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Where is the 'WIL' in Work-integrated Learning Research?

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ABSTRACT

Research often defines Work-integrated Learning (WIL) as an educational approach that provides students with work-based experiences. In this article, we argue that this approach definition of WIL is nonsensical and maintains a research terminology that fails to capture what WIL is, namely, a multidimensional learning phenomenon. Drawing on this argument, this article aims to explore and problematise how the term WIL is used in contemporary research. To achieve this aim, we draw on contemporary research and conduct a text analysis of 48 extended abstracts that were accepted for an international WIL conference in December 2022. The text analysis generated three recurring research phenomena that we relate to research. These are (i) *WIL avoidance*, when the WIL term is evaded although it could very well have been used, (ii) *WIL washing*, when the WIL term is used in a hollow manner, and (iii) *WIL ambiguity*, when the WIL term is used vaguely. We scrutinise how these research phenomena and the approach definition of WIL pose challenges to establishing a comprehensive research terminology that can bring about an increased understanding of what WIL is. Finally, we call for research to use a more careful and nuanced terminology that acknowledges WIL's multidimensional nature.

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Introduction

Work-integrated Learning (WIL) is a popular umbrella term in contemporary research. An established research trend is to conceptualise WIL as an *educational phenomenon* that you only encounter if you are a student or someone who works with students such as a university teacher or a work placement supervisor. This representation is reinforced by the established definition that WIL is an *educational approach* that provides students with work-based experiences to ensure that they learn from and *integrate* these experiences with the theories and methods they study. An example of how WIL is defined as an educational approach is found on the website of the *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* where WIL is defined as:

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An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum [...] (<https://www.ijwil.org/>).

When employed as a label for this educational approach, WIL is often used interchangeably with terms such as work-based learning and experiential learning (Björck 2020a; Buzzelli and Asafo-Adjei 2022), yet sometimes also distinguished from such terms (see e.g. the website of the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning on this link: <https://www.ijwil.org/>). This does not only create uncertainty about how WIL, work-based learning, and experiential learning are related, but also uncertainty about what WIL is. Furthermore, Billett (2019) notably clarified that it is vital to not confuse WIL with Work-integrated Education (WIE). In research, there is a tendency to utilise WIL rather than WIE as the label for the educational approach. However, it is crucial to recognise that WIE constitutes the educational approach, *not* WIL (Billett 2019). In the context of WIE, WIL refers to the learning that students are intended to participate in and acquire through this educational approach (Billett and Valencia-Forrester 2020). Moreover, it is not only in connection with this educational approach that the concepts of ‘learning’ and ‘education’ are confounded. Biesta (2010; 2022) declared that in contemporary society the concept of learning is generally used instead of, and mixed up with, the education concept. While these clarifications have been put forward by Billett and Valencia-Forrester (2020) and Biesta (2010; 2022), it remains a problem that research tends to misrepresent WIL as an educational approach. This misrepresentation reinforces the established but false notion that WIL is exclusively an educational phenomenon that you can only encounter by being a student or by having a work role on or off campus in students’ education. In this article, we will argue that WIL is a multidimensional learning phenomenon that not only students but also professionals engage in. Against this brief background, the aim of this article is to explore and problematise how the term WIL¹ is used in contemporary research. To reach this aim, this article draws on contemporary research and conducts a text analysis of *how* and *in which contexts* the WIL term is used in extended abstracts accepted for a 2022 international WIL conference.

