



Empowering Tomorrow's Workforce

Insights from a Work-Integrated Learning Readiness Assessment in the UAE

This paper summarizes the key findings of Phase 1 of a 'Work-Integrated Learning' readiness assessment, which was conducted by the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation and the University of Waterloo.



Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is a form of experiential learning, where students complete authentic work-based activities as part of their higher education studies. WIL is a proven mechanism for students to bridge the gap between graduate attributes and labour market requirements through soft skills development in parallel to technical skills development from both WIL experiences and academic curriculum¹.

WIL programs have been proven to further benefit academic institutions, host organizations and students through talent development and improved employment outcomes. As defined by Cooperative Education and Work Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada, WIL experiences include an engaged partnership of at least: an academic institution, a host organization, and a student. WIL can occur at the course or program level and includes the development of student learning objectives and outcomes related to employability, agency, knowledge and skill mobility and life-long learning.²



1 [Preparing for the future of work](#)

2 [Cewil Canada](#)

In 2022, the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation (AGF) partnered with the University of Waterloo to support the enhancement of work-integrated learning in institutions in the UAE. This aligns with the Foundation's mission to support Emirati and Arab youth development and employability as it also aligns with the UAE's national growth strategy. The UAE's ambitious National Strategy of 2030³ provides a rich landscape to promote human capital development and education. Part of this is the Advanced Skills Strategy, which sets out the national framework aimed at consolidating the concept of life-long learning for the UAE's citizens and residents to achieve the goals of Centennial Plan of 2071.

The WIL initiative at AGF falls under the Foundation's Education 360 pillar, which promotes experiential learning pathways with the intent to broaden the range of learning experiences in higher education. The success of this approach depends on excellent strategic partnerships.



The partnership with the University of Waterloo aims to explore how work-integrated learning can enhance employability outcomes for UAE graduates and reduce the skills gap by offering market-driven employment experiences as part of higher education programs.

Joint Assessment:

Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation and University of Waterloo

The Foundation and the University of Waterloo outlined a multi-phased approach, dividing the project into several stages that would allow room for flexibility, adjustments, and revisions to foster continuous improvements.

Phase 1 of this partnership focused on assessing the feasibility of implementing work-integrated learning models within institutions in the UAE through a multi-stakeholder analysis. The main findings were summarized in a final report and were used to create a concept note for each potential partner academic institution, outlining a high-level path to implementation.

This paper summarizes the main points shared by different stakeholders, presents the key takeaways from Phase 1, and shares the strengths and recommendations for a successful implementation of WIL models in the UAE.





Phases of the WIL Readiness Assessment



About Phase 1

4 Universities

160 Hours Scoping Analysis

4 Concept Notes

1 Final Report

Main Outputs of the Assessment



Stakeholder Analysis

The assessment engaged university representatives, students, employer organizations and governmental entities to assess the feasibility of implementing WIL in the UAE



Implementation Pilot

The outcomes devised a model plan outlining a contextualized high-level recommended path to implementation per institution for integrating WIL



Responsibilities Matrix

The final report indicated roles, responsibilities and resources required for a successful and sustainable implementation



Key Strengths and Recommendations

The scoping review revealed that there are many existing strengths within the UAE to support the enhancement of work-integrated learning and a few key barriers to overcome. The following section presents the strengths and recommendations for each key WIL stakeholder.

Academic Institutions

The assessment revealed strength factors in the structures of the academic institutions that could be used to lead successful work-integrated learning programs. These factors include:

- **Willingness and interest** of academic Institutions to increase their students' employability as this will reflect positively on student recruitment, retention, and admission rates.
- **Acknowledgment of institutions** on the need to integrate innovative professional development experiences that prepare their students for the future of work and enhance their employability.
- **Keeness to engage** in wider conversations with regulatory authorities that can provide guidance on enhancing existing accreditation regulations and graduation requirements like credit hours and duration.



Key Strengths and Recommendations

Phase 1 provides the following recommendations and key factors for academic institutions who choose to proceed with pilot WIL programs:

- **Conduct a Pilot Program:** It is recommended for academic institutions to start with a controlled pilot and build the program up from there. Starting with focused pilots rather than campus-wide initiatives will allow faculty, administrators, and students to assess progress and implement necessary adjustments for a sustainable program.
- **Commit Resources:** Piloting and implementing a WIL program requires institutional commitment and dedicated resources. There are incremental costs associated with program startup and operationalization which institutions should consider.
- **Make Necessary Curriculum Adjustments:** Engaging faculty and administrators is a key success factor to this program. Institutions can incorporate faculty's support through comprehensive discourses around new industry trends to create meaningful and high-quality WIL experiences.
- **Consider Market Relevance:** Academic Institutions should leverage their faculty members' strengths and encourage them to jointly develop WIL curriculum with industry input to ensure market relevance.



Students

Students are key stakeholders in the success of WIL through their:

- **Enthusiasm** towards engaging in WIL experiences and participating in authentic work experiences during their study years.
- **Awareness** of the education-to-employment skills gap and interest in participating in professional development opportunities to enhance their employability.

