

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) AS A NEW TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH IN POLITEKNIK IBRAHIM SULTAN, JOHOR MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Work-Based Learning is a learning method that combines theoretical and practical learning in real work practices. Although this method has been implemented in developed countries, in Malaysia it was only implemented in 2007 which involves a few community colleges. Recently, the Department of Polytechnic Education stipulated that all homegrown degree programmes and seventy –five percent of the diploma programmes should be using Work-based Learning (WBL) approach. Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan is among the first public institution in Malaysia that implement the Work-Based Learning approach in both teaching and learning at the undergraduate level in tourism and hospitality management field, which started in September 2013. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to evaluate the effectiveness of WBL in improving skills and knowledge of students; and to examine the challenges of WBL implementation. This study is based on semi-structured in-depth interview and observation. The key informants are students, lecturers and companies that have been through the WBL process. The finding shows that the Work-based Learning approach is very effective in helping students to improve their skills and knowledge and enhance their chances of acquiring jobs. However, the study finds a number of issues and challenges that need to be addressed such as coordination of information and maintaining continuous cooperation.*

**Field of Research:** *Work-based learning, teaching and learning approach, semi-structured in-depth interview, observation, effectiveness*

### 1. Introduction

Teaching and learning (T&L) is a dynamic process which requires a constant innovation and changes to adapt to the changing needs of the world, which are applicable to conventional education systems as well as Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) institutions. Work-based Learning is a transition from education in institutions to carriers. It combines institutional learning with industrial learning and creates an integrated experience for the student. According to Boud and Solomon (2001), work-based learning focused on teaching and learning in the industry.

WBL has been seen as an area that can attract higher education institutions and is seen as a mechanism that has a very high value to support the personal and professional development of students. WBL is used as a learning mode and a way to introduce the skills changes at the workplace. The recent decades have seen a growing number of TVET institutions using this approach in its system in order to ensure the relevance of TVET programmes to the industry. This is in line with the nature of TVET institutions that produce graduates who are semi- or highly skilled who are ready for the various job markets.

The conventional approach of T&L demands a total commitment from the institutions to expose students to three key areas which are knowledge, practical skills and affective values that are essential in a specific industry as embedded in the curriculum. The presence of WBL component in a programme structure means that students will undergo the conventional T&L process on campus but certain part of the programme requires students to complete tenure at a company that is related to the field he or she is studying.

In September 2013, Department of Polytechnic Education (DPE) has marked another achievement towards TVET excellence by launching a homegrown Degree programme in Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan called Bachelors of Science (Hons) in International Tourism and Hospitality Management or more popularly known as BTH. BTH programme is currently opened to Diploma holders who graduated from any Malaysian Polytechnic (PM) in either Tourism Management, and Hotel and Catering Management. They will undergo a conventional teaching and learning (T&L) process on campus from semester 3 until semester 5. During the sixth semester, the students will go for Industrial Training at a company of their choice. Finally, in semester 7 and 8, the students will be sent to the selected companies to undergo WBL session.

Although the idea of being away from the institution for three semesters (i.e. one semester for Industrial Training and two semesters for WBL) was initially endorsed at DPE level with consent from Malaysia Qualification Agency, it was later revoked. Both parties consensually deemed that industrial training is redundant with WBL. Consequently, the 10-credit hour industrial training was dropped from the structure and in its place a few courses were introduced. In other words, the first structure was used for two cohorts (September 2013 and September 2014 intakes) and the new structure – without industrial training - took effect for the third cohort that enrolled in September 2015. This change enabled new courses to be added to the structure which will later be handy during WBL. Figure 1 depicts students' entry point and duration of T&L process.

		Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4	
Intake	Semester	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Intake Sept 2013 (Cohort 1) & Intake Sept 2014 (Cohort 2) - Polytechnics' Diploma Graduates (Tourism Management; Hotel Catering Management)		Credit Transfer		← T&L in PIS →				LI	WBL
Intake 2015 (Cohort 3) onwards - Polytechnics' Diploma Graduates (Tourism Management; Hotel Catering Management)		Credit Transfer		← T&L in PIS →					WBL
Intake for SPM school leavers and other equivalent qualification) – pending until further notice				← T&L in PIS →					WBL

**Figure 1: Students' entry point and T&L process (Nor Haniza, Hariati & Rut, 2015)**

Work-based learning is highly familiar in the European countries be it in the high schools, tertiary level or post-tertiary education. Malaysian Polytechnic (PM) has recently adopted the WBL approach and stipulated that all its homegrown degree programmes and seventy-five per cent of its diploma programmes must include WBL approach in its programme structure. As a result, the need to understand WBL is paramount given that WBL approach is still in its infancy in PM system.

