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Work-related learning and professional growth of students at a selected open university in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between work-related learning (WRL) and the professional development of students at Zimbabwe Open University. The purpose of the research, guided by Experiential Learning Theory, is to identify how WRL influences students' employability, problem-solving abilities, and entrepreneurial skills. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 148 third-year Commerce students. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Findings suggest that WRL significantly improves students' problem-solving skills and employability. Conversely, a notable negative correlation was observed between WRL and the development of entrepreneurial skills, indicating that structured workplace environments may limit creativity. Students also reported facing challenges related to mentorship and the alignment between academic learning and industry expectations. The study concludes that while WRL is essential for preparing students for the workforce, its design should be optimized to support more comprehensive professional development. It is recommended that universities and industry partners strengthen collaboration by integrating structured mentorship programs, aligning curricula more closely with industry requirements, and intentionally promoting entrepreneurial skill development within WRL initiatives.

Keywords: *Employability, Entrepreneurial skills, Experiential learning, Problem-solving skills, Professional growth, Work-related learning, Zimbabwe Open University.*

1. Introduction

Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology introduced Education 5.0, which aims to produce problem-solvers and innovative graduates [1]. The role of work-related learning is for students in tertiary institutions to develop practical skills that will help them grow professionally in practical settings [2]. This has resulted in more institutions introducing work-related learning, extending to Zimbabwe Open University. However, different researchers have mixed results regarding work-related learning in Zimbabwe. For example, Garwe [1] endorses work-related learning as progressive and critical for the professional growth of learners. However, Muyengwa and Jitai [3] deem work-related learning not conducive for learners. This is supported by Makuvaro et al. [2], who posit that the dwindling industrial base does not support work-related learning. However, the central question is on the contribution of work-related learning to the professional growth of students in an open university setting [3]. This is a primarily neglected research area, and this study seeks to address it by examining the relationship between work-related learning and the professional growth of students at a selected open university in Zimbabwe.

According to Garwe [1], the vision of the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology is to produce graduates who are prepared for the practical world by being innovative and entrepreneurial. Motalenyane and Konyana [4] found that, at times, students in work-related learning are not mentored, which undermines the program's objectives. Work-related learning needs to be implemented

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appropriately to serve as a vital component of students' professional development. Consequently, there is a growing interest in work-related learning. In universities, work-related learning aims to reinforce professional development for students by providing practical experience while they complete their studies. In Zimbabwe, undergraduate students are required to undertake work-related learning in their third year, dedicating an entire year to applying theory in practice. However, studies have elaborated on the challenges and opportunities associated with work-related learning in most universities. Nonetheless, limited research has explored the relationship between work-related learning and the professional growth of undergraduate students engaged in such programs. This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between work-related learning and students' professional development.

Open universities initially didn't include work-related learning in their curricula because most students were already employed. However, as these institutions expanded and began enrolling students who were not yet working and students from different professional backgrounds, work-related learning was introduced. Third-year students participate in work-related learning to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired during the first two years of their studies in an open university. This change aims to provide students with mentorship opportunities that enhance their professional development in their third year. Upon returning for their fourth and final year, students are expected to have improved their problem-solving, innovation, and creativity skills within their respective fields of work. Work-related learning was introduced to improve students' practical skills. In Zimbabwe, undergraduate students are requested to go for work-related learning for two semesters spanning from eight to twelve months [1]. The main objective is for students to be armed with practical skills that enhance their employability, problem-solving, and entrepreneurial skills, which were a problem for higher education institutions to calculate for graduates. This study seeks to measure the relationship between work-related learning and the professional growth of students in the Faculty of Commerce at Zimbabwe Open University. This will add knowledge on whether work-related learning is effective in open-distance institutions. Therefore, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the overall satisfaction levels of students with the work-related learning program and its contribution to their career readiness?
2. Is there a relationship between work-related learning and problem-solving among Faculty of Commerce students?
3. Does a relationship exist between work-related learning and the employability of Faculty of Commerce students?
4. Is there a relationship between work-related learning and entrepreneurial skills among Faculty of Commerce students?

