Beyond Placement Duration: Workplace Affordances, Constraints and Student Agency in a Work-Based Learning Programme

Rozita Ibrahim*

Faculty of Liberal Science (Fakulti Pengajian Sains Citra), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

A twelve-month industry placement gives undergraduates time to encounter authentic work, but duration alone cannot ensure meaningful learning. This study examines the workplace conditions that support or constrain learning among students in a Malaysian liberal education degree with multidisciplinary study pathways and a structured twelve-month work-based learning (WBL) component. Thirteen students from one programme described specific workplace episodes in individual interviews informed by behavioural event interviewing; accounts were examined through reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were developed: (1) access to meaningful work is distributed rather than guaranteed; (2) everyday problems become learning opportunities through repair and guidance; (3) learning is mediated by relationships and organisational rules; (4) organisational pressures can reduce opportunities to learn; and (5) students negotiate ways to learn within workplace constraints. Students reported that trusted assignments created opportunities to practise judgement and understand the consequences of their actions. Supportive feedback helped them learn from errors, whereas exclusion from information, changing supervisors and heavy workloads restricted participation. Hierarchy and limited voice also emerged in their accounts, although workplace culture were not measured. These single-programme, student-reported experiences were not corroborated by supervisors and do not support sector-wide generalisation. This exploratory study proposes development of mid-placement task and feedback audit for joint academic-industry review. Overall, quality in long-duration WBL depends on meaningful task access, responsive guidance and appropriate discretion, rather than time spent in industry alone.

Keywords: work-based learning; higher education; liberal education; workplace affordances; student agency

INTRODUCTION

Work-based learning (WBL) brings higher education students into authentic workplace activities as part of their curriculum. It can help students connect knowledge with work practices, but an industry placement is an opportunity to participate rather than a guarantee of learning (Billett, 2009; Jackson, 2015). Students who spend the same period in different organisations may receive different work assignments, supervision, information and opportunities to make decisions. These differences matter in liberal education because students bring varied combinations of disciplinary knowledge and may enter workplaces that do not correspond to one fixed occupation. A longer placement may provide repeated exposure to real problems, teamwork and organisational routines. It may also place learners in changing work conditions that are primarily organised around productivity, service or compliance. Students can encounter difficult clients, inaccurate records, unfamiliar digital systems or shifting supervisors. These experiences are not automatically beneficial. Learning depends partly on whether students are allowed to take part, receive timely feedback and reflect on what happened (Billett, 2004; Eraut, 2004; Helyer, 2015).

Previous studies have examined the quality of work-integrated learning curricula and the contribution of supervision and student participation (Smith, 2012; Ferns et al., 2025; Hains-Wesson et al., 2026). In Malaysia, work-based learning is also part of a wider move towards experiential, competency-based and flexible higher education. The EXCEL Framework presents industry-driven experience (IDEAL), personalised learning (POISE), research-infused experience (REAL) and community resilience experience (CARE) as complementary curricular pathways (Department of Higher Education, 2021). Ibrahim, R. et al. (2023) explained an example of how IDEAL, REAL and POISE are operationalized in a multidisciplinary liberal

education curriculum with personalised study choices, an extended industry component and a capstone project linking academic study with practical problems. Their study explains the educational setting of the program but did not evaluate the impact on the students or other stakeholders.

The present study aims to examine how learning opportunities are distributed, supported and restricted across different organizational settings for liberal education students undergoing a planned twelve months WBL placement. It does not test whether IDEAL is effective, measure changes in graduate employment or make professional identity formation the primary outcome. Instead, it asks how workplace participation becomes educationally meaningful, or fails to do so, from the students' perspectives. The study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) What kinds of workplace opportunities and responsibilities do students identify as enabling their learning? (RQ2) How do supervision, communication, organisational norms and changing work conditions shape learning opportunities? (RQ3) How do students exercise agency to seek guidance, negotiate constraints and develop workable responses to unfamiliar tasks? Correspondingly, the objectives are to identify meaningful learning affordances, examine organisational and interpersonal constraints, and interpret students' situated strategies for learning within those conditions. As a single-programme study based on student accounts, the analysis seeks contextual understanding rather than representative estimates of learning quality across sectors or organisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-based learning and related terms

Related terms on WBL are not fully interchangeable. Work-integrated learning (WIL) is often used as a broad curriculum term for planned connections between academic study and work or professional practice; its activities may include placements, projects and simulated work (Ferns et al., 2025). Work-based learning (WBL) has a strong focus on learning that takes place through actual workplace activities and workplace problems (Lester & Costley, 2010; Raelin, 1997). Industrial training and internship commonly name a particular period of work placement, while cooperative education concerns programme arrangements that alternate study and workplace engagement. Workplace learning is broader as it describes formal and informal learning processes that occur within organisations, whether or not the learner is registered in a university programme (Eraut, 2004; Tynjälä, 2008). Experiential learning, in turn, is a wider educational process through which experience is examined, reflected on and used to guide future action (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The boundaries between these terms vary by country and institution.

Table 1 summarises the main distinctions used in this article. Consistent with Malaysian WBL guidance (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2026), the term WBL is used here to describe an intentional, credit-bearing component of the undergraduate curriculum in which students participate in authentic work, receive academic and workplace guidance, and complete learning-related assessment. It is not used as a synonym for all internships. The wider term WIL is retained only when reporting literature that uses that terminology. The phrase workplace learning refers to what and how students learn while working, including informal inquiry, feedback and social participation.