The scenario of growing emphasis on WBL reflects the importance of knowledge sharing pertaining to the implementation of WBL in PM context. Therefore, this paper is prepared to share knowledge on two key areas which are:

- i. to evaluate the effectiveness of WBL in skills and knowledge of students
- ii. to identify the challenges faced in the implementation of the WBL

## 2. Literature Review

WBL has slowly become a body of knowledge with growing number of literature discussing it from various angles. Understandably, the definition of WBL has been subjected to disputes as well. Common terms associated or used interchangeably with WBL are industrial/practical training, workplace training, internship, apprenticeship, job shadow, work placements, cooperate technical education, vocational training, and mentoring/coaching. In many instances, some of these terms have been used interchangeably within organizations (DfES, 2005).

### 2.1 Work-Based Learning

Work-Based Learning is an educational strategy that provides students with real-life work experiences where they can apply academic and technical skills and develop their employability. It is a series of educational courses which integrate the school or university curriculum with the workplace to create a different learning paradigm. "Work-based learning deliberately merges theory with practice and acknowledges the intersection of explicit and tacit forms of knowing (*Raelin, Joseph, November 1997*).

Figure 2 explain the WBL approach for TVET programme adopted by Department of Polytechnic Education. Boud and Symes (2000) were among the first to call for the differentiation of meaning between work-based learning and workplace learning. UVAC (2005) acknowledges the grey area in differentiating work-based learning and workplace learning. It offers a definition for the former which emphasizes on the forms of WBL which addresses the needs of vocational programme and emphasizes on learning that occurs at the workplace. UVAC suggests that a training programme should focus on skill sets and competencies needed by employers and complies with the national standard for that particular industry. The forms of the training may vary but is essential to assess the learning that takes place.

