wblchampion

Embedding Real-World Relevance Into the Curriculum

The gap between what universities teach and what employers need isn't closing on its own.
Work-Based Learning is the bridge, but implementation requires rethinking how we design, deliver, and measure education.

THE REALITY

Students Know the Theory, But Employers Say They Can't Do the Work.

Across Europe, employers consistently report the same problem: graduates arrive with academic credentials but lack the skills to perform on day one. They can't solve ambiguous problems. They don't understand how organisations actually operate. They struggle with collaboration in real work environments (Cedefop (2015).

This isn't a gap in knowledge. It's a gap in relevance. For over 15 years, WBL has been presented as the solution, but integration remains inconsistent, fragmented, and often superficial across European higher education institutions.

57.1%
of respondents identify mismatch between educational curriculum and job market needs as a top challenge (WBL Champion Consolidated Report, 2025).

The WBL Champion Consolidated Report reveals that this isn't about lack of policy. The frameworks exist.
The problem is implementation, and it manifests differently depending on who you are.

EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE

The Institutions That Got It Right

Across the WBL Champion countries (Malta, Italy, Ireland, and Portugal), some institutions and organizations have cracked the code. They've moved beyond treating WBL as an optional module and embedded it as a core approach.

KNIGHTS COLLEGE (MALTA)

Formalised WBL as a "Sites of Learning" model where the workplace is an active site of academic instruction. Students complete 15–30 ECTS through practical placement, with dual supervision from academic tutors and industry mentors. Learning outcomes are mapped explicitly to the Malta Qualifications Framework and industry expectations.

The breakthrough: Employers became co-educators, not just placement hosts. Assessment is triangulated, combining student reflection, employer feedback, and academic evaluation. This creates accountability and relevance simultaneously.

UNIVERSITY OF L'AQUILA + ENEL (ITALY)

Dual apprenticeships in higher education, where students complete their master's degree in electrical engineering while working part-time at a leading energy company. The curriculum was co-designed by both the institution and employer to address real industry needs in energy transition and digital transformation.

The breakthrough: No separation between theory and practice. Students experienced both simultaneously, which meant their learning was immediately tested and refined in real time. The company got talent that was already trained to their needs.

TU DUBLIN (IRELAND)

Structured 3–6 month placements in year 3, preceded by pre-placement modules covering CV preparation, interview skills, and professional etiquette. During placements, lecturers conduct regular check-ins, and structured tripartite meetings bring together student, supervisor, and employer to assess progress against learning outcomes.

The breakthrough: Institutional consistency. Every student gets the same rigorous preparation, support structure, and assessment framework. There's no "hope and see what happens" approach. WBL is managed like any other critical academic component

UNIVERSITY OF PORTO (U.PORTO) & FACULTY OF SCIENCES (FCUP)(PORTUGAL)

Launched in 2006 by the Faculty of Sciences (FCUP), the ECCE program connects academic study with the professional world. Students undertake internships in SMEs and large companies, applying their technical and scientific knowledge to real business challenges. The program promotes collaboration between University of Porto (U. Porto) and industry, helping bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The breakthrough: U.Porto created a structured, institution-wide model that supports both students and employers. The program embeds work-based learning within the curriculum through guided internships, active mentoring, and strong industry partnerships. Students gain teamwork, time management, and communication skills, while businesses benefit from access to trained, innovation-driven talent.

THE SHIFT AHEAD

WBL IS THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

The institutions leading on WBL aren't treating it as an optional activity. They're recognising it as a fundamental shift in how education prepares people for work.

Here's what's becoming clear:

1. Curriculum design must start with employer input
If higher education curricula are designed without input from employers or industry, there is a significant risk that they will become misaligned with current labour market needs, often within a relatively short timeframe as job requirements and industry standards evolve rapidly. Regular engagement with workforce stakeholders is necessary to ensure that curricula remain relevant and equip graduates with the practical skills and competencies demanded by employers.

2. Assessment must measure what work actually requires
Academic assessments often test knowledge in controlled environments. Work requires solving ambiguous problems, collaborating under pressure, and adapting when plans change.

3. Quality frameworks must be meaningful, not bureaucratic
Institutions need frameworks that improve WBL outcomes, not just document that WBL happened. This requires local adaptation, not one-size-fits-all standards.

4. WBL must be accessible, not exclusive
Currently, WBL opportunities are concentrated in popular sectors and well-resourced institutions. Students in niche fields, rural areas, or smaller institutions struggle to access meaningful placements. Equitable WBL means designing flexible models, virtual placements, project-based alternatives, and partnerships with SMEs so that all students can develop practical competency, regardless of sector or location.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

THE WBL CHAMPION PROJECT IS BUILDING SOLUTIONS FOR YOU

The research is complete. The best practices have been identified. The gaps are clear. Now comes the practical work: translating insights into tools that academic leaders can actually use.

EXCITING INITIATIVES ARE COMING!

Designed for academics, quality assurance professionals, and institutional leaders, these courses will equip you to embed WBL systematically into your curricula:

1. Three New CPD Courses For Leaders and Mentors
Learn how to assess WBL without creating an administrative burden. This course provides frameworks, templates, and assessment tools aligned with EQAVET and tailored to your institutional context.

2. Curriculum Redesign for WBL Integration
Practical guidance on embedding WBL into existing programmes, from industry engagement to learning outcome design to workplace supervision.

3. Quality Assurance Toolkit Course
Continuing professional development for the people who make WBL work—faculty coordinators, workplace mentors, and quality assurance staff. Practical skills in mentoring, feedback, assessment, and stakeholder engagement.

Follow us on social media for regular updates on course launch announcements, access opportunities, and ongoing WBL resources:

By following the WBL Champion project, you'll be the first to know when courses launch on the digital platform, and when additional resources are released. You'll also be part of a growing community of educators rethinking how we prepare students for real work.

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