

THE ROLE OF WORK-BASED LEARNING IN FUTURE-READY EDUCATION

Annual Academic Symposium 2025: Workshop Report

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We extend our heartfelt thanks to all workshop participants. Your time, insights, and enthusiasm were invaluable, making this workshop a resounding success. We hope this report reflects the energy and dedication you brought to our discussions.

Thank you for sharing your perspectives on WBL,

John, Tracey & Miles.

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Introduction

This report summarises the key messages and outputs from our workshop, “**The Role of Work-Based Learning in Future-Ready Education**” as part of the [Annual Academic Symposium 2025](#) (30th March 2025) at the University of Aberdeen. The workshop comprised three activities with participant input being captured via Padlet.

The workshop had three key areas of focus that explored the definition, relevance, and implementation of work-based learning (WBL) with group discussions broken down into three distinct but connected activities:

Activity 1 (What is WBL?): Participants were asked to add their ideas and definitions of Work-Based Learning to a Padlet board, contributing individually or collectively.

Activity 2 (Relevance to your context): Participants rated different predefined types of WBL on Padlet, adding specific examples they found relevant or impactful.

Activity 3 (Brainstorming): Participants contributed ideas to two specific areas on Padlet: the “Quick Wins” (smaller, achievable steps) and “Broader Possibilities” (longer-term ambitions) for enhancing WBL.

Activity 1: What is WBL?

Participants explored the meaning and scope of WBL, identifying several key themes from group discussions as documented below and in a word cloud (Figure 1).

WBL definition

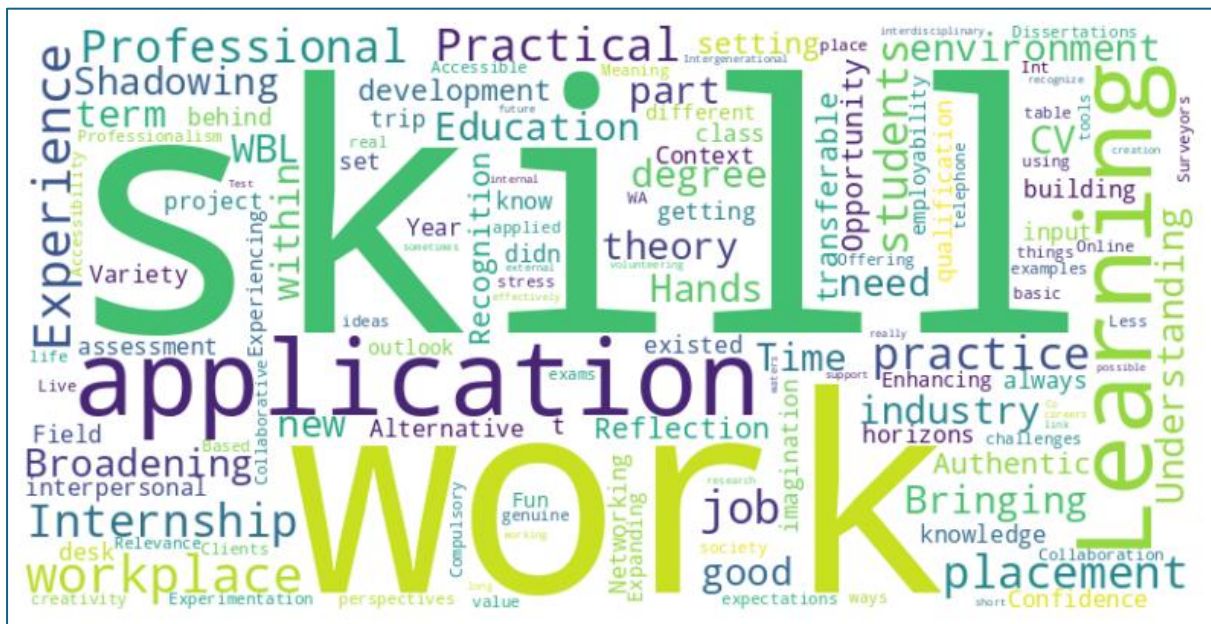
WBL was broadly understood as learning that occurs outside the typical university environment, often in a workplace setting. It involves the practical application of theoretical knowledge and authentic educational experiences that replicate or connect with the workplace.