Previous research

In this section, we outline various ways of using WIL in contemporary research and how WIL is used in connection to other related umbrella terms. The section will focus on both established and emerging ways of using the WIL term. We begin with the most established way of using the term WIL, namely, to refer to WIL as an *educational approach*², which provides students with *work-based experiences* to ensure that they *integrate* these experiences with the theories and methods they study. Björck and Johansson (2019) stated that a research trend is to refer to WIL as an educational *approach* that helps students *bridge gaps* between on-campus and work placement-based training, gaps which are typically labelled *theory-practice gaps* but also *academic-real world gaps* (Björck 2020b). Patrick et al. (2008, 9) underlined that WIL is often used as an ‘umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum’. Effkeny (2020) referred to WIL as a ‘broad strategy’ that seeks to provide students with a connection between on-campus learning and workplace learning. Jackson (2015, 350) described WIL ‘as the practice of combining

traditional academic study or formal learning, with student exposure to the world-of-work in their chosen profession'. Dean (2023, 11) declared that WIL is a 'pedagogical strategy that contributes to supporting the transition into work by engaging students in workspaces and practices during their higher education studies'. Jackson (2017) pointed out that students can be exposed to working life through *placements*, which she refers to as *placement WIL* or through *non-placement WIL*. The latter refers to various forms of on-campus activities, such as physical or virtual simulations or role plays, that are intended to connect students' education to working life (Jackson 2017). Ferns, Campbell, and Zegwaard (2014) emphasised that WIL has become internationally recognised as an educational strategy that provides students with so-called 'authentic' learning experiences. In this connection, several researchers have declared that WIL is often framed as an educational approach that fosters 'employable' graduates (see e.g. Yorke 2006; Ferns and Moore 2012; Jackson 2015; Kennedy et al. 2015; Jackson and Rowe 2022; Choy and Delahaye 2011; Ferns and Zegwaard 2014; Kay et al. 2019). Björck (2021) problematised that when WIL is promoted in this manner, employability is often understood as work readiness. Yet, employability is not only about being ready for but also about being able to, challenge and change how work is conducted in a profession and in working life in general (Björck 2021). Furthermore, it is often the case that WIL and other umbrella terms are used interchangeably to refer to the educational approach stated above (Björck 2020a; Sattler 2013). For instance, Sattler (2013) stated that WIL is often used interchangeably with terms such as work-based learning, practice-based learning, work-related learning, vocational learning, experiential learning, co-operative education, clinical education, internship, practicum, and field education. However, it is also the case that the WIL term is sometimes related to but distinguished from such terms. For instance, the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning declares that 'WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training' (<https://www.ijwil.org/>). While WIL is often referred to as an educational approach, there is research that underlines that WIL is a form of learning that students shall engage in and/or acquire. For instance, Cooper, Orrell, and Bowden (2010, 13) used the expression *Work-integrated Learning experience* to refer to 'the time students spend learning in the workplace'. Björck (2020a) accentuated that WIL can be seen as a *learning process* that takes place when students *integrate* what they learn about a profession or field of work on and off campus. Billett and Valencia-Forrester (2020) used a distinction between Work-integrated Education (WIE) and WIL to declare that WIE is the educational approach whereas WIL is the learning that is acquired and/or takes place when students integrate learning experiences on and off campus (see also Billett 2022). However, while the WIE/WIL distinction has been put forward, it is still not widely used in contemporary research. Rather, research tends to refer to WIL as the educational approach, and seldom uses this distinction or the WIE term. Furthermore, the learning taking place on various forms of work placements is not only labelled WIL. Umbrella terms such as practice-based learning, work-based learning, learning by doing, workplace learning, experiential learning, and on-the-job learning, are often used to refer work placement-based learning. These umbrella terms are also often used to refer to the daily learning at work that professionals acquire outside a higher education context; a learning that has increasingly come to interest researchers (Tynjälä 2013). However, the WIL term

is typically not used as a label for professionals' daily learning. Still, there is some research where learning and change processes in professionals' daily work are studied under the umbrella term WIL. For instance, recent studies have explored how digitisation changes the professional life for teachers (Augustsson 2020; Willermark 2018) and creates new conditions for learning in the hospitality (Högberg 2018) and the manufacturing industries (Hattinger 2018) and in healthcare (Islind 2018; Vallo Hult 2021). Rangraz and Pareto (2021) used the term *Workplace Work-integrated Learning* to highlight that professionals' daily learning is a form of WIL. Nevertheless, as stated above, studies that examine professionals learning under the WIL label are not particularly common in research. Rather, research tends to conceptualise WIL as an educational phenomenon that merely students or someone who works with students encounter. This article problematises the inaccurate and narrow definition of WIL that this tendency reinforces, and how research in vague ways both distinguishes the WIL term from and uses it interchangeably with the kind of umbrella terms stated above.

