Quality Assuring Work-integrated Learning in Irish Tertiary Education

A Thematic Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

QQI INSIGHTS.

Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann
Quality and Qualifications Ireland

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1. CONTEXT

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (as amended) requires Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) to issue guidelines for education providers relating to the establishment of quality assurance (QA) procedures for programmes of education and training, research, and related services. In addition to developing core statutory QA guidelines, which are applicable to all providers, QQI has also issued supplementary QA guidelines for different types of providers (sector-specific guidelines) and for different categories of provision (topic-specific guidelines).

In 2024, QQI initiated the development of a new set of topic-specific QA guidelines on work-integrated learning, appointing a project team to undertake the development process and associated activities on their behalf. The outcomes of an initial period of stakeholder engagement undertaken by the project team are set out in this report, which presents a thematic analysis of stakeholder perspectives on the QA of work-integrated learning. This report is published concurrently to *Work-integrated Learning Practice in Ireland* (Peck, Jackson & Anton-Aherne, 2025), a typology of work-integrated learning as it is currently practised in Ireland, based on submissions from practitioners working across tertiary education and training contexts, including apprenticeship. The findings documented in both reports will be used to inform the drafting of the new guidelines.

1.1 WHAT IS WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING?

Work-integrated learning is an umbrella term, encompassing a range of work-related learning activities that may take place on campus, in a workplace setting or online (Zegwaard et al, 2023). Examples of work-integrated learning include (but are not limited to) apprenticeships, internships, professional practice placements, traineeships, industry projects, company challenges and work experience placements. A distinguishing feature of work-integrated learning is that it always involves a partnership between the learner, the education provider and an external partner[1] (e.g. an employer or placement provider) (Ferns et al, 2024). The external partner provides opportunities for learners to engage in practice-based or work-based activities and demonstrate their achievement of relevant learning outcomes.

Notably, forms of assessment that emphasise authenticity are increasingly prevalent and are recognised to go "hand-in-hand" with work-integrated learning (O'Neill, 2024, p.620). However, authenticity in assessment also occurs in contexts where an external partner is not directly involved.

In some cases, a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) may also be an important stakeholder in setting requirements for or approving the inclusion of work-integrated learning in a programme of education and training.

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[1] External partners are, by definition, not members of the education and training provider organisation. QQI does not regulate the activities of the external partners that education and training providers engage with for the purposes of work-integrated learning. The quality assurance of education and training providers for work-integrated learning must therefore consider the governance, management (including risks) and operational arrangements associated with engaging in forms of provision that involve (to variable extents) dependencies on external partners.

1.2 IN WHAT CONTEXTS WILL THE NEW QA GUIDELINES FOR WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING BE RELEVANT?

It is envisaged that QQI's QA guidelines for work-integrated learning will apply to the provision of educational programmes leading to further education and training (FET) or higher education (HE) qualifications (i.e. awards) that involve assessed learning outcomes achieved (not necessarily exclusively) through work-integrated learning activities.

QQI previously developed a set of topic-specific QA guidelines for providers of statutory apprenticeship programmes in 2016. As a well-known form of work-integrated learning, apprenticeship will be within the scope of the QA guidelines on work-integrated learning.

In some instances, recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes can involve assessment of learning acquired in a work setting. As QQI's statutory QA guidelines on work-integrated learning are intended to apply to the acquisition of learning in a planned manner as part of a programme of education/training, the assessment of work-based learning for RPL purposes is not within the scope of the planned guidelines.

1.3 HOW WILL THE NEW GUIDELINES BE INFORMED BY STAKEHOLDERS AND CURRENT PRACTICE?

Given the diversity of activities and the breadth of contexts to which the guidelines on work-integrated learning will apply across the tertiary education sector in Ireland, a priority is that the development process be well-informed by engagement with relevant stakeholders and based on an understanding of work-integrated learning as it is currently practised in Ireland.

Although the term work-integrated learning may not be well-established in Ireland, the associated practices are certainly not new to the national tertiary education landscape (see, for example, Sheridan & Linehan, 2011). In particular, practice placements, internships, work experience and apprenticeships are well established features of FET and HE provision. This report therefore sets out the key findings from an initial process of engagement with well-informed stakeholders[2] who hold significant experience navigating the often complex terrain of work-integrated learning.

1.4 REPORT STRUCTURE

A summary of the stakeholder engagement mechanisms informing this report is provided in section 2. The key findings derived from an overall analysis of contributions made by stakeholders via focus groups, surveys and interviews are then set out in summary form and discussed in section 3.

Section 4 profiles the perspectives of learners, setting out the benefits, challenges and priorities for the quality assurance of work-integrated learning that were identified by learners and recent

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2   A separate and concurrent publication, *Work-integrated Learning Practice in Ireland* (Peck, Jackson & Anton-Aherne, 2025) sets out a broad typology of work-integrated learning as currently practised in Ireland, based on submissions from tertiary education providers.

graduates in direct engagements with the project team. This section also highlights findings from recent and relevant research undertaken with learners in the Irish context. These reinforce and augment the findings from direct engagement with learners within this project.

In section 5, the perspectives of external partners (e.g. employers or placement providers) that provide opportunities for learners to engage in work-integrated learning are summarised. Section 6 integrates the contributions of education and training providers, including FET and HE providers of apprenticeship programmes. Finally, contributions to the initial stakeholder engagement from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are summarised in section 7.

2. SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Initial stakeholder engagement involved learners (including apprentices), recent graduates, education providers and external partners in work-integrated learning (e.g. employers or placement providers), PSRBs, representative bodies and relevant government departments and agencies. Engagement activities were conducted in the latter half of 2024. The purpose was to bring to the fore considerations in respect of the quality assurance of work-integrated learning that are priorities for stakeholders[3]. Engagement methods and participation/responses are summarised in the sections below.

2.1 FOCUS GROUPS

Online focus groups were facilitated by the project team across October 2024 for a range of stakeholders (see table 1). Each stakeholder group was provided with more than one scheduled option for attendance. All focus groups were scheduled for a duration of one hour.

Focus Group Participants[4]		
24 Learners and Recent Graduates	6 External Partners and Employers	15 PSRBs and Sectoral Representative Bodies
17 Further Education Providers	24 Higher Education Providers	13 Apprenticeship Providers

Figure 1: Number of Participants in Focus Groups by Stakeholder Type

Stakeholders participating in focus groups were invited to respond to four key prompts. Specifically, they were invited to identify what they perceived the benefits of work-integrated learning to be, as well as any challenges. They were invited to comment on the extent to which they considered a tentatively proposed definition of work-integrated learning to be appropriate to their context and experience. The participants were also invited to identify any aspects of work-integrated learning that they felt should be a focus within QQI's new quality assurance guidelines.

Focus group discussions were semi-structured. This enabled the participants to respond to one another's contributions and the facilitators to ask for clarifications or pose follow-up questions as appropriate. It was emphasised at the outset of each focus group that the purpose of the discussions was not to reach consensus but to enable the exchange of a breadth of views and perspectives. These perspectives are summarised and discussed throughout this report.

2.2 SURVEYS

Targeted surveys were issued to engage with particular stakeholder types for particular purposes. All surveys were open for a six-week period across September – November 2024. The individual surveys are outlined below[5].

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3   A concurrent engagement was focused on informing a summary and typology of work-integrated learning as it is currently practiced in Ireland. This is published by QQI in a separate (but related) report, *Work-integrated Learning Practice in Ireland* (Peck, C., Jackson, N. & Anton-Aherne, A., 2025).

4   Figures stated include individual interviews and acceptance of written submissions facilitated for a small number of stakeholders unable to attend scheduled focus groups.

5   Copies of the survey items are included in Appendices I - IV.

2.2.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE SURVEY FOR PROVIDER ORGANISATIONS

Providers were asked to provide one response per organisation to a survey focused on QA considerations in work-integrated learning, informed as appropriate by internal consultation. The survey elicited general information on the broad types of work-integrated learning in operation and what levels on the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) the programmes involving work-integrated learning were associated with. Organisations were invited to provide open-text responses indicating what types of work-integrated learning occurred most commonly in their programmes, and indicating whether the activities included virtual/online, international/global elements or payment for learners. Providers were additionally asked to indicate if any of the work-integrated learning they delivered was required for professional registration or standards. Further open-text responses were invited in relation to any specific considerations pertaining to the design, management, operation and assessment of work-integrated learning that may be important to consider in QQI's forthcoming quality assurance guidelines.

The survey was issued directly to provider organisations by QQI and a link to the survey was also posted on QQI's website. A total of 64 responses were received from FET provider organisations and 35 from HE provider organisations. A further 8 responses indicated they were submitted by organisations delivering programmes in both FET and HE.

Organisational QA Survey Responses		
64 Further Education Providers	35 Higher Education Providers	8 Further & Higher Education Providers

Figure 2: Number of Responses to Organisational QA Survey by Provider Type

2.2.2 PRACTICE SURVEY FOR INDIVIDUALS

Individual practitioners (staff involved in planning, coordinating, facilitating or delivering work-integrated learning) were invited to make submissions in response to a second survey. This survey focused on eliciting specific features of work-integrated learning practice in the context of individual programmes, e.g. the location of activities, the intended learning outcomes, assessment practices and strategies used to facilitate inclusion of diverse learners.

The practice survey was issued to provider organisations by QQI with a request to disseminate as appropriate to practitioners. A link to the survey was also posted on QQI's website and it was additionally promoted via the project team's professional networks and on social media. The survey attracted 65 responses from practitioners working in FET and 183 responses from practitioners working in HE. A further 27 submissions indicated the practitioners worked for providers offering both further and higher education awards. These 27 practitioners identified their organisation types as ETBs, linked providers of a designated awarding body, other public providers offering programmes leading to QQI awards, private providers offering programmes leading to QQI awards, universities and technological universities.

Practitioner Survey Responses		
65 Further Education Practitioners	183 Higher Education Practitioners	27 Further & Higher Education Practitioners

Figure 3: Number of Responses to Practitioner Survey by Sector

2.2.3 EMPLOYER SURVEY

External partners (inclusive of employers; placement providers; and industry, community and professional partners) on work-integrated learning were invited to respond to a brief survey. The survey elicited information about the respondents' organisational profile and which sectors (FET, HE or both) the organisation engaged with to provide opportunities for work-integrated learning. Respondents were asked to identify the ways in which they provided those opportunities, e.g. by hosting site visits, facilitating challenges, or providing internship, placement and work experience opportunities. They were additionally asked to indicate the extent to which they collaborated with education and training providers on programme design and management activities as well as in relation to the assessment of learners and the provision of feedback. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which their organisations experienced particular benefits and challenges when providing opportunities for work-integrated learning. An opportunity to make additional comments was provided as well as the option of registering to attend a focus group.

The survey was promoted by education and training providers and through the project team's professional networks. A link to the survey was also posted on QQI's website and promoted by QQI on social media. A summary of responses by organisation profile is provided in table 4.

Employer Survey Responses		
121 Small to Medium Enterprises	26 Government Agencies	21 Multinational Organisations
19 Large Enterprises	11 Community Organisations	12 Healthcare Providers
11 Education Institutions	6 Start-ups	5 Social Enterprises

Figure 4: Number of Responses to Employer Survey by Organisation Profile

2.2.4 STAKEHOLDER SURVEY

Stakeholders including professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, industry or sectoral representative bodies and apprenticeship consortium members were invited to respond to a brief survey. The survey elicited information about the respondents' organisational profile, the sectors (FET, HE or both) that their organisations engaged with and the roles they played in relation to education provision, for example accrediting body, regulator or advisory body. Respondents were asked to identify whether their organisation published standards or guidelines for work-integrated learning, and, if yes, identify what those encompassed. Respondents were also asked to identify the extent to which their organisations played a role in the development, approval and review of programmes and the degree of impact they perceived work-integrated learning to have on preparing graduates to successfully transition to work in their industry or sector. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate specific and additional challenges and benefits associated with work-integrated learning and provided with the option of registering to attend a focus group.

Stakeholder Survey Responses		
22 PSRBs	8 Industry Representative Bodies	5 Apprenticeship Consortium Members

Figure 5: Number of Responses to Stakeholder Survey by Organisation Profile

2.3 INTERVIEWS

The project team additionally conducted interviews with individual representatives of key government agencies and representative bodies that contribute to the development of education and training in Ireland as well as the broader upskilling agenda. The interviews offered an opportunity for those representatives to clarify the purpose and scope of the new guidelines and to provide initial reflections on the extent to which these may intersect or align with strategic priorities being pursued across the broader education, training and skills ecosystem.

Key Agencies and Representative Bodies	- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) - Higher Education Authority (HEA) - An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna (SOLAS) - Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) - The National Skills Council - Skillnet Ireland - The Industrial Development Agency (IDA) Ireland - The Irish Small to Medium Enterprise Association (ISME) - The Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD)

Figure 6: Interviews with Key Agencies and Representative Bodies

All stakeholders, including those that have contributed to the initial engagement informing this report, will have the opportunity to provide feedback on draft QA guidelines for work-integrated learning. These are intended to be published for consultation by QQI in 2025.

3. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The key findings in this section draw upon thematic analysis of the inputs made by diverse stakeholders across the surveys, focus groups and interviews outlined in section 2. More detailed findings, including (where appropriate) quantification of particular findings and illustrative extracts from qualitative data are provided in sections 4 – 7.

3.2 BENEFITS

- Learners, FET and HE providers, external partners, PSRBs and other stakeholders view work-integrated learning as beneficial in facilitating **applied learning** and developing work-ready skills among graduates. In particular, the positive impact of work-integrated learning experiences on **soft skills and transversal skills** development is noted.

- Learners, FET and HE providers and PSRBs highlight that work-integrated learning experiences facilitate **career development learning**. This enables learners to make better informed choices regarding their future study and career options and to begin to establish professional networks.

- External partners view work-integrated learning as an important mechanism to **support the talent pipeline for their industries**, as well as to identify future talent, increase internal capacity and promote internal learning and development.

- Stakeholders working at strategic levels within the education and training sector (DFHERIS, SOLAS, HEA, QQI) and the broader skills ecosystem (National Skills Council, IDA Ireland, ISME, Skillnet Ireland) view work-integrated learning as a critically important feature of Ireland's capacity to **deliver future-oriented education, training and skills, and to develop work-ready graduates**.

3.3 CHALLENGES

- Learners indicated that the **limited availability** of work experience and placement opportunities was often a challenge. Where learners were required to source opportunities independently this was noted to create considerable stress.

- Learners identify a **lack of remuneration or subsidy** for extensive placement hours and inappropriate working conditions to be exploitative.

- Learners, FET, HE and apprenticeship providers identified that **learning environments for work experience, placement or on-the-job learning do not always facilitate meaningful experience or achievement of all learning outcomes**.

- Learners, learner advocates and education providers identify that challenges persist surrounding equity in work-integrated learning that impact a breadth of learners, including those experiencing socioeconomic hardship, managing family and caring commitments or living with a disability. Specific challenges include **lack of accessibility, socioeconomic barriers and a lack of flexibility in the organisation of, and processes for, work-integrated learning experiences**.

- External partners in particular perceived that **learners are often under-prepared to commence workplace-based learning experiences** and that a greater emphasis on preparation by education providers, particularly in relation to **behavioural expectations and basic technical skills**, is desirable.

- **Both external partners and education providers perceive challenges or gaps in lines of communication**, which can undermine the experience of the learner or apprentice.

- Some external partners identify a **lack of information** provision by education providers regarding learner preparation or the academic curriculum as an issue.

- Education providers emphasised the importance of workplace mentors and supervisors in facilitating workplace-based forms of work-integrated learning, noting challenges associated with **training, supporting and engaging workplace mentors and supervisors**.

- Education providers identified concerns that new QA guidelines, if prescriptive, could **increase bureaucracy and deter employers from providing opportunities for work-integrated learning**.

- The **resource requirements** of work-integrated learning were noted to be challenging for employers (particularly SMEs) and education providers.

3.3 TERMINOLOGY

Although the term work-integrated learning is not in frequent use across the tertiary education sector in Ireland, the provisional definition below was considered by most stakeholders to be broadly inclusive of their experience and practice. A number of stakeholders suggested that apprenticeship should be specifically identified as a common form of work-integrated learning within any definition.

> Work-integrated learning is an umbrella term that encompasses a broad spectrum of programmes and activities that directly involve at least three stakeholders:
>
> - The learner;
> - The education provider;
> - The employer.
>
> *N.B. In this context, the employer provides an opportunity for work-related activity or supervised practice but is not necessarily employing the learner.*
>
> Common forms of work-integrated learning include (but are not limited to) internships, placements, projects for industry, community or professional partners, simulations, showcases or performances. Work-integrated learning teaching, learning and assessment activity may occur in the workplace, in the community, on-campus or online.

Figure 7: Provisional Definition of Work-integrated Learning Discussed in Focus Groups

- The majority of **stakeholders engaged directly in work-integrated learning (learners, FET and HE providers) or with close linkages to practice (PSRBs) considered the term 'employer' to be inappropriate or too narrowly defined to represent their experience or contexts**, even when qualified as presented above.

