Transformation in Higher Education
ISSN: (Online) 2519-5638, (Print) 2415-0991

Reconciling work-integrated learning assessment: A collaborative employer–coordinator approach

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Dates:
Received: 18 Jan. 2026
Accepted: 09 Apr. 2026
Published: 11 June 2026

How to cite this article:
Van der Merwe, T., De Jager, T. & White, C.J., 2026, 'Reconciling Work-Integrated Learning Assessment: A Collaborative Employer-Coordinator Approach', *Transformation in Higher Education* 11(0), a752. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v11i0.752

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Work-integrated learning is vital for graduate employability, yet assessment is often compromised by misaligned academic and industry expectations. A gap existed between advocating for collaboration in the literature and implementing it in practice to reconcile differing notions of valid evidence.

This study aimed to identify key themes from collaborations between employers and module coordinators in designing work-integrated learning (WIL) assessments, to develop a framework that reconciles academic and workplace validity. The research was conducted within a diploma WIL programme at a South African University of Technology (UoT). A qualitative action research design was employed, comprising semi-structured interviews with seven module coordinators and 21 employers. Data were analysed thematically, guided by an integrated theoretical framework that drew on Activity, Stakeholder and Constructivist theories. Analysis revealed a surface-level consensus masking a deep 'validity schism', with coordinators prioritising academic construct validity while employers emphasised verifiable workplace performance. Despite this, both groups shared a vision for a digitally enhanced, communication-rich assessment system. Effective WIL assessment was reconceptualised as a managed negotiation between validity cultures, necessitating a co-designed, evidence-based framework as essential to cultivating work-ready graduates.

Contribution: This study addressed a theoretical and practical gap by modelling the 'validity schism' and proposing the Integrated, Reflective, and Evidence-Based (IREB) WIL assessment framework. It advanced scholarship by framing collaboration as an epistemological negotiation and offered actionable insights to align assessment and improve graduate employability.

Keywords: assessment; higher education; stakeholder; validity; work-integrated learning.

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely recognised as essential for improving graduate employability by connecting academic theory with professional practice (Alharahsheh & Pius 2021:1148; Green et al. 2022:1), equipping students with real-world skills and fostering a professional identity (Boud et al. 2022:1326; Gambheer & Acharya 2024:5). However, WIL assessment remains a persistent challenge, often marked by a disconnect between academic and industry expectations that weakens its social purpose (Ajjawi et al. 2020:305; Alharahsheh & Pius 2021:1148). This disconnect can result in graduates lacking verifiable workplace readiness. South Africa's alarming graduate unemployment rate of 31.9% (Statistics South Africa 2025) underscores the urgent need for effective WIL programmes to bridge this gap (Boud et al. 2022:1326; Majiya 2023:55). In the South African context, institutional assessment frameworks frequently fail to adequately prepare graduates for workplace demands (Bosco & Ferns 2014:281; Boud et al. 2022:1326), a problem stemming from a fundamental misalignment of stakeholder expectations.

Existing research consistently emphasises the need for collaboration between module coordinators and employers to align academic and industry needs (Aničić & Divjak 2022:49; Henderson & Trede 2017:73). Frameworks have been proposed to promote university-industry-student partnerships and embed authentic, workplace-aligned tasks (Bosco & Ferns 2014:283; Henderson & Trede 2017:73). However, a considerable gap remains between the conceptual support for collaboration and its practical application in designing assessment processes. While the literature advocates for partnership, collaboration is often treated as a procedural hurdle rather than an epistemological challenge. A notable shortfall exists in detailed qualitative analysis that explicitly compares employer and module coordinator perspectives on core assessment principles (Aničić & Divjak 2022:49–57; Campbell et al. 2021:515). This gap is especially evident in the under-explored processes through which these stakeholder groups negotiate their differing

notions of validity. Initial investigations indicate a fundamental divergence: Module coordinators emphasise academic construct validity while employers concentrate on genuine workplace verifiability. Current collaborative models do not fully address this disconnect, or 'validity schism' (Van der Merwe 2026). Therefore, this study shifts the focus from *whether* stakeholders collaborate to *how* they reconcile their fundamentally different views of what constitutes valid evidence of competence.

To conceptualise this challenge, the study is grounded in a theoretical framework synthesising constructivist, stakeholder and activity theories. Activity Theory, in particular, provides a dynamic lens for analysing complex interactions in WIL (McRae & Johnston 2016:338), enabling the analysis of the identified 'validity schism' as a core contradiction within the WIL activity system. Supported by stakeholder theory, which mandates active involvement to reconcile expectations, and constructivist principles, which validate experiential learning tools, this integrated framework guides the investigation.