2. Literature

2.1. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)

According to Ogba et al. [5], David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is a valuable framework for exploring the effects of work-related learning on the professional development of students, particularly within the context of open universities, where the practical application of theoretical knowledge is essential. ELT asserts that knowledge acquisition is a dynamic process involving active participation and ongoing reflection [6]. According to Kolb [7], this learning cycle encompasses concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Dixit and Thomas [8] further argued that this cyclical model is particularly relevant to work-related learning, which immerses students in real-world tasks and necessitates applying academic knowledge, observing outcomes, and refining understanding. Mateko and Chingwanangwana [9] expressed that the adaptability of the theory also supports various learning environments, including distance education, which is crucial for open university students.

For Zimbabwe Open University students, the framework of Experiential Learning Theory reinforces the idea that work-related learning, when supported by guided reflection and academic alignment, fosters critical skill acquisition and enhances their preparedness for the job market [9]. This approach provides

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a comprehensive model that enables students to develop technical skills, interpersonal skills, and problem-solving capabilities. White [10] ELT further underscores the significance of reflective observation, which is essential for students' internalization of experiences, making them more competent and self-aware as they transition from academic to professional environments.

2.2. Definition and Importance of Work-Related Learning

According to Chaiyong and Moonpa [11], work-related learning (WRL) encompasses programs and activities that enable students to acquire direct experience in the workplace, applying their academic knowledge in practical settings. Scandurra et al. [12] revealed that WRL includes internships, apprenticeships, and industry partnerships where students engage in hands-on tasks that simulate real job roles. This transition from an academic environment to a professional one is crucial for students' professional growth, as it aids in developing career-relevant skills, enhances employability, and strengthens the connection between education and future careers [12]. For students in Zimbabwe, particularly those enrolled at Zimbabwe Open University, WRL acts as a bridge linking theoretical knowledge to applied skills, which is especially valuable in the country's evolving economic landscape [13].

2.3. Work-Related Learning and Professional Growth of Students

Ezeuduji et al. [14] indicated that work-related learning plays a critical role in enhancing students' employability and equipping them with industry-relevant skills. Govender and Våland [15] demonstrated that students who participate in WRL exhibit substantial improvements in their ability to apply academic knowledge in professional settings, communicate effectively, solve complex problems, and demonstrate leadership qualities. In Zimbabwe, where many students encounter economic and educational challenges, WRL provides an essential pathway for professional growth by granting them a competitive advantage through the acquisition of practical experience [16].

A notable benefit of WRL is the exposure it affords students to industry standards, workplace cultures, and expectations, which can differ significantly from academic contexts Chavan and Carter [17]. Manwa [18] argued that this exposure is particularly advantageous for Zimbabwe Open University students who often juggle their studies with work or familial responsibilities. Similarly, Patel [19] suggested that the skills gained extend beyond technical proficiency; they also encompass insights into workplace dynamics, enhancing students' adaptability and resilience. Moreover, Scandurra et al. [12] pointed out that WRL programs facilitate the creation of professional networks within chosen industries, pivotal for securing future employment opportunities. In Zimbabwe, where job prospects may be limited, such networks hold immense value.

2.4. Satisfaction Levels of Students with the Work-Related Learning Program

According to Tan et al. [20], student satisfaction with work-related learning programs is shaped by several key factors, including the quality of placements, alignment between academic objectives and workplace tasks, mentorship, and feedback. A study by Cleak and Smith [21] found that students with clear learning objectives, structured supervision, and regular evaluations reported higher levels of satisfaction. These components are critical in the Zimbabwean context, where Zimbabwe Open University students may face unique challenges such as limited access to quality placements and industry resources [22]. On the other hand, Stanley and Xu [23] argued that when WRL programs provide structured support and relevant mentorship, students feel more engaged and capable, resulting in increased satisfaction rates.