- **Apprentices and apprenticeship providers were more likely to consider the term 'employer' appropriate to their context**. However, apprenticeship providers in many instances suggested that greater nuance was warranted, as mentors, supervisors and other roles were more typically referenced in their communications and/or interactions.

- Stakeholders working at a greater remove from practice (e.g. government agencies) generally did not express strong views on the definition.

3.4 PRIORITY AREAS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE GUIDELINES

- All stakeholders perceive that QA guidelines should emphasise the importance of ensuring there is **clarity surrounding roles and expectations** for all parties involved in work-integrated learning, including in relation to legal and compliance obligations.

- FET and HE providers indicated that QA guidelines may need to take account of **contemporary modes of working and the increasing prevalence of remote and virtual work-integrated learning**.

- Interviews with representative bodies including IBEC, ISME and the National Skills Council brought to the fore that in the context of the upskilling agenda, micro-credentials and provision for mature, part-time learners, efforts within the guidelines to **expand understanding of how non-placement-based forms of work-integrated learning can be managed and integrated to programme design** would be valued.

- Interviews with the HEA, SOLAS and QQI also highlighted the importance of considering **how the new QA guidelines may map to future reporting requirements** and inform data capture via information systems.

- Education providers, external partners and PSRBs emphasised that while QA guidelines would be welcome in some areas, caution should be exercised. In particular, **stakeholders view it as important that QA guidelines are not overly prescriptive and avoid creating unnecessary additional bureaucracy or workload for stakeholders.**

3.5 DISCUSSION

Practical limitations of scope and time mean that the findings arising from the initial engagement process conducted to inform the development of QQI's statutory quality assurance guidelines for work-integrated learning should be considered preliminary. Nonetheless, they draw upon the direct and often substantive contributions of stakeholders including learners and those involved in the quality assurance, practice, facilitation and oversight of work-integrated learning in Ireland. The findings as a whole reflect that benefits associated with the practice of work-integrated learning are recognised and appreciated across all stakeholder groups. Learners and education providers in particular suggest that opportunities for work-integrated learning contribute valuably to learning and graduate employability. Interviews with strategic stakeholders also confirmed that measures to support quality and promote inclusive and sustainable practices in work-integrated learning align closely with the strategic priorities being pursued across the broader education, training and skills ecosystem.

A finding arising from the initial process of stakeholder engagement is that across all stakeholder groups there is a strong view that the new QA guidelines should emphasise the clear communication of roles and expectations for all parties contributing to work-integrated learning.

Notably, the current challenges identified in this area are indicative of potentially compounding impacts arising from resource constraints. For example, education providers working across both FET and HE, including in the context of apprenticeships, identified that there are challenges associated with training, supporting and engaging with workplace mentors and supervisors. A perception that workplace staff may not have sufficient time to fully engage in these roles was repeatedly shared with the project team. The allocation of time to mentors and supervisors requires the ongoing commitment of dedicated resources by external partners. An equally strong theme in the inputs from representatives of external partner organisations was that learners are not adequately prepared for placements or other forms of workplace-based work-integrated learning prior to its commencement by education providers. Dedicated learner preparation activities also entail resource implications for providers. These examples indicate that the findings from this initial engagement process should be carefully considered in relation to how resource constraints underlie or intersect with other challenges. Notably, a review of the resources allocated to support work-integrated learning by education providers (or by their external partners) was not within the scope of this initial stakeholder engagement. Future research and reviews could usefully explore the specification and allocation of resources associated with various forms of work-integrated learning in different settings.

The stakeholder engagement reported here offers a preliminary exploration of the breadth of current practice in Ireland and associated considerations for QA. It does not provide definitive quantification of the relative volumes of different types of work-integrated learning in operation across the Irish tertiary sector. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that forms of work-integrated learning anchored by substantive experience in the workplace (e.g. apprenticeship, placement, internship or traineeship) currently dominate practice. Moreover, a thematic review of quality reporting in Irish higher education published by QQI in 2024[6] identified that at least two universities in Ireland had indicated intentions to increase or further promote the use of placement within their programmes in their most recent annual quality reports. The dominance of workplace-based forms of work-integrated learning relative to other types is not unusual[7] when compared with practices in other countries. Nonetheless, the prevalence of these forms within the submissions and inputs from stakeholders in Ireland warrants reflection. This is particularly important to consider in relation to the finding that both learners and education providers report that there is an overall scarcity of such opportunities. Education providers have additionally identified that where opportunities do exist, the workplace environments may not always facilitate achievement of all relevant learning outcomes.

Further consideration also needs to be given to the challenges identified by learners associated with equity and inclusion (including affordability) that are particular to these forms of work-integrated learning. It is important to note that these challenges are not unique to the Irish context and have been widely discussed across the international literature. For example, a special issue of the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning[8] focused on equity, access and inclusion features international contributions that consider the barriers faced by learners on low incomes, international learners, learners with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ learners and learners who are members of racialised communities (among other groups). The particular challenges for learners with disabilities associated with placement have also recently been explored in the Irish context (Waters and Rath, 2022). Future inquiry could valuably be directed toward considering the

6   See Quality in Irish Higher Education 2024: A Thematic Analysis of the Higher Education Institution Annual Quality Reports for 2024, p. 46.

7   See, for example, a 2019 survey conducted by Universities Australia, which found that 43% of total work-integrated learning activity was placement, 23.3% was project, 9.7% fieldwork, 12.9% simulation and 11.2% other. The report also noted that universities in Australia were observed to be "moving beyond this historical approach" and increasing the use of alternative formats across their programmes (2019, p.8).

8   See International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning, Issue 1 (Special Issue) Equity, Access and Inclusion in Work-Integrated Learning, 2024.

equity implications of work-integrated learning and how this intersects with relevant government policies[9].

Looking to the future, it will be important for education providers to continually review the sustainability and suitability of their approaches to work-integrated learning. Localised risk assessments conducted by providers may usefully consider factors including, for example, the availability of placement opportunities, the resource requirements and the equity implications associated with particular forms of work-integrated learning in the context of particular programmes. These will be particularly important considerations in the context of part-time provision for mature learners, micro-credentials and the broader upskilling agenda. In such contexts, promoting the intentional use of industry projects, challenges, simulations and other forms of work-integrated learning within programme design may help to ensure the benefits of work-integrated learning are leveraged and maximised for all learners[10].

A concern expressed by education providers, employers and PSRBs was that the new QA guidelines, although broadly welcome, may create additional bureaucracy and workload, particularly if overly prescriptive. Reflecting on the breadth of contexts to which they will apply, it can be anticipated that the guidelines will identify high-level considerations for the quality assurance of work-integrated learning. The education providers required to have regard to or demonstrate alignment with the guidelines in their own quality assurance procedures will be responsible for interpreting and applying them in contextually appropriate and locally specific ways.

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9   For example, the strategic priority of inclusion in Future FET: Transforming Learning published by SOLAS; the goal of inclusion articulated in the HEA's National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028; and the objective of 'apprenticeship for all' stated within the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 published by DFHERIS.

10   It is noted that forms of work-integrated learning that are not based in the workplace have been linked to perceived improvements in skills that are comparable with those associated with workplace-based experience in the international literature (see, for example, Jackson and Dean, 2022).

4. LEARNERS AND RECENT GRADUATES

Four online focus groups were held to explore the perspectives of current and recently graduated (< two years post-completion) learners on programmes involving work-integrated learning in Irish further and higher education and training, including apprenticeship.

A total of 24 learners/apprentices/recent graduates participated in the focus group discussions[11]. The participants' profiles reflected the breadth and diversity of the tertiary education sector in Ireland, and included early school leavers, mature learners, learners for whom English was a second or foreign language and learners who identified as disabled/living with a disability. Some participants drew upon multiple experiences of work-integrated learning, with at least one learner currently enrolled in higher education also referring to previous experiences on a further education and training programme. Participants were enrolled in or had recently graduated from programmes ranging from NFQ Level 3[12] to NFQ Level 9, including programmes that were professionally accredited and apprenticeship programmes. They had engaged directly in work-integrated learning within diverse disciplines and vocational areas and across geographically dispersed regions.

Further Education & Training (including apprenticeship)	17
Higher Education & Training (including apprenticeship)	7

Figure 8: Profile of Learner and Recent Graduate Participation

4.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS

The learners and recent graduates participating in the focus group discussions were overall very strong advocates for work-integrated learning.

Applied Learning

Their contributions emphasised the value they placed on opportunities to apply theory to practice and develop skills and competences in 'real world settings' via work-integrated learning experiences.

> "For my undergraduate in [health care discipline] it was the opportunity to apply theory to practice … you can only learn so much in the classroom from books, so to be out in the job is so important" (HE Learner)

> "Every day is hands-on experience … the process … you get to see it first-hand working with different people who have different ways, tips and tricks. I do think that learning on site is very important" (Apprentice)

> "It's critical and has a massive benefit. There's no other way of getting that experience. I think it helps with your learning, and it sticks when you can apply it" (FET Learner)

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11   Focus group activity was supplemented by one individual interview scheduled for a learner who wished to contribute but was unable to participate in a scheduled focus group discussion.

12   Learners undertaking NFQ Level 3 qualifications were accompanied and supported to contribute to focus groups by an advocate from the education provider.

As a mode of learning, work-integrated learning was considered by some learners and recent graduates to be better suited to their needs and preferences than more traditional learning environments.

> "I studied some of the content before my apprenticeship and I'm going over this now in this phase of the apprenticeship, but it suits me much better this way, the hands-on part. I got lost in the lecture halls and the mix suits me much better" (Apprentice)

> "I need to be physically involved. If there are a lot of words or talking, I can get overwhelmed so the work experience, I found it really helped me rather than just sat down all day reading it off notes" (FET Learner)

Career Development Learning

Learners and recent graduates also emphasised the importance of work-integrated learning in informing further study and career choices. This was particularly noted in contributions from those currently enrolled in FET programmes.

> "It is really a good way of knowing if this is the role you want to take. It happens with a lot of people who go to college and after years of going to college, they realise it is not what they want to do" (FET Learner)

> "Reading about the work you want to do is all well and good but actually being out in the field you have more sense of is this the right job for you" (FET Learner)

> "Last year we had work experience, we had about 150 hours. We got a real taste of it but it was also kind of depressing and so I changed my mind about the job" (HE Learner)

The role that work-integrated learning can play in developing learners' confidence was noted across the full spectrum of FET and HE learners and graduates.

> "We had guys completing work experience Level 3. Those who did work experience had a huge leap in their self-confidence and it gave meaning to their work and their written work" (FET Learner Advocate)

> "I think the self-confidence – you feel that when you're going into a paid job you wouldn't be as nervous" (FET Learner).

> "In terms of getting the experience and the confidence building and even making connections for later on and when we are past studying and getting employment" (HE Learner).

4.2 PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

Although the participants clearly valued the work-integrated learning opportunities they had been exposed to, they also identified a breadth of challenges they had personally encountered and

observed across their cohorts. Discussions encompassed the limited availability of placement and work experience opportunities, unfair working conditions and workload expectations, unsuitable placements and a lack of flexibility and accessibility in relation to the management of work-integrated learning opportunities.

Limited Availability of Opportunities

Focus group discussions reflected that in contexts where learners were expected to source a placement opportunity independently, this was frequently challenging.

> "The places I approached weren't qualified to take on learners or didn't have capacity to take me on, I need to be able to shadow someone and have them show me the ropes, so it was really hard" (FET Learner)

> "I was given a fixed period of time, and I had to find someone to take me in that time" (FET Learner)

> "I actually found it challenging finding a work placement. I studied [healthcare discipline] last year and there was a lack of adequate resources/places available" (FET Learner)

In contexts where placements were sourced by providers on behalf of learners, lack of capacity was also reported to create challenges in some instances.

> "We did garda vetting and our manual handling training here and it was already done and set up for us but because there were so many students it was hard to get a place and by the time we got a placement it was hard to reach 150 hours and then we had to miss days of school to get the hours done, so [it would be better] to get the work experience earlier or to book the spots earlier" (HE Learner)

Conditions, Workload and Financial Hardship

Contributions by learners and recent graduates indicated several had experienced challenging conditions surrounding work placements and work experience, including instances of perceived exploitation by employers.

> "The big challenge was working 12 hours a day and the next day I have to go for college, and it was hard for me to do that" (FET Learner).

> "We never got paid, we did 800 hours in total for [healthcare discipline], one was through the summer, no expenses, no nothing – we raised this many times with the college at the time and they said it was to protect us if they had to take us out if we had to whistle blow[13], but this was not consistent with other [associated discipline] professions. I had a really bad experience with an employer taking advantage" (HE Learner).

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13   The term whistle blow is used by the learner quoted in this extract to refer to protected disclosures as per the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act 2022.

"We have one person who already works in a [company type] and her employer encouraged her to do the course. Her employer is now still expecting her to work the same hours whilst still doing the course on top, so she doesn't have time to do assignments" (FET Learner).

Additional challenges were raised pertaining to workload expectations and the challenges of balancing academic coursework requirements while completing work placements or on-the-job hours.

"It's 17 hours each week plus 150 hours practical experience so this is on top of the classroom time. After 17 hours in the classroom, we are then doing assignments and homework and practical training on top. There isn't time left for work or family" (FET Learner)

"Because we are studying for only one day but are working the other four days, finding the time to complete assignments and needing to manage the workload is a challenge" (Apprentice)

Some learners enrolled in FET programmes indicated that the work experience they had undertaken was of questionable value in relation to their learning objectives and/or opportunities to develop.

"It was a fair bit of sitting in the corner not really doing anything other than keeping the place clean, it was mainly just cleaning up after [supervisor], I wasn't allowed to touch the clients and not everyone enjoys having a second pair of eyes staring at them so when I go back into it hopefully there will be someone who can show me more" (FET Learner)

"Whenever I've done my work experience, I didn't have great managers, I knew people from that company, and they gave me work to do usually on my own, so it is kind of a challenge to get into the team" (FET Learner)

Accessibility and Inclusion

A number of learners with experience across the spectrum of FET, HE and apprenticeship indicated that a lack of awareness of supports, a lack of flexibility in arrangements and poor understandings of how to make reasonable accommodations in the workplace for learners with disabilities had created significant challenges.

"Maybe I should have gone and looked for supports. Knowing that supports were there would be good" (FET Learner).

"We have learners with autism. Last year a learner panicked and stopped coming in because they were so stressed out at the thought of doing a 2-week block. It escalated unnecessarily and eventually we resolved it by agreeing an alternative model of a day a week … We need to allow for flexibility and accommodation of individual needs" (FET Learner Advocate).

"In 2nd year I was required to attend [placement] and there were parameters around that which made it difficult. From very early in the 2nd year I began to look into this and to check that I would be able to fully participate. Was wheelchair access available? Was transport

available? I spoke to many people in the university and the Head of Department but nobody knew how to navigate it. Myself and my family were becoming more and more stressed. After a long wait I was told that there was somewhere for me, so me and my dad did a pre-visit to make sure and it was immediately obvious that it wasn't suitable. It just wasn't accessible even though there was a ramp, there was a lip from the ramp into the building so my wheelchair couldn't get over it." (HE Learner)

The financial pressures associated with participating in programmes that involve extended placements that may be unpaid and the potential for learners to be excluded due to socioeconomic factors were also highlighted in focus group discussions.

"Even speaking with my friends I could see that the placement demands are so significant that they can't access a job throughout and college is expensive and the placement is unpaid. These are all barriers to inclusion that need to be considered." (HE Learner)

"I know people who dropped out because they couldn't afford to take the time off work" (HE Learner).

4.3 TERMINOLOGY

Learners were provided with a provisional definition of work-integrated learning, and invited to identify whether they felt it was appropriately inclusive of their experience. They were specifically asked if they considered the term employer was appropriate to describe the third party. The majority indicated they felt an alternative term may be more appropriate. Views expressed ranged from strong objection to the term to a more ambivalent perspective. For many learners, the lack of payment associated with their work-integrated learning experience was central to this discussion.

"We said placement provider not employer and the number one reason for that is we were never paid." (HE Learner)

"I'm not employed by the organisation I'm going to for work experience, so I would probably use provider." (HE Learner)

"My experience on the programme was that students talk of placement providers and are clear they are not getting paid. Maybe use it interchangeably for those sectors where students might get paid but it's not the right term in my experience." (HE Learner)

"When I think of employers, I think I'll get paid or some form of monetary value in return. I don't know if all work-integrated learning provides that. That would maybe raise a question mark for me or be confusing for me. Possibly you could refer to them as a facilitator or something like that." (FET Learner)

"We refer to them as employers, but we are aware there will be no payment – it's a fair enough term I suppose because they are having you do work for them but if there was something more on the nose that would be better." (FET Learner)

An exception to this was among apprentices who are, by legislation, necessarily employed by the external partner.