The central research question guiding this study was: *What key themes emerge from employer and module coordinators' interviews about WIL assessment design?* In pursuit of this question, the research aimed to: (1) explore the challenges in current WIL assessment practices; (2) identify the main themes and elements of successful collaboration between these stakeholders; and (3) develop a context-specific framework for WIL using a logbook strategy. The overarching goal was to establish a collaborative assessment framework for WIL that aligns with both academic and industry requirements, thereby improving graduate employability. Based on the findings, this study proposes the IREB WIL assessment framework as a practical model for achieving this alignment.

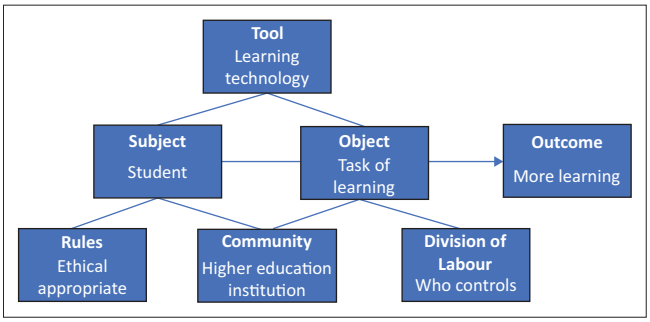
Theoretical framework

This study's theoretical framework integrates constructivist, stakeholder and activity theories to address gaps in WIL assessment, emphasising alignment between practical experience and theoretical learning. Activity Theory provides the central, dynamic lens for analysing the complex WIL environment (McRae & Johnston 2016:338).

Rooted in the cultural-historical psychology of Vygotsky (1978:54) and notably expanded by Engeström (2001:135), this study employs Engeström's Activity Theory model, as adapted for higher education by Scanlon and Issroff (2005:433), to analyse the WIL assessment system. Figure 1 illustrates this model, which we have operationalised to identify the key elements and contradictions within the WIL environment.

This study applies the Activity Theory model to the WIL context, as visualised in Figure 1 and derived from Scanlon and Issroff (2005:433). Activity theory posits that human activities are mediated by tools and shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts. This study conceptualises the WIL activity system by defining the student as the *subject*, developing integrated workplace competence as the *object*, and using the WIL logbook as the key mediating *tool*. This system is governed by the *rules* of both academic assessment and workplace norms, involving a *community* of university coordinators and employers. It operates according to a *division of labour* that distributes mentoring and evaluation responsibilities between module coordinators and industry partners. This model is particularly suited to understanding the tensions and contradictions that arise within collaborations where participants' goals and tools are evolving, making it ideal for examining the interplay between academic and industry priorities in WIL (Hashim & Jones 2007:11; Scanlon & Issroff 2005:433). The central contradiction within this activity system, as revealed by the findings, is a misalignment in the *object of the activity*. For module coordinators, the object is 'theoretically grounded competence', mediated by tools designed for academic construct validity. For employers, the object is 'practically verified competence', mediated by a need for evidence-based workplace verifiability. This contradiction, termed a 'validity schism', inherently destabilises and undermines the collaborative process, constituting the primary contradiction within the WIL activity system. Engeström (2001:136) states that such systemic contradictions are the engines of change and development. The discordances revealed in our findings are manifestations of this contradiction, necessitating the collaborative redesign of the assessment system. As articulated by Baumer et al. (2024:179–180), the cultivation of reciprocity and the mutual appreciation of knowledge among stakeholders plays a pivotal role in mitigating existing tensions and facilitating collaborative partnerships. This foundational principle should inform and guide the redesign process.

Stakeholder theory complements activity theory by mandating the active and collaborative involvement of employers, module coordinators, and students in designing and implementing the assessment framework to reconcile differing expectations and ensure its relevance (Aničić & Divjak 2022:49; Henderson & Trede 2017:73). Constructivist principles, which assert that knowledge is constructed through experience and critical reflection, support this



Source: Adapted from Scanlon, E. & Issroff, K., 2005, 'Activity theory and higher education: Evaluating learning technologies', *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 21(6), 430–439. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2005.00153.x; and Engeström, Y., 1987, 'Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research', G4 Doctoral dissertation (monograph), Helsinki, viewed 28 September 2024, from https://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/Engestrom/Learning-by-Expanding.pdf

FIGURE 1: Activity theory presents the use of technologies in higher education.

approach and validate the use of experiential tools, such as logbooks, within the Workplace Learning (WPL) typology of WIL (Mutereko & Wedekind 2016:908). Ultimately, integrating these theoretical constructs provides a comprehensive foundation for developing a robust, contextually relevant WIL assessment framework that bridges the theory-practice divide and enhances graduate employability.