Table 1. Terms related to WBL and how they are used in this study

Term	Working definition	Use in this paper
Work-integrated learning (WIL)	Broad curriculum approach linking academic learning and work/professional practice; may include placement and non-placement activities.	Broader than the present WBL placement.
Work-based learning (WBL)	Planned learning through authentic workplace activities, supported by curriculum expectations, mentoring and assessment.	Main term for the 12-month component in this study.
Industrial training / internship	A designated period spent carrying out supervised work in an organisation, commonly at course level.	A possible delivery form; not necessarily equivalent to structured WBL.

Cooperative education	Programme pattern that alternates university study with full-time work periods (e.g., 2u2i or 3u1i in Malaysia).	A scheduling/model distinction, not the name of the learning process.
Workplace learning	Formal, non-formal or informal learning through everyday activity and interaction in workplaces.	Used for processes experienced by students inside organisations.
Experiential learning	Learning through experience, reflection, conceptual understanding and further action.	Pedagogical principle underpinning WBL; not a placement type.

Malaysian policy and the liberal education curriculum

The national EXCEL framework promotes purposeful learning experiences rather than adding work exposure to an otherwise unchanged degree. Its IDEAL thrust concerns industry experiences, POISE supports personalised pathways, REAL involves inquiry and research, and CARE connects learning with community concerns (Department of Higher Education, 2021). The multidisciplinary liberal education curriculum used in this study was described in an earlier educational account as combining flexible concentrations, extended industry participation and an applied capstone project (Ibrahim, R. et al., 2023). These features provide a reason to study WBL as an integral part of curriculum design. However, they do not establish that every participant received equal supervision or had the same access to meaningful tasks.

The Malaysian Qualifications Agency's 2026 guidance provides a contemporary quality-assurance reference for organised WBL (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2026). As the policy document postdates at least some of the experiences discussed in the interviews, it is used here as current context, not evidence that the participants' placements were implemented according to the 2026 requirements. Previous Malaysian research also highlights communication across students, industry coaches and lecturers, coaching time, support for independent learning and assessment arrangements as implementation issues (Moo, 2024). The research gap addressed here is therefore not whether a twelve-month placement exists, but how students' actual opportunities to learn vary within it.

Workplace affordances and opportunities to participate

Workplaces can support learning through tasks, interactions, tools and shared routines, yet they do not offer identical opportunities to all participants. Billett (2004) describes workplace participatory practices as a relationship between what an organisation makes available and how people engage with those opportunities. An authentic task may still provide limited learning if a student lacks enough context, feedback or decision rights. Conversely, repeated administrative work can be instructive when students understand its consequences and receive guidance on improving accuracy.

Fuller and Unwin (2003) distinguish expansive and restrictive forms of workplace participation. Expansive arrangements allow broader participation and guidance, whereas restrictive arrangements limit access to people, tasks or development. Their work concerned apprenticeships, so the framework is used here as a sensitising idea rather than a direct classification of the organisations. Billett (2009) likewise argues that educational benefits depend on how workplace and university learning are deliberately integrated. Smith (2012) and Ferns et al. (2025) identify authenticity, preparation, supervision and curriculum alignment as important features of high-quality WIL.

Everyday inquiry, mistakes and feedback

Learning at work may be informal and embedded in daily tasks rather than structured as a lesson. Eraut (2004, 2007) explains how people learn by observing colleagues, asking questions, solving problems, using feedback and reflecting on practice. This is particularly relevant to students from multidisciplinary backgrounds who may encounter software, terminology or procedures that were not central to their previous courses. However, self-directed learning should not be confused with having to manage without guidance. Effective learning can combine student initiative with accessible support (Moo, 2024; Hains-Wesson et al., 2026).

Errors can make the expectations of a task visible, but they can also affect real people and operations. The important issue is whether students can identify the cause, correct the mistake and receive suitable support.

Edmondson (1999) links team psychological safety with learning behaviour, but findings about organisational teams cannot directly establish a student's individual experience. Hains-Wesson et al. (2026) emphasise that effective WIL supervision involves both relational support and clear expectations. Reflection may help students connect such experiences to their learning, although this study did not analyse their reflective journals (Helyer, 2015).

Social access and organisational routines

Students enter workplaces with practices and hierarchies that may be only partly explicit. Situated learning theory places participation in shared social practices at the centre of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). From this perspective, access to a supervisor, team channel or client interaction is a practical resource for learning how work is coordinated. Learning to document instructions, approach senior officers, respond to dissatisfied clients or negotiate interdependent deadlines involves tacit rules not always made visible in induction materials.

Boundary encounters between university and workplace expectations can stimulate recognition and coordination across practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). However, students can misinterpret instructions when authority is fragmented across departments, and exclusion from communication channels can make a perceived individual error partly organisational. This creates an important analytical distinction: a learner may need to improve their communication while the workplace also needs to improve access to information.

Hierarchy, student voice and the Malaysian setting

Workplace authority relations are relevant to how students gain information, ask questions and negotiate responsibility. In a Malaysian placement setting, hierarchy and possible expectations of deference merit consideration, but neither should be assumed to operate uniformly across employers or attributed automatically to national culture. A student's willingness to question a senior colleague may also depend on formal reporting lines, task risk, access to support and the relationship with a particular supervisor (Billett, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the present study, reported experiences of authority and voice are interpreted as situated accounts; cultural values and power distance were not independently measured.