Method

To restrict the search and still capture topical research within WIL, we chose to explore extended abstracts that had been accepted for an international WIL conference, which took place at University West (Trollhättan, Sweden) in December 2022. We chose an international conference because we wanted to acquire empirical instances of how the WIL term is utilised across different regions. The general theme of the conference was: 'WIL in the service of society' and there were four research tracks; (i) Healthy and Sustainable Work-Integrated Learning, (ii) Co-creating an inclusive society through work-integrated learning, (iii) Forming professional knowledge by designing for Work-integrated Learning and, (iiii) Work-integrated Learning in a digitalised society (for an exact description of these research tracks see <https://bit.ly/3YR7yXY>). Hence, the conference extends an invitation to cultivate a more comprehensive understanding of WIL that transcends the singular emphasis on WIL being merely an educational phenomenon. Contributions derived from different regions including Europe, Canada, and South Africa. To be accepted for the conference, the abstracts should include between 600 and 1000 words. This was pivotal for our analysis, as the extended word limit provides the author(s) with sufficient scope for explaining what WIL means in the context of their study. Put differently, within this word limit, it can be expected that the abstracts provide some kind of explanation of how their study relates to the key topic of the conference, namely WIL. We examined accepted abstracts that were later published in conference proceedings, totalling 48 extended abstracts. The abstracts were examined through a text analysis which had both a *quantitative* i.e. how many times the WIL term was used, and a *qualitative* analytical focus, i.e. how and in which contexts the WIL term was used. A protocol was developed to categorise and analyse the characteristics of the abstracts, according to:

1. Is the WIL term used in the abstracts, and if so, how many times and in which contexts?
2. If the WIL term is used, how is it used, and is it used in a clear or vague manner?

3. Are there abstracts that do not use the WIL term but rather allude to one or more notions of what WIL is, and if so, how?
4. Do the abstracts use WIL-related umbrella terms, and if so, which terms?
5. Something else worth noting.

In accordance with the protocol, the extended abstracts were first manually and systematically analysed by the two authors individually. During this stage, each author took notes in Microsoft Word and Excel. Thereafter, the authors went through all abstracts together and compared the categorisation, i.e. *data triangulation* (Bryman 2015). In a few cases, we discovered disagreements in coding and discussed the coding until a consensus was reached. In the results and analysis section, the abstracts are coded with A (= abstract) and a unique ID number, i.e. A1-A48.

Results and analysis

The results show that the WIL term is used in 33 of the 48 extended abstracts. In the cases where the WIL term is used, there is a variation regarding whether WIL is defined or not, and if so, how. Furthermore, when the WIL term is employed, it is generally used in attempts to describe what is studied rather than as an analytical concept. This section outlines and analyses three research phenomena that captured how and in which contexts WIL is used in the extended abstracts. These are *WIL avoidance*, *WIL washing*, and *WIL ambiguity*.

WIL avoidance

In 15 of the 48 abstracts, the researchers avoided using the WIL term in the text submitted to a conference in WIL. We named this research phenomenon *WIL avoidance*. When this phenomenon occurs, researchers use WIL-related terms or phrases to describe the topic of their study. Prime examples are *workplace learning*, *professional learning*, and *learning at work*. Other examples are *organisational learning* and *organisational transformation*. The data also shows that WIL avoidance occurs almost exclusively in abstracts that do *not* focus on work-based learning experiences that students acquire in a higher education context or on approaches for providing such experiences. The exception is an abstract focusing on how Massive Open Online courses can become learning environments that help student teachers develop their *professional digital competence*. Thus, in 14 of the 15 abstracts where WIL avoidance occurs, the focus is on learning and/or collaboration to enhance knowledge creation in and through work. It includes various aspects such as professional learning, organisational development, and competence provision. For example, A15 focuses on a learning activity where professionals from different emergency organisations partake in focus-group sessions to create joint knowledge into how their ways of responding to Mass Causality Incidents in road tunnel environments can be improved. Another example of WIL avoidance is identified in A39, which describes a proposed literature review. The review is intended to explore the relationship between *digital transformation* and *learning at work* in a healthcare context. A total of five terms/phrases are presented as relevant search terms for finding research about learning at work including 1) *workplace learning*, 2) *informal learning*, 3) *learning at work*, 4)