Research methods and design

The study employed a qualitative approach utilising an action research strategy. This methodology was selected because it facilitates iterative, reflective cycles aimed at collaboratively addressing a real-world problem, thereby enabling direct and practical improvement of the WIL assessment process through phases of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:5. The research 'onion' model (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2007:102) informed the methodological structure. An interpretivist paradigm, which posits that social reality is constructed through individuals' meanings and experiences, guided this study, making it particularly suitable for investigating stakeholders' subjective perspectives on WIL assessment practices.

This single-case study examined a diploma WIL programme at a South African UoT. This setting enabled an in-depth exploration of alignment between academic and industry expectations within the South African higher education and graduate employment context.

The study population consisted of module coordinators and employers directly involved in the WIL process at the UoT. Inclusion criteria required participants to be either a module coordinator for a WIL module or an employer who had supervised a WIL student. There were no specific exclusion criteria beyond not fulfilling these roles.

The final sample comprised seven module coordinators (the full population of the WIL programme) and 21 employers. A non-probabilistic, voluntary response sampling method was used, with all module coordinators involved in the WIL module, as well as all employers associated with current student placements, invited to participate. Those who chose to respond self-selected into the study. Participants were gathered through iterative action research cycles in 2024 and 2025 until data saturation was achieved, meaning new data no longer provided additional insights into the emerging themes. This sample size was deemed sufficient to capture a substantive and diverse range of perspectives from these key stakeholder groups, consistent with the qualitative and iterative nature of action research.

As an action research process, this investigation was inherently interventionist. It involved the iterative development and implementation of a revised WIL assessment framework (focused on a logbook). There was no formal comparison group. The study progressed through cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the implementation of this framework with the participating stakeholders. For the phase reported here, the first cycle involved the *planning* and initial *acting* (implementation) of the existing paper-based logbook. The *observing* and *reflecting* phases consisted of gathering and analysing the interview data, which directly informed *planning* for a subsequent cycle and the development of the proposed IREB framework and a digital logbook prototype.

The study collected primary data through semi-structured online interviews conducted via MS Teams. The researchers used a standardised interview guide to ensure consistency while allowing for the exploration of emergent themes (Brink & Van Rensburg 2022:206). They audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. To mitigate potential limitations of the online format, the researcher periodically confirmed participants' understanding through verbal checks and ensured all sessions were conducted on a consistent, secure platform. A secondary analysis of WIL literature supplemented the primary data. The data collection tools (semi-structured interviews) are a standard and validated method for qualitative inquiry, suitable for exploring participant experiences and perspectives in depth.

The researchers transcribed all interviews verbatim. Subsequent steps included checking transcripts against audio recordings for accuracy and anonymising them by removing identifying information and assigning pseudonyms (e.g. MC, P1, a and EMP, P3, b). Data were analysed using a systematic thematic analysis approach. To protect participant anonymity while enabling clear differentiation across roles and data collection cycles, alphanumeric identifiers were assigned to each quoted excerpt. The prefix 'MC' denotes module coordinators, and 'EMP' denotes employers. Participant numbers (e.g., P1, P3) distinguish individual participants within each group. The suffixes 'a' and 'b' indicate the interview year: 'a' for 2024 and 'b' for 2025. Thus, an identifier such as (MC, P1, a) refers to data from module coordinator participant 1, interviewed in 2024, while (EMP, P3, b) refers to employer participant 3, interviewed in 2025. This involved the researchers familiarising themselves with the data and coding it using ATLAS.ti software, then developing and refining themes through an iterative process of reviewing codes to ensure they accurately reflected participants' accounts (Creswell 2014:247; Norton 2018:118-122). Intra-coder reliability was strengthened through peer verification. The analysis focused on identifying key themes emerging from collaborations between employers and module coordinators in WIL assessment design.

The study received full approval from the UoT's Research Ethics Committee (REC Ref #: 'Information redacted to maintain the integrity of the review process'), with further endorsements from relevant faculty and departmental heads. Participation was voluntary, based on signed informed consent. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Anonymising transcripts and using pseudonyms for all participants and their organisations in the reporting of findings safeguarded confidentiality and

anonymity. The research strategy addressed considerations of positionality and potential bias through the maintenance of a reflexive journal and the study's collaborative action research design.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Research Ethics Committee (No. REC2023/02/013).