Organisation-level constraints and student agency

Tynjälä's (2013) presage-process-product model connects learning conditions, processes and possible outcomes. This distinction helps separate the conditions students report, such as supervisor access or restructuring, from their responses, such as seeking help or changing a workflow, and from what they say they learned. It avoids attributing every difficulty to student motivation. Jackson (2015) also shows that placement design can restrict opportunities to practise employability skills. The key concern in this study is how support and constraint coexist within the same long-duration curriculum component. Recent research adds detail on supervision and collaboration. A systematic review of placement supervision emphasises trust, inclusion, feedback and clear expectations (Hains-Wesson et al., 2026). Malaysian studies document implementation challenges and arrangements for shared academic-industry supervision (Moo, 2024; Sabikan et al., 2026), while research in vocational education has explored stages of workplace mentoring (Ahmadi & Sudira, 2026). These findings provide useful comparisons but do not replace an analysis of students' own accounts in a liberal education setting.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and context

This study used a contextualist qualitative design to examine how undergraduate students experienced learning opportunities and constraints during work-based learning (WBL). The setting was a Malaysian liberal education degree with multidisciplinary academic pathways and a planned 12-month workplace placement.

The programme combines flexible study choices with authentic industry participation and an applied capstone component (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Participants described work in banking, aviation, food manufacturing, digital media, educational technology, community youth services and social welfare. The 12-month period refers to the planned curriculum component; students were at different points in the placement when they described their experiences. The host-sector descriptions provide context for interpreting experiences, not a basis for estimating sector-specific effects or comparing organisational cultures.

Participants and management of individual interview accounts

The analytic sample comprised 13 identifiable students (S01-S13). Each student was treated as an individual case, with the emphasis placed on that person's reported workplace episodes, responses and interpretations. The source material was held in 13 distinct interview transcript files, and the unit of analysis was the individual interview account. A data-management matrix linked each participant ID to the relevant source file, transcript-page location, placement context, short scenario summary, initial code, later sub-theme and proposed quotation. Names of individuals and host organisations were omitted in the reporting; employer sectors and broad job functions are presented in Table 2. Identifiable details in accounts of managers, colleagues and service users were anonymised. The number of accounts within each sector was small, and no separate measure of workplace culture or power distance was collected.

Table 2. Individual participants and placement functions

Case	Placement sector	Main duties described by student
S01	Digital children's media	Video editing, thumbnails and video scheduling
S02	Digital children's media	Recruitment and office human-resource operations
S03	Aviation	Ground operations, rostering, overtime and safety follow-up
S04	Food manufacturing	Recruitment, onboarding and training records
S05	Banking	Staff onboarding, training coordination and follow-up
S06	Community youth services	Youth programme coordination and participant engagement
S07	Education technology	Digital outreach and development of an electronic learning resource
S08	Education technology	School liaison, programme documentation and logistics
S09	Social welfare/public service	Community fieldwork and research-related planning
S10	Banking	Corporate events, visits and procurement-related work
S11	Digital marketing/media	Marketing collaborations, role changes and website-related tasks
S12	Digital children's media	Creator operations and an internal software workflow
S13	Banking	Recruitment, hiring administration and career fairs

Interview approach and example BEI-informed questions

Data was collected using semi-structured interviewing informed by the Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) approach. Although the Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) was originally developed to identify behavioural competencies associated with effective performance (McClelland, 1998), its emphasis on recalling actual experiences is also valuable for understanding workplace learning processes. Rather than asking participants to provide general opinions about their learning, BEI encourages them to describe specific situations, their actions, interactions with others, decisions and perceived consequences. In this study, BEI-informed questioning was appropriate because the research sought to understand how students experienced learning opportunities and constraints during their twelve-month work-based learning placements. By recalling workplace episodes involving responsibilities, mistakes, feedback, supervision and organisational challenges,

students provided contextual accounts of how learning occurred and what supported or restricted their participation.

This approach aligns with Billett's (2004) view that workplace learning is shaped by the interaction between workplace affordances and individual agency. It is also consistent with Eraut's (2004) explanation that workplace learning frequently occurs informally through everyday activities, problem-solving and social interactions. Therefore in this paper, BEI was used as an **interviewing strategy rather than a competency assessment instrument.** The purpose was not to score behavioural indicators or compare students' competency levels. Instead, the recalled experiences were examined using Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning concerning learning opportunities, organisational constraints and student agency. The following illustrative prompts reflect the content and style of the questioning.

Table 3. Illustrative BEI-informed interview prompts and intended probes

Illustrative question	BEI-related follow-up
Tell me about a particular workplace task or event that you were proud of.	What was the task? Who was involved? What did you personally do? What happened afterwards?
Recall a situation in which you made a mistake or encountered something you did not know how to do.	What happened first? How did you respond? Who helped? What did you change?
Describe an occasion when you had to communicate with a supervisor, colleague, customer or community member.	What was difficult about the interaction? What words or actions did you choose? How did the other person respond?
Tell me about a time when instructions, workload or organisational changes made your assignment difficult.	How did the situation affect what you could do or learn? What options were available to you?
Give an example of when you took initiative, disagreed respectfully or proposed a better way of working.	What did you do, why did you choose it, what was the response and what did you learn?

Interview transcripts included spoken Bahasa Malaysia with frequent switching between Malay and English, as is common in everyday Malaysian conversation. The mixed-language transcripts were retained as the source material. For reporting, student quotations were translated into English, and English portions were lightly edited only where necessary to remove disfluency or make the meaning clear.

Reflexive thematic analysis

The study used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which treats themes as interpretive patterns of shared meaning rather than objective categories discovered by counting statements (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022). The approach was suitable for interpreting how students understood opportunities, difficulties and responses in diverse workplaces. Coding was primarily inductive and attentive to specific actions, relationships, contextual conditions and the meanings students attached to them. Ideas from workplace affordances and agency informed the later interpretation but were not imposed as a fixed initial coding checklist.

