The audio recordings of the interview data were listened to several times for themes and sub-themes. All the quotes employed as illustrations were translated into English by the researcher. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names are kept anonymous through the use of pseudonyms.

### Findings

The general findings show that the participants were unanimously critical of the tourism training providers and the academics in their pivotal roles in the three main stages of WIL – design, implementation and assessment.

**In the Design of WIL**

Against the conventional view that businesses are reluctant to engage in WIL activities (Bilsland & Nagy, 2015), four-fifths of the human resources managers were defensive about their activeness in collaborating with tourism training providers and blamed the institutions for the dearth of cooperation and support. Both the tourism managers and internship mentors were highly critical of the institutions’ level of preparedness for WIL as illustrated in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Preparation of tourism training institutions before the internship

Preparation of Tourism Training Institutions Before the Internship	Response Pattern	
	N	%
Very well prepared	0	0
Well prepared	2	11.1
Average	4	22.2
Poorly prepared	11	61.1
Very poorly prepared	1	5.6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Nearly two thirds of the interviewees (66.7%) appraised the preparation of the internship as ‘poorly prepared’ or ‘very poorly prepared’. They believed that the lack of liaison between the companies and the institutions led to rough beginnings for the students. The institutions were criticised for not providing proper orientation about the companies. Many students, therefore, contacted the wrong companies for their internships, as revealed by Phi:

*Many students choose companies for their placements due to the reputation of those organisations without equipping themselves with sufficient information about them. Although our company has provided all the institutions in this province with our information, the institutions do not seem to distribute it to the interns before the internship. When their major does not match the companies’ functions, they are obviously rejected. It is a waste of time for them and for the companies.*

The interview data also indicated that there had been no official arrangement between the training institutions and the businesses regarding this type of work-based learning. Before the internship, the institutions merely issued a reference letter and a feedback form for the companies’ certification which the students themselves were to present to the companies when they contacted them for their internship. The

companies did not have a list of expected incoming interns to prepare suitable positions for them. This disorganisation influenced both the activities of the companies and the effectiveness of the internship. It also reflected the lack of responsibility of the institutions towards their own students. Some institutions arranged a lecturer to take the interns to the companies to communicate about the internship, yet the number of such institutions was limited. A few institutions had official contact with the companies through the personal relationships of their leaders with the company managers. Before each internship, the leaders contacted the companies via phone and notified them about the number of incoming interns and requested for their support. One typical procedure described by Dong was as follows:

*Students just give me their college's reference letters when I approve them for internship at our companies. Accepting interns is part of our usual work every year. Therefore, we already know the exact period of time when students come to our place for internship. We collaborate with institutions depending on our relationship with lecturers there. There has been a conversation between us about our capacity to take interns and the requirements of institutions. Then, students just need a reference letter when they see us. However, there is no commitment between us and their institutions regarding this kind of training.*

Although almost all companies were willing to accept interns, they encountered numerous difficulties which were mainly caused by the lack of cooperation with the training institutions. Firstly, a number of institutions passed the responsibility of finding a workplace for internships to the students themselves, so they did not send their students to the companies which were the most suitable for the topics of the theses that the students had chosen or fitted the students' specialisation. Consequently, many companies refused to accept interns due to the incompatibility between the students' demands and their functions. Therefore, these interns all contacted particularly large companies which had different services and could offer various positions for interns to practise. Du gave an example as follows, expressing concern:

*This situation causes lots of difficulties to us when the number of interns outnumbers our capacity. We cannot use all their ability while they cannot learn much from us because too many students are present at the same time. So, most of them come only for statistics or our signatures to write reports and submit to the institutions. This makes the internships ineffective.*

The best time to send students to companies for internship was another hindrance to the businesses and the students themselves. Phi complained:

*The interns normally start their internship after Tet holiday (in around February to April). This point of time is not the peak period when there are many customers for the students to have more opportunities to practise and for the companies to have a good supply of casual workers to serve customers.*

It was obvious that the institutions arranged the internship according to their own plans and ignored the demands of the industry.