work-based learning, and 5) *professional development*. A question that arises is why the authors have avoided using WIL as a search term when their abstract was sent to a WIL conference and when a key focus of the literature review is ‘learning at work’. Perhaps the authors only want to find studies into the learning at work that occurs outside a higher education context and have thereby avoided the WIL term, which is often used in research about work-based learning experiences acquired through higher education. The authors can also have avoided the WIL term because it is typically not used in research which solely focuses on the learning at work that occurs outside a higher education context. In other words, WIL avoidance can be understood as a research phenomenon that manifests itself through the more established trend to typically not use the WIL term in research with the latter focus. Furthermore, the trends to use this term in higher education research but generally not in research that focuses on the learning at work that occurs outside of a higher education context are together misrepresenting WIL as a phenomenon. By this, we mean that together these trends imply that WIL is a phenomenon that only exists or occurs in connection to a higher education context, when professionals evidently engage in WIL. All learning that forms an *integrated part of work*, regardless of whether the work is conducted by students or professionals, is arguably a form of WIL. Moreover, research that refers to WIL as a learning phenomenon occurring in a higher education context, often emphasises that WIL is manifested through an *integration-based* learning process (Bernhardsson 2022) that can go in two different directions which students are supposed to alternate between. One is the process that starts with learning experiences acquired on campus, and which goes in the direction that students shall learn to *integrate* the principles, concepts, and approaches et cetera that they studied on campus into the work they conduct on placements. The other is the process that begins with learning experiences from workplaces, and which goes in the direction that students shall learn to integrate these experiences into their on-campus training to acquire a more concrete understanding of what they read about (Björck 2020a). While professionals do not have on-campus and work placement-based training, they engage in the process of learning how to integrate principles, concepts, and approaches into their work. Furthermore, professionals often integrate their learning experiences from work into their in-service training. This means that professionals engage in the integration-based learning process that research tends to categorise as WIL and identify as specific for students. Thus, the trend to portray WIL as a higher education phenomenon spreads a false picture that is reproduced when the WIL term is *avoided* in research that addresses professional learning in and through work. Thereby, WIL avoidance reduces the possibilities of expanding current ways of conceptualising WIL.

WIL washing

In 12 of the 48 examined abstracts, we found that researchers use the WIL term, yet without articulating an explanation of what WIL means or how WIL relates to the topic of their abstract. We call this research phenomenon *WIL washing*. Using the WIL term this lightly shows no emphasis on explaining WIL but gives the appearance that the abstract examines WIL or a specific topic in relation to WIL. When WIL washing occurs, the WIL term is used in the title, keywords, and/or running text but