The six recursive phases were followed. First, the 13 transcripts were read and reread to become familiar with each individual student's account and to note workplace context. Second, meaningful passages were assigned short codes, including entrusted responsibility, missing information, unsupported workload, supervisor feedback, correcting an error, escalating a decision and redesigning a workflow; an earlier working matrix comprised 38 codes. Third, related codes were considered together to propose broader patterns of learning opportunity and constraint. Fourth, candidate themes were reviewed against the coded passages and across cases, retaining contrary examples such as helpful supervisory feedback alongside reports of limited voice, and a usable student-built tool alongside an unadopted project. Fifth, the boundaries and central organising concepts of five themes were defined, with four sub-themes under each. Sixth, the interpretive account was

written by moving between student episodes, the five themes and the research questions. These activities were iterative rather than mechanically sequential.

The final structure comprises five themes and 20 sub-themes (Table 4). Each theme makes a specific claim about conditions that allow or restrict learning; each sub-theme identifies a more focused dimension of that claim. An extract could contribute to more than one code when different aspects of an episode were analytically relevant. Sub-themes were not treated as separate outcome measures, and no frequency or inter-coder agreement score was used to establish a theme's importance. The codebook and the student-by-source matrix were used to keep the interpretive decisions traceable, not to claim that researcher interpretation was free from subjectivity.

Reflexivity, ethics and limits of the data

The interviewer's familiarity with the academic setting, and the use of encouraging or evaluative probes, may have shaped how participants narrated positive and difficult events. The analysis therefore distinguishes students' own statements from interviewer summaries and treats accounts of supervisors, workload and organisational decisions as reported experiences rather than independently verified workplace facts. Differences in the length and timing of individual accounts may affect the detail available for each case. The study did not independently measure productivity gains, programme learning outcomes or organisational consequences of the reported incidents. All accounts came from student interviews; no parallel interviews with workplace supervisors or academic mentors, formal performance evaluations, or contemporaneous employer records were analysed. Thus, student perceptions could be interpreted but not verified against those additional perspectives.

Table 4. Five themes, 20 sub-themes and organising concepts

Theme	Sub-themes	Organising question
1. Access to meaningful work is distributed, not guaranteed	1.1 Entrusted access to consequential work	Who receives meaningful work and enough authority and information to learn from it?
	1.2 Trust, scope and decision rights	
	1.3 Consequences beyond academic grading	
	1.4 Restricted participation and unequal recognition	
2. Everyday problems become learning opportunities through repair and guidance	2.1 Encountering gaps in practical know-how	How do practical challenges become learning through inquiry, feedback and repair?
	2.2 Self-directed inquiry and observation	
	2.3 Mistake, correction and learning safety	
	2.4 Repetition and timely task execution	
3. Learning is socially mediated through relationships and organisational rules	3.1 Supervisory access and relational support	How do people, reporting lines and everyday routines mediate what newcomers can learn?
	3.2 Decoding hierarchy and documentation expectations	
	3.3 Adapting to clients and community stakeholders	
	3.4 Coordination breakdown and information bottlenecks	
4. Organisational pressures can narrow the space for learning	4.1 High workloads and temporal strain	Which operational conditions reduce learning access, continuity or discretion?
	4.2 Intern status, ambiguous authority and fairness	

	4.3 Supervisory and role discontinuity during change	
	4.4 Scarce resources and stalled implementation	
5. Students negotiate a viable space for learning within constraints	5.1 Setting respectful limits and voicing disagreement	How do students act and learn within, rather than outside, workplace limits?
	5.2 Exercising situated discretion and escalation	
	5.3 Experimenting with tools and redesigning workflow	
	5.4 Separating contribution, adoption and learning	

RESULTS

The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia, with frequent Malay-English code-switching characteristic of ordinary spoken conversations in Malaysia. In this article all student quotations are presented in English translation so that the accounts can be read consistently. Where a student originally spoke in English, only minor conversational repetition or disfluency has been smoothed. The quoted translations represent the meaning of the transcribed accounts. Five themes and 20 sub-themes were developed from 13 individual student accounts. The findings concern the conditions under which WBL can become educationally useful, including circumstances in which the workplace restricts that possibility. The themes are not intended to represent a fixed sequence of professional development or a count of how often an experience occurred.

Theme 1: Access to meaningful work is distributed, not guaranteed

Students did not encounter identical forms of participation. Some were given tasks with clear consequences for workplace operations and others described limits on the information, recognition or decision-making available to interns. The difference was not simply between busy and less-busy placements, but between having work to do and having the conditions needed to learn from it.

1.1 Entrusted access to consequential work

S03, who worked in aviation operations, was asked to follow up on station-related safety and compliance responsibilities across locations. The student described the assignment as more than routine administration because failures could affect operations. In another setting, S10 was trusted to coordinate a banking event, including arrangements that had to work on the day. S09 also supported research and the collection of information relevant to community planning. These accounts show that learning could arise through involvement in tasks whose outputs mattered to the host organisation, although the students did not necessarily control the whole process.

"I felt a strong responsibility to look after all the stations." (S03)

"It was a great trust that they placed in me." (S10)

1.2 Trust, scope and decision rights

Responsibility was most useful when students understood the extent of their discretion. S02 handled personnel and office requests and described making straightforward decisions while seeking help for more difficult ones. S10, meanwhile, interpreted being permitted to manage a designated arrangement during corporate visits as a sign of the employer's confidence. Both examples suggest that trust can extend participation beyond observation, without implying that the student possessed formal managerial authority.