Results

This study sought to identify the key themes that emerge from collaborations between employers and module coordinators in WIL assessment design. The iterative analysis of interviews from both module coordinators and employers across two cycles revealed a complex interplay of perspectives, though both groups demonstrated strong consensus on the logbook's foundational usability. The data revealed a fundamental dichotomy regarding the assessment tool's purpose and what constitutes valid evidence of competence. The following analysis structures itself around three central themes: (1) Convergent Satisfaction with Logbook Design and Core Principles, (2) The Divergent Lens: Academic Rigour versus Workplace Verifiability and (3) A Shared Path Forward: The Digital Imperative and Enhanced Communication. Each theme will be explored in detail, with representative participant accounts illustrating convergences and divergences.

Theme 1: Convergent satisfaction with logbook design and core principles

A strong consensus emerged from both stakeholder groups regarding the WIL logbook's fundamental design and ethical underpinnings. Participants universally found the assessment tool to be clearly explained, well-structured and manageable, thereby fulfilling the basic principles of sound assessment design (Bosco & Ferns 2014:281). This shared positive appraisal centred on two sub-themes: Perceived clarity and foundational fairness.

Perceived clarity and usability

Both coordinators and employers described the logbook as straightforward and transparent. A coordinator noted, 'For me, the logbook is clearly explained because there's information for the students and a section with information for the employer' (MC, P2, a). This sentiment was echoed by an employer who stated, 'Yes. I mean, if an attorney can follow a document of academics, it means it's quite simple, it's straightforward' (EMP, P3, a). This convergence indicates that the logbook successfully met basic usability criteria for both groups, providing a common foundation for its use.

Foundational fairness and consistency

The data overwhelmingly affirmed the principles of fairness and consistency in the assessment process. Coordinators deemed the process as 'very fair' (MC, P1, b), while employers agreed, with one adding a nuanced perspective on ensuring equity:

> 'Yes, there is fairness … but the worry is the issue of checks and balances on fairness … need attention in terms of whether the students can debrief by providing feedback on their mentors and supervisors …' (EMP, P5, b)

Despite this strong consensus on foundational fairness, the employer's comment also reveals an emerging realisation of the need for more dynamic feedback mechanisms to uphold equity in practice. This point foreshadows the communication challenges discussed later (EMP, P5, b). Table 1 summarises the convergent satisfaction with the logbook's basic design and ethical principles, synthesising representative quotes and implied principles from both stakeholder groups.

Theme 2: The divergent lens

Academic rigour versus workplace verifiability

Beyond the initial consensus, a profound divergence emerged, reflecting the classic theory-practice divide noted in WIL literature (Rook & Sloan 2021:41). The two groups evaluated the logbook through different lenses: coordinators focused on academic construct validity, whereas employers focused on practical aspects. In contrast, employers focused on the practical aspects. The employer group prioritised practical verification and workplace verifiability, that is, the direct demonstration of competent performance with tangible evidence. This fundamental divergence, termed a 'validity schism', occurs when stakeholders agree on the assessment tools but disagree on their purpose and on what constitutes valid evidence, causing collaboration to stall as partners pursue different objectives with the same tool.

The academic concern: Construct validity and theoretical alignment

Module coordinators were deeply concerned about whether the logbook accurately assessed the theoretical knowledge and discipline-specific skills taught in the curriculum, a core aspect of construct validity (Ajjawi et al. 2020:305). A coordinator argued, 'No, I do not think that there is validity. The knowledge and understanding of subject content, there's too much misalignment there' (MC, P1, a). Another noted that the framework, '… tests the generic and is not necessarily module-related or content-related …' (MC, P4, b).

TABLE 1: Convergent views on logbook design and principles.

Sub-theme	Stakeholder group	Representative quote	Implied principle
Perceived clarity	Coordinator	'It is simple and transparent for the students' (MC, P2, a).	Usability and Transparency
	Employer	'It's quite simple, it's straightforward' (EMP, P3, a).	Usability and Transparency
Foundational fairness	Coordinator	'Yes, I think it is very fair' (MC, P3, a).	Equity
	Employer	'Yes, there is fairness …' (EMP, P5, b).	Equity and Checks and Balances

Source: Adapted from Van der Merwe, T., 2026, 'Development of an assessment framework for work integrated learning in business administration at a South African University of Technology', Doctor of Education thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

This perspective frames the logbook as an assessment tool to measure theoretical learning, leading to proposals for module-specific tasks and more rigorous, academically graded components.