"It is my employer who sponsors me to undertake the course, and I do a six-month stint in each part of the company during the course." (Apprentice)

"I would acknowledge them as my employer as they're paying my wages and it's a job." (Apprentice)

4.4 PRIORITY AREAS FOR QA GUIDELINES

Learners and recent graduates were asked to identify any aspects of work-integrated learning that they felt could benefit from inclusion in the new QA guidelines to be developed.

Availability and Quality of Learning Opportunities

Contributions indicated that guidance pertaining to the availability of placements, work experience and on-the-job learning opportunities would be welcomed.

"Having a pre-approved list of providers to contact knowing they are willing to take on learners." (FET Learner)

"Sourcing placements … during COVID the student union took on placement students to help make provisions for those left without a place because of the pandemic." (HE Learner)

Apprentices also identified that being offered sufficient exposure to the breadth of contexts and tasks relevant to their industry across the span of their apprenticeship programme was a priority.

"A lot of people might spend their whole apprenticeship just doing residential or just doing industrial, so I think opportunities to get a bit more varied experience." (Apprentice)

Some learners expressed appreciation for mentors and supervisors they had encountered. It was suggested that workplace staff taking on this role should be provided with time to do so and appropriately acknowledged or remunerated.

"There is a lot of support in place already [from] the trainers … the linking in between the trainer and the employment supervisors, that really helps because we have feedback then on how we are doing it really helps with guiding us before we leave our placements. I find it is quite good at the moment." (FET Learner)

"I've had many placements and all the mentors bar one were lovely. Retaining staff has become hard at this stage so mentors tended to be great at taking us under their wing and to be fair they should be given additional payment if possible. It does take up a lot of their time and it is additional work so I would recommend there is some compensation." (HE Learner)

Clarity of Roles

Contributions from learners and recent graduates identified that clearer communication and clarification of roles and responsibilities would be welcome.

"Communication before the course started needs to be improved. I need to know what's happening so I can organise my life." (FET Learner)

"Guidelines for the employer as to what is expected of the student in terms of what they are insured to do, in my case there's things that I'm not yet qualified to do, just in terms of boundaries and keeping the learners or the employers safe." (FET Learner)

Expectations, Supports and Inclusion

Setting reasonable expectations of learners engaging in work-integrated learning within their programme was also considered a priority. Contributions pertained to issues including workload, time commitment and fair remuneration.

"Making sure that the hours are expected from 9 – 4 same hours as in college, and not too much work. It is still work experience, it is not to do the work for someone who is sick and you are covering for him or her." (FET Learner)

"If the guidelines could encourage employers to give students (whose employees are studying to qualify for their role) time to complete the course commitments that would be good." (FET Learner)

"Maybe where possible that the work placement could be on a timeline where you aren't inundated with other assignments that you can focus on the work. Also, where possible they could be tailored more to the individual so they can fully engage. I imagine you will get more out of the person if their availability and needs are considered." (HE Learner)

Within this, clarifying and expanding supports (financial, disability-specific and general) was perceived to be an important issue.

"The supports. Education has been opened to everyone but our structures haven't changed to accommodate that, so people are doing part-time jobs and struggling with the cost of living." (HE Learner)

"We have a classmate who has additional needs and he has the supports put in place but I think it would be good to have continuous assessments of needs and supports at different points as stress levels and challenges may change." (Apprentice)

"A disability should not prevent someone from completing these courses.
Disabled students should not have to advocate for themselves as they go.
Programme development needs to be looked at through the lens of a disability to ensure that it is as accessible as possible." (HE Learner)

"No one had the expertise on how to navigate the conversation and the fear of offending me meant that nobody actually spoke to me. People need to have the education behind them to start the conversation on disability. Student life can be tiring and taxing mentally and physically but if you add a disability into the mix it becomes more so. You need someone to have your back." (HE Learner)

4.5 ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INSIGHT ON LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

Direct engagement with learners and recent graduates was conducted by the project team to inform the development of the new guidelines. However, substantive additional insight into learner perspectives on work-integrated learning in Ireland is accessible within recent research publications and sector-specific reports. These provide additional information regarding the views of learners in higher education, living with a disability or undertaking the newer form of apprenticeships. A number of reports have brought to the fore the same challenges that learners participating in this project perceived when navigating work-integrated learning.

For example, research conducted by O'Neill (2022) explored how stakeholders, including learners, negotiated the balance/tension between consistency and authenticity associated with work-integrated learning in their disciplinary contexts and what solutions or actions they could identify. Adopting a Participatory Research and Action (PRA) approach, O'Neill's research facilitated inter-stakeholder dialogue among 40 students, 41 educators and 39 practitioners. Early, high-level findings noted that with regard to assessment, student stakeholders appeared to be more concerned with consistency than authenticity. Student stakeholders participating in O'Neill's research also highlighted the need for greater clarity as to what was expected of them in their role, a finding consistent with the outcomes from focus groups and interviews conducted within this consultation.

A report published by AHEAD provides an important source of insight into the experiences of learners with disabilities on placement (Waters & Rath, 2022). The researchers drew upon interviews and focus groups conducted with 20 learners in HE and 3 learners in FET as well as participation by provider institutions, provider staff and professional bodies. Key findings included that a majority of students (>60%) had faced barriers to the completion of their placements and had concerns around disclosure due to perceived potential negative impacts on career progression. A lack of clarity regarding the differentiation between on the one hand, the actual competence standards required by professional bodies and on the other, administrative rules regarding placement was also found to be problematic.

The perspectives of apprentices engaging in the newer form (post-2016) of consortia-led apprenticeships have also been directly explored. A review commissioned by QQI in 2022 of the quality assurance, governance arrangements and processes developed by mid-2022 collected survey responses from 274 apprentices and engaged with 6 apprentices in focus group discussions. Apprentices described challenges including balancing the workload demands of the academic programme with on-the-job requirements as well as economic hardship associated with rising costs of living and inadequate salaries. A small proportion (11%) also indicated being unclear who to contact within the education and training provider organisation if they were encountering difficulties (McManus, Peck & Vickery, 2022).

In addition to these direct engagements with learners, output from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement[14] facilitates insight to the views of learners in Irish higher education on the practicality and authenticity of their learning in general. In 2023, 45.1% of students responding to the survey indicated 'often'/'very often' exploring how to apply their learning in the workplace. Only 38.7% of students responding indicated 'often'/ 'very often' blending academic learning with workplace experience in the course of their studies. Nonetheless, a total of 59.3% of students responding

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14 StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) is an annual national survey of student engagement among first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in higher education institutions in Ireland.

believed that their studies contributed 'quite a bit'/ 'very much' in acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills. Within analyses of the relative frequency of words used in response to a question asking learners what their institutions could do better to improve students' engagement in learning, Erskine & Harmon (2022) and Ahmed et al (2023) found 'more practical' to be the 4th and 2nd most frequently occurring bigram (sequence of 2 words) respectively within the qualitative data, while Ahmed et al (2023) also found 'real world' to be the 16th most frequently occurring. These outcomes are consistent with those of previous analyses, including Diffley et al (2021) and McCashin & Boyd (2021). Cumulatively, these findings reinforce that learners continue to place a high value upon practical, work relevant and work-integrated learning experiences.

5. EXTERNAL PARTNERS

Employers, placement providers and industry, community and professional partners in work-integrated learning were invited to complete an 'employer' survey during a six-week period across September and October 2024. Additionally, three online 'employer' focus groups were facilitated to further explore the perspectives among this stakeholder group, supplemented by a small number of individual interviews scheduled for participants unable to attend scheduled focus group discussions. Potential contributors indicating an interest in participating after the window for focus group and interview participation had closed were offered the opportunity to submit written responses to discussion prompts.

Employer Survey Responses	232
Employer Focus Group Participants	4
Individual Interviews	2

Figure 9: Profile of External Partner Participation

The survey collected 232 responses, of which 149 responses were complete, meaning that the respondents did not skip any of the questions. To facilitate transparency for the reader, throughout this section the overall number of respondents that provided answers to a particular question is indicated using the abbreviation: (N=). Responses to the first two questions of the survey (N = 232) provided an insight into the organisational profiles of external partners that responded and the education sectors they collaborated with to provide opportunities for work-integrated learning. These indicated that external partners from diverse organisation types had engaged with the survey, with the highest frequency of responses provided by SMEs.
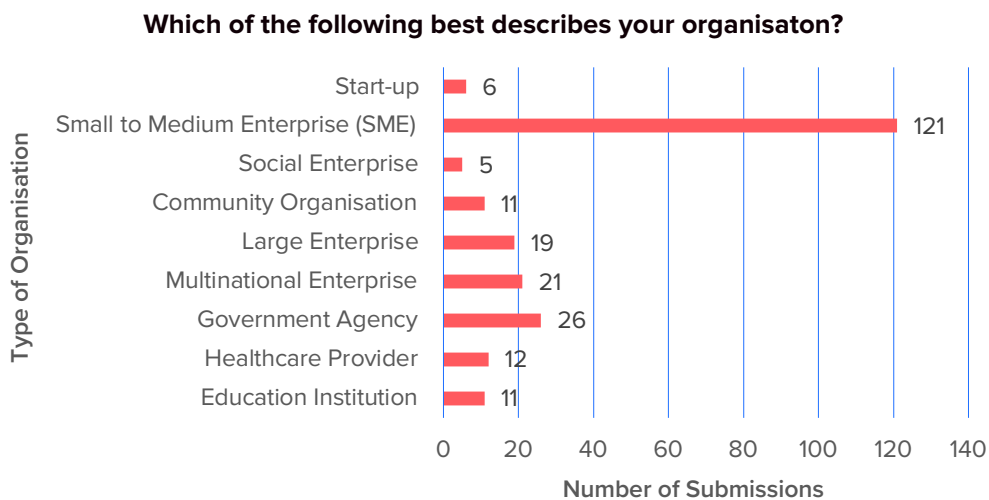
Which of the following best describes your organisaton?

Figure 10: Employer Survey Respondents by Organisation Type

A total of 48 of the respondents provided work-integrated learning opportunities for learners studying in higher education and 99 provided opportunities for learners studying in further education and training. An additional 56 respondents indicated that they provided opportunities for learners enrolled in both further and higher education programmes, while 29 indicated they were unsure which category of learner was relevant to their organisation in their response.

Responses to a subsequent question (N = 190) indicated that a high proportion of respondents provide opportunities for multiple forms of work-integrated learning, including internship, placement or work experience (110) or the employment of apprentices (107). Responses reflected that other forms of work-integrated learning opportunity are being facilitated for Irish learners across a spectrum of activity, including projects (47) and simulations (65), as per table 3 below.

How does your organisation provide work-integrated learning opportunities for learners?	Responses
Engaging with learners in simulated work environments (physical or online)	65
Delivery guest lectures	30
Hosting site visits	35
Facilitating challenges, competitions or hackathons	9
Engaging in collaborative research projects	22
Providing access to tools and resources	49
Facilitating learners to undertake projects for your organisation	47
Providing internship, placement or work experience opportunities	110
Employment of apprentices	107
Unknown	1
Other (please briefly explain)	7

Figure 11: Work-integrated Learning Opportunities Provided by Type

Focus group and interview participant profiles from this stakeholder group were diverse and included representatives of multinational organisations, publicly funded service bodies and SMEs. Representatives contributing to focus groups and interviews indicated their organisations also provided opportunities for learners primarily via placements, internships and apprenticeships.

5.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS

The employer survey invited responses to a question exploring external partners' motivation to provide opportunities for work-integrated learning, providing four suggested response categories as well as the option to select 'other' and use an open text comment box to provide further detail. Among a total of 230 responses to this question, the majority indicated that supporting the talent pipeline for the industry and identifying talent for future recruitment were primary motivators.

What motivates your organisation to engage with education providers to offer work-integrated learning opportunities to learners?
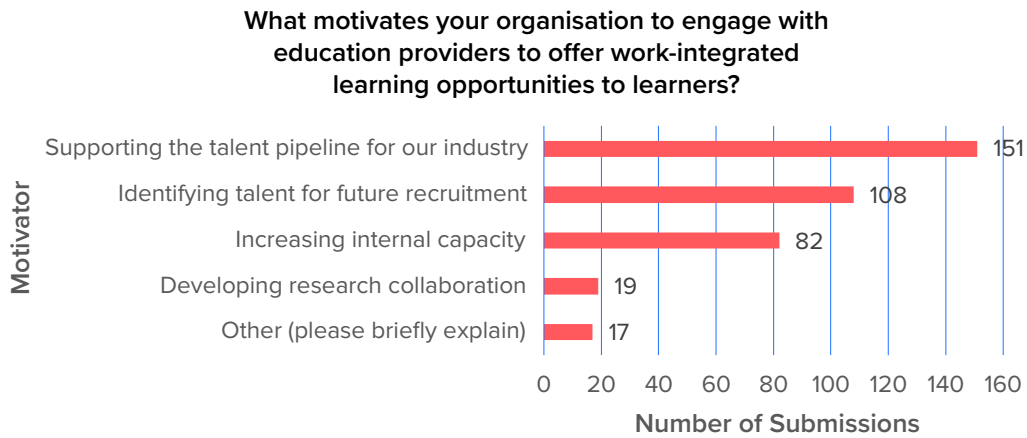
Figure 12: Motivation for Employer Organisations to Engage in Work-integrated Learning

This view was also expressed by contributors to focus groups.

> "Some interns work out really well, we are essentially investing in talent pipeline." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

A total of 17 employers elected to provide responses under the 'other' category for this question. Those responses, a sample of which is provided below, indicated diverse additional motivators.

> "Providing an opportunity to students to understand and engage in local authority work with a view to it being an option for them in their career path". (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "Personal interest in capacity building." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "Creating enthusiasm and comfort in working environments and supporting communities." (Employer Survey Respondent)

Further responses to survey items indicated that in some organisations the provision of work-integrated learning opportunities was also seen as contributing positively to professional learning or motivation for existing staff.

> "It keeps our clinicians up to date on recent theories in relation to practice." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "We have found that they learn but we also learn. While mentoring takes some time, a well-managed placement can make a positive contribution to resources and also motivate some other staff members." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "Our collaboration with education providers offers great benefits, including access to emerging talent and fresh perspectives, and allows us to nurture future professionals aligned with our organisational values. It also enriches our team by keeping us engaged with current academic insights and practices." (Employer Survey Respondent)

Applied Learning

An additional survey question elicited respondents' perspectives on the impact of work-integrated learning on preparing graduates to successfully transition to employment in their industry or sector. The majority of respondents to this question (N=151) perceived that work-integrated learning had a high impact on the development of soft and transversal skills (98), the development of applied, practical skills (122) and the development of industry or sector-specific knowledge (106).

Please indicate the degree of impact you perceive work-integrated learning to have on preparing graduates to successfully transition to work in your industry/sector in relation to the below.
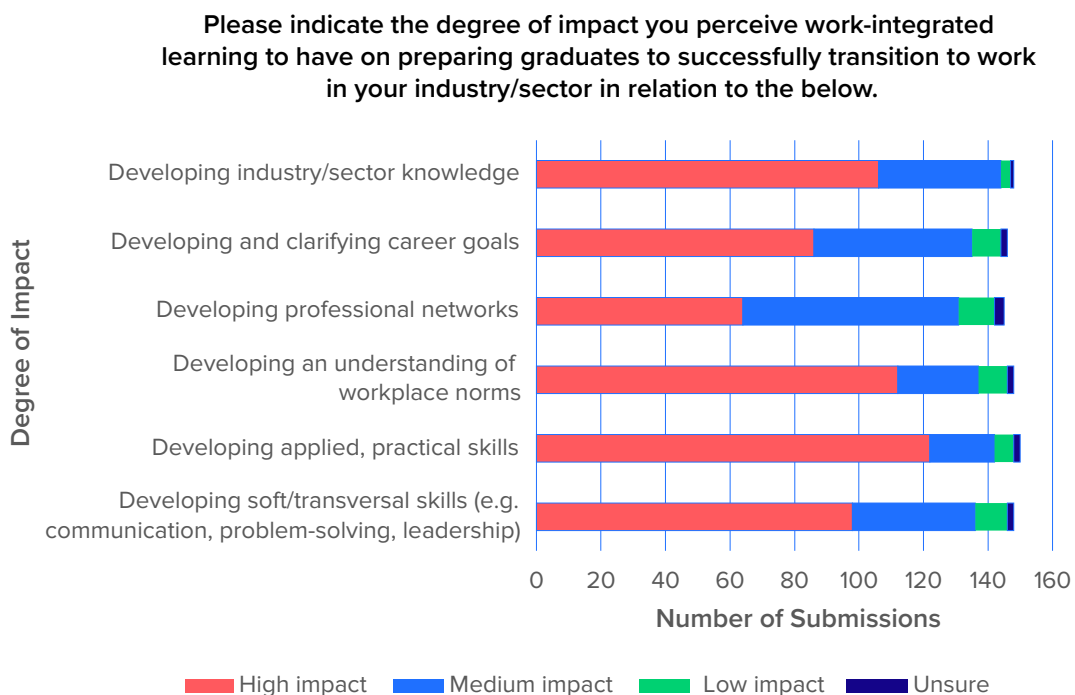
Figure 13: Employer Perspectives on the Impact of Work-Integrated Learning on Graduate Transitions to the Workforce

Focus group participants and interviewees were also asked to identify the perceived benefits of work-integrated learning for learners. Contributions reinforced survey outcomes indicating the development of applied skills and practical skills through hands-on learning is considered by external partners to be a primary benefit.