"If I felt I could do it, I would do it." (S02)

"I was also trusted to do that task." (S10)

1.3 Consequences beyond academic grading

The students came to recognise that mistakes and incomplete work could affect others. S12 described how a delayed video upload drew complaints from external content creators, who saw the delay as affecting their channel and earnings. S04 explained that incomplete training records could have consequences when the information was later used to prepare reports for senior staff. S13 described a duty to follow up missing documentation by email. These are reported organisational consequences, not independently checked records of financial or legal effects.

"In industry, it is the company, the larger organisation, that gets blamed." (S12)

"Those records are needed for reports to senior management, so missing information will have an effect." (S04)

1.4 Restricted participation and unequal recognition

Access was also limited by the organization's communication and status arrangements. S06 reported that interns were outside a main messaging channel, which contributed to late notice of some activities. S01, who worked on content production, felt that similar tasks were expected from interns and permanent employees without equivalent recognition. The first case concerns practical information access; the second concerns a participant's perception of fairness.

"We were not included in the main group." (S06)

"Everything I did was the same kind of work the team did." (S01)

Theme 2: Everyday problems become learning opportunities through repair and guidance

A second pattern concerned how students acquired practical knowledge when work did not proceed as expected. Many episodes were ordinary operational problems rather than dramatic turning points. Their educational value lay in the opportunity to investigate, receive feedback, correct errors and change the next attempt.

2.1 Encountering gaps in practical know-how

Students from different academic backgrounds encountered unfamiliar terms, software and formats. S01 began digital video work without knowing basic production terms. S03 needed spreadsheet skills for several administrative and operational duties, while S07 made an electronic booklet in a format the student had not previously used. Such examples establish differences between what students already knew and what a particular workplace task required; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate a failure of the university curriculum.

"Before this, I did not know what a thumbnail was." (S01)

"We used Excel almost all the time, even for HR administration and line-station work." (S03)

"I had never made an electronic booklet before; it was my first time." (S07)

2.2 Self-directed inquiry and observation

Students sought information through resources beyond formal induction. S03 used video tutorials to address spreadsheet problems; S06 described using a generative-AI assistant when uncertain about some tasks. S12 reported learning about software construction through AI-assisted experimentation despite lacking previous software-development experience. These examples show active help-seeking, but the use of an online source or AI tool is not itself evidence that the resulting advice was technically correct.

"Sometimes I watched YouTube to learn how to do things in Excel." (S03)

"I learned from ChatGPT." (S06)

"I had never made software before, but I learned with help from AI." (S12)

2.3 Mistake, correction and learning safety

For S03, an error in overtime calculation could affect an employee's pay, but the supervisor helped the student correct the mistake without an angry response. S08 recalled sending a school document with the wrong programme details and immediately preparing a corrected version. The contrasting experience of S12 showed how a delayed publication could damage a content creator's trust before an error had been fully resolved. Together, these accounts suggest that mistakes become learning opportunities through feedback and repair, rather than through the mistake alone.

"My supervisor did not get angry because they knew I was still learning." (S03)

"I realised it was the wrong programme, so I quickly edited the document and sent a new one." (S08)

"Eventually, the creators did not want to send videos to us anymore." (S12)

2.4 Repetition and timely task execution

Repeated assignments exposed students to workplace expectations of speed and accuracy. S04 described work that needed to be completed on the same day rather than postponed. When demands from different units overlapped, S03 prioritized finishing a station roster before calculating overtime. S01 compared earlier and later thumbnail work and perceived improvement with repeated practice. However, urgency should be distinguished from learning, and repeated tasks were more educational when students could review the result and refine their practice.

"It had to be done straight away; it could not be postponed." (S04)

"I prioritised finishing the station roster first and then calculated the overtime." (S03)

"I can see how my work has changed from when I first started until now." (S01)

Theme 3: Learning is socially mediated through relationships and organisational rules

Students also learned through the people, channels and customary practices that made work possible. These experiences showed that workplace learning includes knowing how to ask, whom to inform, what should be recorded and how communication differs across audiences.

3.1 Supervisory access and relational support

More experienced colleagues supplied examples and feedback that students could use in unfamiliar situations. S03 observed a supervisor respond politely to a difficult passenger. S07 received ongoing comments while producing an electronic booklet. S02 sought practical advice from a former employee when the current task exceeded the student's experience. Learning support therefore came from both formal supervisors and accessible informal contacts.

"I watched my supervisor; they were very polite." (S03)

"I received a lot of feedback from my supervisor while producing the electronic booklet." (S07)

"I just sent a message to the person who had left and asked what to do." (S02)

3.2 Decoding hierarchy and documentation expectations

Students had to learn organisational rules that were not always explained as formal lessons. S05 found that

important instructions needed a written record to avoid later misunderstandings. S10 learned that an immediate supervisor preferred a Word document, whereas a director expected a PDF. S09 observed that higher-level programme planning could not move ahead without evidence. These details show how learning was shaped by approval routes, documentation habits and the requirement to justify a decision.

"Whenever we do something, we need a written record." (S05)

"My supervisor prefers a Word document, but the director asks for a PDF." (S10)

"They need to obtain the data first." (S09)

3.3 Adapting to clients and community stakeholders

The work required different styles of communication for different people. S06 described building rapport with young people through conversations and continued contact rather than relying only on formal instructions. S03 learned from a supervisor's calm response to a dissatisfied passenger, while S09 described the practical difficulty of meeting unfamiliar community members during fieldwork. These experiences illustrate why communication learning depends on relationships and context, not merely on being assigned to speak to someone.

"We tried to approach them, talk with them and build their trust." (S06)

"When we wanted to meet people, there were some people I did not know." (S09)

3.4 Coordination breakdown and information bottlenecks

Not all communication problems arose from the student's lack of skill. S03 accepted a request to assist another unit and assumed that the direct supervisor had been told; the assumption proved incorrect. S06 reported receiving event information at the last minute. S05 also described how the same verbal instruction might be understood differently by different staff. Such episodes make the distinction between individual judgement and organisational information flow important to the interpretation of learning difficulties.