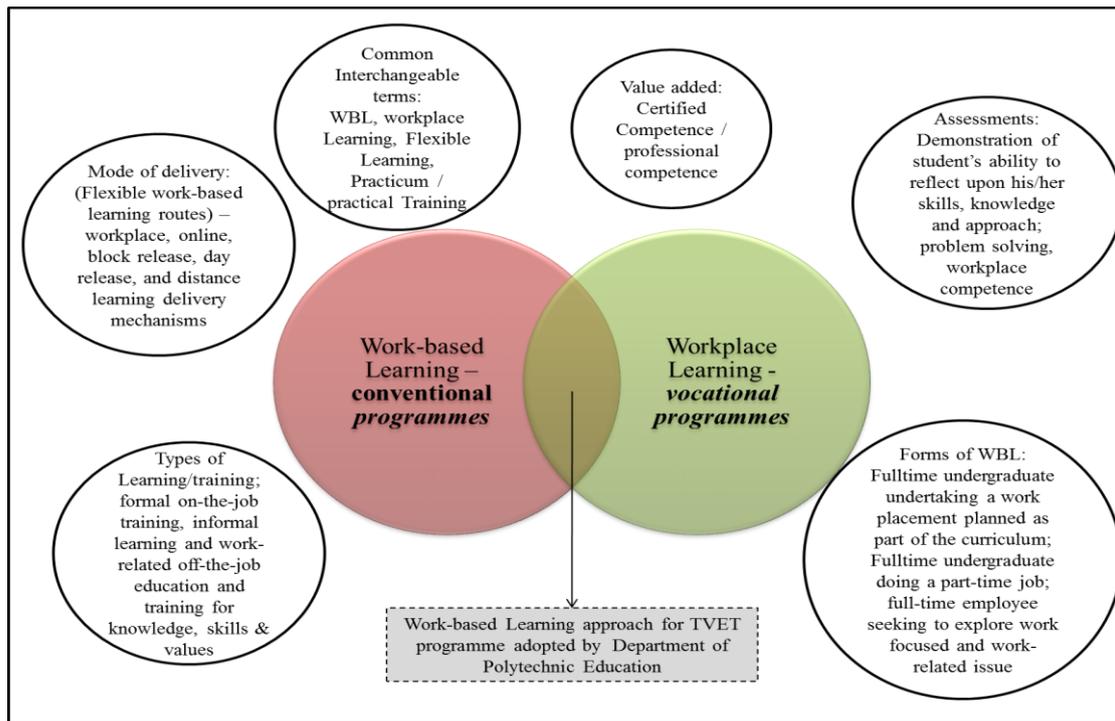


Figure 2: WBL Approach for TVET (Nor Haniza, et al, 2015).

Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2009) posit that work-based learning may not need to be undertaken on a full-time basis. Instead it is *'for anyone who is regularly engaged in work (or undertakes periods of contractual work sufficiently long enough to complete a programme of study), whatever the nature of that work.'*

Little and ESECT (2004) pointed out that work based learning could take many forms including

*'...a full time undergraduate undertaking a work placement planned as part of the curriculum; a full time undergraduate doing a part-time job; a full-time employee seeking to explore work focused and work-related issues in the context of the knowledge, skills and values of a higher education institution. The common factor linking these forms was that the individual would be doing a job of work, or would be undertaking a work role.'*

Fuller and Unwin (2003) stretch the boundary of the term “workplace learning” to refer to all types of learning which has to occur at or outside the workplace in order to fulfil the needs at the workplace which includes *'... formal on-the-job training, informal learning and work-related off-the-job education and training.'*

Mode of delivery refers to how knowledge, skills and values are imparted /delivered to students while they are in the industry instead of on campus. Again, authors have different views on what should be the mode of delivery for WBL. However, Garrick and Usher (2000) propose that ‘flexibility’ is a keyword that can support the learning process. Flexibility is a concept that is commonly highlighted in the discussion of WBL. Its philosophy encompasses the agility of the institution and industry to respond to changes in job market where the institution initiates collaborative partnership with industry players and devised ways to obtain the desired learning outcomes stipulated in the curriculum which includes different learning domains, modes of delivery and types of assessments.

