

# RETHINKING WIL AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

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# CONVENTIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON WIL

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is, in the Anglo-Saxon academic sphere, traditionally mostly seen as a pedagogical model for students' academic learning in relation to working life

WIL is thereby largely related to forms of practice-based education like work-based learning, 'sandwich' learning, co-operative education, clinical placements, service learning and internships

A common motivation for WIL in higher education is to enhance student's employability

**However, there is more to WIL than a pedagogical approach!**

There is a need for a broader multidimensional perspective of WIL that can highlight and discuss conditions, challenges and solutions of **co-creative** knowledge and learning in and for the (new) working life.

# SHAPING THE FUTURE ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE OF WIL

WIL should be seen as a multidimensional learning phenomenon that can provide innovative insights and solutions around knowledge production and learning

WIL should be understood as a process where the reflection on learning is crucial, including the existence of structures supporting such reflection.

WIL can also challenge traditional hierarchical views, where the status of theoretical knowledge has led to an undervaluation of practical knowledge

A narrower sense of WIL research focus on various aspects of a tripartite collaboration

However, a broader understanding of WIL explore and investigate learning processes and knowledge (co)production in different contexts, including higher education, working life and civil society.

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF WIL AT UNIVERSITY WEST

University West (Est 1990) is committed to making a difference, contributing to positive societal development

Commissioned by the Swedish government in 2002, University West has continuously worked to develop WIL.

University West extend the concept: from “learning for work” and “learning through work” towards a broader conception beyond employability to “learning for life”.

From initially focusing on pedagogical development linked to education, WIL has developed into an academic research and educational field in its own right.

WIL is today the main profile of the University, in education, research and collaboration.

University West provide the only PhD Programme in WIL, with a PhD degree in WIL!

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF WIL AT UNIVERSITY WEST

University West constructs WIL as having three interconnected dimensions:

a philosophical or epistemological dimension that “considers theoretical and practical knowledge as equally important and mutually dependent on each other”

a pedagogical dimension “for the students to obtain a deeper understanding of the given subject, to facilitate the conditions for them to engender their own insights, and to get practical experience”

a disciplinary dimension “characterized by the studying of learning through the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge and experiences”

# DEFINITION OF WIL

The Complete Academic Research Environment at University West define WIL as a transdisciplinary research and educational field, primarily connected to social sciences and humanities.

The field focus on the relationship between work and learning, which also includes other forms than traditional paid work.

The concept of learning is understood in a broad sense and encompasses processes of knowledge and competence development in various social contexts, not only focusing on students but also including various forms of learning within and between professions in working life.

Study objects can include preconditions, organisation, implementation, content, forms and implications of integrating work and learning.

# WORK-INTEGRATED EDUCATION (WIE) versus WIL

In a higher education context, it is perhaps more correct to define WIL as a form of learning that students are intended to experience through Work-integrated Education (WIE)

However, given the common usage of WIL to mean WIE, I use the term WIL in this presentation to refer to the richer notion of WIE.



# WIL - KNOWLEDGE & STUDY OBJECTS

WIL reveal a complex picture on the relationship between work and learning  
WIL studies can make a distinction between knowledge and study objects

Objects of Study - what is to be studied

Objects of Knowledge - how the object of study is conceptualised

The distinction between study and knowledge objects needs to be supplemented with ways of understanding relationships between the two.

WIL requires a contextualization. With an transdisciplinary WIL approach, an object of study can focus on processes of learning, knowledge (co)creation, prerequisites and outcomes, actual institutional and organisational forms

Objects of knowledge explore, structure and integrate concepts of knowledge and learning, aiming to increase insight into how reality works, why it works, and how it "should" work.

# MASTERS PROGRAMME IN WORK-INTEGRATED POLITICAL STUDIES (WIPS)

## **Reflective practice on research-intensive political work**

WIPS program is a two-year, structured international master's programme that provides an academic degree in WIL, with a focus and contextualization on Political Studies

In year 1, students complete four courses, two compulsory focusing on (applied) research theory and methods and WIL theory, and two electives focusing on political studies

In year 2, students complete a research internship with a host (political) organisation, combined with a WIL reflection course. *(The internship focuses on applied research tasks to produce specific research related products for the host. Research tasks and outputs are defined in an agreement by all three partners)*

The degree is completed by a thesis that can use and reflects on the work conducted in the host organization through a WIL lens.