The industry concern: Authenticity and evidence-based verification

In contrast, employers were primarily focused on practical execution and verifying that students could perform in a real-world context. Consistent with Bosco and Ferns's (2014:281) concept of authentic validity, employers were primarily focused on practical execution and verifying that students could perform in a real-world context. A key employer pinpointed this, stating, 'The validation issue could have worked best if it had been paired with a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE)' (EMP, P2, b). They questioned, 'The policy requires moderation. I asked the question, what is being moderated? … Where is the evidence to show they have done it?' (EMP, P5, b) From this perspective, the logbook primarily serves as a mechanism for tracking and verifying progress towards workplace readiness. The risks of relying on unverified claims were starkly highlighted by another employer, who pointed to the potential for a complete lack of authenticity:

> 'I can have the students sit there, stare at the computer the whole day, and fill in the logbook. OK Okay, you got through the system by another one. Where is the evidence?' (EMP, P12, b)

This focus on verifiability was further complicated by a critical emergent theme: The need for confidential feedback. An employer revealed, 'Employers don't have confidentiality … Because now that we know they're going to read it, we may hold back …' (EMP, P3, b).

The pressure to deliver positive feedback highlights a potential threat to the integrity of the assessment.

This divergence between academics and employers signifies a fundamental operational flaw within the assessment partnership, constituting not merely a difference of opinion but a structural incompatibility in how valid evidence of competence is defined and assessed. This was vividly illustrated by one employer, who recounted a problematic reversal of roles: 'Yes, I did call the student to take me through the logbook … she wasn't sure as well …' (EMP, P4, b). This confusion directly compromises employers' roles as co-assessors and the reliability of their evaluations. On the other hand, the academic perspective on the inadequacy of the logbook for measuring theoretical knowledge was summarised by a module coordinator who argued the assessment was, '… not clear because it does not evaluate a learner on much of what they have been exposed to in class. It is more behavioural oriented …' (MC, P4, b). Whereas Baumer et al. (2024:176-177) found that positive WIL relationships are characterised by partnership and teamwork framings, the validity schism identified here reveals a deep structural incompatibility that prevents such framings from emerging. Table 2 synthesises this fundamental divergence in perspectives on assessment validity. It illustrates the core 'validity schism' by starkly contrasting the different lenses through which academia and industry view the logbook's purpose and their respective proposals for improvement.

TABLE 2: The validity schism: Contrasting conceptions of assessment.

Aspect	Module coordinators (academic lens)	Employers (industry lens)
Primary concern	Construct validity: Aligning assessment with theoretical knowledge from modules.	Authentic verifiability: Ensuring tasks are practical and claims are backed by evidence.
View of the logbook	A tool to measure theoretical learning.	A tool to track progress and verify workplace competence.
Proposed improvements	• Module-specific tasks • More rigorous rating scales • Academic marking	• Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) • Confidential feedback mechanisms • Soft skills training

Source: Adapted from Van der Merwe, T., 2026, 'Development of an assessment framework for work integrated learning in business administration at a South African University of Technology', Doctor of Education thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

Identifying competence: Data trustworthiness versus observed behaviour

This divergence extended to how each group perceived and valued evidence of student development. Coordinators were sceptical of student self-reporting, with one noting, 'There are quite a number of students who are not truthful in filling this section' (MC, P1, b). Employers, however, focused on observable behaviours, with one identifying limitations such as a lack of '… decision-making and taking initiative' (EMP-P4b). Furthermore, employers explicitly identified a theory-practice gap, with one observing that students '… sincerely don't have certain skills … They still have to Google how to do that …' (EMP, P14, b). The coordinators did not substantively engage with this concern in their responses.

Theme 3: A shared path forward: Convergent visions for an enhanced work-integrated learning framework

The profound 'validity schism' identified in Theme 2 reveals a fundamentally misaligned system. However, the improvements proposed by both module coordinators and employers, while sometimes differing in focus, may serve as direct remedies for this core divergence. Their convergent visions suggest a shared path forward for achieving a more robust, efficient and collaborative WIL assessment model. This convergence was particularly evident in three key areas: Digital transformation, stakeholder communication and student preparation. The convergent and divergent visions for a future WIL framework, as expressed by coordinators and employers across three key areas, are detailed in Table 3. This Table 3 highlights their shared goals and clarifies the different emphases requiring reconciliation in a new design.

The digital imperative: A shared goal with different concerns

All stakeholders unanimously recommended the transition to a digital logbook, underscoring a shared recognition of the need for greater efficiency and modernisation. However, the perspectives on its implementation differed. Employers advocated a digital platform to address practical

TABLE 3: Convergent and divergent visions for improvement.