> "I hugely value the programme, I often present to schools, I always advocate for placement – it focuses the mind. Applicability of theory – gives them the encouragement to go back and make the most out of their final year. We see a huge difference in the interns that have done the internship programme – very valuable, it's brilliant." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "It's the best way of learning hands-on, in my particular case I can't give him much practical because of the highly sensitive nature of the work we do here. They should have the option to go to level 7 in college after three years, that would be an attractive point, to get their qualification." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "We heavily lean on the apprenticeship model to bring new talent in. There is a massive shortage in our industry at the moment. We have limited experience of the professional

apprenticeship, but for [profession] it is excellent, and made so much sense. Theoretical and practical skills lead to fantastic results and hugely valuable individuals." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"It's hugely beneficial from all aspects, not just from the employer side. It manages expectations, if they come in under that umbrella it makes it clear that someone is at a certain level – like an L plate on a car. It affords them the opportunity to make a mistake without dire consequences." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

5.2 PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

Although an appreciation of the value of work-integrated learning in developing work-ready graduates and building the talent pipeline was evident in survey responses and focus group contributions from this stakeholder group, a number of challenges were also identified.

Learner Preparation and Skills Profiles

Survey responses (N = 151) indicated a perception that learners were sometimes (76) or frequently (27) not adequately prepared to commence work-integrated learning activities.

Please indicate the extent to which your organisation experiences challenges with the aspects of workintegrated learning below.

Figure 14: Challenges Experienced by Employer Organisations Engaging in Work-integrated Learning

Among respondents engaging only with the HE sector (N=32), 20 respondents identified that learners were sometimes not adequately prepared and 5 respondents identified that this was frequently the case, representing 78% of responses overall. For those engaging only with FET (N=62), a somewhat lower proportion of respondents (60%) indicated this was sometimes (28) or frequently (8) a challenge.

Notably, concerns regarding learners' readiness to engage, particularly in workplace-based forms of work-integrated learning were raised by both survey respondents and focus group contributors. The perception that learners did not understand what would be expected of them in the workplace in terms of behaviour and deficiencies in relation to both soft skills as well as relevant technical skills was noted.

> "Everyone has to be trained on-the-job and we have plenty of on-the-job training but it's a real issue if they lack soft skills, emotional intelligence, communication, how to behave. It's not appropriate to have earbuds in your ear, being on the phone. Concentration is a big thing, and general reliability. We've had many cases where we were ringing the intern at 9.30am and told 'we're on campus and we've had a power cut'. Just a lack of maturity." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "Interns have had little or no learning in relation to workplace expectations. They do not appear to have been given any mentorship in how to get on in their career or how to behave in the workplace. No advice around punctuality or day to day practicalities of work." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "Some preparation is needed but also expectations about life skills, that perhaps shouldn't be left to the employer." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "There are challenges in terms of recruiting relevant skills, real challenges in terms of recruiting interns with soft skills. Just an appropriate way to conduct yourself, they are lacking social intelligence. [HE Provider] offers no guidance to interns for entering employment. There is a lack of preparation of interns for real world of work." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "The bigger issue is the work ethic, expectation, willingness to push themselves to learn. There is a feeling that every piece of learning should be paid – that it's a benefit to the company – it is a benefit to them foremost." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

Additional challenges were raised associated with communication and trust between education providers and employers regarding learners' skills profiles.

> "Colleges tend to put CVs together for these learners – often times the CV and skills listed – carbon copies of each other, what we end up with doesn't match the ability of the student. It's unfair for the student. You get them to do something basic, you discover that they don't have those skills. If you are looking for a particular calibre of student, you want to trust the education provider but can't sometimes." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "We've had varying levels of success. Lack of Microsoft Office application knowledge – anyone coming in this industry, they need to be able to do some basic things. I would've expected that anyone participating would have certain skills, especially coming into IT – some level of coding, for example. I'm not convinced that their modules on their course are to the level that they need to be. Are they ready for work-integrated learning? Do they have the basic skills?" (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "Learners are misrepresented. It's a challenge in terms of the trust we have in the education provider … We decided that if we were taking on any more interns, we want to interview

them ourselves — rather than relying on the education provider to vet interns. Before we commit to take them, we want to interview them ourselves." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

Coordination and Communication with Education Providers

A related challenge identified by representatives of this stakeholder group pertained to coordination with education providers. Survey responses indicated that the extent and nature of collaboration between employer organisations and education providers was highly disparate across a number of indicators.

To what extent does your organisation collaborate with education providers on the following aspects of work-integrated learning?
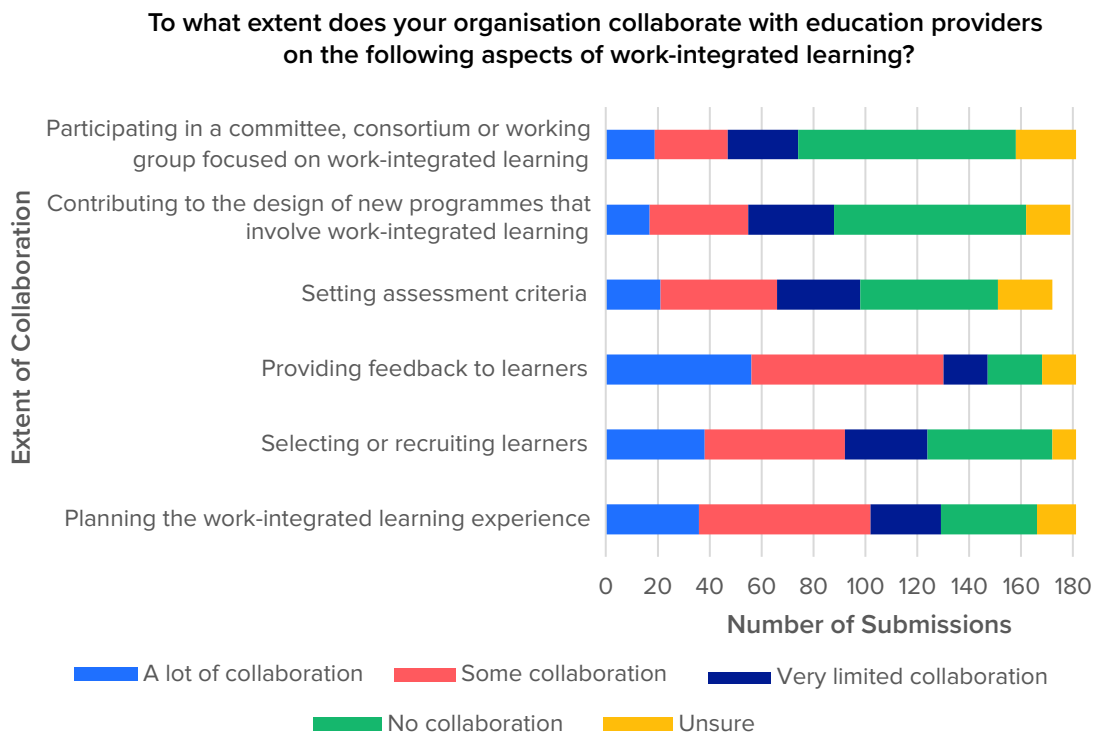
Figure 15: Employer Perceptions of Extent of Collaboration with Education Providers

These proportions remain relatively consistent across most indicators when analysed across submissions from external partners working with providers of HE (N=44), FET (N=77) and both FET and HE (N=49). However, submissions from external partners working solely with HE providers indicate that a slightly higher proportion of those respondents engage in some (16) or a lot of collaboration (18) on the provision of feedback to learners, representing 79% of responses overall. Submissions from partners working solely with FET providers (N=77) indicate some collaboration (30) or a lot of collaboration on feedback (19), representing 67% of responses overall.

Focus group contributors and survey respondents both emphasised challenges associated with a lack of communication and interaction with education providers, indicating that this inhibited their capacity to facilitate a meaningful integration between the academic curriculum and workplace-based learning experiences.

"I'm the manager and I have zero communication with the [education provider]. I have no idea what the apprentice does in college, I can't use that knowledge to map accordingly or to facilitate practical work." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"It can be challenging to guide students without a clear specification from the college regarding the required learning outcomes." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"It would be great to know the days they are attending, modules, these are the exams, this is what they will achieve at the end. It would give better perspective to me in terms of what I give them. You need to know what they are learning in college." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"[Responsibility for the learner] was handed to me [workplace supervisor] by HR and I'm trying to figure it out. I've had no communication, nothing on what they are doing in college." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"There is no established communication between the line manager of the apprentice and the education provider." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"We have interns from a number of higher education providers. Some providers are very hands off. They would get in touch to see if the learner has passed their placement. There are no competencies or learning outcomes to assess. There used to be a report based on my own chosen criteria – but they got rid of that so now it's just an informal chat with the lecturer." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

The survey invited responses to an open text item asking what (if any) documentation external partner organisations required to be able to support education providers by offering work-integrated learning opportunities. Responses (N=190) reflected that a very broad spectrum of requirements were imposed by employers across different sectors. A total of 99 respondents indicated this question was not applicable in their context, while 7 indicated none as a response. Only 3 respondents referred to requiring sight of learning outcomes. Fuller responses reflected the apparent divergences in expectations across different employer organisations.

"Nothing is defined but it should be" (Employer Survey Respondent)

"Clear Memo of Understanding on how the work-integrated learning opportunity is organised." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"Partnership agreements, evidence of liability insurance, Garda checks" (Employer Survey Respondent)

"NDA for pieces of college work carried out whilst student on placement" (Employer Survey Respondent)

"Details of the Learning Outcomes from the courses chosen to recruit from in order to maximise alignment between the course, our ability to maximise the student learning opportunity and the choice of the right student to undertake the placement /apprenticeship" (Employer Survey Respondent)

Alignment Between Curriculum and Industry Practice

Additional concerns were raised by employers in focus group discussions regarding the currency, quality and breadth of the curriculum delivered by education providers and the extent to which this was keeping pace with or serving the needs of industry.

"The pace of change in industry is faster than the off-the-job learning and assessments. It's a major issue for our industry – it's a multi-disciplinary industry, all wrapped up under one umbrella term. Not all companies do all those disciplines, there are some that specialise in just one. The curriculum is 7 or 8 years behind current technology." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"The MIMLOs and MIPLOs is currently going through a revision at the moment – our specific industry is very technical and changing on a weekly basis, it's difficult to keep up with it." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"In IT it's moving quicker by the day. Even in my undergrad I was learning about a system that was 5 years old at that point (in 2014). 10 years later, it's actually still on the curriculum. It's moving very fast, particularly internet security." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"There are courses out there that would be useful in our industry. It's difficult for [provider] to change the curriculum. But on an individual basis – what has the apprentice been exposed to – what would be beneficial to this apprentice? There might be a small course then, maybe a bit of funding – maybe done during their time on-the-job. Maybe rather than a one size fits all type of apprenticeship, more communication to see what is relevant." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

An emphasis was also placed in this stakeholder group's contributions on ensuring that there is a good fit between the learner and employer, and that the right opportunities for the learner are available in workplace-based forms of work-integrated learning.

"Something fundamentally will have to change soon as [graduates] are not fit for purpose. We need to ensure that the workplace environment allows learners to develop their skills and reach learning outcomes – ensuring that there is a good fit and breadth of experience." (Employer Focus Group Contributor).

"It's a challenge in terms of giving meaningful work – we can't give them access to anything because of the high sensitivity work that we do. So the workplace-based learning has no advantage really, they are restricted – we can ask them to do research but can't let them work on live systems." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"There are some issues with the apprenticeship structure particularly with electricians – some getting Level 6 QQI qualifications are not electricians. They end up being pigeon-holed, doing a particular task repetitively … [there is a need to] sit down with the employer to understand their experience and rotate them with different employers. It's a major issue in our industry at the moment – they are not getting quality experience. They need to be trained up again once they come through." (Employer Focus Group Contributor).

Resource Requirements

Employers contributing to both focus groups and surveys raised resourcing as a challenge, both in terms of supervision and mentoring for the learner and, in the case of apprenticeship, payment and release for off-the-job learning hours.

> "Takes a lot of our team's time and resources - so it is an expensive undertaking for a small company like ours the students are not able to do any billable work, and are not able to be client facing, so we can't pay them. Can be very challenging trying to find things for them to do and keep them busy. We don't receive any government payment or resources for taking on students. The legal situation is not ideal - as employers providing unpaid work placement are not protected by Irish law - this situation needs to be fixed and I recommend that the HEIs get involved in fixing it." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "In a sector that is massively understaffed providing the student with the right support can be a challenge." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "The biggest challenge I face as a small business owner is having to pay holiday pay/bank holidays/sick days and training days while my apprentice won't actually be in the workplace. I'm willing to give whatever amount of hours needs be per week to train them to the best level I can but feel badly done by having to pay for days in which they aren't in the salon." (Employer Survey Respondent)

> "[Provider] taking 3 or 4 apprentices to college at the same time causes problems for us." (Employer Survey Respondent)

5.3 TERMINOLOGY

Employers participating in focus groups and interviews were invited to comment on the extent to which they considered a tentatively proposed definition of work-integrated learning appropriate. Although the broad definition was considered to be sufficiently inclusive of the focus group contributors' experiences, some discussion occurred in relation to the use of the term 'employer'. Some contributors indicated this was an appropriate term in their own context. However, it was also noted that the term may be less appropriate in situations where learners are not paid for their time in the workplace.

> "That definition is fine for me – we hire interns for 12-months fixed term contracts. They are treated exactly as an employee, treated the same in terms of payment, perks etc. In the eyes of the company – we are their employer. We also take on students from a different faculty, they come in for 6-month contracts. Some of my colleagues in actuary they take on students in accounting, maths, business students, etc. In all those contexts it's a fixed term contract and they are treated the same way employees are" (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "For simplicity – that is how we would refer to ourselves. The apprenticeship model would refer to it as 'on-the-job' phase." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

> "Where the apprentice is concerned, we are currently and will be their employer. With an

intern, they are employed and paid but we are not necessarily their ultimate employer. Education provider is generic – perhaps a more generic term is needed like 'workplace provider'. I don't know what the term would be though." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

5.4 PRIORITY AREAS FOR QA GUIDELINES

In addition to identifying current challenges that could helpfully be addressed (see section 5.2), focus group participants were also invited to identify any aspects of work-integrated learning that they felt should be a focus within QQI's new quality assurance guidelines. A general emphasis on ensuring that the guidelines did not increase workload or resource requirements for employers was noted.

"I would have a concern around the addition of a layer of bureaucracy for employers – we're heavily regulated as is. I would hate to have more paperwork. There is a balance to bring it to the next step. More communication but not more bureaucracy." (Employer Focus Group Contributor)

"The challenges for us is that we [are] non-profit and there is [a] limit [on] resources in the terms of funding and supports for staff and trainee therapist to meet the standards of several regulating and accrediting bodies." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"It definitely is a benefit for the service and the participant to have work-integrated learning experiences, however as stated this does not need to come with additional workload on the service manager/supervisor." (Employer Survey Respondent)

Representatives of this stakeholder group also expressed a view that the guidelines should emphasise clarity of roles and processes, as well as enhanced communication regarding the curriculum and learning objectives.

"We took on 11 or 12 apprentices. I have some kind of template from dealing with interns, but some departments never experienced it. We kind of had to figure it out." (Employer Focus Group Respondent)

"I would like a timeline of what paperwork we would expect to receive and when. This will help us in organising better." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"If there was a template – guidelines, maybe more collaboration in how the course is built between the 'employer' and the education provider. That there is collaboration – what do you need – what does the employer need from the candidate and how can a course be built that satisfied both. More communication on an ongoing basis – more collaboration on learning outcomes, assessments." (Employer Survey Respondent)

"Communication with education providers [on] the most beneficial/fitting topics to be covered during college course." (Employer Survey Respondent)

6. EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROVIDERS

During October 2024, focus groups were scheduled to elicit the perspectives of FET, HE and apprenticeship provider representatives. Participants in the focus groups held experience in designing, managing and delivering programmes involving work-integrated learning across a broad range of disciplines and professions. These included full- and part-time, on-campus, blended and online education programmes, apprenticeships, and professionally accredited programmes.

Additionally, stakeholder perspectives were gathered via two surveys. Providers were asked to provide a single response per organisation to a survey focused on QA considerations in work-integrated learning. The QA survey received 107 responses, of which 64 respondents indicated they worked in FET, 35 respondents indicated they worked in HE and 8 respondents indicated they worked in organisations which spanned both FET and HE provision. Not all respondents completed all questions. To facilitate transparency for the reader, throughout this section where quantifiable survey responses are referenced the overall number of respondents that provided answers to a particular question is indicated using the abbreviation: (N=).

