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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH: WORK-BASED  
LEARNING (WBL) AT UNIVERSITI TENAGA NASIONAL**

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**Abstract**

Collaborating institutions of higher education and business industries to provide on-the-job training is essential to the success of Work-Based Learning (WBL). One of the ways people learn, experiential education involves applying what they have learned in class to real-world scenarios. Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) recognized that many Malaysian employers have voiced concerns that recent graduates lack the necessary skills and experience to succeed in their positions, and the country has taken note. In addition, the vast majority of employers also have reported that recent graduates lack the necessary skills, knowledge, and abilities to do their jobs. In line with this, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) has stated that the goal of WBL is to help students achieve the learning outcomes of their programme or unit of study by gaining knowledge and skills related to a particular industry from the workplace environment. Hence, in year 2020, Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) has started to introduce WBL program in order to ensure the graduates able to improve their employability skills and receive a variety of possibilities for career growth and employability. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by UNITEN students in their WBL program. Data will be collected by using semi-structured interview and secondary data. The respondents are consisting of students who taking WBL program in UNITEN.

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## 1. Introduction

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses, new requirements are being placed on the current educational system. Thus long, the education system has been focused solely on producing graduates, independent of the requirements of the workforce, leading to a large number of graduates being rejected by the job market because their skills are outdated (Jalinus & Efendi, 2020). Minister in the Prime Minister's Department (Economy) of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed mentioned the unemployment rate has been trending downward, and in June 2022 it hit a new low of 3.8%, the lowest level since before the Covid-19 pandemic (Ismail et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Lakshmanan (2022), it is a difficult conundrum to solve that one cannot acquire work experience without employment, but it is extremely difficult to find employment when one has no relevant work history. In addition, another survey found that nearly half of respondents cited a lack of relevant opportunities as a barrier to gaining the employability skills they need, while 28% cited a lack of ready access to career and skills insights. However, employers reported recent graduates lack not only practical experience, but also the necessary knowledge, attitude, critical thinking, and soft skills (Boost Higher Education Ties, 2022).

Historically, universities have responded to these growing demands in one of two ways, depending on the context (Morley, 2018). He explained; one incorporates work readiness into formal education by making it a required part of the curriculum. The second strategy expands students' access to practical experience through internships or the incorporation of business perspectives into academic programmes. Work-based learning (WBL) is one of the instructional strategy wherein students engage in paid work during their formal education. This allows them to gain practical knowledge and expertise in fields relevant to their major while also preparing them for the challenges of the professional world.

Work-based learning (WBL) can be quite different from one country to another due to differences in the standard educational and occupational development practises that are widely followed (Bahl & Dietzen, 2019). According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education), there is a gap between the supply and demand of graduates in Malaysia, as reported by employers, who say that recent graduates lack the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes. As a result, WBL intends to improve education by fostering greater participation from business in the development and delivery of its programmes. Recognizing the value of WBL, UNITEN has incorporated it into its degree offerings, such as the Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) in Human Resource Management and Bachelor of Business Administration (Honours) in Marketing Programme. The objective is to enhance the student's capacity for effective communication and time management beyond what can be accomplished in the classroom, and broaden the student's experiential learning beyond what is possible within the University's courses.

Hence, since UNITEN has introduced the Work-Based Learning mode in year 2020, it is important to know the experience and challenges of the students. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and challenges faced by UNITEN students in WBL programmes.

## 2. Literature Review

There are several different definitions of WBL available in the literature. For instance, the authors of *Work-Based Learning: A New Higher Education* (Boud & Solomon, 2001) defined WBL as including both addressing learner needs and contributing to the long-term growth of the organization. Beside that, according to Jalinus and Efendi (2020) WBL is essentially a learning model method that transfers knowledge by using the workplace as a medium. Researchers found that the WBL approach requires participation from students, academic institutions, and lab facilities up till industrial party. Students will benefit from having a better value characteristic since they will be better in theory, academics, and direct technical abilities.

Meanwhile, Malaysia Qualifications Agency (MQA) stated that WBL is becoming a more significant factor in the improvement of academic qualification and the development of a person's lifelong learning through the acquisition of credits for negotiated learning in the workplace. WBL give students the opportunity to learn about work in a real workplace (Musset & Kurekova, 2018). However, research revealed that there are certain problems with WBL's implementation and other quality-related difficulties. According to Cunningham et al. (2016), work-based learning is by necessity and design focused on information that is frequently unsystematic, socially created, and action centered by the worker in order to attain specified results that are important to others.

Stephen and Festus (2022) stated that activities associated with WBL programmes that do not perfectly fit into regular schools and a lack of effective collaboration between TVET and industry are challenges against the use of WBL. The growth of work-integrated learning in higher education has presented difficulties for all parties. According to Ümarik et al. (2010), among the challenges in WBL are the level of skills of workplace supervisors is occasionally insufficient, there are communication issues between schools and the workplace, there is ambiguous culpability, and the parties' rights are not clearly defined.

## 3. Methodology

This study is expected to conduct by using qualitative technique. The phenomenological method will be used, which is based on an examination of the participants' subjective experiences. Phenomenology approach seeks to describe the significance of students' experience, both in terms of the content of the experience and the manner in which it was had (Neubauer et al., 2019). This method of research can be used to provide further insight into the topic at hand, thus enhancing the quality of the information presented. The sample will include WBL students in UNITEN. Participants are encouraged to draw on their own experiences in this study's discussion-based research design.

Data will be gathered through interviews with representatives from each side and suggestions from students at higher education institutions. The interviews will analyzed participants' experiences and opinions, and overall outlooks on the topic. The data collected through the interviews will be analyzed through the use of thematic analysis. Next, interview notes for each interview will be analyzed to identify independent ideas as basic themes; a code will be assigned to each as a marker. Next, based on all the basic

themes revealed in the research, a broader category will be developed, leading to the identification of organizing themes.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Changes in higher education are happening quickly. Everyone involved in the educational system is pressing for new, creative approaches to teaching that take into account the wide range of students and the rapid social and economic shifts. It is anticipated that the information presented to students will be distinct from what has traditionally been taught in educational institutions. Professional organizations in search of growth should place a premium on work-based learning in today's competitive job market. Since the workplace is now seen as the foundational domain for education, work-based learning has become increasingly valuable to universities as well (Ahmad, 2014).

According to research conducted by Ali and Marwan (2019), students who participate in WBL are more likely to acquire a set of transferable skills useful for any profession. Moreover, activities in experiential learning are also a great way to help students learn and retain new information. Scott (2020) affirmed that providing opportunities for higher education through work-based learning is more likely to be taken advantage of by both individuals and businesses if it is seen to benefit both parties. Such a feeling suggests that the provider is up-to-date with and involved with the wider world.

For students, assessments based on work-based learning (WBL) allow students to showcase what they have learned and what they have accomplished while also giving instructors a quick way to spot those who are struggling (Ahmad et al., 2020). Moreover, during the process of implementation, educational institutions are prompted to establish clear objectives that are supported by the institution's business partners, lecturers, and students.

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