Sub-theme	Stakeholder group	Representative quote and focus	Implied solution
Digital transformation	Coordinator	'This is a concern regarding the online logbook … Employers will require training' (MC, P2, b). *(Focus: Implementation Challenge)*	Phased rollout with comprehensive training and support.
	Employer	'I think converting the logbook into a digital format … Maybe consideration should be given to an online platform' (EMP, P15, b). *(Focus: Functional necessity)*	Development of a user-friendly digital platform for real-time tracking and submission.
Communication and coordination	Coordinator	'Inspections must focus on students' wellbeing … both employer and employee should be present during inspections' (MC, P1, a). *(Focus: Formal, structured visits)*	Scheduled, in-person site visits with a formal protocol.
	Employer	'It's also essential to have some means of communication with the university officials … Just a WhatsApp, just checking …' (EMP, P11, b). *(Focus: Informal, accessible support)*	A dedicated, low-friction communication channel (e.g. a WhatsApp group or a designated contact) is necessary for ongoing support and maintenance.
Student preparation	Coordinator	(Implied through validity concerns; no direct quote for 'preparedness') *(Focus: Theoretical and technical readiness)*	Better alignment of curriculum and assessment to ensure students possess the required technical knowledge.
	Employer	'I had to step in and assist them in drafting a professional email. … I see it as a learning gap' (EMP, P3, b), and 'Students could benefit from role-plays …' (EMP, P12, b). *(Focus: Soft skills and professional etiquette)*	Pre-WIL 'finishing school' or workshops focused on professional communication, workplace norms, and soft skills.

Source: Adapted from Van der Merwe, T., 2026, 'Development of an assessment framework for work integrated learning in business administration at a South African University of Technology', Doctor of Education thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

issues, such as manageability and remote collaboration, and to simplify time-consuming tasks, including the EL1 time-logging section. For them, it was a functional necessity. While agreeing on the goal, coordinators immediately raised the implementation challenge, specifically the need for training to ensure employer buy-in and competent use. This distinction underscores that a successful digital transition requires both a technically sound platform and a robust, co-designed training and support strategy for all users.

Communication and coordination: Formal protocols versus informal access

Both groups identified the need for improved communications, but their preferred models for achieving this varied. Coordinators discussed formal inspections, suggesting a structured, scheduled and protocol-driven approach to engagement. This reflects the academic need for standardised data collection and quality assurance. In contrast, employers requested informal, accessible support, as exemplified by a suggestion for a WhatsApp group. This reflects the fast-paced, fluid nature of the workplace, where raising queries immediately on an *ad hoc* basis is the norm. A future framework must, therefore, bridge the gap between the communication needs of academia and the workplace. It should potentially combine scheduled formal reviews with a dedicated, low-friction channel for immediate support, as suggested by Hungerford et al. (2010:204–207) regarding co-developed documentation.

Student preparation: Bridging the theory–practice gap

While both groups acknowledged student readiness issues, their focus revealed the core theory-practice divide. Employers provided vivid examples of a soft skills gap, such as an inability to draft professional emails and proposed solutions, including role-playing exercises ('finishing school'). Coordinators' concerns about preparedness were more implicit and tied to their primary theme of theoretical readiness; they worried that the assessment did not evaluate students' specific knowledge from their modules. This indicates that 'preparedness' is a dual-faceted problem. Therefore, an effective WIL programme must incorporate pre-placement training that addresses industry-identified soft skills deficits and academic requirements for students to apply their theoretical knowledge effectively in a professional setting.

In summary, the proposed improvements reveal that while module coordinators and employers have distinct primary concerns, their visions for a better system are not incompatible. Consequently, the path forward necessitates a hybrid model that integrates digital tools, facilitates multi-modal communication, and ensures holistic student preparation. Such an approach would foster a more integrated and effective WIL assessment ecosystem.

Discussion

The analysis progressed from a surface-level consensus on the logbook's usability (Theme 1) to the identification of a profound 'validity schism' between academic construct validity and workplace verifiability (Theme 2) and finally to a convergent stakeholder vision for a digitally enhanced, communication-rich assessment system (Theme 3). This progression reframes effective WIL collaboration not as a procedural challenge, but as an epistemological negotiation between distinct validity cultures.

Theoretical contribution: From procedural partnership to epistemological negotiation

These findings invite a critical reframing of existing literature on WIL collaboration. While prior research has rightly emphasised the *procedural* aspects of partnership, such as the need to establish communication channels and define roles (Campbell et al. 2021:515; Henderson & Trede 2017:73), our data reveal that collaboration is hampered, not by a lack of willingness or structure, but by an acute, often unspoken, *epistemological disagreement* over the very nature of valid evidence and the purpose of assessment. This study provides an empirical model for collaboration

as a *managed negotiation* between differing epistemological cultures. This 'managed negotiation' should not be an ad hoc process but should instead require a structured forum, such as a pre-placement co-design workshop, where module coordinators and employers can explicitly articulate their definitions of competence and validity. The goal of this managed approach is not to erase differences but to establish a shared, hybrid set of assessment criteria and rules that honour both academic and workplace logics. This need is starkly illustrated by employers questioning authenticity without tangible proof. 'How can you ensure validity without evidence?' asked one employer (EMP, P5, b). At the same time, coordinators lamented that the existing framework 'tests the generic and is not necessarily module-related' (MC, P4, b). This dissonance highlights a critical gap in the literature that necessitates the development of a more nuanced model, in which successful collaboration is defined not by harmonious agreement but by the active, managed negotiation of differing priorities to achieve a common goal.