Please select the NFQ level/s of any academic programmes (e.g. certificate, diploma or degree) offered by your organisation that involve planned and assessed work-integrated learning.
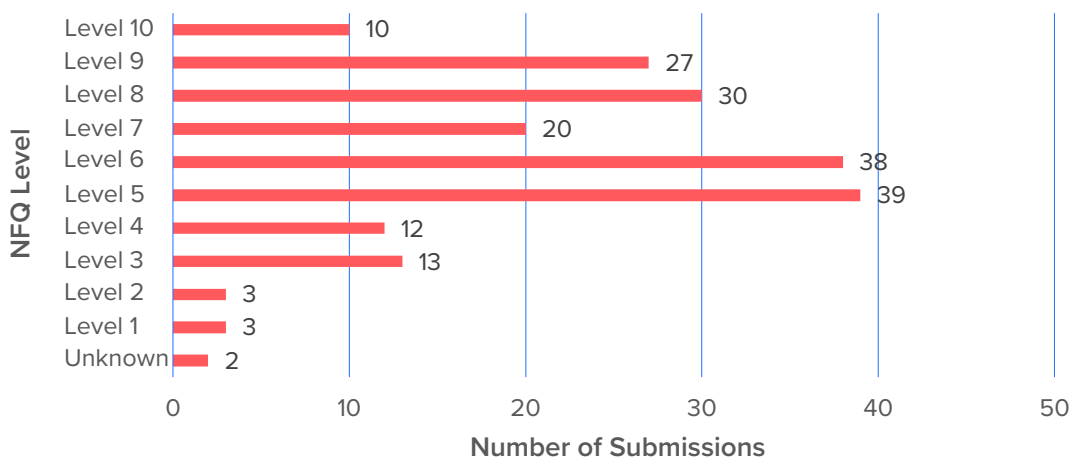
Figure 16: NFQ Levels of Academic Programmes Involving Work-integrated Learning (QA survey)

A second survey focused on eliciting specific features of work-integrated learning practice, for example, the location of activities, the intended learning outcomes, assessment practices and strategies used to facilitate inclusion of diverse learners. The practice survey attracted 275 responses, of which 65 were from practitioners working in FET, 183 were from practitioners working in HE and 27 respondents indicated they were providers of both further and higher education. Practice survey respondents represented universities, technological universities and institutes of technology, linked providers of designated awarding bodies, and other public and private providers offering programmes leading to QQI awards. Inputs from this survey are discussed in detail in the concurrent report, *Work-integrated Learning Practice in Ireland* (Peck, Jackson & Anton-Aherne, 2025) which provides a typology of work-integrated learning practice in Ireland. The findings in that report may usefully be considered in relation to the findings discussed in this section.

Overall education and training provider input to the initial period of stakeholder engagement is summarised below.

QA Survey Responses	107
Practice Survey Responses	275
Focus Group Participants FET	17
Focus Group Participants HE	24
Focus Group Participants Apprenticeship	13

Figure 17: Overall Profile of Education and Training Provider Participation in Initial Stakeholder Engagement

6.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS

Focus group participants articulated a range of benefits for stakeholders involved in work-integrated learning, with an emphasis on the benefits for learners and achievement of learning outcomes oriented to skills and competencies.

Applied Learning

Education and training provider representatives emphasised the opportunities work-integrated learning provides for learners to work with experienced professionals, to experience the real world of work, and apply their learning in ways that can't always be simulated in the classroom environment.

"The benefit – real life experience, there is only so much you can teach in a simulated environment or classroom." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"The development of real life skills and getting feedback in real time is a great positive to work-integrated learning." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"You can leverage the experiential learning that is available in the workplace and you can embed the learning in the mind." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"There is only so much you can teach in a simulated environment or classroom. It also shows them the value of what they are learning when they come back to the classroom. They can't necessarily see how some of the things they learn about in class apply practically – but they see the relevancy afterwards." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"It allows the application of knowledge in solving real life problems." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It enables a learner to appreciate the impact of a skilled practitioner in the workplace setting." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It bridges the gap between academic learning and real world learning." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It fosters innovation and creativity through opportunities we may not naturally have in the classroom." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Career Development Learning

Career exploration was also identified by focus group participants as a particular benefit of work-integrated learning, in that it can help learners confirm or refine their career interests, providing insights into specific roles, industries, or specialisms, and the opportunity to experience different work environments or roles without the same level of risk that is attached when securing an employed position. The low-risk nature of work-integrated learning in facilitating learners to determine their career aspirations was also emphasised.

"It allows them to test the environment they think they want to go into." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"...it really settles them when it comes to seeking work and a bit of try it before you buy it on seeking work and to understand the possibilities." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"The direct employer mentor is a good opportunity to ensure that apprentices are getting the very best experience and a sense of the future, of where they will progress." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"There's huge diversity in the placements that students engage with. It gives them a chance to try out what they want to do." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"I have also seen occasions when work placement changed a learner's vocational aspirations - the 'real world' experience was quite at odds with the expectations of the learner and led them to change their career path." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"They learn about other career options and paths available that they were not aware of." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Work-integrated learning also allows learners to develop in a supported environment, allowing for trial and error with protection and guidance." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"In our profession, it allows the learner to develop clinical ability, trust in themselves and a clinical governance in their own practices prior to qualifying. It also provides insight into how a service is run, which is also invaluable." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Education and training provider representatives also noted the opportunities that work-integrated learning presents for learners to build their professional networks and potentially lead to employment.

"Quite often it also does evolve into actual employment." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"They are also making connections and expanding their network." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"It's an opportunity for learners to gain added value to market themselves down the line, showcase their own skills and make connections for their future career." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Work-integrated learning allows students to grow their professional network." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Students can get graduate job opportunities when participating in work-integrated learning." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It allows employers to onboard students and make a decision on future hires." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Participants from HE in particular emphasised the value of work-integrated learning in supporting learners' personal development.

"It's the personal attributes and skills students pick up. In particular the development of confidence." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Work-integrated learning helps to develop independence, responsibility, and confidence in abilities." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"One thing I notice is that putting students in real world situations helps them learn a lot about themselves and how they react and respond in different situations." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"The exposure to different cultures and diversity in the work context. Enhancing cultural awareness and diversity." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It brings a benefit of exposure to diversity in the workplace." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

6.2 PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

The experience of the focus group participants provided useful insight into challenges education and training providers encounter surrounding work-integrated learning. The discussion brought to the fore concerns associated with the suitability of opportunities, accessibility and inclusion, the effectiveness of workplace mentors and supervisors, and the assessment of work-integrated learning.

Suitability of Work-integrated Learning Opportunities

FET focus group contributors noted that learners were sometimes engaged in activities that lacked relevance or value. Experienced providers highlighted the need to agree clearly defined activities within each placement for completion by the learner.

"In apprenticeship it's less likely to come up but in work placement sometimes the challenge is giving meaningful tasks or the right type of experience." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"The learner needs to get value from the experience and true input from the employer." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"The placement has to be specific and meaningful." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

Apprenticeship providers also identified that ensuring apprentices were exposed to a sufficiently wide range of workplace experience despite being employed by a single organisation was at times a challenge. Contributions indicated that current measures to mitigate this include consideration of the breadth of employer types within a sector in assessment design as well as requirements to provide workplace rotation opportunities for the apprentice.

"In the e-portfolio we structured a task around that – e.g. reflect on working with a particular situation, but we give three choices to give flexibility in the answer so there is a range. With the e-portfolio you can be creative with the questions to accommodate the different type of workplaces in the sector." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"What we struggled with … you are going on to a construction site and sometimes somewhere where carrying out a certain task is not feasible so developing our task list for on-the-job had to be scaled back because you don't know what sort of environment the apprentice is going back to and being able to guarantee – we can't assess out on site either in the traditional craft apprenticeships as we don't have anyone qualified in the same way to sign off, so we had to keep it vague but structured." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"In the homecare sector they don't have access to the clinical tasks so we tell the employers they will have to place the learners in a clinical setting for a period of time. [Provider] does accommodate the second employer. It is tedious at the moment but we are working on it. From our point of view that may need to be flagged." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

Accessibility and Inclusion

There was a general consensus from focus group participants that supporting different groups of learners was at times complex. Contributions from FET provider representatives highlighted examples of how learners and external partners are supported to engage in programmes involving work-integrated learning at lower levels of the NFQ. Examples included support for learners with disabilities or additional needs, those who are under-represented in a given vocational area, or those who may have no previous experience of engaging with employers, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who don't have an established professional or vocational network.

"For the learners doing Level 2 for them to get any work experience is exceptional, but we have to do a lot of training with the employer because they need to know how to work with that learner." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"We help students with additional needs to make sure it's the right placement for them." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"There is a lot of training around the workplace hosts to allow reasonable accommodations in the workplace." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

The apprenticeship providers making input did not identify any specific challenges related to the inclusion of learners living with disabilities, indicating that supports and accommodations were in place and that in some instances consideration of universal design within assessment mitigated the potential for exclusion.

"In terms of examinations, we push reasonable accommodations and ensure there are adequate supports in place. In terms of the workplace, we haven't had any of those challenges. We had one student that was in a wheelchair, but the company ensured that the environment was accessible." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"We haven't had any issues – we help students with additional needs to make sure it's the right placement for them. It hasn't presented as a huge problem." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"The nature of our programme means they are not filling out forms on site and any accommodations we give are off-the-job. Able bodied is a requirement." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"We allow a spoken word or video or PPT rather than a written piece if preferred." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

Although exposure to diversity was positioned as a benefit, contributions from HE representatives also highlighted challenges associated with equity, diversity and inclusion in the context of work-integrated learning.

"Students from underrepresented backgrounds, such as those from low socioeconomic statuses or with disabilities, often face barriers in accessing work-integrated learning and may experience different employment outcomes than their peers." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Higher education providers and partner organisations should work collaboratively to establish inclusive work-integrated learning environments that offer meaningful learning opportunities for all students." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Provider representatives in HE discussed the impact of unpaid placements on learners who are concurrently facing the expense of fees and the cost of living. It was identified that work-integrated learning requirements can be beneficial, when payment is included for placements and internships. However, they can also be barrier when they are unpaid, and the time demands are such that they impact a student's earning potential elsewhere. Similar concerns were raised by respondents to the QA survey.

"In some sectors, internships are unpaid and students opting into them are aware of this. However, this can make internships inaccessible to students with lesser financial means." (HE Survey Respondent)

"There is a growing demand for specialised placements in postgraduate programmes, particularly in non-traditional areas of study and also in all areas of the country – students need to have financial resources to access these placements including the ability to drive etc." (HE Survey Respondent)

Effectiveness of Workplace Mentors / Supervisors

Focus group discussions highlighted the need to support both the employer and the learner and to ensure work-integrated learning was not simply a one-off engagement at a fixed period in time but part of an ongoing relationship, requiring relationship building, management and resources.

"Employers are enthusiastic, but they'll tell you they are not experts at education and training, and they need training. It is important to remember that they are not experts, and they do need support." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"It's critical throughout the year that we have resources for them and have availability to support the mentors." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

Focus group participants highlighted the diverse resources they have developed and the different strategies they implement in response to challenges in this area, including (but not limited to) training programmes, information packs, online meetings, and employer visits. The significance of the workplace-based supervisor or mentor and the different issues that can arise where this individual is not fulfilling the requirements of the role, or they are not allocated the time, support or resources to adequately fulfil the role was a commonly cited concern within HE focus group discussions.

"It is quite worrying at times to see how some co-operating teachers in schools are very hands-off and disengaged from the student teacher." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Supervisors can become very busy. The student is left in the corner not because they don't want to engage but because the supervisor is very busy. This isn't an issue with the host organisation; it's more what happens when the supervisor is not available or when they are not natural mentors or supervisors." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"The external stakeholder is required to give up their time and often that can be the busiest person in the team and then they are given a student that requires support and nurturing. How external people are impacted by work-integrated learning needs to be considered." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Apprenticeship providers were also forthcoming in relation to the complexity and challenges involved in managing work-integrated learning, often in contexts where 80% of the apprentice time is dedicated to on-the-job learning. Given the relatively small proportion of time spent off-the-job and in direct contact with education providers, the importance of the employer, workplace supervisor or mentor contribution was focal in discussions. Challenges included ensuring mentors were appropriately allocated and engaged in their role.

"A mentor is instructed to take on their role by their supervisor, they're not necessarily volunteering for it – they don't really understand what is involved." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"The mentor, sometimes they are volunteered by their employers … [we should] build in guidelines around the mentorship part. Workplace mentors need to see themselves as part of the delivery team." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"The employer's commitment to fulfilling their role – making sure that there is a mentor there for the duration of the programme. Sometimes that changes. Mentors can get busy, but they need to make sure that they are given the supports to perform their mentor role." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

Contributors perceived that, in some instances, employers and mentors may not be sufficiently aware of the apprenticeship curriculum, requirements or objectives.

"I think in apprenticeships the biggest challenge is access to mentors. It is the single biggest problem and you have to get it into the guidelines that the mentors have to be provided with training. Those mentors need to understand the full curriculum and the IT systems used and have the capacity to take on the number of apprentices." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"There is an element where the off-the-job is so removed from the on-the-job – the employer may not be aware what is happening each day". (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"Another challenge is around information management, who the mentors are, these may have changed throughout the year, but systems are not updated. Monitoring piece is crucial throughout the year." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

Assessment

The assessment of work-integrated learning was identified to present challenges by focus group participants and QA survey respondents. Discussions encompassed assessment methods, different grading systems and the challenges associated with consistency, ethics and fairness when assessing learners in diverse settings, often in partnership with workplace mentors and supervisors.

"The big challenge I would see would be providers use policies and approaches that aren't really designed for work-based learning programmes and if you look at the way they are designed and delivered it is completely different, the assignments should be completely different. At a broad level it is like a cultural collision you have industry wanting one thing and education providers who have an established way of doing things." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"When it comes to placement, recognition of effort is categorised as pass/fail. Within that assessment you'll see students that have really applied themselves, and yet it's the same mark of pass/fail." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"My prior experience in a clinical environment is a pass/fail. Where we've moved away from that pass/fail offering, and provide more granular feedback, that is where you get divergence and inconsistency." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

> "Our rubric would be very granular. It's important to allow for diverse approaches depending on the sector or the skills of student or host organisation." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

> "Within Counselling and Psychotherapy, direct observation or 'live' assessment within placements raises ethical concerns that are potentially inappropriate and harmful to clients including emotional distress, fear of privacy invasion, and the magnification of vulnerability or inhibition." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

6.3 TERMINOLOGY

At the outset of the focus group meetings participants were introduced to a provisional definition of work-integrated learning and asked to assess its suitability and relevance to the different contexts in which their programmes operate. There was a general agreement that the definition was an accurate reflection of work-integrated learning as it applies in their diverse contexts.

A number of participants identified that the term 'employer' was not appropriate for their context as the individual or organisation that the provider dealt with directly was not the employer either due to the position they hold; or due to situations in which the employer is a larger entity but the location of the work placement and the wing of the organisation the provider engages with may be a regional or local entity. For example, a learner undertaking a placement in a hospital or a school requires the provider to engage with a named person or department in that hospital or school. The employer in such instances would be the HSE or the Department of Education, neither of which the education provider directly engages with.

It was highlighted that within FET there are instances, particularly in apprenticeships, where the term 'employer' is considered appropriate, although it was noted that the terms "organisation" or "company" were used interchangeably with employer and often "workplace supervisor" or "mentor" was the preferred term as interaction was typically with these parties rather than the employer.

> "I would see a lot of programmes where it might be an employer representative body, so that wouldn't quite fit with employer." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

Others felt the term employer has responsibilities and implications attached that are not applicable in their work-integrated learning context:

> "We find that 'employer' often indicates that the learner will be paid, which may not always be the case." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

Across HE focus groups there was particularly strong resistance to the use of the term "employer" to describe the external partner within the definition of work-integrated learning.

> "I was thinking of employer differently. I was thinking of the place rather than the person. It needs to be clear if we are talking about the place, the person or both." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"As well as a place or a person it also describes a relationship. There's ambiguity in that term as can be confusing due to different interpretations." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"We can't consider them employers; we're limited by accrediting bodies." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Under Irish legislation anyone under employment must be paid at least the minimum wage. The footnote on the employer therefore doesn't really sit with what we understand an employer to be." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"The use of the term 'employer' sets an expectation that there is employment. Using that language as a front facing term sets an expectation that's not achievable and problematic for the learner." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"It's not an employee-employer relationship, the language isn't helpful." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"In counselling and psychotherapy, it's the line manager, supervisor, and therapist. A student can finish with training hours and continue with clients and use those hours towards their pre-accredited hours. The use of the term employer would add to confusion as it implies payment. Our accrediting body makes it clear that must not be paid." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Our placement is with a national governing body – not an employer." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Some participants proposed alternative terms.