with no stated explanation of what the WIL component of the abstract is. In two cases of WIL washing, the WIL term is only used as a keyword and nowhere else in the text (A13 and A34). In three other cases, WIL is only used one time in the running text without any explanation (A2, A28, A45). For example, WIL is used only in the last sentence, as illustrated by; ‘The intention of the paper is to be inspirational and to encourage informal critical friendships as part of WIL’ (A2, 2). Similarly, in one abstract WIL is used once in the keyword and once in the conclusion stating that the results can be used ‘to promote WIL’ (A12). In the additional six cases, the WIL term is used a few times but without an articulated explanation of how WIL is used (A7, A19, A37, A40, A43, A44). In some of the abstracts where WIL washing occurs, the focus is on the learning at work that occurs outside a higher education context. In other abstracts, the focus is on students’ work-based learning experiences and/or on educational approaches that can provide these experiences. A problem with WIL washing is that it supports a *hollow* use of the WIL term which can contribute to WIL becoming an *empty* concept, especially if WIL washing becomes a widespread research phenomenon. Globally several higher education institutions (HEIs) use the WIL term in their marketing (Björck 2020a) and governments use this term in their higher education policies (Zegwaard and Rowe 2019). Research has shown that when a term becomes popular, it can become overused to the extent that it is drained of meaning. For instance, this has happened to terms such as *sustainability* (Davidson 2019) *discourse* (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002) and *graduate employability* (Sin and Neave 2016). The global popularity of the WIL term could thus be one reason why WIL washing exists. Finally, WIL washing works against a conceptual development of WIL, by spreading a hollow way of using the WIL term which does not at all engage in a discussion about what WIL is and is therefore not contributing to such a development.

WIL ambiguity

In 14 of the 48 abstracts, we found vague explanations of WIL which created uncertainty about what WIL means. We call this research phenomenon *WIL ambiguity*. Like WIL washing, this research phenomenon leads to a lack of clarity about what WIL stands for. However, unlike WIL washing, WIL ambiguity includes some explanations of WIL, although these are unclear. This does not mean that the explanations are so unclear that they provide no indication of what WIL could mean, but rather that they are imprecise. An example of WIL ambiguity is found in the following quotation from an abstract (A22):

In 2002 University West was commissioned by the government to develop forms for work integrated learning (WIL) as part of the work with pedagogical renewal of higher education. As a result of this assignment, WIL is now a deeply rooted philosophy and cornerstone of the university but also the main principle for pedagogical approach. We believe that knowledge, both theoretical and practical, is acquired everywhere and not only in institutions of higher learning. In other words, we are striving to connect university studies with everyday work life and the surrounding society (A22, 1).

Here, WIL is described as a deeply rooted philosophy and a cornerstone of University West, as well as their main principle for pedagogical approach. However, these descriptions do not create a clear picture of what WIL entails; instead, they foster uncertainty

about its definition. For instance, the descriptions prompt inquiries such as: when the authors employ the term WIL, are they referring to the educational approach that furnishes students with work-based experiences? Or do they use WIL as a term for the process of learning in and through work? The quotation includes the term ‘pedagogical approach’, which can imply that the authors refer to WIL as an educational approach. However, by stating that WIL is ‘the main principal’ for pedagogical approach, the quotation suggests that WIL is not the approach itself but rather the principle for the approach. A8 provides another example of how WIL ambiguity can be manifested:

(...) this article seeks to investigate whether Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as a bridging mechanism, which is located between the theoretically based orientation of the university and practically based demands of the workplace, can assist in enhancing graduate employability. At the core of WIL is its approach of integrating theoretical knowledge in the classroom with the practical knowledge in the workplace. The relationship between work and learning is becoming increasingly important as a society in transition requires ‘seamless’ integration between the challenges of working life and lifelong learning (A8, 1).