Furthermore, Madhlangobe et al. [24] indicated that the perceived value of WRL programs for future career prospects significantly influences satisfaction among students in Zimbabwe. In a competitive job market, students prioritize experiences that will enhance their employability and professional credibility [25]. The view corroborates with Lysova et al. [26], who expressed that high satisfaction levels are often associated with opportunities for meaningful contributions within the workplace, as these experiences

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reinforce students' sense of value and recognition. Additionally, Abdullah et al. [27] demonstrated that programs incorporating feedback mechanisms, enabling students to assess their progress and receive constructive input, contribute positively to satisfaction levels as they foster improvement and preparedness for future careers.

2.5. Satisfaction and Program Impact

According to Uppal et al. [28], satisfaction derived from work-related learning programs directly influences students' engagement, motivation, and overall professional growth. Fisher and Frey [29] added that satisfied students are more inclined to actively engage in their roles, leading to enhanced learning outcomes and increased confidence in performing professional tasks. Research by Wong and Chapman [30] indicates that students who report high satisfaction with their WRL experiences are more likely to recommend the program to peers, remain in their chosen fields, and demonstrate commitment to their professional development. In Zimbabwe, where job prospects can be uncertain, satisfaction with WRL programs may bolster students' determination to succeed and pursue long-term career ambitions, particularly in sectors facing skill shortages such as engineering, healthcare, and education [1].

Moreover, Wardley et al. [31] argued that satisfaction with work-related learning cultivates a commitment to lifelong learning, as students develop a favorable association with skill acquisition and professional advancement. This relevance is particularly pronounced among Zimbabwe's open university students, who may already be accustomed to independent study. A well-structured WRL program reinforces students' dedication to ongoing development, highlighting the necessity of continuous upskilling and adaptability for success in a fluctuating job market [32].

2.6. Work-Related Learning and Job Readiness

According to Herbert et al. [33], a primary goal of work-related learning is to prepare students for a seamless transition into their professional roles. On the other hand, Ritter et al. [34] indicated that job readiness encompasses technical skill proficiency and the capacity to adapt to workplace cultures, communicate effectively, and manage responsibilities. According to Vailasseri et al. [35], students engaged in WRL showcase improved job readiness through enhanced resilience, flexibility, and competency in addressing real-world challenges. In Zimbabwe's competitive environment, students who have completed WRL programs often distinguish themselves as better equipped to meet workplace demands [36].

For students enrolled at Zimbabwe Open University, WRL provides a critical advantage by allowing them to experience authentic workplace dynamics, effectively bridging the gap between academic learning and job requirements [36]. According to Zehr and Korte [37], this experience introduces students to employer expectations, including deadlines, performance evaluations, and teamwork, key elements of the contemporary workplace. Additionally, Vailasseri et al. [35] expressed that WRL encourages the development of soft skills such as interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and time management, all of which are essential for long-term career success.

2.7. The Role of Soft Skills and Practical Exposure

According to Borg et al. [38], job readiness is significantly influenced by acquiring soft skills, which are typically nurtured through frequent exposure to workplace situations. For Zimbabwean students, the development of these skills through WRL is crucial, as they often determine professional success across various industries [13]. Research by El-Sakran [39] indicates that employers prioritize graduates who excel in teamwork, effective communication, and adaptability. WRL programs that enable students to collaborate on projects, navigate conflicts, and receive feedback prepare them to meet these industry demands [40].

Patel [19] argued that practical exposure through WRL also enhances students' confidence in their abilities, fostering resilience in the face of challenges. In Zimbabwe, where economic instability can lead to volatile job markets, students equipped with WRL experience may find themselves better prepared to

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navigate uncertainties [16]. Similarly, Gerhardt [41] and Juchau [40] summarized that WRL offers students valuable insights into their professional strengths and weaknesses, guiding their career choices and helping identify areas for further improvement.

2.8. Conceptual Framework

Based on inadequate literature to explain the relationship between work-related learning and the professional growth of students, Figure 1 shows the developed conceptual framework.

