

Work-Integrated Learning of Generation Y and Z in the Mental Health Profession: Expanding Participation and Bridging Gaps

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Abstract

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has emerged as a critical strategy in higher education to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and professional practice. This study examines the role of WIL among Generation Y and Z students in the mental health profession, focusing on assessment practices, challenges, and best practices within the Philippine context. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, the paper synthesizes existing studies on WIL implementation, highlighting issues such as skill mismatch, inadequate supervision, and student well-being. Findings indicate that effective WIL requires multi-source assessment, strong institutional-industry collaboration, and structured reflective learning. The study concludes that adapting WIL programs to the characteristics of younger generations enhances employability, professional identity formation, and readiness for mental health practice. Recommendations are proposed to improve WIL frameworks and promote inclusive participation.

Keywords: Work-Integrated Learning, Generation Z; mental health education; employability; internship; assessment

INTRODUCTION

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a pedagogical approach that integrates academic learning with practical workplace experience. It is widely utilized in higher education to enhance graduate employability and ensure alignment between academic preparation and industry demands (Jackson, 2014). In professional fields such as mental health, WIL plays a crucial role in developing essential competencies, including communication skills, ethical decision-making, and reflective practice.

In the Philippine context, WIL is commonly implemented through internships and practicum courses embedded in undergraduate programs. These experiences allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings while developing professional identity and workplace readiness. Universities, employers, and students all benefit from WIL through strengthened partnerships, talent development, and improved employment outcomes (Jackson et al., 2016).

Generation Y and Z students bring distinct characteristics into WIL environments. These cohorts are technologically proficient, value continuous feedback, and seek meaningful work experiences (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). However, they may also face challenges such as communication difficulties, low confidence in

professional settings, and increased stress levels. These factors necessitate a re-evaluation of WIL design and implementation.

Despite its importance, there is limited research focusing on WIL in the mental health field, particularly in developing countries like the Philippines. This study aims to address this gap by examining WIL assessment practices, identifying challenges, and proposing strategies for improving implementation.

Research Statement

Despite the growing integration of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in higher education, there remains limited research on its implementation, assessment, and effectiveness within the mental health profession, particularly among Generation Y and Z students in the Philippine context. Existing studies largely focus on general employability outcomes, with insufficient attention to generational differences, student well-being, and discipline-specific challenges. This study aims to address this gap by examining the assessment practices, challenges, and best practices of WIL in mental health training, with the goal of enhancing student learning outcomes, employability, and professional readiness.

METHODS

A qualitative-descriptive design was employed to evaluate the career guidance program using SWOT analysis. Data were gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) with licensed guidance counselors, guidance designates, faculty advisers, and senior high school students from selected schools in Cebu City.

Participants were selected purposively based on their involvement in or experience with career guidance activities. Structured guiding questions intended to elicit information to elicit insights about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the program was conducted.

Narrative analysis was used to examine the data, capturing informants' lived experiences and perspectives. Emerging themes were categorized into the SWOT matrix to identify internal (strengths, weaknesses) and external (opportunities, threats) factors. Ethical clearance ensuring participant confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data Sources

The data for this study were derived from a range of scholarly and academic materials. These included peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Studies in Higher Education* and *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, which provide extensive research on work-integrated learning and higher education practices. In addition, books and institutional reports were utilized to offer theoretical foundations and policy perspectives. Recent studies focusing on Generation Y and Z, as well as experiential learning, were also included to ensure that the analysis reflects current trends and generational characteristics relevant to WIL.

Inclusion Criteria

The selection of literature was guided by specific inclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Studies were included if they focused on work-integrated learning, internships, or practicum experiences. Priority was given to research that addressed key themes such as assessment methods, employability, and student

experiences in workplace settings. Furthermore, only literature relevant to higher education and the training of students in mental health and related disciplines was considered, ensuring alignment with the objectives of the study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to systematically examine and synthesize the selected literature. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns, concepts, and insights across studies related to work-integrated learning. Through iterative coding and categorization, key themes were generated and organized into three major areas: assessment of WIL, challenges and barriers in its implementation, and best practices and innovations. These thematic categories provided a structured framework for analyzing the findings and discussing the implications for improving WIL programs, particularly in the context of mental health education for Generation Y and Z learners.

RESULTS

Table 1
Assessment Methods in Work-Integrated Learning

Assessment Method	Description	Strengths	Limitations	Key Source
Self-Assessment	Students evaluate their own performance based on set criteria and reflective processes	Promotes self-reflection, autonomy, and metacognitive skills	May lack objectivity; students may overestimate or underestimate abilities	Trede et al. (2015)
Supervisor Assessment	Workplace supervisors assess student performance in real-world settings	Provides reliable evaluation of competencies, professional behavior, and work readiness	May be influenced by supervisor bias or limited observation time	Norcini (2003)
Reflective Assessment (Journals, Portfolios)	Students document and reflect on their learning experiences during WIL	Enhances critical thinking, links theory to practice, supports professional identity development	Time-consuming; requires structured guidance for effectiveness	Billett (2011)
Multi-Method Assessment	Combination of self, supervisor, and reflective assessments	Increases validity and reliability; provides holistic evaluation of learning outcomes	Requires coordination among stakeholders	Smith (2014)

The findings reveal that WIL assessment is most effective when multiple methods are used. These include self-assessment, supervisor evaluation, and reflective assessment tools such as journals and portfolios (Smith, 2014).

Self-assessment promotes reflective learning but is often limited by students' inability to objectively evaluate their performance (Trede et al., 2015). In contrast, supervisor assessment provides more reliable insights into workplace competencies and professional behavior (Norcini, 2003).