"Would 'workplace facilitator' or 'host organisation' be an alternative to employer?" (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"The definition that we have approved is the one in the international handbook for work-integrated learning. It's external stakeholder rather just employer as in our experience work-integrated learning may not always be paid. External stakeholder speaks more generally." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Aside from concerns regarding the use of the term employer, the participants acknowledged the suitability of the definition of work-integrated learning. It was noted that the provisional definition specified a minimum of three stakeholders and that this also aligned with instances where work-integrated learning within HE included more than three, particularly where a PSRB is involved.

Apprenticeship providers generally recognised the term employer as relevant to the context of apprenticeship. However, contributors to focus group discussions also indicated that the term may need to be situated within a broader or more nuanced lexicon that captures more fully the nature of key roles and relationships within the apprenticeship system.

"Employer is not really a representative term because it doesn't indicate if the employer is actually the mentor or the supervisor, this would change it for us. There are different roles within the organisation." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"The only other thing I would call it is 'organisation' or 'company' – but in my context the term 'employer' works." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"We use 'workplace supervisor' which is a designated person on the employer side." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"I would be including the term 'employer' – they have a valuable contribution where the learner is getting the opportunities in the workplace to complete tasks. Good employers provide a range of tasks to align with the syllabus on the apprenticeship programme." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"I think you should consider widening it to include organisation at least. There are lots of learning & development representatives involved, so it is difficult to pin down – perhaps the employer organisation is a more inclusive term. But if the guidelines are to encompass not only apprenticeship but also placement for example then it is just too narrow to say employer – somebody who is on placement is not employed." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

6.4 PRIORITY AREAS FOR QA GUIDELINES

Provider representatives were asked to identify areas of practice they viewed as a priority for inclusion in the new QA guidelines for work-integrated learning. Suggestions aligned closely with the challenges identified.

The importance of employer relationship management and continuous communication to ensure a shared understanding between all parties was highlighted by QA survey respondents and focus group participants as an important aspect for inclusion in new QA guidelines.

Clarity of Expectations, Roles and Responsibilities

The need for the guidelines to place emphasis on ensuring clarity of expectations and requirements for each stakeholder was considered particularly important by education provider representatives. Articulating roles and responsibilities clearly at the outset was a strong theme in inputs.

"There needs to be a clear understanding of expectations from the employer and learner perspective." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"...so, clear and consistent communication between the workplace mentor and the college..." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"Communication is so important – and understanding in terms of what are the expectations and what is the programme is about." (FET Focus Group Contributor)

"It is very important to have good communications with the host company supervisor...." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"Communication – it is one of the things that being a new apprenticeship we have struggled with. Our employers are happy to know they are with us doing three – four week blocks and then they are back with them and it is very hard to know what they are doing and hard for them to know what we expect from them." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"At the start of the programme its integral that we conduct an information session with our employers and cover various things – like upcoming deadlines, showcase how the apprentice is getting on – it is essential that every mentor … joins that session." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"Development of communicative relationships is key. Making sure that host organisations are very clear on what learning outcomes are there for the students they have on work-integrated learning. Making sure that there is strong understanding for all stakeholders of where responsibility lies throughout all work-integrated learning processes." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

The importance of employer relationship management, documented agreements and continuous communication to ensure a shared understanding between all parties was highlighted by QA survey respondents and emphasised by focus group participants, particularly in instances where problems may arise.

"Employer relationship management [is a specific consideration to be reflected in the guidelines]." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"You have to have the whole thing scoped out and to know what is available in the work place, and the other thing is [a memorandum of agreement] between the employer and student and college, because that would set a benchmark to go back to and sit around the table and would clarify for everybody who is doing what and what parts they are doing. It would be very useful to build that in." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

"The communication piece is important, not only in terms of expectations, but also when things go wrong. Know what the expected resolution is. Have a service level agreement between both parties." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Clarity on the responsibility of the student, the HEI and the employer. Complaints and disciplinary can be tricky - need to be clear at the start if the employer, university or both complaints/discipline are to be applied. If employed, student entitled to use grievance procedures of the employer." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Things have arisen in the past because perhaps they thought the employer was managing something when they weren't." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"A lot of our work-integrated learning is through projects, etc., not placement – an important consideration is managing expectations in terms of time requirements. It's important from the beginning not only from the education side but also from the employer." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"The guidelines should define clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders, including students, academic staff, workplace mentors, and industry partners." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

Apprenticeship providers in particular identified early engagement with employers and industry representatives at the point of programme design to be critical, alongside obtaining ongoing input from industry as apprenticeship programmes evolve. Concerns that apprenticeships are not always industry led in practice (as envisaged within the apprenticeship action plan) due to lack of buy-in from employers were also shared.

> "Getting the employers to communicate – it is essential they are involved from day one. They need to specify what goes into the programme, what they want, the learning outcomes, we need to get their mindsets to change and see apprenticeships as joint delivery and the experiential learning piece is nearly larger than the academic piece." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

> "The communication and the more information you can get before you even start, to put down how it will flow into your programme or scheduling, having your learning outcomes at the very start, it could be a recommendation for somebody who is trying to develop an apprenticeship." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

> "One of the aspirations I have is to get employers together and ask them if the activities we are getting them to do in the workplace are the right ones and are appropriate to the role they are doing on a day to day basis. They have got to see themselves as part of the delivery team." (Apprenticeship Focus Group Contributor)

ASSESSMENT

QA survey respondents and focus group participants identified that the guidelines could valuably place a focus on assessment of work-integrated learning, highlighting a broad range of issues including the attainment of learning outcomes, assessing learners when operating as part of a team, assessment strategies and the role of mentors in assessment:

> "With regard to assessment in particular, I think there are very important questions to consider around the assessment of learning outcomes achieved through work-integrated learning: what constitutes valid and authentic work-based assessment, how it can be demonstrated feasibly and to whom (academic staff, placement supervisor?), who is qualified to assess it fairly (academic staff, placement supervisor?), what role the learner has in the determination, whether it can/should be graded or not." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

> "An area that requires special attention from a QA perspective in work-integrated learning programmes is assessment. Work-integrated learning provides an opportunity to make the workplace a live case study where learners can demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competencies through addressing opportunities and challenges in their own workplace. Exams and fictitious case studies should be avoided where possible in work-integrated learning." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

> "A focus on the guidance for work-integrated learning on assessment should be concerned with the authentic nature of the assessment; production of an essay or long-form piece of writing is not appropriate as it does not reflect the nature of the work-place (in most cases)." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"The assessment process should be transparent, fair, and aligned with the learning outcomes." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

Learner Preparation and Support

Learner preparation and support emerged as a theme in responses to a question eliciting provider views of specific considerations for the design, management, operation and assessment of work-integrated learning in the QA survey. While this was raised in focus group discussions, it was not as heavily emphasised by contributors to those discussions.

"Student preparation and support during placement engagement." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"The role of the workplace mentor involved in the training and supporting the apprentice is pivotal to ensure the apprentice gets the training in the specific occupation and the academic elements support the requirements of the programmes." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Students should be adequately prepared for the workplace experience, including training on workplace expectations, professional behaviour, and relevant industry specific skills." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Learner preparation for/support during work-integrated learning." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"I find it extremely useful where students can find a point of reference in the college: support/check in meetings with students for just 15/20 minutes but students are aware that they are supported…. Consideration should be given to ongoing supports and communications while in the workplace." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

Remote Working

QA survey respondents additionally raised the matter of remote working, which is observed to be increasingly common in the context of work placement. Providers encouraged recognition of this in the development of the new QA guidelines.

"Guidelines on remote working as part of placements, apprenticeships etc." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"A lot of employers have their staff working remotely. Remote work placements are becoming more and more common especially in business sectors. This should be a key feature of the guidelines." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"Virtual or hybrid placements allow for greater accessibility and provide opportunities for global work experiences, where students can collaborate with companies or teams across borders." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Given the evolving nature of work environments, we foresee a growing demand for virtual placements and remote work options within work-integrated learning programmes." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Remote work-integrated learning opportunities should emphasise the development of digital skills and the ability to work in virtual teams, reflecting the growing demand for these competencies in the workforce." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Remote work-based learning models are emerging, and we foresee a need for updated guidelines to ensure quality assurance in these areas." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

Legal and Regulatory Matters

Focus group participants and survey respondents were keen to point out the requirements of different PSRBs and expressed concern that any new guidelines remained sufficiently high-level to allow for PSRB requirements to be accommodated.

Additional legal and regulatory considerations were highlighted across a broad spectrum of practice. These were raised from the perspective of learners being adequately equipped to operate in these contexts and knowing their responsibilities, along with education providers and external collaborators needing to operate within clear parameters.

"The legal aspect – insurance, duty of care etc. It is complex and that needs to be kept in mind." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"[We are in an] era of regulatory compliance – data protection and confidentiality etc. Students may not be fully competent in these matters." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"A theme that's emerging from the conversation is that there can be legal and regulatory requirements around work-integrated learning in many professions."
(HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Another important consideration is intellectual property – anything developed in collaboration." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Risk assessment, insurance and liability." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Assessment of employer organisations to include compliance to equality legislation, employment act, insurance cover, on-boarding supports, health & safety...."
(HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Other ethical and legal concerns relate to privacy, disclosures, informed consent, GDPR." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Legal Framework: MOUs and agreements with partner organisations will become increasingly important to establish clear expectations, responsibilities, and legal frameworks for work-integrated learning … MOUs should address risk management considerations, including insurance, intellectual property, and data protection." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

These considerations were also raised in the context of overseas placements by focus group contributors.

"There are additional challenges with international placements outside our jurisdiction where legislation is different, things are done differently, there may not be tutor visits, and it is harder to maintain these relationships." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

"Risk assessments for students travelling international." (HE Focus Group Contributor)

It is noted that in response to the institutional QA survey, a total of 26 providers (N=91) indicated that work-integrated learning in their organisation has an international element, of which 18 responses were from HE providers. However, ambiguity is noted in relation to how common international work-integrated learning practice is in practice[15].

Resourcing

A recurring theme among responses to the QA survey was the need for adequate resourcing to support the effective operation of work-integrated learning. Many emphasised the resource-intense nature of these programmes for the provider:

"Another challenge is resourcing and supporting work-integrated learning initiatives. Ensuring health, safety and welfare of learners engaging on work-integrated learning activities is extremely important. This requires significant administrative support to ensure best practice is maintained." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Ensuring that university systems can support work-integrated learning - can be a resource intensive exercise that is difficult to scale." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Careers Units - these units are central to the development of work-integrated learning for all partners and need to be adequately resourced to cope with the intensive demand of work placements." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

Contextualisation

The challenges associated with developing guidelines encompassing a diverse range of providers, practices and modes of learning were acknowledged by contributors to both focus groups and surveys. The need to be able to contextualise guidelines appropriately in locally specific contexts was noted, with some contributors referencing international guidelines that were perceived to be appropriately flexible and future oriented requirements.

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15 A total of 73 practice survey respondents (N=118) indicated there was an international element to their work-integrated learning practice exemplar. When filtered by sector, the distribution patterns indicated that an international dimension was a feature of just over half (64) of the submissions from practitioners working in HE settings (N=118) and that this was less common within FET, with only 4 submissions among 22 indicating an international dimension. However, it is noted that the open text responses provided indicated that the international dimension was frequently optional, and uptake was low.

"A one size fits all or overly rigid approach to the quality assurance of work integrated learning will not work. Perhaps guidelines for the different types of provision would be useful or key things to consider when planning, implementing and assessing work integrated learning. Other things that could be useful … Definitions of the different types of work integrated learning. Examples of the different types of work integrated learning including guidance on what types are best for different outcomes/provision type/learner groups, perhaps using case studies based on the feedback from the surveys. Case studies to accompany guidelines. Guidelines on remote working as part of placements, apprenticeships etc." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"Avoid being overly prescriptive … If the guidelines are prescriptive people won't even try to develop new apprenticeships. That might be the biggest challenge."
(Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"[Refer to] WACE [World Association of Cooperative Education] and the Australian and the Canadian guidelines, maybe we need a guide or a framework that people can use joined alongside the guidelines and having those made available would be very good."
(Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"By far the biggest challenge is that you are trying to accommodate quite a range … the guidelines probably should start out as being a set of recommendations, because work-integrated learning is only really evolving now and in Australia and Canada they have super guidelines in both of those places … you need to be careful not to bolt it down, whether we like it or not there have to be grey areas."
(Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"We anticipate further growth in hybrid and online apprenticeships, particularly in fields such as data analytics, cloud computing, and financial services, where digital skills are increasingly important. Additionally, remote work-based learning models are emerging, and we foresee a need for updated guidelines to ensure quality assurance in these areas."
(Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"Strong partnerships with employers are essential, particularly for managing work placements and apprenticeships. Clear employer agreements and structured learner support systems are integral, and the HEI provider must be accountable for the approval, monitoring and review of these. We would caution against the introduction of direct sectoral QA oversight of employers who host work placement students – to encourage employers to get involved and to stay involved, regulatory oversight is best placed with the HE provider who can manage the employer relationship." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent HE)

"In the context of learners who are working full time and using their own workplace as their learning context the requirements cannot be overly prescriptive as to create issues for the learners or indeed their employers. In terms of workplace selection overly onerous workplace 'inspection' or induction can in very real terms place an undue burden on employers and could lead to a decision to reduce the number of learners who can be facilitated." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

A number of FET and apprenticeship providers responding to surveys and participating in focus groups also indicated that the development of QA guidelines in this area was a welcome development. Perceptions that the guidelines would help facilitate consistency of standards and additionally serve to enhance awareness of the value of work-integrated learning were shared.

"The development of the new QA statutory guidelines for work-integrated learning is very important for all providers to ensure consistent quality assured approach for learners and to ensure [fairness] and consistency with work-based assessments." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"By having the guidelines, you will clarify the concept for colleges and providers, there is a huge lack of knowledge about work-integrated learning and it's very opportune you are doing this and very important." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"This is a very welcome undertaking by QQI and any outputs will be much appreciated by the ETB sector." (Institutional QA Survey Respondent FET)

"It can only encourage good practice amongst employers and help to ensure that apprentices aren't brought into the workplace and segregated or not given support." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

"It will be great to get a consistent approach. Things can happen in an organic manner in FET so this is a good opportunity to get some consistency." (Apprenticeship Provider Focus Group Contributor)

7. PROFESSIONAL, STATUTORY AND REGULATORY BODIES

During October 2024, Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) were invited to participate in two focus groups, with one individual interview also facilitated for one PSRB representative that wished to contribute but was unavailable to join the scheduled focus group discussions. The PSRB representatives participating in the focus groups shared experience of engaging with both further education and training and higher education providers relevant to their professional field. A stakeholder survey was also issued, which twenty-two PSRBs responded to.

Survey Responses	22
Focus Group Participants	15
Interviews	1

Figure 18: Profile of PSRB Participation

Survey respondents from this stakeholder group (N= 22) also indicated that both further education and training and higher education providers are engaged in the education and training of future professionals in their field:

Which education sector/s are involved in the education and training of future professionals for your field?
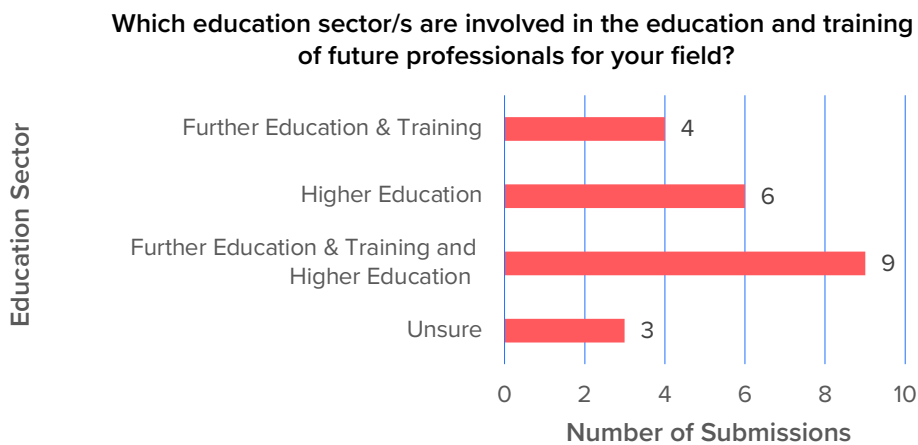

Figure 19: Education Sector/s Under PSRB Areas of Responsibility

The majority of survey respondents (N=19) indicated the different roles they play in respect of education providers in their disciplinary field that offer work-integrated learning.