Refining activity theory: The validity schism as a central contradiction

Theoretically, the findings strongly support and significantly refine the application of Activity Theory in WIL contexts. The 'divergent lens' can be precisely interpreted as the central contradiction within the WIL activity system, a concept central to Engeström's theory (2001:136). The *subject* (student) uses the same mediating *tool* (logbook), but the *object*, the ultimate motive of the activity, is fractured. For academics, the *object* is 'theoretically grounded competence', while for employers, it is 'practically verified competence'. This misalignment in the *object*, referred to as the 'validity schism', is not minor friction but a primary contradiction that generates systemic tension and undermines collaborative efforts (Engeström 2001:136). Our contribution is to empirically identify and label this specific contradiction, moving from the abstract concept of 'misalignment' to making a precise theoretical diagnosis. The *shared path forward* identified in Theme 3 represents the collective, bottom-up redesign of the activity system, proposing new tools (digital platforms, PoEs), new rules (hybrid communication protocols), and a refined division of labour (via co-designed training), to resolve this core contradiction. Thus, this study demonstrates how Activity Theory can be operationalised not just as an analytical lens but also as a diagnostic and generative framework for designing interventions.

The shared path forward, as identified by stakeholders, points directly to the need for a redesigned system. In response, we propose the IREB WIL assessment framework. This practical model operationalises epistemological negotiations by providing a structured yet flexible approach to assessment design. This responds directly to the need, identified by Kiruthika, Raja and Valusa (2024:123), for universities to create robust WIL frameworks that not only benefit students but also contribute to the broader community and economy by moving beyond high-level principles to a specific, co-designed assessment framework. The framework is structured around five interconnected components that work synergistically to bridge the 'validity schism'. (1) *Clarity and Usability*, ensuring the tool is foundationally sound (Theme 1); (2) *Partnership and Engagement*, formalising the collaborative roles; (3) *Authenticity and Relevance*, aligning tasks with both academic and industry needs; (4) *Evidence and Verification*, directly addressing the employer demand for proof through tools such as PoEs; and (5) *Reflexivity and Development*, integrating structured reflection for student growth. The findings on the need for confidential feedback (EMP, P3, b) further underscore the importance of designing *Partnership & Engagement* mechanisms that safeguard honest dialogue (see EMP, P5, b).

A strength of this study is its use of an integrated theoretical framework and action research design, which provided a robust lens for analysis and enabled direct stakeholder input. However, the findings are subject to certain limitations. The focus on a single department at one South African UoT, while providing rich, context-specific data, may affect the direct transferability of the results. However, the core concept of the 'validity schism' is a theoretically transferable construct likely to be present across various WIL contexts, disciplines and institutions. Furthermore, the use of a self-selection sampling method, while practical, may have attracted participants with particularly strong engagement or frustration with the WIL process, potentially underrepresenting those with less pronounced views. In the interest of reflexivity, we acknowledge our position as academic researchers who are inherently predisposed toward construct validity as a framework for understanding assessment quality. To mitigate this, the action research approach was pivotal; specific steps included initially coding employer and coordinator data separately to ensure both stakeholder groups' perspectives were weighted equally, and explicitly prioritising employer-driven solutions (such as the PoE) in the final IREB WIL assessment framework. Finally, the reliance on an unpublished manuscript ('Author/s in press' 2026:257–258) was a limitation; future publication of this source will strengthen the argument. The empirical themes directly inform the proposed IREB WIL assessment framework, as illustrated in Table 4, which demonstrates how each framework component addresses a specific research finding.

A pivotal finding that any future framework must address is the confidentiality dilemma (EMP, P3, b). Employer reluctance to provide fully candid feedback due to perceived confidentiality concerns represents a significant threat to the validity and honesty of the assessment process (EMP, P5, b). Therefore, operationalising *Partnership and Engagement* (Component 2 of the IREB framework) requires designing specific, trusted mechanisms for confidential feedback, such as anonymised surveys for employer evaluations or third-party facilitation of moderation sessions, to safeguard the integrity of the co-assessment process.

TABLE 4: Mapping research themes onto the integrated, reflective, and evidence-based work-integrated learning assessment framework.