Reflective assessment emerged as a critical component, enabling students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. Studies emphasize that structured reflection enhances critical thinking and professional identity development (Billett, 2011).

Table 2
Challenges and Barriers in Work-Integrated Learning

Challenge	Description	Impact on Students	Key Source
Irrelevant Work Assignments	Students are assigned tasks not aligned with their field of study (e.g., routine or clerical work)	Limits skill development and reduces meaningful learning experience	Alpert et al. (2009)
Skill Mismatch	Gap between students' competencies and workplace expectations	Leads to poor performance, reduced confidence, and limited contribution to tasks	Jackson et al. (2016)
Communication Difficulties	Challenges in expressing ideas, interacting with colleagues, and adapting to professional communication styles	Affects workplace integration and professional relationships	Jackson (2015)
Inadequate Supervision	Limited guidance and mentoring from workplace supervisors	Reduces learning opportunities and weakens skill acquisition	Henderson & Trede (2017)
Mental Health Concerns	Stress, anxiety, and emotional strain during internship, especially in demanding fields like mental health	Negatively affects well-being, performance, and engagement	Hussein et al. (2022)
Lack of Student Engagement	Students feel excluded or not part of the organization	Decreases motivation and overall internship satisfaction	Toncar & Cudmore (2000)

Several challenges affecting the effectiveness of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) were identified in the literature. One major issue is the assignment of irrelevant tasks, where students are given responsibilities unrelated to their field of study, thereby limiting meaningful learning outcomes (Alpert et al., 2009). Additionally, a noticeable skill mismatch exists, as employers often report gaps between students' competencies and workplace expectations (Jackson et al., 2016). Communication difficulties also pose a challenge, with students struggling to express ideas clearly, interact professionally, and integrate into workplace environments (Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, inadequate supervision due to limited mentor availability reduces the quality of guidance and support provided to students during their placements. Lastly, mental health concerns have emerged as a significant issue, particularly in demanding fields such as mental health, where students experience increased levels of stress and emotional strain (Hussein et al., 2022).

Table 3
Best Practices in Work-Integrated Learning Implementation

Best Practice	Description	Benefits	Key Source
Strong Academic-Industry Collaboration	Partnership between universities and employers in designing and managing WIL programs	Ensures relevance of tasks and alignment with industry needs	Henderson & Trede (2017)
Clear Learning Outcomes	Defined competencies and expectations for student performance	Enhances assessment clarity and student focus	Smith (2014)
Structured Reflective Activities	Use of journals, portfolios, and guided reflection tasks	Promotes critical thinking and integration of theory and practice	Dean et al. (2012)
Continuous Feedback Mechanisms	Regular evaluation and feedback from supervisors and academic coordinators	Improves performance and supports continuous learning	Jackson (2017)
Pre-Internship Training	Preparation programs covering skills, expectations, and workplace behavior	Increases student readiness and confidence	Billett (2011)
Use of Digital Tools (e.g., E-portfolios)	Technology-based platforms for documenting and showcasing learning	Enhances accessibility, reflection, and employability	Rowe et al. (2020)
Student Support Systems	Provision of mentoring, counseling, and well-being programs	Supports mental health and improves student engagement	Hussein et al. (2022)

The analysis identified several effective strategies for enhancing the implementation of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). These include strong collaboration between academic institutions and industry partners, which ensures alignment between academic preparation and workplace expectations (Henderson & Trede, 2017). Equally important is the clear articulation of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, providing students with defined goals and performance standards (Smith, 2014). The integration of structured reflective activities, such as journals and guided reflections, further supports the connection between theory and practice (Dean et al., 2012). In addition, continuous feedback and performance monitoring play a crucial role in improving student learning and development. Pre-internship preparation and training programs also enhance student readiness and confidence prior to workplace immersion. Finally, the use of digital tools, including e-portfolios, facilitates documentation, reflection, and showcasing of competencies (Rowe et al., 2020). Collectively, these practices contribute to improved student engagement, stronger learning outcomes, and enhanced employability.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the importance of adapting WIL programs to the needs of Generation Y and Z learners. These students benefit from interactive, feedback-driven environments that support both professional and personal development.

The integration of multi-source assessment enhances the validity and reliability of evaluating student performance. Combining self-reflection with supervisor feedback ensures a comprehensive understanding of learning outcomes. This aligns with experiential learning theory, which emphasizes the role of reflection in knowledge construction (Kolb, 1984).

Challenges such as skill mismatch and inadequate supervision indicate a need for stronger collaboration between universities and industry partners. Establishing clear expectations, structured training, and mentoring systems can address these issues.

Furthermore, the emotional demands of mental health placements highlight the need for support systems that promote student well-being. Institutions should integrate counseling services, stress management programs, and resilience training into WIL frameworks.

Overall, WIL remains a powerful tool for developing competent and work-ready graduates. However, its effectiveness depends on continuous improvement, stakeholder collaboration, and responsiveness to generational differences.

CONCLUSION

Work-Integrated Learning is essential in preparing Generation Y and Z students for careers in the mental health profession. It enhances employability, fosters professional identity, and bridges the gap between theory and practice.

This study concludes that effective Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) implementation requires the use of multi-method assessment systems to capture a more comprehensive picture of student performance, as well as strong institutional–industry collaboration to ensure alignment between academic training and workplace expectations. It also emphasizes the importance of structured reflective learning to help students critically process and connect their experiences to theoretical knowledge. In addition, adopting student-centered and flexible approaches is essential to accommodate diverse learning needs, promote engagement, and enhance the overall effectiveness of WIL programs.

Addressing existing challenges and adapting to the needs of modern learners will ensure that WIL programs remain relevant and impactful.

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