Here, WIL is referred to as some form of bridging mechanism that provides students with a connection between on-campus training and the demands they meet at workplaces. In this connection, it is also written that WIL could: ‘assist in enhancing graduate employability’. Furthermore, it is stated that WIL has a *core*, namely its ‘approach of integrating theoretical knowledge in the classroom with the practical knowledge in the workplace’. While these explanations of WIL are rather detailed, they are still unclear about what WIL stands for. For instance, when referred to as ‘bridging mechanism’, it is not clear whether WIL means an ‘educational approach’ or a ‘form of learning’ that provides a bridge between on-campus training and the working life-domain outside HEIs. From analysing all abstracts where WIL ambiguity occurs, we concluded that a defining feature of this phenomenon is that it is manifested through explanations that compel the reader to guess whether WIL is used as a term for (a) an educational approach, (b) a form of learning or (c) something else. Thus, WIL ambiguity problematically contributes to confusion about a question that there should be no confusion about. While there is an established trend to define WIL as an educational approach, it is WIE and *not* WIL that constitutes the educational approach (Billett 2019; Billett and Valencia-Forrester 2020). In the context of WIE, three interconnected forms of WIL can be delineated, illustrating the multidimensional nature of WIL as a learning phenomenon. Firstly, there is the learning that students gain as an integral part of their work during placements. Secondly, another form of WIL involves the learning acquired through on-campus activities designed to simulate specific work assignments or situations. Thirdly, in conjunction with WIE, WIL constitutes a learning *process* wherein students are tasked with integrating their classroom teachings and work placement-based learning experiences. The quotation presented above represents an example of how WIL ambiguity is regularly manifested through an established research trend which creates uncertainty about what WIL stands for. What we refer to is the trend to use the WIL term in connection to one or more related umbrella terms without providing a clear explanation of what these terms mean and how the term(s) are related to WIL (Sattler 2013). In the quotation, WIL is used in connection to lifelong learning, but it is unclear how WIL and lifelong learning are related. The next quotation provides another example of how WIL

ambiguity is manifested through the trend to vaguely relate WIL to other umbrella terms. This quotation is from abstract A9, which focuses on a partnership between University West, and the Central University of Technology (CUT) in South Africa:

WIL at CUT is aimed at the enhancement of the employability of students, amongst others, at this level. Students at CUT are exposed to various modalities of WIL such as workplace-based learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, simulations, as well as work directed theoretical learning under the umbrella terminology of WIL (A9, 1).

Here, WIL is explained as a phenomenon that can take different forms. However, what WIL means is not specified. Rather, the quotation connects WIL to terms such as workplace-based learning, problem-based learning and simulations, without explaining in what ways these ‘modalities’ constitute different forms of WIL. In the abstract, this quotation appears after WIL has been connected to terms such as cooperative education, work-based learning, internships, and experiential learning, again without clarifying how WIL is connected to these terms. Thus, the abstract provides the ambiguous message that WIL can be manifested in different ways; in the shape of certain forms of learning such as work – and problem-based learning, in the form of an educational setup such as an internship or in the form of an educational activity like simulations. As this message implies that different types of phenomena can be examples of WIL, it creates uncertainty about what WIL is. An interesting feature to note is that the quotation presented above uses the WIL term in connection to both terms that end with *learning* and terms that end with *education*. This feature is not unique to this study. For example, *The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning* relates WIL to both work-based learning, experiential learning and vocational education (<https://www.ijwil.org/>).

In sum, a problem with WIL ambiguity is that this research phenomenon spreads a vague rather than a careful use of the WIL term, which contributes to an unclarity about what WIL means. This vague use of the WIL term does not contribute to an expansion of how WIL is understood and conceptualised in research but rather creates confusion about what WIL means.

Synthesis

WIL avoidance, WIL washing, and WIL ambiguity share the common denominator that they work against a conceptual development of WIL, although they operate in different ways. WIL avoidance works against this development by being a language use that does not make WIL *visible*; WIL washing by being a *hollow* language use that does *not* address the nature of WIL; WIL ambiguity by being a *vague* language use that creates *confusion* about what WIL means. Together these three research phenomena cause unclarity about what WIL is. This makes it difficult when overviewing what research can and cannot be counted as WIL research. In other words, the three research phenomena do not make it easy to acquire an overview of what has and what has not been studied about WIL, and thereafter use such an overview to identify a research topic that can add new knowledge about WIL.