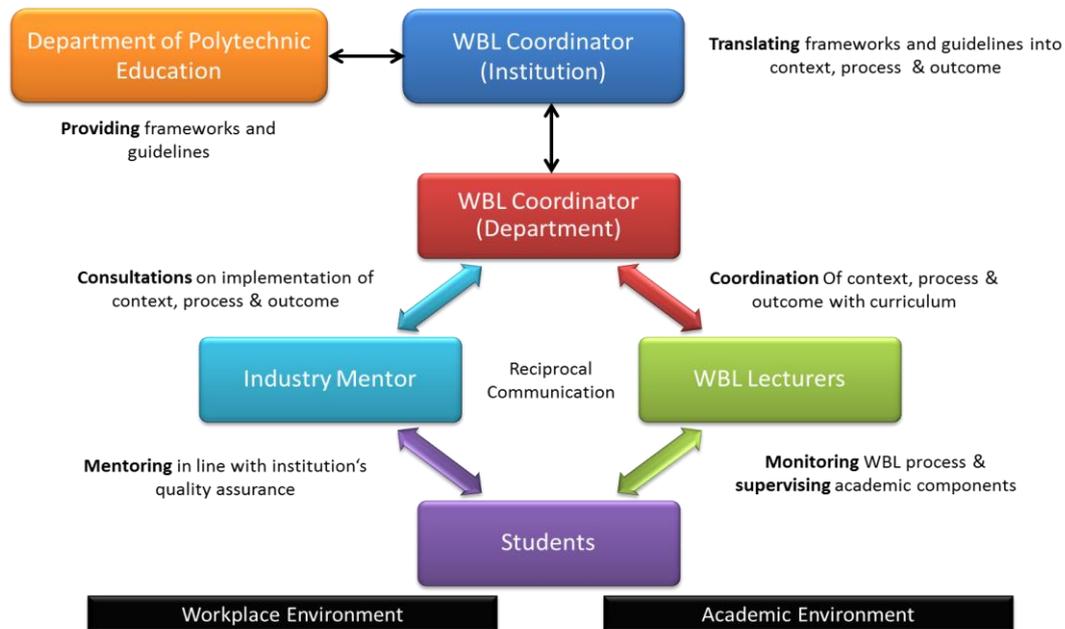
## 2.2 WBL in Malaysian Polytechnic

Before delving further on WBL, it is essential for implementers in institutions to understand the source of mandate to implement WBL and the demands which ensues. The directives to implement WBL approach in Higher Learning education is stipulated in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) or also popularly referred to as MEB 2015-2025 (HE). This blueprint aspires to enhance and consolidate students' learning experience by tapping on industry collaboration in the design and delivery of programmes; increasing the use of experiential learning to develop 21st century skills, and leveraging on technology-enabled models to facilitate personalized learning in order to produce holistic, talented, and balanced graduates. Equally important, MEB encourages lifelong learning to adapt to changing skills needed for high income economy through reskilling and up-skilling workforce using WBL approach. (Haniza, et al, 2015)

Literature has highlighted a few advantages of adopting WBL approach. It has the flexibility to adapt to the changing landscape of the workforce supply side such as part-timing, second jobs, self-employed reskilling and up-skilling, and the job market demand side such as the need for highly competent, dynamic and flexible work force. In addition, WBL also provides a legitimate platform for TVET institutions to address issues associated with limited resources by engaging the industry in its teaching and learning process.

## 2.3 WBL Organizational Framework

The WBL organizational framework used by institution in PM is contextually exact particularly to the homegrown degree programme (refer Figure 3). It includes key players in WBL implementation namely Department of Polytechnic Education (DPE), PIS, department, industry and students. DPE provides the policy and guidelines that must be adhered to by the institution. These policy and guidelines comply with the aspiration of higher education and the guidelines stipulated by the Malaysia Qualification Agency. Subsequently, such rules and requirements are translated into workable strategies by the institution that is implementing WBL which encompasses programme-based WBL guidelines and folios for students and industry players. They are one of the important mechanisms to convey important information about WBL. At institution level, a WBL coordinator is appointed to bridge communication between DPE and programme. It is useful when an institution has a few WBL-based programmes. Subsequently, a WBL committee is set up to facilitate the flow of work at the department level. It is advised against appointing the Head of Programme as a WBL coordinator due to the extensive job scope of each post. The programme shall appoint a few staff to form a WBL observation team whom will visit and provide consultation to students. On the industry side, a mentor or a supervisor should be appointed by each company in order to facilitate WBL students in receiving proper guidance at the workplace. Figure 3 indicates the structure of WBL committee in PIS.



**Figure 3: WBL organizational framework used by PIS (Nor Haniza, et al, 2015)**

### 3. Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative research approach via semi-structured in-depth interview and observation. The contextual setting for this study is a TVET institution known as Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan (PIS) located in Johor whereas the unit of analysis is the Bachelor of Science (Hons) in International Tourism and Hospitality Management undergraduate programme (BTH). The key informants for this study are 29 students of first cohort, PIS WBL committee and 8 companies involved in the WBL implementation.

A semi-structured in-depth interview is usually one in which the interviewer has a checklist of topic areas or questions. The intention is to get the informants to talk in their own terms; hence questions tend not to be too specific allowing for a range of possible responses.

Data collection was done by way of formal and informal discussions, casual conversations, direct participation, direct observations, and document analysis. Next, data analysis was done by scrutinizing the data collected by examining, making association and connection, categorizing, mapping, comparing and conducting any other necessary procedures in order to answer the research questions. Eventually, these findings are interpreted to provide insights to the research questions.

The finding is divided into two category based on the objectives of the study. The evaluation of WBL effectiveness is conducted based on the feedback of students. Feedback on challenges of WBL are sourced from the three main stakeholders; student, employers or companies and polytechnic.

