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Exploring Factors Impacting Student Engagement and Performance Towards Work-Based Learning Among Culinary Students

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Abstract: This study explored factors affecting student engagement and performance in Work-Based Learning (WBL) among culinary students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Cawangan Pulau Pinang Branch, using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews with six (6) Diploma Culinary Arts students from the 2019 and 2020 WBL programs were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed crucial factors influencing engagement and performance. Positive aspects included a strong knowledge base, high discipline, effective time management, and proactive behavior. However, significant barriers such as sexual harassment and unfair treatment by supervisors were identified. The study also highlighted the importance of industry involvement and feedback for successful WBL experiences. To improve the WBL program, it is recommended to enhance collaboration with industry partners, systematically gather feedback, and adopt flexible program designs. Addressing these issues could significantly boost learning outcomes, performance, and overall student engagement in the WBL program.

Keywords: *Student engagement, performance, work-based learning, Culinary Students*

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry has experienced significant growth and remains a key driver in the advancement of the tourism and food service sectors, primarily due to the exceptional skills and competencies of its workforce in delivering high-quality services. This expansion necessitates that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) develop comprehensive educational frameworks that align with market demands and the need for well-trained, competent employees (Wei, 2018). The intense competition within the hotel industry underscores the need for culinary programs that equip students with the necessary skills to meet industry standards (Farmaki, 2018).

Effectively balancing supply and demand in the hospitality sector and differentiating between students' experiences and expertise within both educational settings and the hotel industry is crucial. As many countries modernize their infrastructure and technology to meet international standards, a skilled workforce becomes increasingly essential (Schuh et al., 2015). Employers must prioritize qualifications to meet these standards, and internship programs are vital in preparing students for future careers. HEIs play a pivotal role by offering practical internship opportunities that simulate real work environments and meet employer expectations (Hughes et al., 2013). To produce well-rounded, entrepreneurial, skilled, and knowledgeable graduates, the Malaysian education system introduced Work-Based Learning (WBL) in 2007 (Mimi et al., 2021). Work-based learning (WBL) was initially introduced to enhance the education and training system within Malaysian Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions. As part of TVET, the WBL program has successfully attracted a skilled workforce to Malaysia with minimal government investment. In 2011, the Malaysia Centre for Tourism and Hospitality Education (MyCenTHE) incorporated WBL into its hospitality education curriculum. The program aims to provide students with practical industry experience during their tertiary studies and to prepare them for the workforce by immersing them in real-world hospitality settings. This initiative aligns with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2020-2025, which seeks to develop industry-led curricula to improve graduate employability and address skill mismatches.

Moreover, WBL programs are centered on the concept of student engagement and provide a dynamic method for integrating academic knowledge with real-world experience. This engagement manifests in various forms, all of which are crucial to the success of WBL initiatives. Scholars have positioned student engagement within a broader motivational framework, such as the self-system model of motivational development (Connell &

Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 2008), to theorize its precursors in students' learning environments and psychological processes.

Many scholars have demonstrated that declining levels of student engagement are strong predictors of early withdrawal from education and training, particularly in secondary education (Lam et al., 2016; Lamote et al., 2013; Rotermund, 2010). Understanding this phenomenon requires viewing student engagement as a process through which students progressively disengage from education, aligning with the notion that early leaving from education and training (ELET) often represents the culmination of this gradual disconnection (Finn, 1989).

Student engagement is crucial for academic achievement, resulting in attention, class participation, and learning motivation (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement influences student retention, learning, achievement, and graduation (Nelson Laird et al., 2008). Coates (2006) identifies student involvement as crucial for developing students' sense of belonging to their institutions. The level of engagement can significantly impact a student's performance and the overall success of the work-based learning (WBL) experience.

Through the practical context of work-based learning, the application of theoretical knowledge can be seen as a comprehensive measure of student performance (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Theoretical and practical learning heavily influence this method, which enables students to apply their academic knowledge in real-life hospitality situations leading to increased engagement and skills development (Sudjimat et al., 2019). Performance evaluations are based on professionalism, skill development, involvement in one's learning process, academic success and feedback assimilation; practical experience promotes job competencies and positive learning environments (Ossenberg et al., 2020; Sudjimat et al., 2019). The technical as well as soft skills proficiency, participation in complex activities, reflective practices use and mentors' feedback are preconditions of success (Ossenberg et al., 2020). In conclusion, WBL performance reflects on outputs such timely completion of projects and attainment of competencies thus equipping students with future jobs as well as improving educational outcomes and skills (Ossenberg et al., 2020).

Work-based learning (WBL) at UiTM Penang is an integral component of the university's curriculum, designed to bridge the gap between academic learning and real-world industry experience. Therefore, the first cohort of culinary students from WBL was discharged from the UiTM Penang Branch in 2019. Students are required to spend two semesters (1 year) within the industry, gaining exposure to real-world work environments within well-established food and beverage organizations across the country. In this WBL program, students are required to complete four main modules namely *Culinary Production, Cold Kitchen, Malaysian Cuisine* and *Hospitality Procurement* that focus on culinary skills, while also providing in-depth knowledge in food production, safety, entrepreneurship, and organizational management throughout the course.