Discussion and conclusion

In the introduction, we questioned the established trend of defining WIL as an educational approach that provides students with work-based experiences. An educational

approach is how an education is designed to generate one or more intended learning outcomes amongst its students (Billett 2019). Thus, the educational approach is not the same thing as the learning it is intended to generate (Billett 2024). Therefore, it is nonsensical to claim that WIL is an educational approach. If WIL is the approach, what should we then call the learning that the approach is intended to generate? There is a need to separate the learning (i.e. WIL) from the educational approach (i.e. WIE) (see Billett and Valencia-Forrester 2020, for a similar argument). The necessity for this clarification arises not solely due to the related, yet distinct nature, of the educational approach and the intended learning outcomes. It also stems from the fact that, in the context of WIE as an educational approach, the integration of on-campus and off-campus learning experiences into a cohesive whole is an intended but not always realised outcome. Research has over time shown that while the approach provides opportunities for students to accomplish this integration process, they often find this process challenging and regularly experience gaps between what they learn on and off campus (Björck 2020a; Shulman 1998). When the approach is defined as WIL, this implies that the approach is bound to ‘deliver’ WIL for students in the sense that it will inevitably ensure that they learn to integrate their on-campus and off-campus learning experiences (see Björck 2022, who briefly makes a similar argument about what the approach definition implies). Nevertheless, as aforementioned, such an assumption is not accurate. Instead, the educational approach affords opportunities for this integration but does not guarantee that students will acquire the skills to integrate these experiences. The differentiation between WIE and WIL facilitates the avoidance of the erroneous implication suggested by the approach definition. Distinguishing between WIE and WIL can also be an apt way of avoiding the nonsensical but established definition that WIL is an educational approach. Furthermore, when WIL is defined as an educational approach, it is not surprising that WIL is thought of as an educational phenomenon that only students and, to some extent, their on and off-campus educators engage with. By instead distinguishing WIE from WIL it becomes possible to illustrate that WIL is a *multidimensional learning phenomenon* that not only students but also professionals engage in. We have previously touched upon the diverse characteristics that define WIL as a multidimensional learning phenomenon. However, we aim to elaborate more comprehensively on our argument leading to this conclusion. Our assertion is grounded in the various forms that WIL takes and the diverse contexts in which WIL unfolds. Instances of learning integral to the work conducted by students or professionals in workplace settings constitute a manifestation of WIL. However, not only the learning that forms an integrated part of and thereby occurs in and through regular work can be counted as a form of WIL. Learning that occurs with a clear connection to work but in formal education settings rather than in workplace settings is arguably also WIL. For instance, students can acquire WIL on campus and professionals can acquire WIL during formal education events that their employers offer them.

Moreover, there is a particular form of WIL which begins in one context but is intended to become accomplished in another context. This is the learning process whereby students or professionals try to learn how to *integrate* learning experiences that they have acquired in formal education settings with learning experiences they have acquired in and through work. This process can start with a learning experience in a formal education setting and become accomplished when the learning experience