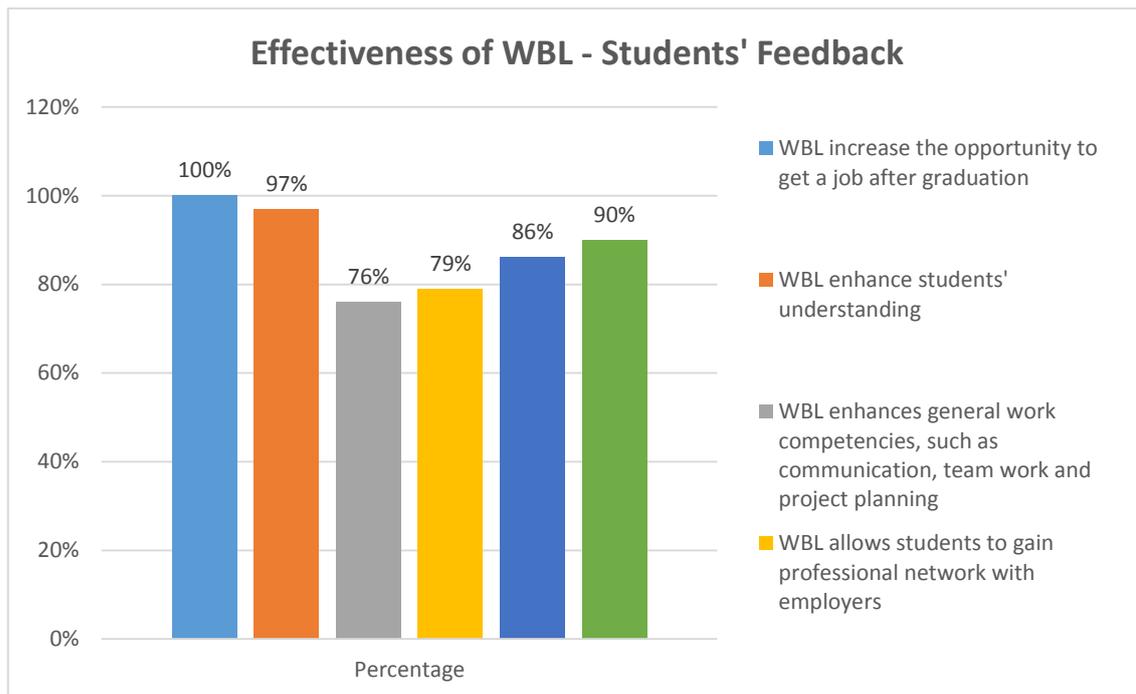
### 4. Finding and Analysis

This section will address the objectives set out at the beginning of this paper which are to evaluate the effectiveness of WBL implementation as a new approach in teaching and learning of Bachelor Degree in International Tourism and Hospitality Programme and to identify challenges faced during the implementation.

#### 4.1 Effectiveness of WBL

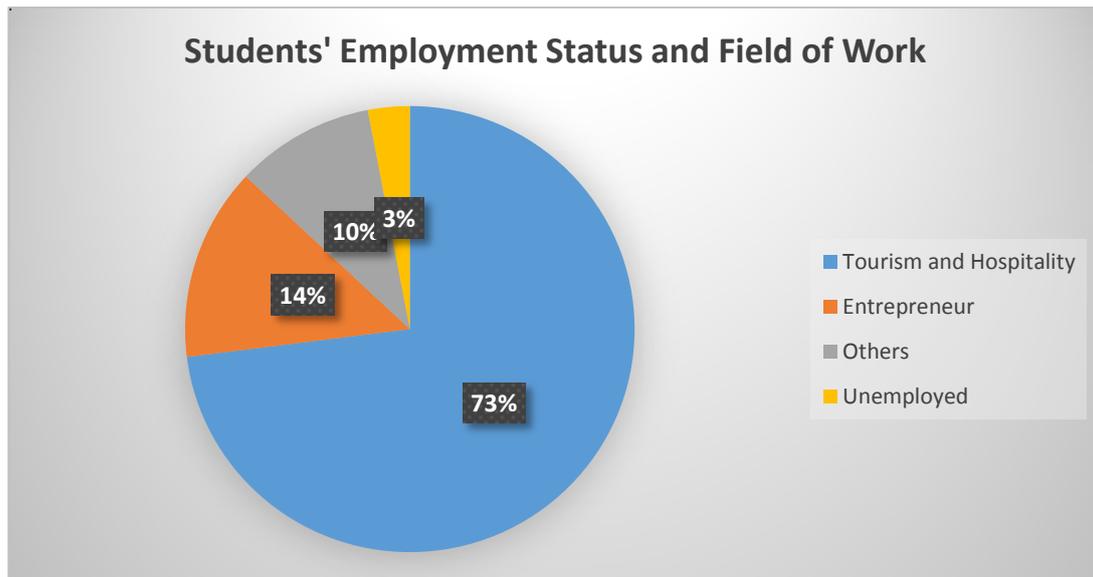
The educational institution is a place to stamp a certain skill and it is responsible for designing its products according to its own mould. Hence, the role of the industry towards the technical educational institute is undeniable. Notwithstanding the quality of the technical graduates produced by the institute, it must fulfill the criteria and demands of the industry. The product has to meet the wishes of the industry. The current curriculum and skills training that is developed emphasize the aspect of the skill that fulfill the needs of the employer and the industry.