What (if any) role does your organisation play in relation to the education providers for your sector that offer work-integrated learning experiences?
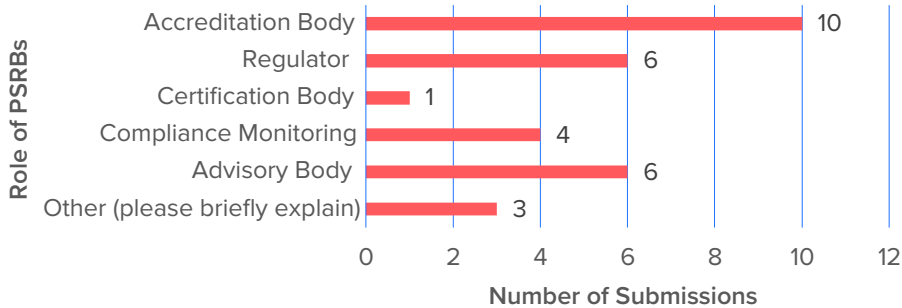

Figure 20: Role of PSRBs Engaging with Providers Offering Work-integrated Learning

Over 50% of respondents (N=19) responding to a question about publication of standards or guidelines for providers relevant to work-integrated learning confirmed that their organisations did not publish any, while 32% indicated they did and 16% indicated they were unsure.

Does your organisation publish standards or guidelines for education providers relevant to work-integrated learning?
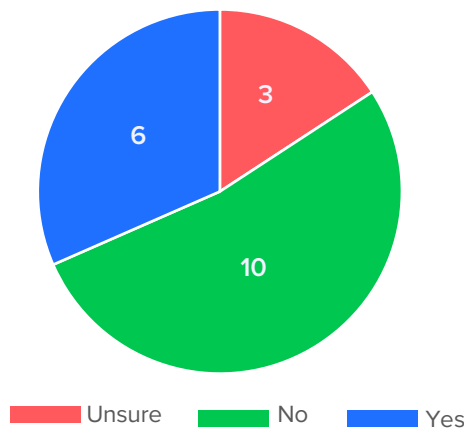
Figure 21: PSRB Publication of Standards or Guidelines Relevant to Work-integrated Learning

Responses to a subsequent question indicated that where standards or guidelines were published, these covered aspects of work-integrated learning including the duration of the experience, the profile of employers offering work-integrated learning opportunities, assessment standards, the qualifications and expertise of supervisors, and access and equity considerations.

The extent of PSRB engagement with providers in relation to different aspects of the lifecycle of academic programmes was also indicated by survey respondents (N = 17). Responses highlighted that a significant proportion are very involved in programme validation or approval (65%), annual review of programmes (47%) and periodic review of programmes (53%). However, a number of respondents also indicated no involvement in these activities, reflecting diversity in the ways in which different PSRBs engage with education providers in this area.

To what extent does your organisation play a role in the following activities with education providers?
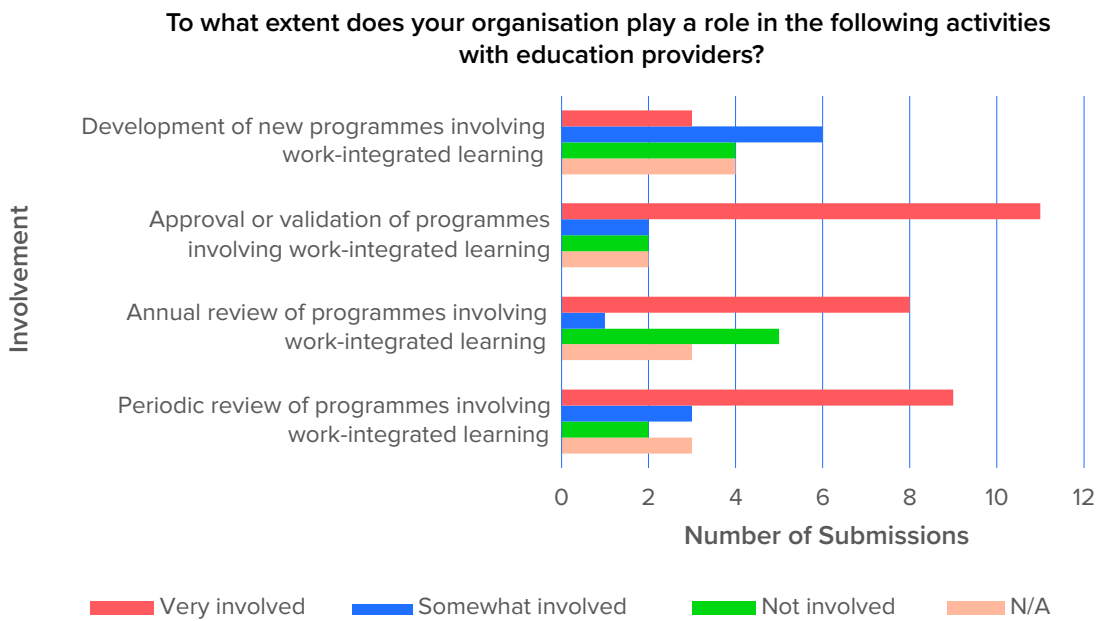
Figure 22: PSRB Involvement in the Programme Lifecycle

7.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS

Both survey respondents and focus group participants were very positively disposed towards work-integrated learning. The general sentiment expressed was captured well by one focus group participant:

"They are more work ready when they graduate having done a placement." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Applied Learning

Survey respondents (N=14) outlined the significant impacts they perceived work-integrated learning had on preparing graduates to successfully transition to employment in their professional field, indicating perceptions that it has a notable impact in particular on the development of transversal and applied, practical skills.

Please indicate the degree of impact you perceive work-integrated learning to have on preparing graduates to successfully transition to work in your industry/sector in relation to the below.

Figure 23: PSRB Perceived Impact of Work-integrated Learning on Preparing Graduates for Future Employment

These responses aligned closely with the benefits of work-integrated learning highlighted by focus group participants spanning a diverse range of PSRBs.
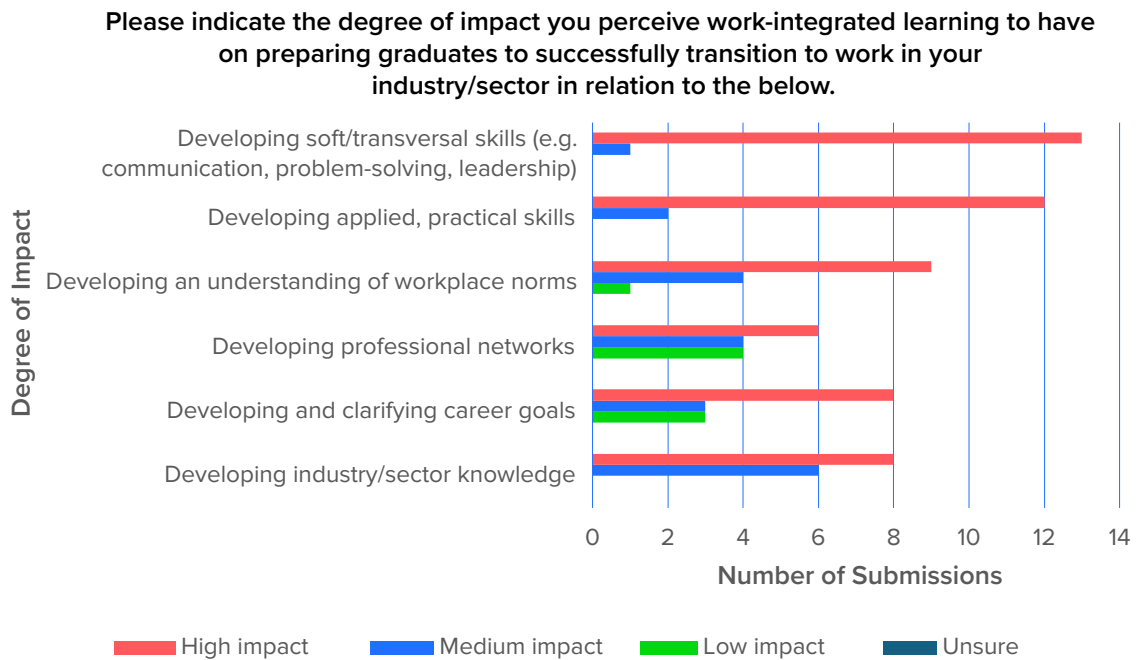
"We deal with technical skills and qualifications so it's useful to see practical application through assessment. That application of learning is specifically tailored to the workplace. Feedback is that they are the most beneficial modules." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Real world application – simulation is good but [work-integrated learning] can't be replicated." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"The patient focus is important, but also the workplace setting – being exposed to hospitals, clinics – this can't be replicated in the education institution." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Putting things into practice, what you've been learning - academic or skills base. See it in real life and learn." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Essential opportunity to link theory and practice and develop skills." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

This same perception was shared by survey respondents (N=14) with 86% viewing work-integrated learning as having a high impact on developing applied practical skills.

Career Development Learning

Survey respondents (N=14) identified that work-integrated learning was beneficial for career planning, with 57% indicating that it was highly impactful for developing and clarifying career goals. Focus group participants also emphasised the advantage of being able to try out different areas of professional practice, develop their awareness and understanding of professional roles or environments and make informed judgements about future career plans.

> "Our industry can be an isolating profession. Work-integrated learning is the first opportunity for learners to engage with it so it's a good opportunity or a blueprint for them to assess whether individual practice or group practice is suitable for them." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "It's a foothold onto getting a job – get a feel for what's out there." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "Students would have a different picture/idea of what workplace is like compared to real life." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "Students can gain an understanding of that real life experience, and where that role can take them." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Building Connections

A further benefit highlighted by focus group participants was the opportunity that work-integrated learning presents to learners to develop their own professional networks, make connections and establish relationships that will be of benefit to their future career or may be a support through their studies.

> "[The benefit is] the networking opportunities also." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "Opportunity to meet people in the industry and network." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "It's a good opportunity to meet people, huge opportunity for them to get to know people in the industry." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

> "We find that students learn a lot from placement – networking, building connections. They develop mentors from it also." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Similarly, 72% of survey respondents (N=14) indicated that work-integrated learning has a high or medium impact on the development of learners' professional networks.

Benefits to the Sector / Industry

Survey respondents (N=14) provided an indication of the motivations for engaging with providers on work-integrated learning in the industries or sectors their organisations represent. While these were varied, supporting the talent pipeline was selected by 71% of respondents.
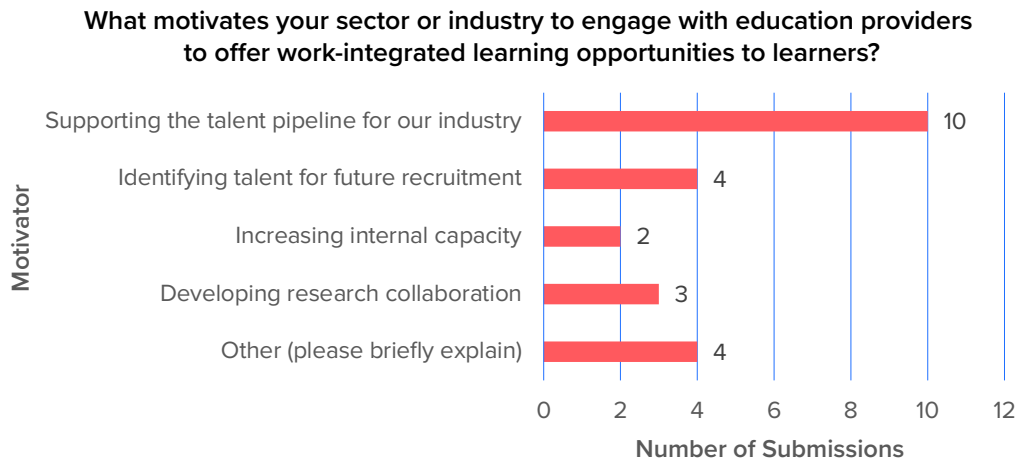
What motivates your sector or industry to engage with education providers to offer work-integrated learning opportunities to learners?

Figure 24: Drivers for Industry/Sector Engagement with Provider to Offer Work-integrated learning

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7.2 PERCEIVED CHALLENGES

Both focus group participants and survey respondents were invited to provide an indication of the challenges associated with work-integrated learning. Survey respondents (N=14) were invited to indicate the extent to which they observed specific and commonly cited challenges arising in their sector. A total of 70% of respondents indicated that preparedness of learners for the experience was sometimes challenging, while a further 14% said it was frequently challenging.

Please indicate the extent to which your organisation perceives challenges with the aspects of work-integrated learning below.
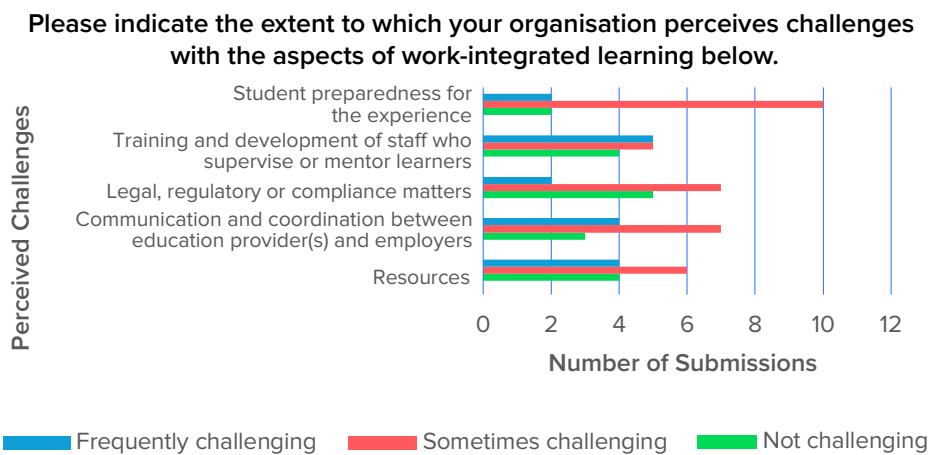

Figure 25: Extent of Perceived Challenges of Work-integrated Learning

Mentor Training

A high proportion of survey respondents (N=14) and focus group participants indicated challenges associated with the training and development of workplace mentors. Focus group participants emphasised the need for training in order to attempt to prevent such issues arising.

"It's important... that training is provided to employers." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"This is outside of their job, so need to make it straightforward for them." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"[They] would assign clients that weren't suitable. There needs to be safeguarding of students and clients, that they are given appropriate people to work with." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"You hear horror stories... Students are so grateful to get the placement they will put up with anything." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Survey respondents (N=14) also highlighted the perceived challenge of training or development of staff who mentor or supervise learners with almost 36% identifying it as frequently challenging and an equal number identifying it as sometimes challenging.

Support for Learners

Support for learners was raised by a number of participants as a particular area of challenge. This was highlighted both in terms of the support for the learner from the employer (or mentor) and the support from the provider.

"There needs to be greater awareness around supports available when on placement or in workplace – clear channels of communication and access to educational supports while on placement also." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"...if industries are under pressure and apprentices aren't getting the time/support they need, the experience can suffer." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"In our context, placement is a requirement. There needs to be a central point of support for both sides. If a trainee/trainer is not happy, there needs to be a port of call. On a human level keep those channels open." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Legal and Regulatory Matters

Survey respondents (N = 14) highlighted legal, regulatory and compliance matters as being sometimes challenging (50%) or frequently challenging (14%). Focus group participants also highlighted concerns, though these were much more targeted to matters of data protection. A particular concern relates to information regarding students with specific support needs that have been disclosed to the provider but not the employer.

"It's difficult when a student has disclosed a medical condition to the HEI, but they can't disclose to the employer unless the student has given explicit consent." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Another issue related to providers not sharing information about apprentices with the employer.

"An employer should be advised [about their apprentices' progress] but our education providers felt that they couldn't share information." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

It was suggested that practice in relation to data sharing applied differently depending on the provider and the employer concerned.

Clarity of Roles and Responsibilities

Lack of information, ambiguity or uncertainty regarding roles and responsibilities was frequently cited as potentially problematic for all parties by focus group contributors.

"The workplace provider needs to know what is expected of them, standards of profession, assessments – that it's all very, very clear to the person involved in the process." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"There needs to be awareness. They need to know what happens when it goes wrong and what to do in that case – whose responsibility it is." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"An initial contracting / placement meeting needs to take place, where all this information is provided – this is what your HEI provides you, what your employer provides, etc." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Clarity needed in relation to roles and responsibilities of the employer and the education provider – as there is overlap – division of responsibilities." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Similar matters were raised in respect of the need to support mentors and have clear communication channels.

"If the student isn't meeting requirements, the process of going back to the HEI needs to be clear." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Similarly, the relationship between the college and the employer – they must be able to link in and comfortably check in with each other to see how the student is getting on." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Communication and coordination between employers and providers was also a perceived challenge highlighted by survey respondents (N = 14). Fifty percent of respondents felt it was sometimes challenging and a further 29% said it was frequently challenging.

7.3 TERMINOLOGY

Focus group participants were provided with a provisional definition of work-integrated learning and were invited to comment on it. Although the definition was considered to be broadly representative, there was difference of opinion regarding the use of the term 'employer' to represent the third party involved. Although many contributors acknowledged its relevance, others expressed the view that the term was too narrow.