is integrated into the work that students or professionals conduct at workplaces. However, the process can also commence with a work-based learning experience, which is thereafter integrated into and discussed in a formal education setting. The integration process itself can also lead to different types of knowledge. For instance, when students or professionals succeed in integrating a specific principle, concept or approach into work, they can acquire a concrete *know-how* of how this principle et cetera can be applied. However, as they integrate formal education-based and work-based learning experiences, students or professionals can also acquire knowledge in terms of a greater understanding of what a specific principle, concept or approach stands for. For instance, when students or professionals bring back certain learning experiences from work to a formal education setting, they can share these experiences with others to provide themselves and their peers with a greater understanding of the principles and concepts et cetera that their formal education focuses on. The fact that the integration-based learning processes stated above can lead to different types of knowledge further reinforces the argument that WIL is a multidimensional learning phenomenon. Problematically, contemporary research does not really shed light on the fact that WIL is a multidimensional learning phenomenon. A key example of this is that research continues to generally portray WIL as an educational phenomenon that only students or someone who works with students encounter. Some recent studies have avoided this general trend by examining professionals learning under the WIL umbrella (Augustsson 2020; Hattinger 2018; Högberg 2018; Islind 2018; Rangraz and Pareto 2021; Willermark 2018). Yet, contemporary research does typically not underpin the argument that professionals engage in WIL. When our data is compared to trends in previous research, we see that WIL avoidance is common in research that focuses on learning at work that is not acquired in a higher education context. When WIL is avoided as a label for this learning, it is not really recognised that professionals' learning can be understood as WIL. Furthermore, distinguishing WIE from WIL can be an apt basis for researchers to use the WIL term more carefully, instead of engaging in WIL ambiguity or WIL washing. This distinction can encourage researchers to go into detail about the nature of WIE and WIL, and thereby produce a more precise explanation of what these phenomena mean by themselves and in relation to each other. When we argue that it is important to use the WIL term outside of higher education research, we do not wish to promote WIL in favour of other related terms, such as workplace learning. Rather, we want to emphasise that when the WIL term is used more widely, this sheds light on the fact that WIL occurs in a broader context and has more dimensions than what established definitions of WIL claim. Neither the phenomena of WIL avoidance, WIL washing, nor WIL ambiguity contribute to the clarification of WIL as a multidimensional learning phenomenon. Instead, these three research phenomena exacerbate the challenge of prioritising this conclusion. In doing so, they align with rather than challenge the prevalent tendency to define WIL as an educational approach. The approach definition, in particular, poses significant challenges, as it steers individuals towards perceiving WIL as an educational phenomenon rather than recognising its essence as a multidimensional learning phenomenon engaged in by both students and professionals. Moreover, our argument that a WIE/WIL distinction can provide a greater understanding of how WIL is related to WIE should be seen in relation to the fact that WIE is not a popular term in research. Rather, the established research

trend is to use WIL or other umbrella terms ending with learning (e.g. work-based learning and experiential learning) as labels for the educational approach of providing students with work-based experiences (Björck 2020a). Using umbrella terms ending with 'learning' rather than 'education' can be seen as an example of what Biesta (2010) labelled *the learnification of the educational discourse*. Biesta (2010) argued that in contemporary discourse (conversation) on education, there is a tendency to use the word 'learning' instead of 'education'. This makes it difficult to distinguish an educational approach from the learning that this approach is intended to generate. We have already discussed that this can easily happen when the educational approach of providing students with work-based experiences is defined as WIL rather than as WIE. The fact that WIL still tends to be defined as an educational approach is problematic because this shows that a considerable amount of research fails to acknowledge that WIL is a multidimensional learning phenomenon. From our point of view, there should be more serious attempts in research to distinguish WIL from WIE and represent WIL for what WIL is. By this, we mean that just as a spade should be represented as a spade, WIL should be represented as a multidimensional learning phenomenon, not as an educational approach or as something else.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be addressed. The study builds on extended abstracts with a word limit of 1000 words. While this word limit provided the author (s) with sufficient scope for describing WIL and how WIL is studied, full-length articles would have provided more scope for such a description. Furthermore, the study's empirical data consists of a limited number of extended abstracts from a recent WIL conference, with four tracks shaping the focus for the extended abstracts. However, to place our results in a more general context, we compared the three discerned research phenomena to identified trends in contemporary research about WIL. Based on this comparison, we have been able to conclude that both WIL avoidance and WIL ambiguity are research phenomena that exist more generally in research. As for WIL washing, we cannot make statements of its existence in research in general. Rather, the results indicate that there is a possibility that this may be the case. Furthermore, qualitative-oriented research such as ours is about generating theorisations in the form of concepts or categorisations that can be applicable in a more general context. This form of generalisation is often called 'theoretical generalisation' (Mitchell 1983). We argue that the concepts of WIL avoidance, WIL washing, and WIL ambiguity have broader theoretical implications than to explain this specific study and can be used more generally by other researchers to conceptualise and understand research into WIL and how the WIL term is used in research.

Notes

1. When we use the term WIL, we mean both the word Work-integrated Learning in its unabbreviated form and the abbreviation WIL.
2. In this connection, terms such as strategy, programme, design, setup, practise, or method are sometimes used instead of the term approach.

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