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Unequal access to work-integrated learning: misalignment, barriers, and inclusion for students with disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is central to higher education strategies for strengthening university-to-work transitions; however, access and participation remain uneven. This study examines barriers to, and facilitators of, work placement participation for students with disabilities in Irish higher education. Drawing on survey data from Disability Office and Career Office managers, complemented by student-reported experiences, it adopts a mixed-methods approach combining composite indices and thematic analysis. The findings reveal a systematic misalignment between the domains in which barriers are most frequently reported (employer and structural) and those in which support is most developed (primarily institutional and student-focused). The analysis also identifies work placement type (compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional) is a key institutional condition shaping access and participation. The study conceptualises WIL as a system characterised by misalignment across domains, reflecting the distribution of responsibilities across institutions, workplace, and regulatory actors, and highlights the need for greater coordination to support inclusive pathways.

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Introduction

Higher education participation among students with disabilities has expanded significantly over the past decade. In Ireland, the proportion of new entrants reporting a disability has increased from around 5 per cent in 2011/12 to almost 18 per cent in 2021/22 (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2023). Despite this progress, disparities in labour market outcomes persist, with graduates with disabilities more likely to be in part-time employment and concentrated in lower salary bands (HEA, 2023). These patterns suggest that widening access to higher education has not translated into equitable post-graduation outcomes, placing increasing emphasis on employability as a key dimension of inclusion in higher education policy.

Work-integrated learning (WIL), including work placements, has become central to these efforts to strengthen the transition from education to employment (Bell et al., 2025;

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Dollinger et al., 2023; Jackson et al., 2025). A substantial body of research demonstrates that WIL supports academic achievement, skill development, and graduate outcomes such as employment, career prospects, and earnings (Arsenis & Flores, 2024a; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2015; Jackson, 2015). However, access to these opportunities remains uneven. Emerging evidence indicates that WIL participation is stratified, with structural, organisational, and individual barriers disproportionately affecting underrepresented groups, including students with disabilities (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2025; Papadopoulos, 2025). As a result, WIL may not only enhance employability, but also reproduce inequalities in access to employment-relevant experiences.

Understanding these inequalities requires moving beyond individual-level explanations towards a system-level perspective. Access to WIL is shaped by the interaction of multiple actors, including higher education institutions, employers, and, in some fields, professional or accrediting bodies (Harpur et al., 2025). These actors operate under distinct priorities and constraints, influencing how work placements are organised, accessed, and experienced (Dollinger et al., 2023; Lasrado et al., 2024). Participation therefore depends not only on institutional provision, but also on workplace practices, regulatory requirements, and broader structural conditions. While recent research has called for system-level approaches to inclusive WIL (Bell et al., 2025; Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2025), there remains limited empirical evidence on how barriers and supports are distributed across these domains and how this shapes participation for students with disabilities.

This gap is particularly salient in the Irish context, where legislative and policy frameworks emphasise the right of students with disabilities to participate in higher education on an equal basis. Instruments such as the Disability Act 2005 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 establish a legal obligation to provide reasonable accommodation, while policy frameworks, including the National Access Plan (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [DFHERIS], 2022), extend this commitment beyond access to encompass participation, progression, and graduate outcomes. However, work placements sit at the intersection of higher education institutions, employers, and professional bodies, raising questions about how these commitments are operationalised in practice. Existing research highlights ongoing challenges related to disclosure, support provision, and tensions between competency requirements and inclusive practice (Nolan et al., 2015), suggesting a gap between policy commitments and the conditions under which participation is enacted.