The length of the internship also had a direct effect on the training quality. Thanh pointed out that the internship was not effective because the interns had little time to practise administrative work, office work or tour guiding. He said, “*with only one month’s internship, they just have enough time to get to know about the tasks and cannot be skilled at them just in a limited period of time*”. Phu addressed another weak point of the internship as follows:

*The interns have to return to their institutions to write the theses after the internship and see their academic supervisors, so they do not have much time to concentrate on the work-based training at the company. Many students after working in the company for several days give an excuse that they have to see their supervisors, learn this or that subject... so they just need the company to approve their feedback forms.*

Chu was detailed in his expectations of the training institutions. He stated:

*I think they should be in constant contact and coordinate closely with enterprises regarding the design of the training programmes and the implementation of the training. There should be cooperation and communication between educators with the businesses who will use their ‘products’. In other words, there must be an understanding and a close cooperation between ‘suppliers’ and ‘consumers’. The educators must accept feedback from businesses and improve their training programmes on what knowledge about tourist destinations they should provide the students with, what English level their students must achieve or how to combine with travel businesses on every field trip to provide a real experience.*

Similarly, Minh voiced his expectation of the institutions to make the internship more effective as follows:

*Schools create their 'educational products', so they need to be responsible for their training. They need to be active in communicating with tourism companies to cooperate with them for training. They should make a detailed plan about where to send their students for an internship, contact the companies to inform them of the quantity of incoming interns, and provide the companies with a clear outline of an internship such as how many hours for an internship, what activities the interns must perform, etc.*

**In the Implementation of WIL**

When asked about the support of the institutions during the internship, all of the interviewees expressed their disappointment. Once the interns were admitted into the companies, the institutions gave no further support to the interns or the companies. “*They even neglected the role of academic supervisors and never contacted the companies to check up on the performance of their students,*” revealed Thanh. A few lecturers contacted the companies to inquire about the students’ attendance or performance just because of their personal relationship with the students. All of the activities of the interns were only managed by the companies. The institutions neither controlled the actual doings of the interns nor ensured the effectiveness of the internship. Consequently, the interns were assigned irrelevant tasks without their institutions’ notice. The summary of the tasks given to the interns is displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Tasks given to interns (N=18)

Tasks Given to Interns	Number of Responses	Percentage of Total Number of Interviewees
Menial administrative tasks such as typing, printing, photocopying, etc.	17	94.4
Simple tasks such as welcoming guests, carrying guests’ luggage, distributing leaflets, etc.	7	38.9
Specialised tasks such as sales, designing tours, booking, contacting tour guides, etc. at simple level	6	33.3
Following tours to observe	8	44.4
Guiding tours	2	11.1

The most common tasks assigned to the interns were menial administration duties such as typing, printing, photocopying, faxing documents, etc. These interns were not allowed to deal with anything related to paperwork because as shared by

Hai: *“I am afraid that they will make mistakes”*. They were also given some simple tasks such as welcoming tourists at the airport, carrying tourists’ luggage, helping the elderly to get on or off the company’s shuttles and distributing leaflets to potential customers. They could also join in the company’s activities such as team building activities. Those who had a good knowledge of their area of specialisation could be assigned tasks suitable for their majors such as sales, designing tours, operating tours, booking, contacting tour guides, checking prices, giving quotes and preparing documents for coming tours. All of these tasks were normally implemented at a simple level with close supervision. When there were more complicated tasks such as dealing with customers, these interns had to refer the customers to the official staff for consultation. In some companies, they were asked to observe the experienced staff to become familiar with the tasks and then conducted these under supervision.

For the students whose major was tour guiding, their chances to guide a real tour were quite slim. Approximately half of the mentors revealed that they only allowed the interns to follow a real tour to observe and help with errands during the tour. A typical explanation given by Nam was:

*Most of the interns are allowed to accompany our tour guides to observe and help our tour guides with team building activities in order to develop a good relationship with tourists, but they are not permitted to hold the microphone to give a presentation in front of the tourists. Our tour guides are not courageous enough to let them present or lead the tour for the sake of the tour’s quality. We are afraid that these interns cannot take charge of the tour well.*

Some large companies did not even allow interns to follow a tour to observe, giving the excuse that they had to seek permission from the tourists, and they had to prepare carefully with the tour guides before allowing them to accompany the tours. Some other companies gave the interns a chance to follow only short day tours.