Purpose and benefits

Key benefits highlighted include professional skills development (e.g., interpersonal, transferable skills), enhancing employability, gaining work experience, building confidence, networking, and broadening perspectives and horizons. It was also seen as an opportunity for students to understand the application of their knowledge, experience different work environments, learn new skills, and potentially “test the water” for future careers. It was further highlighted that WBL can provide valuable experience for CVs and sometimes a source of income.

Various forms of WBL were mentioned, including placements, internships, industry projects, field trips, shadowing, volunteering, and bringing professional input into the classroom via guest speakers or clients.

Questions were raised about whether WBL needs to be part of a degree, the availability of local opportunities, making WBL accessible, ensuring it is relevant for postgraduate students already in careers, and whether it should be compulsory. The idea of co-creating opportunities with students was also suggested.



Word analysis derived from responses to the question “What does WBL mean to you?” along with associated words, ideas, and examples. The terms “WBL” and “student” were excluded from the analysis due to their high frequency, which obscured the visibility of other significant words.

Participants rated/ranked and discussed various types of WBL, highlighting those considered most relevant and impactful as shown below.

Industry-set projects/challenges and placements received the highest average ratings, closely followed by internships and mentorship programmes. Guest

speakers/masterclasses and job shadowing were also viewed favourably. Networking opportunities also scored highly.

Student employment

Recognising and potentially accrediting students' existing part-time jobs was seen as highly relevant, although potentially needing support to link the activity to their studies.

Impactful examples

Specific impactful examples included hackathons, career mentoring, placements for specific professions (e.g., clinical), developing soft/transferable skills, putting theory into practice, and providing opportunities for paid, credit-bearing work.

Activity 3: Brainstorming of “Quick Wins” and “Broader Possibilities”

The final activity focused on actionable steps with participants grouping them into the easier to implement “quick wins” or longer-term “broader possibilities” for changing WBL practices. Word clouds were also generated from this data (see Figures 2 and 3).

Quick Wins (Short-term, Achievable Steps)

Communication and awareness: Clearly highlighting to students what WBL is and its benefits.

Assessment: Incorporating WBL options into assessments across courses, redefining assessments, using more authentic assessments, and potentially using creative assessment methods. Assessing industry-based challenges was also suggested.

Leveraging existing resources: Inviting guest speakers, particularly former students/alumni. Working more closely with the Careers Service. Sharing good practice between Schools.

Student jobs: Innovatively using students' part-time jobs, possibly for credit, acknowledging students may be time-poor. Recognising links between student jobs/volunteering and their learning.

Simulations and projects: Using simulated placements and industry projects created by Schools/departments, or interdisciplinary simulations on courses that are open to all. Summer research projects within departments were also mentioned.

Embedding WBL: Embedding employability elements, like masterclasses, into teaching.



Figure 2 – Word cloud of suggested “Quick Wins” from Activity 3.

Word analysis derived from participants sharing their ideas regarding the quick wins for WBL activities.

Broader Possibilities (Longer-term Ambitions)

Integration: Making WBL a standard component for all students on all programmes, potentially at multiple points throughout their degree programme (if undergraduate).

Infrastructure: Creating a central repository for WBL ideas and information or even a dedicated WBL department/School.

Advanced simulation: Using AI-assisted simulation clinics, particularly for fields like medicine involving complex ethical discussions.

Industry partnerships: Developing real industry projects in conjunction with businesses.

Institutional projects: Utilising current students to contribute to institutional projects (e.g., computing students on AI initiatives).

Placement variety: Offering a mix of short-term and long-term placements throughout the year.

Analysis of Work-Based Learning (WBL) Padlet Discussions

This analysis examines the content from the exported data derived from Padlet, following discussions during the workshop. It identifies the most common terms, extracts key themes, and assesses the overall sentiment associated with these themes.

Common words analysis

Across the three Padlets, the most frequently occurring relevant words, excluding common words, names, dates, etc., provide some insights into the core topics as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – Analysis of common words from Padlet data.