"I assumed the administrator had already told my supervisor." (S03)

"We were only informed at the last minute." (S06)

"Sometimes one person says one thing, and another person understands something differently." (S05)

Theme 4: Organisational pressures can narrow the space for learning

The workplace provided authentic demands but could also constrain the time, continuity and authority needed for learning. Students narrated heavy workloads, concerns about fairness, changing reporting arrangements and work that did not progress despite their effort. These pressures should be interpreted in relation to the reported context rather than treated as proof of wrongdoing by a host organisation.

4.1 High workloads and temporal strain

S13 described very long days in banking HR, often arriving before others and leaving after them. S04 reported a steady stream of daily tasks in a fast-moving manufacturing workplace. S10 described losing sleep during corporate events, even while valuing the responsibility involved. These contrasting accounts indicate that demanding tasks can coexist with worthwhile learning, but the pressure may leave less space to ask questions, obtain feedback or undertake academic reflection.

"I was usually the one who switched on the lights and the one who switched them off." (S13)

"Since I started this placement, I feel there have been assignments to finish almost every day." (S04)

"With every event, I usually do not get enough sleep." (S10)

4.2 Intern status, ambiguous authority and fairness

A sense of being an intern affected how some students interpreted organisational expectations. S01 felt that weekend production work had not received the recognition expected and described the situation as unfair. S05 noticed an issue in a more senior colleague's coaching process but did not feel entitled to challenge that person directly. Both accounts suggest that the student position can involve real work expectations alongside a limited sense of voice due to their position as student interns.

"That was very unfair to me." (S01)

"But as an intern, I could not say that to them." (S05)

4.3 Supervisory and role discontinuity during change

Organisational restructuring interrupted the predictability of some learning arrangements. S11 reported being assigned three different supervisors and described changes to the job scope each time. S13 associated another organization's restructuring with uncertainty about hiring and future opportunities. These cases do not establish the management rationale for reorganisation, but they show how students experienced instability in the sources of information, guidance and future task opportunities.

"I had to change supervisors three times because of restructuring. My job scope changed every time." (S11)

"Restructuring was taking place there. That worries me." (S13)

4.4 Scarce resources and stalled implementation

Student effort did not always lead to an adopted output. S07 spent time producing an electronic resource and received supervisor feedback yet reported that the host organisation did not use it. S05 recalled helping prepare arrangements and a budget for planned training events that did not go ahead. The reason for non-adoption or cancellation cannot be established fully from these accounts. Nevertheless, the episodes show why the educational value of preparing a project should be separated from an employer's eventual decision to implement it.

"In the end, it was not used." (S07)

"In the end, it did not happen." (S05)

Theme 5: Students negotiate a viable space for learning within constraints

Students responded to workplace conditions rather than simply accepting them. The accounts show efforts to set limits, decide when assistance was necessary, try new tools and interpret an outcome even when an employer did not use a completed project. This agency was situated and dependent on available relationships, tools and authority.

5.1 Setting respectful limits and voicing disagreement

S11 described a proposed transfer into customer service after changes in the organisation. The student prepared a respectful response, acknowledged the manager's confidence and declined the assignment. S06 also described gradually reducing personal financial favors for a youth she worked with when boundaries had become difficult to maintain. Both participants tried to preserve working relationships while resisting particular expectations.

"I also had to put myself first." (S11)

"We were not avoiding them completely, but we slowly reduced what we were doing." (S06)

5.2 Exercising situated discretion and escalation

Individual agency sometimes meant knowing when to stop acting alone. S02 said that simple tasks could be completed independently, but harder requests were referred to a more experienced colleague. In a bank training context, S05 directed a persistent scheduling disagreement to the supervisor rather than trying to resolve an issue beyond the student's authority. These accounts suggest that competent participation involves judgment about the limits of one's discretion, especially in hierarchical or regulated workplaces.

"If I really could not do it, I would tell a colleague." (S02)

"I would ask them to email my supervisor directly so they could discuss it." (S05)

5.3 Experimenting with tools and redesigning workflow

Some students attempted to change an inefficient work process instead of only following the existing routine. S12 described using AI-assisted learning to build a dashboard that brought several tasks into one interface for creators, administrators and reviewers. S11 also experimented with AI in website-related work when the assigned duties changed. The accounts document initiative and perceived usefulness.

"I decided to build the system myself with the help of AI. The administrators, reviewers and creators now have their own dashboards." (S12)

"I had fun experimenting and learning with AI." (S11)

5.4 Separating contribution, adoption and learning

A comparison between S07 and S12 illustrates the distinction between producing something, learning through production and having it adopted at work. S07 invested considerable time in a new electronic booklet, which the company did not use. S12 described a dashboard that allowed work to be coordinated in one place. S01, meanwhile, valued positive responses to produced videos and thumbnails.

"I spent a long time producing the electronic booklet." (S07)

"Everything can be done in one place." (S12)

"When people liked my videos and thumbnails, I felt it was an achievement." (S01)

Cross-theme synthesis

Across the 13 individual accounts, access to consequential work mattered when students also had relevant information and suitable discretion; everyday errors became educational when support and correction were possible; and tacit organisational rules were learned through supervision and communication. Heavy workloads or changes in supervision could narrow these opportunities, while initiative offered some ways to negotiate the conditions of participation. Table 5 summarises the relationship between reported learning opportunities and their practical limits. It is an interpretive synthesis, not a causal model or a measure of how commonly each condition occurred.