This study addresses this gap by examining barriers to, and facilitators of, access to and participation in work placements for undergraduate students with disabilities in Irish higher education. Drawing on survey data from Disability Office and Career Office managers across multiple institutions, complemented by student-reported experiences, the study analyses how barriers and supports are perceived and experienced across stakeholder groups and work placement types (compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional), capturing both organisational conditions and lived experiences of participation.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it provides new empirical evidence on how barriers and facilitators are distributed across employer-related, structural, institutional, and student-level domains, highlighting differences between institutional perspectives

and student-reported experiences. Second, it identifies work placement type as a key institutional condition shaping access, with distinct configurations of constraints and supports. Third, and most importantly, it conceptualises ‘misalignment’ as the uneven distribution of barriers and supports across domains governed by different institutional logics, highlighting how differences in authority and capacity across actors shape participation outcomes. To explain this pattern, the study draws on an institutional logics perspective, which highlights how WIL is shaped by distinct organising principles across academic, employer, and professional-regulatory domains (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). From this perspective, misalignment reflects the distribution of responsibilities and constraints across actors within the WIL system, rather than a simple gap in provision. This framing contributes to the literature by moving beyond participation-focused approaches towards understanding inclusion as a problem of coordination across domains.

The findings have important implications for higher education policy and practice. Improving access requires not only strengthening institutional support, but also addressing employer practices, structural constraints, and regulatory frameworks. Inclusive WIL should therefore be understood as a system-level challenge requiring coordinated action across actors. While situated in Ireland, the findings speak to broader international challenges in aligning institutional, workplace, and regulatory actors in the design of inclusive WIL systems.

Background

WIL has become a central mechanism linking higher education to labour market outcomes, incorporating activities that combine academic study with workplace experience, including work placements and other forms of industry engagement. It is widely positioned as a core component of employability strategies, reflecting its role in facilitating the transition from education to employment (Inceoglu et al., 2019; Jackson, 2015). A substantial body of research shows that participation in WIL is associated with improved graduate outcomes, including enhanced transferable skills, greater career clarity, stronger professional networks, and improved employment prospects (Arsenis & Flores, 2024a; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Crawford & Wang, 2015; Jackson & Rowe, 2023). These benefits are typically explained through mechanisms such as human capital accumulation, exposure to workplace norms, employer signalling, and access to recruitment pathways (Arsenis & Flores, 2024b; DiMeglio et al., 2022; Jackson, 2015).

Despite these benefits, access to WIL remains uneven. A growing body of research highlights that participation is shaped by structural, organisational, and individual constraints that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups, including students with disabilities (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2025). Financial costs, unpaid work placements, and transport barriers have been identified as key obstacles, contributing to what has been described as ‘placement poverty’ (Bell et al., 2025). In addition, workplace practices, including limited flexibility, inconsistent accommodation provision, and concerns about stigma, further influence access and participation (Dollinger et al., 2023; Thompson & Brewster, 2023). These findings suggest that WIL may not only support employability, but also reproduce inequalities in access to employment-relevant opportunities.

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasises that these inequalities cannot be understood solely in terms of individual disadvantage. Instead, access to WIL is shaped by the interaction of multiple actors, including higher education institutions, employers, and, in some fields, professional or accrediting bodies (Harpur et al., 2025; Jackson et al., 2025). Each of these actors operates under distinct priorities and constraints, influencing how work placements are organised, accessed, and experienced (Dollinger et al., 2023; Lasrado et al., 2024). This perspective highlights that participation is contingent not only on institutional provision, but also on workplace practices, regulatory requirements, and broader structural conditions. As a result, there have been increasing calls for system-level approaches to inclusive WIL that account for the distribution of responsibilities and constraints across domains (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Lasrado et al., 2024).

However, important gaps remain in the literature. First, research on WIL and inclusion is predominantly student-centred, with limited attention to how institutional actors, such as Disability Offices and Career Services, perceive and respond to barriers. Nevertheless, these institutional actors play a critical role in coordinating work placements, providing accommodations, and engaging with employers. Second, work placements are often treated as a homogeneous form of provision, with insufficient differentiation between compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional work placements, which are likely to be shaped by different institutional and regulatory conditions (Lasrado et al., 2024; William & Lowe, 2025). Third, while existing research identifies barriers across multiple domains, it has not systematically examined how these domains interact or the extent to which institutional responses align with the primary sources of constraint. As a result, there is limited empirical evidence on how support is distributed across domains relative to where barriers arise.

