

TRENDS IN EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESS IN WORK- INTEGRATED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Manchanayaka, S

Department of Languages, Saegis Campus, Sri Lanka

hod_dol@saegis.ac.lk

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is increasingly recognised as a key strategy for enhancing the employability of graduates. However, issues of equity, inclusion, and access persist as significant challenges, particularly within private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Sri Lanka. The objectives of this study were to examine barriers to equity, inclusion, and access in WIL, explore strategies that promote inclusive participation, and analyze the role of institutions and industries in shaping equitable WIL opportunities. This cross-sectional study investigated these concerns among 132 undergraduates enrolled in a special degree program. Data were collected through document analysis of institutional records, internship-related documents, and data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal multiple barriers that limit equitable participation in WIL. Findings indicate that the internship stipends, ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 LKR, are insufficient to cover living expenses, particularly in urban areas. Students from rural districts face additional challenges due to the scarcity of affordable accommodation near their internship placement sites. Scheduling conflicts also emerged, as some companies require weekend work, which clashes with weekend lectures. Students with disabilities, those from minority faiths, and those facing financial hardships encounter compounded disadvantages in seeking WIL opportunities. The study highlights the need for inclusive policies, flexible work and study arrangements, and stronger collaboration between PHEIs and employers. Integrating the principles of equity, inclusion, and access as core principles of WIL is recommended to ensure that all students benefit meaningfully, thereby advancing the employability of graduates.

Keywords: *Access, disabilities, equity, inclusion, work-integrated learning.*