Table 5. Workplace conditions, learning processes and reported limits

Condition	Reported learning process	Potential constraint
Consequential assignments	Task ownership, accuracy, and understanding effects on colleagues or clients	Delegation without sufficient information, recognition or decision rights
Accessible guidance and repair	Observation, feedback, explanation and correction after mistakes	Missing feedback, unresolved mistakes or blame without support

Social and informational access	Learning reporting conventions, rapport and interdepartmental coordination	Excluded channels, delayed updates and unclear handovers
Continuity of work and supervision	Repeated practice, reliable routines and coherent mentoring	Overload, supervisor changes and shifting responsibilities
Room for responsible initiative	Bounded discretion, respectful disagreement and workflow experimentation	Limited authority, resource constraints and non-adoption of outputs

DISCUSSION

The contribution: learning opportunity rather than time at placement

The findings suggest that duration alone is an incomplete indicator of the educational quality of WBL. Students in the same multidisciplinary liberal education programme described different levels of task access, supervision, information, workload and authority. The pattern is consistent with Billett's (2004) account of workplace affordances and personal participation: a task offers a learning opportunity only when students can understand it, obtain feedback and exercise suitable judgement. The students were not passive, but their initiative did not remove every organisational limit. This supports a quality assessment based on the conditions of participation rather than time in the workplace alone.

The study does not rank one placement sector above another or establish a uniform model of successful WBL. Instead, it identifies combinations that may matter across sectors: consequential tasks paired with support; mistakes paired with a chance to repair them; communication responsibility paired with access to information; and initiative paired with suitable decision rights. These combinations help distinguish WBL as a structured educational component from simply occupying an internship position. A work placement can be authentic while still providing limited access to learning.

Guided repair and the conditions of productive challenge

The error narratives are particularly informative because they connect learning mechanisms to real organisational stakes. S03's overtime error had implications for another employee's payment, yet the supervisor's response provided room for correction. S08's document error similarly required a rapid amendment. These accounts resonate with Eraut's (2004, 2007) emphasis on learning embedded in work and with Edmondson's (1999) argument about learning behaviour in safer interpersonal environments. Importantly, the present data support the student's perception of helpful responses; they do not establish the overall level of psychological safety in any host team.

From a programme perspective, students should not be exposed to avoidable harm as a method of teaching. A pedagogically valuable challenge includes clarity about acceptable risk, access to escalation routes, timely checking and feedback, and an opportunity to examine why an error occurred. This is particularly pertinent to administrative, financial, customer-facing or regulated activities in which a simple data or reporting mistake may affect another person.

The hidden curriculum has an infrastructure

The accounts of hierarchy, evidence trails and exclusion from message groups show that learning social norms is not only a matter of student confidence. It also requires access to the infrastructure by which work is coordinated. The distinction between a student's erroneous assumption and a missing handover is analytically useful; where the first may call for improved questioning, whereas the second points to an organisational communication problem. Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and expansive/restrictive participation (Fuller & Unwin, 2003) help explain how the structure of access changes what newcomers can learn.

This insight suggests that host organisations should review whether students are included in the relevant induction, operational announcements, handover routines and safe routes to ask questions. Exclusion should not be interpreted solely as an individual failure to be proactive. Conversely, access to information must also

respect legitimate privacy and confidentiality boundaries; educational inclusion does not require unrestricted access to sensitive organisational data.

Hierarchy, voice and organisational context

The accounts also invite a cautious interpretation of hierarchical workplace relations. S05 felt unable to challenge a more senior colleague directly, while S11 described respectfully declining a proposed reassignment; S10 adapted documents to different managerial expectations. These contrasting episodes suggest that students' room to speak, question and negotiate may differ even within one national setting. They do not establish that cultural power distance caused the reported actions. Role-specific authority, organisational procedures, supervisory relationships and the stakes of a task offer alternative explanations. A culturally informed interpretation should therefore attend to the particular workplace and the student's position in it, rather than characterise Malaysian workplaces as homogeneous.

Organisational turbulence and the limit of individual agency

Reports of supervisor turnover, workload pressure and unadopted outputs show that the workplace is not a stable pedagogical setting. Students are affected by restructuring and resource constraints that are only partially within their control. Fuller and Unwin's (2003) continuum provides a useful lens, but the results caution against labelling an entire organisation "restrictive" based on one or two accounts. Conditions may vary across departments and over time within the same host.

Likewise, a student's successful attempt to renegotiate responsibilities or redesign a workflow should not be read as proof that personal agency can resolve systemic problems. S11's respectful refusal depended on a relationship in which the manager accepted a different view; S05's reluctance to challenge a senior figure illustrates a different distribution of voice. S12's workflow experiment depended on access to tools and a problem suitable for redesign, whereas S07's non-adopted output depended on organisational acceptance. Agency is situated, relational and conditional.

Implications for WBL curriculum, supervision and evaluation

First, academic and industry mentors could review task allocation at entry, mid-placement and completion rather than rely only on the total number of weeks or completed activities. They could ask whether students have access to tasks of growing complexity, the people and information needed to perform them, and opportunities to connect those tasks with individual learning goals. This approach is consistent with curriculum quality principles in WIL (Smith, 2012; Ferns et al., 2025) and with a personalised liberal education pathway.

Second, institutions and workplaces could agree on how students should seek help, report errors and receive timely feedback, especially for financial, safety, compliance or client-facing tasks. Guidance should clarify decisions an intern may make independently and those requiring approval. Mentors can help students document the learning gained from a problem rather than only record whether the task was completed. This can support the experiential and reflective purpose of a structured WBL curriculum (Billett, 2009; Helyer, 2015).