Addressing these gaps requires moving beyond approaches that focus on individual participation or institutional practices in isolation, towards an understanding of WIL as a system shaped by the interaction of multiple actors and conditions. This provides the basis for examining how barriers and facilitators are distributed across domains, how they vary across work placement types, and how institutional support strategies relate to the broader conditions influencing participation.

Framework, data and methods

Conceptual framework and research questions

This study conceptualises access to and participation in WIL for students with disabilities as shaped by the interaction between individual characteristics, institutional arrangements, and the organisational contexts in which work placements are embedded. Rather than treating barriers as arising primarily from individual limitations, the analysis adopts a social relational understanding of disability, in which disadvantage emerges through the interaction between individuals and the social, organisational, and material environments in which participation takes place (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2013). From this perspective, disability is not reducible to impairment alone, but is produced and intensified when institutional practices, workplace norms, and structural conditions fail to accommodate diverse forms of participation.

To explain how these environments affect access to WIL, the study draws on an institutional logics perspective (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). WIL is conceptualised as operating across multiple domains governed by distinct organising principles. An academic logic structures the actions of higher education institutions, prioritising student progression, programme requirements, and the provision of support services (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). An employer or market logic shapes workplace participation, emphasising productivity, organisational fit, and operational efficiency (Dollinger et al., 2023). In some fields, a professional-regulatory logic governs participation through external competency frameworks and accreditation requirements, which may constrain flexibility (Papadopoulos, 2025; Thompson & Brewster, 2023).

Bringing these perspectives together allows WIL to be understood as a system in which inclusion depends on the degree of alignment across domains. Barriers and facilitators are therefore examined across four empirical categories: employer-related, structural, institutional, and student-level factors. These categories reflect observable features of participation but are interpreted as manifestations of broader institutional arrangements. Employer-related factors capture workplace practices and cultures; structural factors reflect the distribution of opportunities and constraints such as cost and transport; institutional factors capture policies and support within higher education institutions; and student-level factors reflect disclosure, confidence, and health-related conditions formed by wider contexts.

This framework provides the basis for examining how barriers and facilitators are distributed across domains, how they vary across work placement types, and how institutional responses relate to the primary sources of constraint. The study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are the main barriers and facilitators of access to and participation in work placements for students with disabilities from an institutional perspective?
- RQ2. How do these barriers and facilitators vary across stakeholder groups and types of work placements (compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional)?
- RQ3. To what extent do institutional support strategies align with the primary sources of barriers, and what implications does this have for inclusive practice?

Data

The empirical analysis draws on original survey data collected from eight publicly funded higher education institutions in Ireland, including universities, a technological university, and colleges. The study focuses on two institutional stakeholder groups: Disability Office managers and Career Office managers. Responses were obtained from Disability Office managers in all eight institutions and from Career Office managers in five institutions. These actors play complementary roles in supporting students' transitions to employment, including accommodation provision, career guidance, and employer engagement. Their responses capture how institutional actors perceive barriers and facilitators, as well as how these are addressed within existing institutional arrangements.

To complement these institutional perspectives, the study includes survey responses from 50 undergraduate students with disabilities who completed work placements within the same institutional contexts. While institutional respondents provide insight into

organisational practices and support structures, student responses capture the lived conditions of participation, including experiences of accessing work placements, navigating workplace environments, and requesting accommodations. The inclusion of both perspectives allows for an interpretive comparison between how barriers are perceived and how they are experienced.

The survey instrument combines closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items capture the presence of specific barriers and facilitators across predefined categories, while open-ended responses provide qualitative insight into challenges, experiences, and suggested improvements. Both institutional and student respondents report on barriers and facilitators across different types of work placements (compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional), allowing for analysis across distinct institutional and regulatory contexts.

Institutional participants were recruited via email in Trimester 1 of 2025 and provided with a participant information statement, consent form, and a link to an online survey. Student participants were recruited through Disability Offices, which distributed the survey to students registered with their offices. Participation was voluntary, and all responses were collected anonymously. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the author's institutional review process, and all data were handled in accordance with data protection and confidentiality requirements.