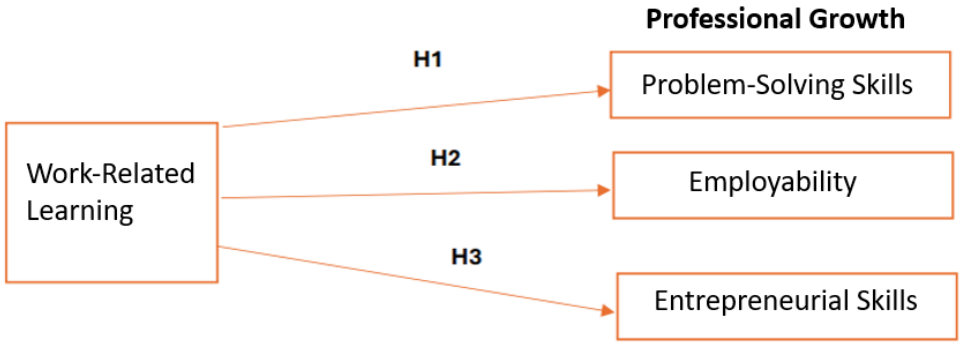

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework.

The independent variable for this investigation is work-related learning. The dependent variable is professional growth, which has been divided into three sub-variables: problem-solving skills, employability, and entrepreneurial skills. Therefore, three hypotheses have been developed as follows:

H_1: Work-related learning has a positive impact on the problem-solving skills of students.

H_2: Work-related learning has a positive impact on the employability of students.

H_3: Work-related learning has a positive impact on the entrepreneurial skills of students.

3. Research Methodology

This section outlines the methodology utilized in the study, emphasizing the research approach, target population, sampling techniques, data collection methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

For this study, the positivistic paradigm and quantitative approach were adopted. Positivism, because it generates explanatory associations or causal relationships that ultimately lead to prediction and control of the study, Park et al. [42]. Farquhar [43] emphasizes that the quantitative research approach collects numeric data and allows quick and relatively inexpensive modes of data collection. This research employed a quantitative research design to demonstrate the correlation between empirical observations and the mathematical representation of the quantitative relationships between two variables: work-related learning and the professional growth of students at the Zimbabwe Open University.

A target population refers to a specific subset within the larger population. Furthermore, Willie [44] states that the identification of the target population is based on the research question of a particular study. The study's target population consisted of 240 third-year students at the Faculty of Commerce, Zimbabwe Open University, specifically students required to engage in work-related learning. According to Bhandari [45], sampling involves selecting a predetermined number of observations from a larger population. Simple random sampling was used to determine a representative sample of 148 students. The sample size was determined based on Raosoft.

Data was collected using a closed-ended, semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using the five-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to choose a response ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. A pilot study identifies any issues potential respondents may encounter in understanding or interpreting the questions [46]. The objective is to ensure that the

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questionnaire is clear and unambiguous. Ten (10) homogenous respondents, who were not part of the main study, were randomly selected to participate in the pilot study. The pilot responses were subjected to Cronbach's Alpha test to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability and validity of the measuring instrument are two essential features of research. Using a measuring instrument that does not have reliability and validity will not yield beneficial results [47]. According to Flake et al. [48], validity is the degree to which a study accurately measures the specific construct it aims to assess. Silverman [49] emphasizes that reliability is essential for ensuring that an empirical investigation yields consistent results when a questionnaire is administered multiple times. In the context of this research study, factor analysis was employed to assess the construct validity of the research instrument, while item analysis was conducted to calculate the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, thereby measuring the reliability of the questionnaire [50].

3.1. Demographics

One hundred twenty-six questionnaires were returned, garnering a response rate of 85%, which is acceptable according to Hirschsohn [53]. Table 1 below shows the demographics of the respondents.

Table 1.
Sample demographics.

Gender	
Male	47% *(n=59)*
Female	53% *(n=67)*
Age	
18-27 years	32% *(n=40)*
28-37 years	44% *(n=56)*
Above 37 years	24% *(n=30)*
Employment	
Employed	40% *(n=50)*
Unemployed	26% *(n=33)*
Self-employed	34% *(n=43)*
Program	
Accounting	33% *(n=42)*
Banking and Finance	20% *(n=25)*
Human Resources Management	26% *(n=32)*
Marketing	21% *(n=27)*

The data collected was captured to form a data set and was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 30. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the sample composition and characteristics, and robust inferential statistics such as mediation analysis and correlation tests were used to identify causal relationships among the study's variables. Ethical conduct protects the sample respondents' moral rights and/or danger [51]. The anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents will be ensured, and all institutional ethical protocols will be rigorously followed. Bryman et al. [52] affirm that the key ethical considerations of the study include voluntary participation, avoiding harm, gaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, respecting the respondents' privacy, preventing deception, and the collection and storage of data. The study complied with the policies and procedures outlined by the institution's Research Ethics Committee.