Key Strengths and Recommendations

Phase 1 provides the following recommendations to encourage students' engagements in WIL:

- **Program Development:** Programs offered should appeal to students and fill a gap in their experiences. Hence, students' perspectives should be sufficiently incorporated in program design and development phases.
- **Alignment of Expectations:** Providing students with a clear understanding of what the work experience will offer and what is expected of them can ensure retention and program satisfaction.
- **Pre & Post Placement Terms:** The pre-placement term is important to prepare students for work experience and communicate expectations. Equally important, the post-placement term can be used to assess the student experience and adopt necessary adjustments.
- **Authentic Experience Offering:** a well-rounded WIL program with constructive feedback throughout and after can add value to students' experience and complement their academic studies.

Key Strengths and Recommendations

Employers

The UAE has a strong professional environment with potential advantages, such as:

- **Extended Duration of WIL**, which can be more advantageous than internships. Employers are thus more interested in supporting WIL models as a means to develop a sustainable talent pipeline.
- **A Professional Work Environment**, which presents potential opportunities to provide students with meaningful WIL experience.

Key Strengths and Recommendations

Phase 1 provides the following recommendations to employers, encouraging the consideration of the following points prior to designing WIL programs:

- **Talent Pipeline:**

- Launch a competitive hiring process and provide authentic, meaningful experiences to students.
- Ensure commitment to quality and integrate students in the company's processes.
- Develop a work environment and a compensation structure that would appeal to students, particularly Emirati students.
- Explore prioritization of post-graduation hires for former WIL students to gather momentum and attract more students to the program.

- **Capacity Building:**

- Companies are encouraged to provide training and capacity building for their staff to support WIL students and engage them in meaningful work experiences.

- **Program Design:**

- Build a strong partnership with the academic institutions, provide inputs for curriculum design and consider adding WIL quotas to accelerate their discussions with the academic institutions.



Enabling Environment

The assessment uncovered certain strengths within the UAE environment that can be leveraged to facilitate a successful work-integrated learning program. Among these factors are:

- **Commitment** from the UAE government towards supporting the development of local talent through the launch of several initiatives such as NAFIS and Jahiz, which aim at increasing the competitiveness of Emirati professionals in the private sector and boost the preparedness of federal government employees for the future respectively.
- **Engagement** of students above the age of fifteen in 16-week internship programs in a recently (i.e. 2023) launched nationwide initiative, which will be an important measure to assess the quality of WIL experiences and the necessary resources and conditions.

Key Strengths and Recommendations

Phase 1 recognizes the need for WIL to encompass all students residing in the UAE, both UAE citizens and non-Emirati residents. This will ensure a sustainable flow of the program and will gradually build the best practices among the various stakeholders.

The assessment suggests that the enabling environment should consider the following key factors if they decide to pilot WIL programs:

- **Ensure Legislative Barriers are Addressed:**

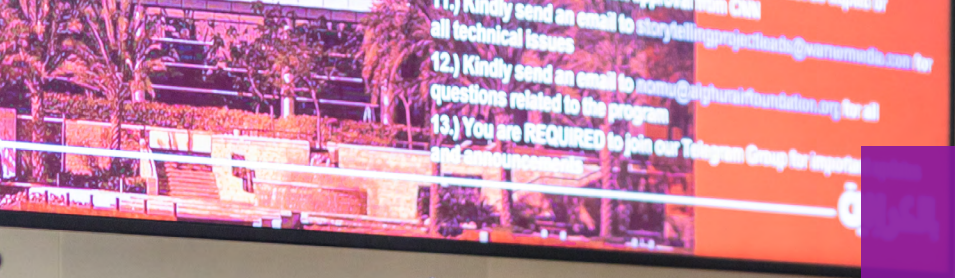
Offering incentives, like financial discounts and salary support, to companies that provide high-quality paid work experiences for students. Additionally, setting regulations, such as mandatory WIL participation quotas aligning with the current quotas, can motivate companies to actively engage in and appreciate the advantages of WIL programs.

- **Provide Flexibility to Implement WIL Pilots:**

Initiating a pilot WIL program in selected academic institutions in alignment with current government directives, fostering innovation in education. This approach encourages re-evaluation of program accreditation, credit hour allocations, and curriculum design, potentially extending degree completion timelines. Such a move is in harmony with visionary governmental goals but also sets a precedent for educational advancement in the region.

- **Convene Key Partnerships:**

Building upon existing cross-stakeholder collaborations between various Ministries and Federal programs to effectively implement WIL programs. Enhancing these partnerships can be achieved through establishing a multi-tiered council dedicated to the strategic rollout of WIL models.