Methods

The analysis adopts a mixed-methods approach combining descriptive quantitative analysis with qualitative thematic analysis. Consistent with the exploratory aim of the study, namely, to map patterns across institutional domains, the quantitative component is designed to provide descriptive insight into the distribution of reported barriers and facilitators, rather than to establish causal relationships.

To summarise patterns in the institutional data, category-level composite indices are constructed across four domains: employer-related, structural, institutional, and student-level factors. Survey items are recoded into binary indicators, taking the value 1 when a barrier or facilitator is reported and 0 otherwise. For Likert-scale items, responses are recoded to capture the presence of meaningful constraints or supports. Indices are then computed as unweighted means of these indicators, ranging from 0 to 1, and interpreted as the proportion of items within each category identified by respondents. For example, an index value of 0.75 indicates that 75 per cent of the component items within a category were reported by respondents. Higher index values therefore reflect a greater concentration of reported barriers or facilitators within a given domain. This approach provides a consistent method for aggregating multi-item responses and identifying patterns across stakeholder groups and work placement types (Nardo et al., 2008). Further detail on index construction is provided in the Supplementary Online Material.

Given this design, the analysis does not employ statistical inference. Differences across stakeholder groups and work placement types are therefore interpreted as indicative patterns rather than statistically established differences. While the use of binary indicators and unweighted indices enables comparability across domains, it does not capture variation in intensity or relative importance. This trade-off is consistent with the study's objective of providing a system-level mapping of barriers and facilitators.

Student data is analysed separately using descriptive statistics. As student responses are collected through multi-response items rather than structured indicators aligned with the composite index framework, direct quantitative comparability with institutional indices is not possible. Instead, the student data provide complementary insight into the lived conditions of participation, enabling an interpretive comparison with institutional perspectives.

Open-ended responses from both institutional stakeholders and students are analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses are coded inductively to identify recurring themes related to barriers, facilitators, and suggested improvements, with particular attention to employer practices, structural constraints, institutional processes, and variation across work placement types. The qualitative analysis is used to contextualise and interpret the quantitative findings, rather than as a basis for generalisation. Further detail on the thematic analysis is provided in the Supplementary Online Material.

Findings

Barriers and facilitators: institutional perspectives and student experiences (RQ1)

As described in the Methods section, composite indices represent the proportion of items within each category identified by respondents, with higher values indicating more frequently reported barriers or facilitators. As shown in Table 1, employer-related barriers display the highest index values (mean = 0.58). This category comprises two items: employers' lack of awareness or preparedness and inflexible workplace policies or requirements. Among Disability Office respondents ($N = 8$), 75 per cent identified employers' lack of awareness or preparedness and 75 per cent identified inflexible workplace policies, resulting in an employer-related barrier index of 0.75. Among Career Office respondents ($N = 5$), the corresponding figures were 60 per cent and 20 per cent, producing an index of 0.40. Across both stakeholder groups, the overall index value of 0.58 indicates that employer-related barriers were identified in 58 per cent of the relevant responses. Structural barriers are also commonly reported (mean = 0.29), particularly in relation to the availability of accessible opportunities, financial costs, and transport constraints. Institutional barriers display comparatively lower index values (mean = 0.26), although they remain present in relation to institutional resources and regulatory requirements. These findings indicate that barriers are more frequently located in domains outside the direct control of higher education institutions.

The qualitative responses reinforce this interpretation, highlighting the central role of employer knowledge and workplace culture. Respondents noted that 'employers may not always be aware of how to support students with disabilities', and in some cases that students were perceived as 'slowing down the team'. Positive experiences, by contrast,

Table 1. Barrier indices by stakeholder group.

Barrier category	Disability Office ($N = 8$)	Career Office ($N = 5$)	Overall
Employer	0.75	0.40	0.58
Structural	0.38	0.20	0.29
Institutional	0.31	0.20	0.26

Table 2. Facilitator indices by stakeholder group.

Facilitator category	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)	Overall
Employer-focused support	0.38	0.40	0.39
Institutional support	0.83	0.75	0.79
Student-focused support	0.88	1.00	0.94

were associated with supportive supervisors, inclusive team environments, and flexible practices, suggesting that workplace culture plays a key role in shaping participation.