Based on the interviews, respondents agreed that the WBL need to be implemented and continued. Below are the feedbacks of respondents about the implementation of WBL:



**Figure 4: Students' Feedback on WBL Effectiveness**

Figure 4 shows the feedback from students regarding the effectiveness of WBL. 100% of the 29 students stated that the implementation of WBL for one year is very helpful in increasing their chances of getting a job. Undeniably, the implementation of WBL enhances students' opportunities in getting jobs as 93% of the first cohort graduates in July 2016 obtained jobs within two months. According to the data collected by 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016, 97% of the graduates are employed. 10 of the graduates currently work at the companies involved in WBL. The Figure 5 indicates the percentage of graduate and field of work. 97% agree that the implementation of WBL enhances their understanding of the work and tasks in hospitality industry. 90% stated that WBL enhances their motivation to gain knowledge and skills. 86% of students agree that the WBL increases technical skills through their application in authentic task. 79% mentioned that the WBL allows them to gain professional network with employers. Other than that, according to them, WBL enhances their general work competencies, such as communication, team work and project planning.



**Figure 5: Students' Employment Status and Field of Work**

#### 4.2 Challenges of WBL

Overall, students and employers are very satisfied with the implementation of the WBL. However, there are still some challenges that need to be addressed to create a better learning environment.

**Table 1 Challenges of WBL Implementation**

Challenges of WBL Implementation
<p><b>Polytechnic</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ polytechnic still lack of experience and knowledge to implement WBL</li> <li>○ difficulties to ensure that the companies follow the syllabus / learning area</li> <li>○ lecturers are not well trained to implement WBL</li> <li>○ to maintain the continuous cooperation with companies</li> </ul> <p><b>Student</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ students still lack of understanding about WBL</li> <li>○ some supervisors or managers did not give full support</li> <li>○ time constraints for students to complete assignments given by lecturers</li> <li>○ some managers or supervisor assign student to do a job that are not in their learning area</li> </ul> <p><b>Employer</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ industry still lack of knowledge to implement WBL</li> <li>○ time constraints for companies to teach student when busy</li> <li>○ employers are not well trained to implement WBL</li> <li>○ staff or supervisor did not receive correct information about implementation of WBL from Human Resource Manager (HRM is the person who attend meeting with polytechnic)</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusion

The study of WBL has been carried out by many researchers in various contexts and involving various stakeholders. This paper discusses the main findings through interviews with students, polytechnic and companies. The findings are presented in two aspects, namely the effectiveness of WBL implementation and its challenges. There are a few things to note about WBL. WBL approach in TVET programmes is a dynamic step. WBL in Politeknik Ibrahim Sultan is a process that is still in its infancy.

In order to overcome the challenges, WBL must be carried out carefully, through a process of continuous quality improvement, which focuses on learning outcome and assessment methods. The understanding of WBL at institutional level is still limited due to reasons such as lack of prioritization from departments and programmes, inadequate communication to promote the WBL approach, lack of presence from the institution's 'bigger picture'; and lack of force and endorsement for a hierarchical collaboration to conduct training. PIS management should conduct a training from time to time to enhance the understanding of WBL. Communication between polytechnic and companies need to be improved to avoid miscommunication.

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