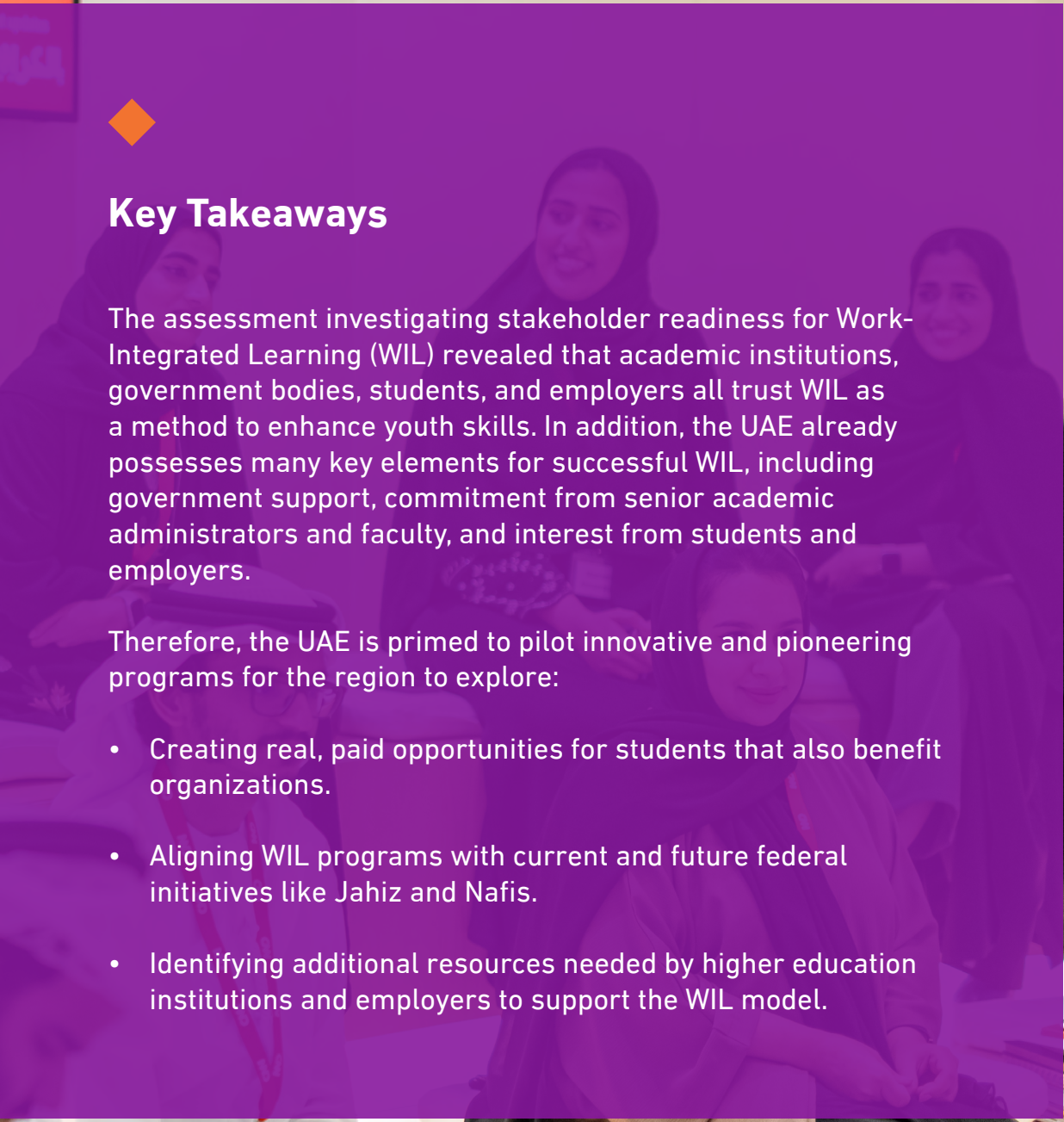


Key Takeaways

The assessment investigating stakeholder readiness for Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) revealed that academic institutions, government bodies, students, and employers all trust WIL as a method to enhance youth skills. In addition, the UAE already possesses many key elements for successful WIL, including government support, commitment from senior academic administrators and faculty, and interest from students and employers.

Therefore, the UAE is primed to pilot innovative and pioneering programs for the region to explore:

- Creating real, paid opportunities for students that also benefit organizations.
- Aligning WIL programs with current and future federal initiatives like Jahiz and Nafis.
- Identifying additional resources needed by higher education institutions and employers to support the WIL model.



Key Takeaways



The fast-paced changes in the job market, the ongoing discussions on the future of jobs and the shortage of required skills have all been addressed with high priority by the UAE government. The implementation of various initiatives has also expedited and enhanced local talent development and youth empowerment.

The UAE government is focusing on improving the quality of education across the different stages and has recently introduced the part-time work framework for students aged above fifteen years old.

The implementation of a sustainable Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program opens the door to exciting opportunities, enhancing talent development and contributing positively to the UAE's economy. We invite key stakeholders to consider the insights and recommendations in this paper as a guide to collaborate effectively, work in concert with the government to address private sector challenges, and provide innovative solutions for a stronger economy.. Together, we can lay a strong foundation for the successful introduction of the WIL program.



Abdulla Al Ghurair مؤسسة
Foundation عبدالله الغرير