Student-reported data provide a complementary perspective on how barriers are experienced in practice (Table C2 in the Supplementary Online Material). The most frequently reported constraints relate to structural and individual conditions, including lack of confidence (58 per cent), inflexible placement requirements (52 per cent), transport barriers (50 per cent), financial costs (46 per cent), and difficulties balancing placements with health needs (44 per cent). Employer-related concerns, such as fear of stigma or discrimination (36 per cent), are also reported. These findings indicate that students experience barriers not only in accessing placements, but in sustaining participation under specific structural and organisational conditions.

Qualitative responses further highlight the importance of structural constraints and relational processes. Respondents noted that ‘students struggle with the cost of relocation and accommodation’, and that ‘transport can be a major barrier, especially for placements outside cities’. Disclosure and accommodation processes also emerged as key challenges. Students were described as ‘often unsure when or how to disclose their disability’, particularly as ‘disclosure can be difficult at interview stage’. In addition, accommodations were not always easily transferable, with one respondent observing that ‘accommodations that work in college don’t always translate into the workplace’. Together, these findings suggest that participation is shaped by ongoing, context-specific processes rather than by institutional support alone.

In contrast, facilitators are more frequently located within higher education institutions (Table 2). Institutional and student-focused support display the highest index values, including pre-placement preparation, disclosure guidance, and accommodation support. Employer-focused support, such as training and awareness initiatives, is reported less frequently. This distribution suggests that support is concentrated in domains where institutions have greater capacity to intervene.

Student responses again provide a complementary perspective (Table C3 in the Supplementary Online Material). The most frequently reported facilitators relate to workplace environments, including positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors (70 per cent), supportive workplace cultures (65 per cent), and increased employer awareness (56 per cent). Institutional supports, such as university services and guidance on disclosure, are also important but are not the most frequently cited factors. Qualitative responses reinforce the importance of relational aspects of work placements, with respondents emphasising that ‘supportive supervisors and teams make a huge difference’, and that students benefit from increased confidence and ‘feeling part of the team’. These findings indicate that while institutional support is important, the conditions enabling participation are strongly shaped by workplace practices.

Variation across stakeholder groups and work placement types (RQ2)

Reported barriers and facilitators vary across work placement types, indicating that participation is shaped by differences in how work placements are organised and governed. From an institutional perspective, compulsory work placements are associated with relatively higher index values across employer, structural, and institutional categories (Table 3), particularly in Career Office responses. This suggests that more structured forms of provision may concentrate multiple constraints within fixed programme requirements, including limited flexibility in timing, location, and accommodation.

Optional work placements display comparatively lower index values in some categories, particularly institutional barriers, consistent with their more flexible and less structured nature. However, this flexibility is complemented by greater reliance on employer discretion and individual resources. Professionally mandated work placements show a distinct pattern, with relatively higher institutional and regulatory constraints reported, reflecting the influence of external standards and competency requirements.

Student-reported data provide additional insight into how these differences are experienced (Table C4 in the Supplementary Online Material). In optional work placements, barriers are more frequently associated with individual and capacity-related factors, including confidence and balancing health needs. In compulsory work placements, structural constraints such as transport and financial costs are more prominent. Professionally mandated work placements are associated with a combination of constraints, including inflexibility, financial pressures, and disclosure-related concerns. These patterns indicate that work placement types are associated with distinct configurations of barriers rather than a uniform experience of participation.

Qualitative responses provide further context for these patterns. Respondents highlighted that professionally mandated work placements can be particularly constrained, noting that ‘professional placements can be very rigid in terms of requirements’, with ‘limited flexibility in how competencies are achieved’. At the same time, optional work placements were described as relying more on self-sourcing, which may disadvantage students with fewer resources or lower levels of confidence. These findings suggest that differences across work placement types reflect underlying institutional and regulatory conditions.