The demographics reflect a diversity among respondents, comprising slightly more female students (53%) than male (47%). The age distribution shows a predominance of students aged 28-37 years (44%), indicating a significant number of working professionals. Regarding employment status, 40% are employed, 34% are self-employed, and 26% are unemployed, suggesting a mix of career development and education-seeking motives. In terms of program preference, Accounting is the most represented undergraduate program (33%), followed by Human Resources Management (26%), Marketing (21%), and Banking and Finance (20%). This demographic data shows the open university's role in accommodating adult learners and tailored services to meet the demands of people in the job market.

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3.2. Cronbach Alpha test

Before commencing the study, a Cronbach's alpha test was conducted to ascertain the study's internal reliability. Table 2 shows the results of the test.

Table 2.
Cronbach Alpha Reliability.

	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
Employability	0.848	0.863	5
Entrepreneurial skills	0.784	0.795	5
Problem-solving skills	0.812	0.831	5
Professional growth	0.805	0.827	5
Work-related learning	0.978	0.982	5

The results from the Cronbach Alpha test show that there were no issues in terms of internal reliability. Work-related learning was reliable, while employability, problem-solving skills, and professional growth were reliable. On the other hand, entrepreneurial skills showed moderate but acceptable reliability.

3.3. Factor Analysis and Sample Adequacy

KMO and Bartlett's tests were used for factor analysis and the determination of sample adequacy. Table 3 shows the results of the tests.

Table 3.
KMO and Bartlett's tests.

	KMO Test	Bartlett's Test
Employability	0.844	0.000
Entrepreneurial skills	0.859	0.000
Problem-solving skills	0.802	0.000
Professional growth	0.834	0.000
Work-related learning	0.815	0.000

As illustrated by Table 3, the results show that all the factors used in the study had very suitable scores, ranging from 0.802 to 0.859. Furthermore, the sample was adequate, as all factors scored less than 0.05.

4. Results and Discussions

This section is mandated to illustrate and discuss the results of the literature reviewed.

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4.1. Satisfaction Levels with Work-Related Learning