Common Word	Description/Context
Skills	Frequently mentioned in various contexts (e.g., professional, practical, transferable, interpersonal, development).
Learning	A core concept, often linked to practical application and real-world experience.
Experience	A key component and desired outcome of WBL activities.
Work/Workplace	Central to the WBL concept, referring to both the setting and the practice of professional activities.
Placements	Often discussed and highly rated form of WBL.
Assessment	Discussed in relation to integrating WBL, ensuring authenticity, and potential for academic credit.
Projects	Often cited as a WBL method, including industry-set challenges and ‘real-world’ problems.
Industry	Referring to the external professional context providing relevance, projects, and placements for WBL.
Authentic	Used to describe desired qualities of WBL experiences, assessments, and educational approaches.
Application	Emphasises applying theoretical knowledge or academic skills in practical settings.

Thematic/sentiment analysis

Based on the common words and the specific comments within the Padlets, the following four themes emerge:

Theme 1 – Defining WBL and its diversity

Participants collectively defined WBL and brainstormed its various manifestations. This included traditional forms like placements and internships, but also extended to industry projects, authentic case studies, simulations, field trips, guest speakers, volunteering, job shadowing, and even leveraging students' existing part-time jobs. The core idea was learning situated *outside* the conventional classroom or university setting.

Neutral to positive sentiment: The sentiment was primarily descriptive. However, the ranking activity in Activity 2 clearly shows positive sentiment towards specific forms of WBL like industry-set projects (avg. rating ~4.5), placements (~4.5), and internships (~4.2), indicating a preference for integrated, practical experiences. Less structured or potentially less directly relevant forms like 'Other types' (~2.9) or apprenticeships (~2.7), perhaps due to specific funding/structural issues mentioned, ranked lower.

Theme 2 – Skills development and enhancing employability

This was one of the main themes. WBL was consistently viewed as a vital mechanism for developing a wide range of skills (practical, professional, transferable, and interpersonal skills). It was seen as essential for applying academic knowledge, significantly boosting student employability, strengthening CVs, and building professional confidence.

Very positive sentiment: There is clear enthusiasm and high value placed on the role of WBL in preparing students for their future careers and bridging the gap between academic theory and professional practice. Commentary like “enhancing employability,” “professional skill development,” “confidence building,” and “practical application” underscore this positive view.

Theme 3 – Student experience

Beyond direct skill acquisition, WBL was discussed for its broader benefits to the student experience. This includes opportunities for networking, broadening perspectives and horizons, experiencing different work environments, enhancing creativity and experimentation, gaining “real-world” context for studies, and even adding an element of “fun.” Accessibility (e.g., for international or online students) and the potential for paid work were also noted as important aspects. Recognising and valuing students' existing jobs/volunteering was also highlighted.

Positive sentiment: The focus was on the enriching aspects of WBL for students' personal and professional development, and how that contributes positively to their overall university experience.

Theme 4 – Implementation

The discussions covered both immediate actions and long-term ambitions. Quick wins included inviting guest speakers, better communication about WBL opportunities, using more creative/authentic assessments, and sharing best practices between departments. Broader goals involved integrating WBL, using simulations or AI for scalability, developing central resources, and deeper integration with Careers and Alumni networks. Challenges were also acknowledged, such as securing institutional buy-in, finding adequate resources and funding, addressing student time constraints, ensuring equity and accessibility for all students (including PGT, online learners), and the logistics of scaling initiatives.

Mixed sentiment: There was optimism around innovative ideas and potential improvements. However, this is tempered by a realistic, neutral-to-slightly-negative acknowledgement of practical hurdles, resource limitations (“more funds needed”), feasibility concerns, and the complexities of implementation (“difficult to get actual industry projects,” “get buy-in”).

Analysis summary

Overall, the sentiment towards WBL from the group discussions recorded in the Padlets is decidedly positive. Participants clearly valued its potential for enhancing skills, employability, and the student experience. The discussions highlight a desire for more authentic, integrated, and varied WBL opportunities. While enthusiasm for innovation is high, there is also a pragmatic awareness of the challenges involved in implementing and scaling these initiatives effectively and equitably.