Facilitators also vary across work placement types (Table 4). Institutional data indicate that support is more frequently reported in compulsory work placements, consistent with their structured and institutional programme-embedded nature. Optional work placements display more variable levels of support, while professionally mandated work placements show uneven patterns across stakeholder groups. Student responses suggest that facilitators are consistently associated with workplace environments across all work

Table 3. Barrier indices by work placement type and stakeholder group.

Work placement type	Employer		Structural		Institutional	
	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)
Compulsory	0.56	0.80	0.69	1.00	0.69	0.90
Professional body	0.25	0.50	0.38	0.30	0.50	0.60
Optional	0.50	0.40	0.31	0.40	0.31	0.10

Table 4. Facilitator indices by work placement type and stakeholder group.

Work placement type	Employer		Institutional		Student	
	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)	Disability Office (N = 8)	Career Office (N = 5)
Compulsory	0.38	0.20	0.63	0.55	0.90	1.00
Professional body	0.25	0.20	0.38	0.15	0.80	0.40
Optional	0.00	0.40	0.31	0.40	0.40	0.60

placement types, including supportive cultures and relationships with supervisors and colleagues. This indicates that, regardless of work placement type, workplace conditions remain central to participation.

Alignment between barriers, facilitators, and support strategies (RQ3)

Bringing these findings together reveals a pattern of misalignment between the domains in which barriers are most frequently reported and those in which support is most developed. Institutional respondents report barriers primarily in employer-related and structural domains, while facilitators are concentrated in institutional and student-focused domains. This indicates that support is directed towards areas where higher education institutions have the greatest capacity to intervene, rather than where constraints are most pronounced.

Qualitative responses reinforce this pattern and highlight challenges in coordination across actors. Respondents noted that ‘there can be a lack of clarity about who is responsible for supporting the student on placement’, and emphasised the need for ‘more coordination between services and employers’. These insights point to gaps between institutional provision and workplace practices, as well as the importance of clearer processes for accommodation and communication.

Student responses provide a complementary perspective. Reported barriers frequently relate to structural and individual conditions, while facilitators are often associated with workplace environments and relationships. Qualitative responses reinforce this pattern, highlighting gaps between institutional support and workplace practices, as well as the importance of employer engagement, flexibility, and communication. Respondents also emphasised the need for greater coordination between institutions and employers, including clearer processes for accommodation and more consistent collaboration.

Variation across work placement types further illustrates this pattern. Professionally mandated work placements combine relatively high levels of both constraint and support, suggesting that institutional efforts coexist with structural and regulatory limitations. Optional work placements display lower levels of reported constraint but also less systematically developed support, indicating greater reliance on individual resources and employer discretion. Compulsory work placements combine structured support with constraints related to flexibility and participation conditions.

Overall, these findings indicate that the domains in which support is most developed do not fully overlap with the domains in which constraints are most frequently reported. Rather than reflecting a simple gap in provision, this pattern points to differences in how responsibilities and capacities are distributed across actors within the work placement system.

Discussion

In this context, misalignment can be understood as a system-level condition arising from institutional complexity, in which the domains generating the greatest constraints are not those where the strongest interventions are located. This extends institutional logics perspectives by focusing on how differences in authority and capacity across actors translate into uneven patterns of support and constraint. This study provides evidence that access to and participation in work placements for students with disabilities is shaped by a structural misalignment between the domains in which barriers arise and those in which support is most developed. Institutional respondents more frequently locate barriers in employer-related and structural domains, while support is concentrated in student-focused and institutional domains. Student-reported experiences similarly emphasise the importance of structural conditions, including financial costs, transport, and flexibility, alongside workplace environments and relationships. These findings indicate that participation in WIL is not determined solely by the availability of institutional support, but by how responsibilities and constraints are distributed across the broader system in which work placements are embedded.