IREB WIL assessment framework component	Addresses research theme	Rationale and evidence
1. Clarity and usability	Theme 1: Convergent Satisfaction	Directly responds to the shared positive appraisal of the logbook's structure and fairness, ensuring this foundation is maintained.
2. Partnership and engagement	Theme 3: A Shared Path Forward (Communication)	Formalises the collaborative roles and communication protocols demanded by both groups, addressing the need for structured and informal interaction.
3. Authenticity and relevance	Theme 2: The Divergent Lens	Ensures tasks are aligned with academic constructs (addressing module coordinator concerns) and real-world practices (addressing employer concerns).
4. Evidence and verification	Theme 2: The Divergent Lens	Directly incorporates the employer-driven solution of a PoE to resolve the 'workplace verifiability' deficit.
5. Reflexivity and development	Theme 3: A Shared Path Forward (Student Prep)	Integrates structured reflection and development to bridge the theory-practice and soft skills gaps identified in student preparation.

Source: Adapted from Van der Merwe, T., 2026, 'Development of an assessment framework for work integrated learning in business administration at a South African University of Technology', Doctor of Education thesis, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria

IREB, integrated, reflective, and evidence-based; WIL, work-integrated learning.

On a practical level, the identified 'validity schism' leads to actionable recommendations. For practitioners, it is essential to co-design a hybrid assessment model that integrates a PoE to satisfy the need for verifiable proof, to implement multi-modal communication combining formal visits with informal channels like WhatsApp, as suggested by an employer, and to develop a pre-WIL 'finishing school' (EMP, P12, b) addressing both soft skills and theoretical application. For university policy, this means mandating digital transformation and formalising employer engagement through structured onboarding. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of such hybrid models and should explore solutions to the confidentiality dilemma raised by employers to safeguard honest feedback.

In practice, the IREB WIL assessment framework functions as a set of co-design principles. For example, a WIL assessment designed according to this framework would begin with a negotiation session (Component 2: *Partnership and Engagement*) where coordinators and employers jointly define tasks that are both *Authentic and Relevant* (Component 3) and aligned with module learning outcomes. Students would then complete these tasks and compile a Portfolio of Evidence (Component 4: Evidence and Verification), including reports, presentations, or project outputs, to demonstrate their competence. Throughout the process, structured reflective prompts within a digital logbook (Component 1: *Clarity and Usability*) would guide *Reflexivity and Development* (Component 5), enabling students to connect practical experience with theoretical knowledge.

Conclusion

This study achieved its three primary objectives, directly responding to the recommendation by Young, McKenzie and Thomas (2024:406) for sector-wide, co-designed approaches to WIL evaluation that ensure both rigour and relevance. Firstly, it explored the challenges in WIL assessment, identifying a foundational consensus on tool usability masking a deep 'validity schism' between academic and industry conceptions of evidence. Second, it found that successful collaboration is not primarily a matter of procedural alignment but rather the managed negotiation of this epistemological divide. Thirdly, in response, it developed the context-specific IREB WIL assessment framework. The framework bridges the theory–practice gap by integrating tools such as PoEs with structured reflection, thereby addressing the core concerns of academic rigour and workplace authenticity.

This work provides both a theoretical lens for understanding collaboration in WIL and a practical model for transforming assessment to cultivate work-ready graduates. In doing so, it directly addresses the key challenges of WIL implementation, specifically the misalignment between academic curricula and industry needs, and offers a concrete strategy for achieving those best practices called for in the literature (Kiruthika et al. 2024: 119–123). Furthermore, the proposed framework aligns with contemporary discussions in the WIL literature advocating partnership models that acknowledge the inherent wisdom of all stakeholders. It emphasises the importance of positioning all parties, including employers, as reciprocal learners, thereby fostering a collaborative learning environment (Baumer et al. 2024:12).

Acknowledgements

This article is based on research originally conducted as part of Tanja van der Merwe's Doctor of Education thesis titled 'Development of an assessment framework for work-integrated learning in business administration at a South African University of Technology', submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology in 2026. The thesis is currently unpublished and not publicly available. The thesis was supervised by Thelma de Jager and Cornelius Johannes White. The thesis was reworked, revised and adapted into a journal article for publication. The authors confirm that the content has not been previously published or disseminated and complies with ethical standards for original publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Tanja van der Merwe: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Thelma de Jager: Funding acquisition, Project

administration, Supervision, Writing – review and editing. Cornelius Johannes White: Supervision, Writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to information that could compromise the privacy of research participants and are available from the corresponding author, Tanja van der Merwe, upon reasonable request.

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