"In our context there is a statutory basis. I immediately see a problem with the term 'employer', it's a term that we all know but the explanation is different. Different meaning for different people." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Within my sector, we would use the term placement provider as they are not employers." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"It might say workplace provider to include people that aren't employed." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"The vast majority of our UG programmes have work-integrated learning or work-based learning. We would define the third stakeholder as an employer – so employer is the right definition in our context." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"I wonder if the term 'employer' needs to be widened out? In our context we talk about host organisations and field work supervisors." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"We would have work placement, and employer would be noted on contracts going out." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Comments also focused on the need to recognise other stakeholders.

"End point assessor' is a fourth player in our context – someone who is separate to the education provider." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Agree that end point assessor is important. From my perspective it would be a trainer who is a consultant in industry and has taken on a mentoring role. They straddle both the employer and the education provider. Inclusion of that is important in some form/separate category." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"There's a third stakeholder – field work supervisor." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

7.4 PRIORITY AREAS FOR QA GUIDELINES

Participants were invited to share their views on quality indicators that would benefit from inclusion within the new guidelines, or consideration during their development. The requirement for clarity around roles and responsibilities was again emphasised with the recommendation that formal agreements are implemented.

"It's important that there are agreements in place …" (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Ensuring the guidelines are applicable to diverse contexts in terms of programme and award types, and in terms of diverse employers, placement providers and industry partners was also considered a priority.

"If you develop a micro-credential vs full programme, I wouldn't have thought the same work-integrated learning guidelines would apply. Someone signing up for a work placement

for three years and someone doing a week here and there – these are different scenarios. These need to be reflected in the guidelines." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"…. guidelines around appropriate ratios for mentors in the workplace, for example. This can be a challenge for SMEs but not multinationals. We want to have a level playing field." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Participants emphasised that the value of the employer or industry partner's role and contribution could be given greater consideration in practice, and that this could usefully be reflected in the guidelines. Within these discussions, participants suggested that a shift away from viewing employers and industry partners as placement providers and toward recognising them as a collaborating partner was warranted.

"It's important that the education provider takes on the feedback from employer or industry body to ensure that work-integrated learning is fit for purpose." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"There's a feeling that the education provider owns the degree – it's a collaboration and this needs to be understood – all stakeholders take credit." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

The challenges associated with data sharing were emphasised in suggestions that greater clarity and specificity on this should be included in the guidelines. This was particularly noted by focus group contributors in relation to information sharing between external partners providing opportunities for placement and the education providers they engaged with as well as between apprentice employers and apprenticeship programme providers.

"Look at the GDPR piece. We've had massive issues with this." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

Participants also expressed concern that the overly prescriptive or onerous guidelines could negatively impact collaborations, employer engagement and work-integrated learning opportunities.

"If the guidelines are overly prescriptive, then they are counterintuitive. Broad areas, disability for example how do we deal with that." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"The worry is around an increased workload, burden of additional administration." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"Anything overly prescriptive can put people off – they need to see the benefit of doing it – don't put employers off." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

"If you go in too hard with the rules it can look overburdensome – there will be less take up from employers. It needs to work for all three parties." (PSRB Focus Group Contributor)

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APPENDIX I - QUALITY ASSURANCE OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN IRELAND

Q1. Within which sector/s does your organisation operate? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Further Education and Training
- Higher Education
- Further Education and Training and Higher Education

Q2. Which of the following best describes your provider type? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- University
- Technological University
- Institute of Technology
- Linked Higher Education Provider of a Designated Awarding Body
- Education and Training Board (ETB)
- Other public provider offering QQI awards
- Private provider offering QQI awards

Q3. What types of planned and assessed work-integrated learning occur in the academic programmes (e.g. certificate, diploma or degree) your organisation delivers? Please select all that apply from the list below, or indicate the type in the space provided under 'other'.

Answer Choices

- Simulation, replicating work processes and workplace activities
- 'Live' work projects with employer involvement
- 'Live' case studies with employer involvement
- Community-based projects with the involvement of relevant organisations
- Showcases or performances for live audiences
- Professional or clinical practice placements
- Cooperative education work placements
- Internships

- Work placements
- Work experience
- Apprenticeship on-the-job activity
- Other (please describe in the space provided)

Q4. Please select the NFQ level/s of any academic programmes (e.g. certificate, diploma or degree) offered by your organisation that involve planned and assessed work-integrated learning. Please select all that apply from the list below.

Answer Choices

- 10
- 9
- 8
- 7
- 6
- 5
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- Unknown

Q5. We would like to gain an understanding of the types of work-integrated learning that are most commonly used across the sector. If you are able to, please provide a brief statement indicating the types of work-integrated learning that most commonly occur in the academic programmes (e.g. certificate, diploma, degree) your organisation delivers in the space provided below. E.g. "In our organisation, the majority of work-integrated learning activity is focused on placement (e.g. roughly 70%) but recently there has been an increase in the use of live work projects. We also have an annual showcase for one creative arts programme." If this information is unknown/difficult to estimate, please enter 'unknown'.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q6. Does work-integrated learning occurring within your organisation involve any of the following elements? Please select the appropriate answer for each option.

- Virtual or Online activity (Yes; No; Unsure)
- International or global activity (Yes; No; Unsure)
- Activity required for professional registration or standards (Yes; No; Unsure)
- Activity for which the learner receives payment (Yes; No; Unsure)

Q7. Are there any specific considerations related to the design, management, operation and assessment of work-integrated learning that should be reflected in QQI's quality assurance guidelines? This may include (but not be limited to) any of the following areas:

- Requirements associated with governance, strategy, policy and procedures for work-integrated learning.
- Development, approval/validation, operation and monitoring academic programmes that involve work-integrated learning.
- Selection and approval of placements, recruitment of employers, employer agreements, employer relationship management, review of employers.
- Training and development of academic staff.
- Learner preparation for/support during work-integrated learning.
- Assessment of learning outcomes achieved through work-integrated learning.
- Management of complaints or disciplinary matters associated with work integrated learning.

Please briefly describe below. If not relevant, please enter N/A.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q8. Are there any anticipated future developments pertaining to work-integrated learning for your organisation or the sector that may need to be taken into consideration when developing quality assurance guidelines for work-integrated learning? Please briefly describe below. If not relevant, please enter N/A.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q9. Is there anything additional you would like to add or comment on?

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

APPENDIX II - EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN IRELAND

Q1. Which education sector/s does your organisation provide work-integrated learning opportunities for? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Further Education & Training
- Higher Education
- Further Education & Training and Higher Education
- Unsure

Q2. Which of the following best describes your organisation? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Start-up
- Small to Medium Enterprise (SME)
- Social Enterprise
- Community Organisation
- Large Enterprise
- Multinational Enterprise
- Government Agency
- Healthcare Provider
- Education Institution

Q3. What motivates your organisation to engage with education providers to offer work-integrated learning opportunities to learners? Please select all that apply.

Answer Choices

- Supporting the talent pipeline for our industry
- Identifying talent for future recruitment
- Increasing internal capacity
- Developing research collaboration
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q4. How does your organisation provide work-integrated learning opportunities for learners? Please select as many options as relevant from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Engaging with learners in simulated work environments (physical or online)
- Delivery guest lectures
- Hosting site visits
- Facilitating challenges, competitions or hackathons
- Engaging in collaborative research projects
- Providing access to tools and resources
- Facilitating learners to undertake projects for your organisation
- Providing internship, placement or work experience opportunities
- Employment of apprentices
- Unknown
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q5. To what extent does your organisation collaborate with education providers on the following aspects of work-integrated learning? Please select the appropriate answer for each option.

Answer Choices

- Planning the work-integrated learning experience (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)
- Selecting or recruiting learners (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)
- Providing feedback to learners (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)
- Setting assessment criteria (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)
- Contributing to the design of new programmes that involve work-integrated learning (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)
- Participating in a committee, consortium or working group focused on work-integrated learning (A lot of collaboration; Some collaboration; Very limited collaboration; No collaboration; Unsure)

Q6. What (if any) documentation does your organisation require to be able to support education providers by offering work-integrated learning opportunities? Please briefly outline in the space below. If not applicable, please indicate N/A.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q7. Please indicate the degree of impact you perceive work-integrated learning to have on preparing graduates to successfully transition to work in your industry/sector in relation to the below.

Answer Choices

- Developing soft/transversal skills (e.g. communication, problem-solving, leadership) (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing applied, practical skills (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing an understanding of workplace norms (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing professional networks (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing and clarifying career goals (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing industry/sector knowledge (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)

Q8. Please indicate the extent to which your organisation experiences challenges with the aspects of work-integrated learning below.

Answer Choices

- Student preparedness for the experience (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Training and development of staff who supervise or mentor learners (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Legal, regulatory or compliance matters (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Communication and coordination with education provider(s) (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Resources (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)

Q9. Are there any additional benefits or challenges that your organisation experiences through its cooperation with education providers to offer work-integrated learning experiences? Please briefly outline in the space provided below.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q10. If you are available to participate in an online focus group discussion with employers about work-integrated learning, please provide your details in the space below. A follow up email and registration link will be issued

Answer Choices

- Name:
- Company:
- Email Address:

APPENDIX III - STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN IRELAND

Q1. Which of the following best describes your organisation? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Industry or Sectoral Representative Body
- Professional, Regulatory or Statutory Body
- Trade Union
- Membership Organisation
- Apprenticeship Consortium
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q2. Which education sector/s are involved in the education and training of future professionals for your field? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Further Education & Training
- Higher Education
- Further Education & Training and Higher Education
- Unsure

Q3. What (if any) role does your organisation play in relation to the education providers for your sector that offer work-integrated learning experiences? Please select as many options as relevant from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Accreditation Body
- Regulator
- Certification Body
- Compliance Monitoring
- Advisory Body
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q4. Does your organisation publish standards or guidelines for education providers relevant to work-integrated learning?

Answer Choices

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Q5. If you answered yes to the previous question, what aspects of work-integrated learning do those standards or guidelines encompass? Please select all that are relevant from the options below.

Answer Choices

- Duration of work-integrated learning (e.g. time on-the-job or in placement)
- Profile of employers offering work-integrated learning opportunities
- Assessment standards and requirements for work-integrated learning
- Expertise/qualifications of staff supervising students during work-integrated learning
- Access and equity considerations
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q6. To what extent does your organisation play a role in the following activities with education providers? Please select the appropriate answer from the options below. If not applicable, please select N/A.

Answer Choices

- Development of new programmes involving work-integrated learning (Very involved; Somewhat involved; Not involved; N/A)
- Approval or validation of programmes involving work-integrated learning (Very involved; Somewhat involved; Not involved; N/A)
- Annual review of programmes involving work-integrated learning (Very involved; Somewhat involved; Not involved; N/A)
- Periodic review of programmes involving work-integrated learning (Very involved; Somewhat involved; Not involved; N/A)

Q7. What motivates your sector or industry to engage with education providers to offer work-integrated learning opportunities to learners? Please select all that apply.

Answer Choices

- Supporting the talent pipeline for our industry
- Identifying talent for future recruitment
- Increasing internal capacity
- Developing research collaboration
- Other (please briefly explain)

Q8. Please indicate the degree of impact you perceive work-integrated learning to have on preparing graduates to successfully transition to work in your industry/sector in relation to the below.

Answer Choices

- Developing soft/transversal skills (e.g. communication, problem-solving, leadership) (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing applied, practical skills (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing an understanding of workplace norms (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing professional networks (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing and clarifying career goals (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)
- Developing industry/sector knowledge (High impact; Medium impact; Low impact; Unsure)

Q9. Please indicate the extent to which your organisation perceives challenges with the aspects of work-integrated learning below.

Answer Choices

- Student preparedness for the experience (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Training and development of staff who supervise or mentor learners (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Legal, regulatory or compliance matters (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Communication and coordination between education provider(s) and employers (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)
- Resources (Frequently challenging; Sometimes challenging; Not challenging; Unsure)

Q10. Are there any additional benefits or challenges that your organisation experiences through its cooperation with education providers to offer work-integrated learning experiences? Please briefly outline in the space provided below.

Answer Choices

- Open text question

Q11. If you are available to participate in an online focus group discussion with employers about work-integrated learning, please provide your details in the space below. A follow up email and registration link will be issued

Answer Choices

- Name:
- Company:
    - Email Address

APPENDIX IV - WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PRACTICE SURVEY

Q1. Which sector/s does your organisation operate within? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- Further Education & Training
- Higher Education
- Further Education & Training and Higher Education

Q2. Which of the following best describes your organisation? Please select one option below.

Answer Choices

- University
- Technological University
- Institute of Technology
- Linked provider of a Designated Awarding Body
- ETB
- Other public provider offering QQI awards
- Private provider offering QQI awards

Q3. Please outline the learning outcomes for the programme to which the work-integrated learning contributes.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q4. Approximately what proportion of the overall programme is comprised of work-integrated learning activities?

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q5. What is the NFQ Level of the final stage of the programme in which the work-integrated learning takes place? Please select from the list below.

Answer Choices

- 10
- 9
- 8
- 7
- 6
- 5
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- Unknown

Q6. Approximately what number of learners enrol on this programme in each intake? Please select one option from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Fewer than 10
- 10 - 25
- 26 - 50
- 51 - 100
- Over 100

Q7. Is work-integrated learning an optional or required part of this programme? Please select one option from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Optional
- Required
- Optional for some activities and required for others
- Unsure

Q8. To what extent are learners involved in the following programme activities? Please select the appropriate answer for each option.

Answer Choices

- Programme development (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)
- Programme review (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)

Q9. Are formal agreements in place that set out roles and responsibilities for some or all of the stakeholders below?

1. The education provider

2. The learner

3. The employer

Please briefly describe any agreements that are in place in the space provided below. Alternatively, please just enter 'unsure' or 'no agreements in place' as appropriate.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q10. To what extent are employers involved in the following programme activities? Please select the appropriate answer for each option.

Answer Choices

- Programme development (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Programme review (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Programme management (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Learner recruitment (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)

Q11. Is the programme (e.g. certificate, diploma or degree) professionally accredited? If yes, please explain. If no, please enter N/A. For example: "The certificate is recognised by [professional body] which allows the successful graduates to work in the [industry] sector as [role/job]."

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q12. If a professional, regulatory or statutory body (PSRB) is involved, to what extent do the PSRB requirements inform the following programme activities? Please select the appropriate answer for each option (or not applicable).

Answer Choices

- Programme design (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)
- Programme review (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)
- Programme management (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)
- Learner recruitment (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved; Not applicable)

Q13. In your own words, please describe the work-integrated learning experience (including how it is assessed) in the space provided. e.g. "this is an industry project in which learners work with a brief from an industry or community partner" or "this is a work placement during which learners are mentored and supervised by a professional in an industry setting" etc.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q14. Where do the teaching, learning and assessment activities associated with the work-integrated learning occur? Please select all that apply from the list below.

Answer Choices

- On campus
- Online
- Blended
- In the workplace
- In the community
- Other (please specify)

Q15. To what extent are employers involved in the following? Please select the appropriate answer for each option.

Answer Choices

- Designing teaching, learning and assessment activities (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Planning teaching, learning and assessment activities (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Teaching/instruction (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Providing feedback to learners during the teaching, learning and assessment activities (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Planning/setting criteria for the assessments (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Conducting the assessments (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Grading the assessments (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)
- Reviewing feedback from learners on the teaching, learning and assessment activity relevant to work-integrated learning (Very Involved; Somewhat Involved; Not Very Involved; Not Involved)

Q16. Is there an international dimension to the work-integrated learning experience that you have described above? Please select one option from the list below.

N.B. An international dimension could include (but not be limited to) interaction with an international industry, community or professional WIL partner, interaction with students in international locations or international mobility.

Answer Choices

- No
- Yes
- Unsure

Q17. If yes, please briefly explain the international dimension in the space provided below. If no, please enter N/A.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer

Q18. Who determines the final grade associated with the assessment of the teaching, learning and assessment activities? Please select all that apply from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Teaching staff of the institution
- Employer or workplace-based personnel
- Assessors appointed by the provider specifically for the purpose of WIL assessment
- Other, please briefly explain in the space provided

Q19. What types of assessment evidence contribute to the grade for the teaching, learning and assessment activities? Please select all that apply from the list below.

Answer Choices

- Workplace mentor or supervisor evaluations of 'on-the-job'/placement performance
- Reflection by the learner
- Project deliverables (e.g. report, thesis, dissertation and such like)
- Simulations
- Presentations
- Showcases, exhibitions or performances
- Other, please briefly explain in the space provided

Q20. How is the learner performance in the teaching, learning and assessment activities recorded? Please select all that apply from the list below.

Answer Choices

- The learner is assigned a letter grade or numerical score
- The learner is awarded a pass / fail or equivalent
- Other, please briefly explain in the space provided

Q21. If relevant, please outline how the assessment strategy facilitates inclusion of a diversity of learners.

Answer Choices

- Open text answer