Drawing on an institutional logics perspective (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012), this pattern can be understood as a consequence of how WIL is organised across domains governed by distinct priorities. Higher education institutions operate primarily within an academic logic, where inclusion is enacted through student preparation, coordination, and accommodation support (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). This helps explain the relatively high levels of institutional and student-focused facilitators observed in the data. In contrast, many of the barriers identified in both institutional and student responses are located within employer or market logics, where participation is affected by organisational priorities such as productivity, operational efficiency, and perceived fit (Dollinger et al., 2023). Structural constraints, including financial costs, transport barriers, and the availability of accessible opportunities, reflect broader systemic conditions, increasingly conceptualised as forms of ‘placement poverty’ (Bell et al., 2025). In professionally mandated work placements, an additional professional-regulatory logic operates, where participation is governed by external standards and competency requirements, which may limit flexibility (Papadopoulos, 2025; Thompson & Brewster, 2023).

From this perspective, the observed misalignment is not simply a gap in provision, but reflects the distribution of authority and capacity across actors within the WIL system. Higher education institutions are best positioned to intervene within the academic domain, which helps explain why support is concentrated in areas such as preparation, disclosure guidance, and coordination. However, many of the constraints shaping participation, particularly those related to workplace practices and structural conditions, lie beyond their direct control. This extends existing research on the multi-actor nature of WIL (Harpur et al., 2025; Jackson et al., 2025) by providing empirical evidence on how barriers and supports are differently located across domains. It also contributes to the literature on inclusive WIL by reframing participation not only as an issue of access or support, but as a problem of coordination across institutional, workplace, and regulatory contexts (Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Lasrado et al., 2024).

These findings are particularly significant when considered in relation to Irish legislative and policy frameworks. While instruments such as the Disability Act 2005, the Equal Status Acts 2000, and the National Access Plan (DFHERIS, 2022) establish a strong commitment to equality of participation and outcomes, the results suggest that these commitments are unevenly operationalised within work placements. The concentration of barriers in employer-related and structural domains, alongside the focus of support within higher education institutions, points to a misalignment between where constraints arise and where policy-driven interventions are most developed. This indicates that, although responsibility for inclusion is formally shared across actors, the capacity to enact inclusive practices remains unevenly distributed. In this sense, policy commitment without effective cross-actor coordination risks reproducing, rather than reducing, inequalities in access to employment-relevant experiences.

The integration of institutional and student perspectives provides further insight into how these dynamics are experienced in practice. While institutional respondents emphasise employer-related barriers, student accounts highlight the lived conditions of participation, including financial costs, transport challenges, and the need to balance work placements with health requirements. These findings are consistent with prior research showing that students with disabilities face both structural and relational barriers in WIL environments (Dollinger et al., 2023; Thompson & Brewster, 2023). At the same time, students identify workplace environments and relationships, such as supportive cultures and interactions with supervisors and colleagues, as key facilitators of participation. This indicates that the conditions enabling inclusion extend beyond institutional provision and are affected by workplace practices, reinforcing the importance of employer engagement in inclusive WIL design.

The analysis also highlights work placement type as a key institutional condition influencing access and participation. Compulsory work placements, embedded within degree programmes, are associated with more structured support but also with constraints related to flexibility and participation conditions. Optional work placements rely more on employer discretion and individual resources, which may contribute to uneven access, consistent with broader concerns about stratification in WIL (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bell et al., 2025). Professionally mandated work placements display a distinct configuration, combining relatively high levels of both support and constraint, reflecting the influence of regulatory requirements and the structured nature of these placements, which may limit flexibility and affect student wellbeing and participation (Luu et al., 2026; Papadopoulos, 2025; Thompson & Brewster, 2023). These findings support recent calls to move beyond treating WIL as a homogeneous construct and instead recognise the diversity of institutional arrangements shaping participation (Lasrado et al., 2024; William & Lowe, 2025). They further suggest that inclusion depends not only on the availability of support, but also on how work placement models are designed and governed.

These findings have important implications for higher education policy and practice. First, improving access to WIL for students with disabilities requires moving beyond approaches centred primarily on student preparation and institutional support. While these remain essential, they are insufficient to address barriers located in employer and structural domains. Higher education institutions therefore need to strengthen engagement with employers through structured partnerships,

clearer guidance on inclusive practices, and more consistent processes for accommodation and support within workplaces. Second, the findings point to the need to address structural constraints, including financial costs and transport barriers, which continue to limit participation. This may require targeted funding mechanisms and more flexible approaches to work placement design, including remote or hybrid models where appropriate. Third, the role of professional and regulatory bodies highlights the importance of ensuring that competency frameworks and accreditation requirements allow for appropriate flexibility in accommodating diverse forms of participation.