### **In the Assessment of WIL**

Regarding the requirements given by institutions for assessing interns, the interviewees expressed an ambivalent attitude. The most common form of assessment of the internship was through feedback sheets, internship journals and internship reports for which templates were provided to the companies by the institutions. Normally after the period of working for the companies as interns, the students are required to write a journal about their daily activities and ask the companies for certification. They also had to write a report about the companies and the internship with feedback from their mentors and submit these documents back to their institutions for marking. One manager, Minh, disagreed with the procedure given by the institutions for assessing interns. He insisted:

*Companies themselves should be the assessors of all the performance of the interns with regard to their workplace learning. Now, many students are given maximum marks in their theses or internship reports but when they come to work in my company, they do not know how to do things properly.*

Some managers who held similar views to Minh's suggested that the interns take some extra steps to be assessed. For example, according to Nam, every intern had to submit a report to him after each tour that he or she had followed. A few companies developed their own procedures to assess interns. For instance, according to Dong, his company assigned staff to work as internship supervisors who reported on the interns to the manager every week. The mentors were asked to watch and assess the interns based on the company's regulations such as punctuality or wearing uniforms because they treated them like regular employees. The manager also set up the company's own assessment standards for the mentors to assess the interns.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study draws on the tourism industry perspectives towards the roles that tourism training institutions play throughout the WIL processes. The findings have shown that the tourism training institutions are not doing the right job as coordinators and facilitators for WIL across the three stages of WIL.

The bonding between the institutions and the tourism companies is mainly secured by personal relationships between the lecturers or the institution leaders and the companies rather than through the official channels. The academics deserve credit for their initiative to establish and sustain rapport with the industry via maintaining relationships through their personal networks as Cooper et al. (2010) outlined. Yet what the industry is longing for is the formal partnerships that the institutions should generate with them. Their expectation of a formal liaison and evident internship guidelines resonates with previous scholars recommendations (Bates, 2005; Cooper et al., Patrick et al., 2008). The host organisations also demand for a comprehensive contract as suggested by Cooper et al. (2010) rather than the casual, cursory and simplistic introductory documents and verbal agreements given by the institutions. The companies become passive recipients of the information on WIL, and thus fail to be in a state of preparedness for an effective WIL experience. The institutions' inadequate communication indicates their lack of professionalism, which leads to discontentment among industry practitioners.

Although the academics have some involvement in WIL at the initial stage, their engagement in the preparation for WIL is judged as personal and spontaneous rather than systematic and sustainable as advised by WIL experts (Cooper et al., 2010; Harvey et al., 1998). Both the company and students are not given adequate

induction, entailing the incompatibility of the organisation's capacity and the interns' demands and expectations. Also, the students themselves are not requested to do research on companies that could accommodate their needs to avoid negative feelings when they contact them.

The companies witness domino effects caused by a lack of elaborate preparation when WIL comes to the implementation and assessment stages. They manage to provide the interns with experiential learning without an academic supervisor working alongside. These findings contradict Cooper's team's (2010) guidelines. The quality of WIL practice thus cannot be guaranteed. It is inevitable that the mentors are reluctant to delegate specialised duties to interns due to the lack of adequate training from the institutions or the WIL coordinators. They have a valid concern whereby they need to protect the reputation of their employers given their insufficient trust in the interns' specialised capability. Without academic monitoring, the mentors are only involved in the WIL process as a formality to fulfil the task assigned by their employers rather than taking the interns' benefits and learning outcomes into account.

The institutions are mostly engaged in the assessment of WIL given that the students are requested to submit feedback sheets, internship journals and reports for marking. However, the quality of these reflection records is not maintained as many companies provide certification via feedback sheets without considering the actual quality seriously. Also, the journals and reports marked by the institutions do not highly value the voices of the host companies while the workplace supervisors' perspectives are pivotal to the effectiveness of WIL design (Patrick et al., 2008). As a result, several managers expressed their objection to the WIL assessment procedure and proposed some rectification. Their initiative in a more effective WIL reflection adds value to the WIL process and deserves appreciation from the academics and institutions.

In summary, the academics' mission as a WIL ambassador to bring insights into the WIL curriculum to both the host organisations and the students is not achieved from the perspectives of the tourism industry. The companies and interns are neither provided with sufficient information nor given appropriate support. Therefore, students are "thrown in at the deep end" as cautioned by Long et al. (2001) to educational providers. This study calls on the tourism institutions for more sustainable partnerships, explicit and transparent WIL guidelines prior to the WIL, sufficient support during the WIL, and recognition of workplace supervisors' voices in students' reflection after the WIL.

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