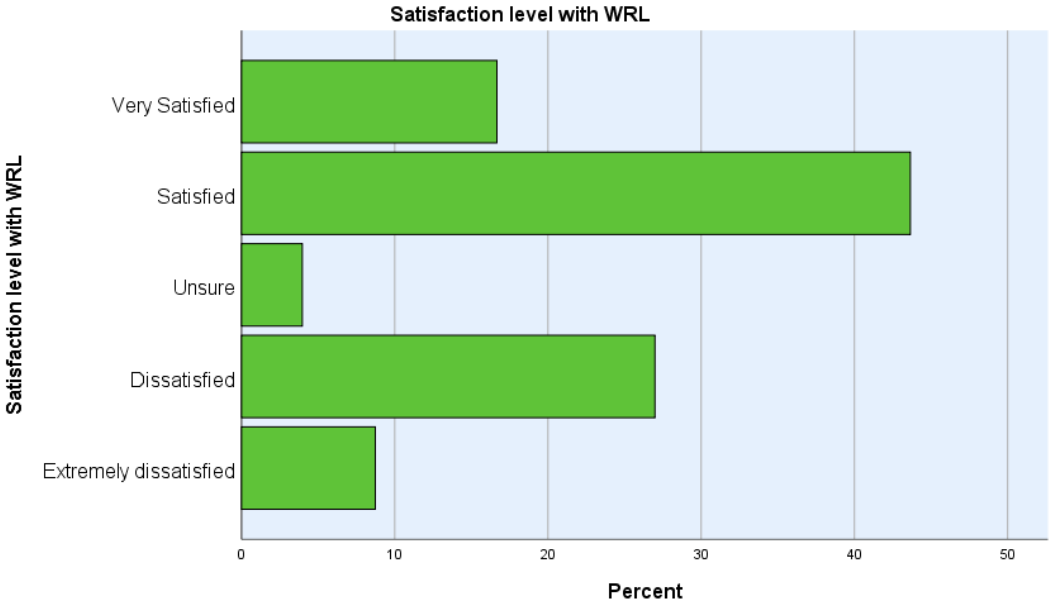

Figure 2.
Satisfaction level with work-related learning.

The results show that a large section of the respondents are satisfied with work-related learning. This is echoed by Garwe [1], who states that work-related learning is progressive; it helps learners acquire work skills that enhance their professional growth. However, 27% of the respondents indicated they were dissatisfied, a significant proportion. This is elaborated by Makuvaro et al. [2] who posit that students face many challenges in work-related learning, including doing tasks unrelated to their programs. This is similar to Muyengwa and Jitai [3], who observe that work-related learning is not conducive to students, as other employers treat them as cheap labor.

4.2. Work-Related Learning and Professional Growth

The main focus of the study was to determine the relationship between work-related learning and professional growth. Professional growth was measured through employability, entrepreneurial skills, and problem-solving skills. Tables 4 and 5 below show the correlational matrix and regression analysis results.

Table 4.
Correlational matrix.

	PS	EY	ES	WRL
PS	1.00*			
EY	0.567*	1.00*		
ES	0.743*	0.341*	1.00*	
WRL	0.663*	0.451*	-0.112*	1.00*

Note: PS: problem-solving, EY: employability, ES: entrepreneurial skills
WRL: work-related learning *Correlation is significant at 0.05 (2-tailed).

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Table 5.
Regression analysis results.

Model	R	R Square	Sig.
1	0.663	0.440	<0.05
2	0.451	0.203	<0.05
3	-0.112	0.013	>0.05

The results elaborate that work-related learning has a positive relationship with problem-solving skills. This investigation established a positive relationship between work-related learning and problem-solving ($R=0.663$, $P<0.05$). Thus, students who participate in work-related learning improve in terms of problem-solving. H1 is also supported by regression results ($P<0.05$). This means that work-related learning has a positive impact on problem-solving skills. This is in line with Borg et al. [38], who observe that their problem-solving skills are enhanced by placing students in the real world. Patel [19] states that students face practical challenges during work-related learning, which improves their problem-solving capabilities.

The findings show that work-related learning and employability have a positive relationship. This study demonstrates a positive relationship between work-related learning and problem-solving ($R=0.451$, $P<0.05$). Hence, students in work-related learning are employable. H2 is also supported by regression results ($P<0.05$), demonstrating that work-related learning positively impacts students' employability. This corroborates with Vailasseri et al. [35] who demonstrate that work-related learning improves students' job readiness. This also cements Mukwambo [36]'s argument that work-related learning makes students competitive in the job industry.

The results demonstrate that work-related learning has a negative relationship with entrepreneurial skills. This investigation established a negative relationship between work-related learning and entrepreneurial skills ($R=-0.112$, $P>0.05$). Hence, students who go for work-related learning do not develop entrepreneurial skills. H2 is also not supported by regression results ($P>0.05$). This finding contradicts Zehr and Korte [37], who found that students in work-related learning improve in terms of skills such as communication and entrepreneurship. Rigidity and bureaucracy in organizations often result in students failing to gain entrepreneurial skills [34].

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that students are satisfied with work-related learning. However, a significant section is not happy. Hence, universities need to collaborate with the employing organizations to remove barriers to effective work-related learning. The investigation also concludes a positive relationship between work-related learning and professional growth. This is because the study shows that problem-solving skills and employability are positively impacted by work-related learning. However, entrepreneurial skills were found to be negatively affected by work-related learning. Hosting organizations should implement policies that allow students in work-related learning to be creative and innovative.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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