These findings also have implications at the system level. Beyond institutional initiatives, policy frameworks may need to more explicitly support employer engagement in inclusive WIL, including incentives for participation, clearer guidance on accommodations, and mechanisms to share responsibility across actors. In addition, addressing structural barriers such as financial costs and transport may require coordinated funding strategies at national or sectoral level. Finally, greater alignment between professional accreditation requirements and inclusion objectives is necessary to ensure that regulatory frameworks do not unintentionally constrain participation. More broadly, these challenges are not unique to Ireland. International evidence suggests that, while higher education systems have made significant progress in widening access, the coordination of actors involved in WIL remains a persistent challenge (Dollinger et al., 2023; Garant-Jones et al., 2024; Harpur et al., 2025; Jackson et al., 2025; Lasrado et al., 2024). This is reflected in recent policy developments in Australia, where proposed revisions to the Higher Education Standards Framework have highlighted the need to clarify accountability and responsibility for work-integrated learning (Bartlett et al., 2026). The Irish case therefore illustrates a wider policy issue: achieving inclusive transitions to employment requires not only strong legal and policy frameworks, but also effective alignment of responsibilities, incentives, and practices across higher education institutions, employers, and regulatory bodies.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study is based on a relatively small and context-specific sample of Irish higher education institutions, with an uneven number of responses across stakeholder groups. The findings are therefore not intended to be statistically generalisable, but to provide indicative evidence of patterns in how barriers and facilitators are distributed across domains within the WIL system. Second, the quantitative analysis relies on descriptive composite indices constructed from binary indicators. While this approach provides a consistent summary of multi-item responses, it necessarily simplifies underlying variation and does not capture the intensity or relative importance of individual factors. As such, the indices should be interpreted as measures of reported prevalence rather than impact. Third, the study draws on self-reported data from both institutional stakeholders and students. These data capture perceptions and lived experiences, which are central to understanding participation, but may vary across respondents and contexts. Differences between datasets should therefore be interpreted as reflecting both variation in experience and differences in perspective.

Finally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to examine how barriers and facilitators evolve over time or how work placement experiences relate to longer-term outcomes.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Further studies could extend this work using larger and more diverse samples, including cross-national comparisons, to assess the generalisability of the findings. Longitudinal designs would enable analysis of how participation in work placements unfolds over time and how it relates to graduate outcomes. There is also scope to develop more refined measures of work placement experiences, capturing the intensity and relative importance of different barriers and supports. In addition, future research should further examine the role of employers and regulatory bodies in shaping inclusive pathways, particularly in relation to how responsibilities are distributed across actors. More broadly, an important avenue for research lies in exploring how policy instruments can better coordinate across domains to support inclusive WIL systems.

Conclusion

This study examined how barriers to, and facilitators of, participation in WIL for students with disabilities are distributed across institutional domains and work placement types in Irish higher education. The findings show that access to WIL is shaped not only by the availability of support, but by how responsibilities and constraints are distributed across higher education institutions, employers, and regulatory frameworks.

A central contribution is the conceptualisation of WIL as a system characterised by structural misalignment. Barriers are concentrated in employer-related and structural domains, while support is primarily located within institutional and student-focused domains. Drawing on an institutional logics perspective, this pattern reflects the distribution of authority and capacity across actors rather than a simple absence of provision. Institutional efforts are therefore directed towards domains where higher education institutions have the greatest ability to act, while many constraints shaping participation lie beyond their direct control. The analysis also highlights work placement type as a key institutional condition shaping access and inclusion, with compulsory, professionally mandated, and optional work placements associated with distinct configurations of constraints and supports.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice. Improving access requires moving beyond student-focused interventions towards addressing employer practices, structural barriers, and the flexibility of regulatory frameworks. Inclusive WIL should therefore be understood as a system-level challenge requiring coordinated action to support equitable transitions from higher education to employment.

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