# MASTERS PROGRAMME IN WORK-INTEGRATED POLITICAL STUDIES (WIPS)

WIPS reflects the philosophical, pedagogical, and disciplinary dimensions of WIL at University West

While undergraduate programs focus on WIL as a form of pedagogy for learning vocations, the PhD program focuses on the actual content of WIL as a distinct research field.

The Masters level represents an instance where the two meet: where WIL as pedagogy/form and discipline/content combine.

WIPS does WIL as both form and content, defining both the object of study and method/strategy for approaching the object of study.

WIPS attempts to develop both a theoretical answer to “what do you study when you study WIL?” as well as defining such study through implementing educational practices.

# THREE DIMENSIONS OF A POLITICAL CONTEXTUALISATION OF WIL

WIPS narrow the gap between the conventional academic discipline and the world of work through a focus on research theory, method and practice.

The diversity of subject content in political studies is managed by focusing on training students in key aspects of applied research, co-defining research tasks with and for the host. Students learn research theory and practice to bridge the gap between the discipline and the professions.

Practice (techne) and theory (episteme) can be taught. Practical wisdom (phronesis), requires experience of both.

WIPS integrate all three components. Students learning proceeds through institutionalized and individual and collective reflection on (political) practice and actions (particulars) considering theory (universals) and vice versa.

WIPS produce new kinds of knowers, developing personal qualities like thoughtfulness, receptiveness, adaptability, resilience, as well as normative reflection on the means and ends of work.

# Per Assmo – Example of Publications

- Sunnemark, F., Assmo, P., Lundqvist-Westin, W., & Al Saad, T. (2023) ***Exploring barriers and facilitators to knowledge transfer and learning processes through a cross-departmental collaborative project in a municipal organization.*** The Learning Organization. ISSN: 0969-6474. 15 June 2023
- Sunnemark, F., Karlsson, E., Rudström, H., Gahnström, E. & Assmo, P. (2023) ***Social sustainability for whom? Developing an analytical approach through a tripartite collaboration.*** Journal of Workplace Learning. ISSN: 1366-5626. 26 July 2023
- Piper, L., Sunnemark, F., Assmo, P. & Dahlqvist, K. (2023) ***Rethinking WIL for an Academic Discipline: The model of Work Integrated Political Studies (WIPS).*** Cogent Education. Volume 10, 2023 - Issue 1.
- Piper, L., Sunnemark, L., Sunnemark, F., Assmo, P., Gahnström, E. & Dahlqvist, K. (2023) ***Bridging Theory and Practice through Work-Integrated Learning (WIL): Critical Perspectives on the Conceptualisations of WIL at a University in Sweden.*** Critical Studies in Education.
- Africa, C., Assmo, P., Moses, M. & Cornelius, M. (2025) ***Embracing in Work-integrated Learning in Political Studies.*** Studies in Continuing Education. (Accepted)
- Hernández, A., Lundqvist-Westin, W., Sunnemark, F., Assmo, P., Bernzen, A. & Born, K.M. (2025) ***Exploring a Multiple-Helix Approach for Small-Scale Development – Illustrations from the Interreg North Sea Project SIRR.*** Review of Regional Research. (Accepted)

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# CIWIL

Current Issues in  
Work-Integrated Learning



Creating change together.

# UNIVERSITY WEST WIL Activities

## Annual International Conference on Work-integrated Learning

<https://www.kristiania.no/forskning/forskningsgrupper/ai/wil25/>

## International Peer-Reviewed Research Journal on WIL (CIWIL)

<https://www.hv.se/ciwiljournal>

## Development of an International Network for WIL

Initiated through collaborations between University West and  
Southern African University Partners

Creating change together.

# WIL'25

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
ON WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

22-24 September 2025  
Kristiania University College  
Oslo, Norway