Third, supervision should be reviewed whenever work conditions change. Supervisor departure, restructuring, increased workload or reassignment can alter access to learning. Academic mentors may need to revisit individual plans and ensure that relevant team communication reaches the student. The 2026 Malaysian WBL guidance highlights shared educational responsibilities; the present interview accounts suggest why such responsibilities need active review during a long placement (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2026; Moo, 2024).

Fourth, a student's capstone or workplace contribution should be judged partly by the quality of inquiry, responsible experimentation, evidence and reflection, not only whether an employer chooses to implement an output. The educational account of this liberal curriculum positioned the capstone as a bridge between academic learning and workplace practice (Ibrahim et al., 2023). In EXCEL language, this is a practical point of connection between personalised pathways (POISE), industry experience (IDEAL) and research-informed

activity (REAL) (Department of Higher Education, 2021). It does not show that all students achieved these aims; rather, it suggests the kinds of support and assessment that could help realise them.

A proposed mid-placement task and feedback audit

Table 6 translates the five themes into a proposed formative checkpoint, not a validated assessment instrument. At placement entry, the student and workplace mentor could agree on an appropriately challenging task, a feedback contact and the scope of the student's discretion. At the mid-placement review, the student, workplace mentor and academic mentor could compare a brief incident-based student account with a relevant work example, agree on one practical action, identify a responsible person and set a review date. The checkpoint could be repeated when supervision, workload or responsibilities change.

Table 6. Proposed mid-placement WBL learning-opportunity and feedback audit

Review dimension	Joint student–mentor prompt and illustrative evidence	Suggested follow-up action
Meaningful task access	What consequential task has the student undertaken? Document one example of responsibility, feedback and decision scope.	Agree on an appropriate next task with clear boundaries and learning goals.
Guidance and repair	What feedback was given after a difficulty or mistake? Use one brief incident and its follow-up.	Identify a named feedback contact and clarify safe escalation and correction routes.
Information and inclusion	Does the student receive task-relevant updates and understand approval lines, with confidentiality respected?	Clarify reporting channels, handovers and permitted information access.
Workload and reflection	Are demands, deadlines and working hours leaving reasonable time to ask questions and reflect?	Review prioritisation, workload distribution and protected feedback time.
Continuity during change	Has a change of supervisor, role or duties altered the agreed learning opportunities?	Update the learning plan and confirm an alternative supervisor or contact.
Agency and contribution	What change or idea did the student propose? What response was received and what was learned, regardless of adoption?	Record feedback, organisational decision and student reflection without treating non-adoption as failure.

The audit is intended as a supportive joint discussion and not as student's scorecard. Different student and mentor interpretations should be recorded and discussed rather than automatically resolved in favour of one account. Sector-specific evidence should respect privacy and commercial confidentiality. The feasibility, acceptability and effectiveness of this tool require pilot evaluation before wider adoption.

Limitations and future research

The accounts come from 13 students in one programme, with differing placements and points of progress within the intended attachment. They were elicited through BEI-informed interviews rather than a standardised longitudinal design. The interviewer familiarity may have influenced descriptions of success or difficulty. Employer rationales, formal supervision arrangements, the adoption of student outputs and alleged unfair practices were not independently corroborated. Accordingly, the findings identify plausible mechanisms and conditions in narrated experiences rather than population frequencies or causal effects. Future research could triangulate students' accounts with supervisor interviews, task logs, workplace observation and records of changes in responsibility across the attachment. A prospective design could compare learning opportunities at entry, mid-placement and completion, while attending to the way changing organisational circumstances shape what students can actually do and learn. Research could also examine how academic mentors identify early signs of restrictive participation and intervene without undermining workplace relationships.

The small sample also limits transferability: cases arose from one Malaysian liberal education programme, and the few accounts within each host sector cannot support comparisons between technology, finance, creative industries or other settings. Although the interviews document perceived hierarchy and unequal voice, they do not distinguish cultural expectations from organisational rules, individual supervisory behaviour or task-specific compliance requirements. Self-reports may reflect selective recall or a desire to present a favourable account. In the absence of independent mentor testimony, formal performance assessments or contemporaneous workplace records, the study cannot determine whether participants and supervisors would interpret the same incidents similarly.

Further studies could recruit larger, purposefully varied samples across technology, financial services, creative industries, manufacturing and public services, and include employers with contrasting supervisory structures. A longitudinal multi-stakeholder design could combine matched student, workplace-supervisor and academic-mentor interviews with task logs, relevant feedback records and selected assessment artefacts at placement entry, mid-point and completion. Such a design could examine differences in access and voice while investigating workplace hierarchy or perceived power distance explicitly, rather than inferring them from nationality. The proposed audit in Table 6 should first be piloted to assess feasibility, perceived fairness, feedback quality and whether agreed actions improve access to meaningful tasks.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the educational value of a twelve-month WBL placement cannot be inferred from duration alone. Students in a multidisciplinary liberal education programme reported meaningful responsibilities, practical problems, guidance and opportunities for initiative, but also uneven task access, missing information, workload pressure and changing supervision. Five themes explain how learning opportunities arise through participation, repair, relationships and students' actions within organisational constraints. WBL should therefore be understood as a structured part of the curriculum whose quality depends on the support and access provided during authentic work, not merely on hours spent in industry. The findings offer a practical basis for shared monitoring by academic mentors, workplace supervisors and students. These insights remain situated within 13 self-reported student accounts from one programme. A structured mid-placement task and feedback audit is proposed as a practical starting point, but its usefulness and transferability must be tested with students, workplace supervisors and academic mentors.

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