An interview with UiTM WBL Coordinator Teku Zarif shed light on critical factors that contribute to the success of the WBL program, including exposure to new industry experiences and job opportunities that follow the WBL module. Teku Zarif (2023) noted that approximately 100 students underwent industrial training from 2021 to 2022, with a minimal failure rate of 1%. Although this percentage is quite low, it highlights underlying issues in the effectiveness of the WBL program. While the majority of students completed their studies on schedule, some faced challenges that caused delays, impacting both student achievement and the faculty's objective of achieving 100% on-time completion. Understanding the factors influencing student engagement and performance in WBL programs is crucial for improving these programs and ensuring timely completion. Despite increased interest in research on student involvement, it remains relatively underdeveloped in comparison to the growing number of students participating in such programs and the policy focus on lifelong learning. Therefore, this study aims to explore challenges faced by UiTM P. Pinang Branch culinary students during the WBL program, specifically focusing on the challenges and problems affecting engagement and performance in WBL programs.

2. Literature Review

Overview of Work-Based Learning (WBL) in Malaysia

WBL stands for "work-based learning." Lewis (2004) defines work-based learning as a learning approach that provides students with firsthand experience of the realities they will encounter in the workplace. In other words, work-based learning is a process that integrates the needs of the employment sector with on-the-job learning and learning through work (Wazli et al., 2015). Work-based learning is commonly linked to the field of education, but it is not yet implemented across all institutions. Currently, the WBL program is acknowledged as a key approach for bridging the gap between education and the workforce. Furthermore, the WBL program is a teaching and learning method that involves students, particularly those in their final semester before graduation, and requires the employee overseeing this aspect to be responsible for both teaching and evaluating the students (Wazli et al., 2015).

Further, the WBL Program gained significant attention when the Malaysian Qualifications Agency introduced guidelines for its implementation across higher education institutions, industries, students, trainers, and other stakeholders involved. These guidelines offer initial insights into the design and methods used in the WBL program (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2016). Following this introduction, the guidelines have been adopted by two Public University programs: the Bachelor of Entrepreneurship with Honors at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) and the Bachelor of Plantation Management at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). While both institutions follow the same foundational concept, they implement it differently based on their specific timelines, utilizing the 2U2i study model.

The Significance of WBL for Higher Education and Hospitality Industry

WBL offers numerous benefits that positively affect both higher education and the hospitality industry. One key advantage of the WBL program is its ability to enhance students' knowledge and practical skills within the hospitality sector, effectively bridging the gap between theoretical learning and real-world application. During the WBL phase, students have the chance to put their academic knowledge into practice. Additionally, the WBL program supports lecturers in developing students with both creative and technical expertise, aligning with the current demands of the hospitality industry. As the hospitality field evolves rapidly, there is a growing need for individuals with critical thinking skills to thrive in this sector. The WBL program serves as a valuable stepping stone for graduates entering the hospitality industry, with many hotels actively seeking skilled staff who can drive advancements and contribute to the future growth of the industry (Mimi et. al., 2021).

In real-life scenarios, WBL can boost students' confidence in their abilities, deepen their commitment to their education, and enhance their professional knowledge. The outcomes show that these advanced WBL strategies foster students' professional development by providing opportunities to engage in real-world situations and gain practical experiences. This, in turn, strengthens their practical skills and prepares them for their future careers (Stalheim, 2020).

Academics, businesses, and WBL programs face diverse challenges. Academics accustomed to traditional teaching methods struggle with the shift to advising, mentoring, and coaching required in WBL programs. Additionally, organizational culture gaps between external employers and higher education institutions (HEIs) can complicate WBL collaborations. Internal challenges within HEIs, such as organizational structure and resistance to change, further complicate the implementation of WBL programs. Cultural differences between academic institutions and the commercial sector may lead to conflicts between academic standards and practical business needs. Improving communication and fostering a collaborative culture, rather than a competitive one, can help HEIs better align interdisciplinary programs with employer demands and manage these challenges effectively (Doherty et al., 2019).

WBL is a crucial component of culinary arts education, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. The WBL program immerses students in professional kitchens, offering hands-on experience that extends beyond the classroom and aligns with planned learning outcomes achieved through work positions. Self-reflection plays a vital role in this program, allowing students to recognize and learn from their job experiences.

The physical layout of the culinary workspace, the mentor-student relationship, and the overall environment play a crucial role in student engagement. Modern kitchen facilities, well-organized training programs and opportunities for hands-on experience are key factors that positively influence engagement levels (Johnson et al., 2020). On the other hand, Brown et al. (2019) found that insufficient resources, poor mentorship, and disorganized work settings can hinder students' immersion in the learning process.

Several studies have explored the potential link between extensive work commitments and the risk of incomplete studies among culinary students involved in WBL. Sobri et al. (2022) found a notable correlation between increased work hours during culinary internships and a higher likelihood of academic difficulties, such as missed assignments and exams, which can lead to a greater risk of program non-completion. Additionally, the demanding nature of the fast-paced culinary industry, with its irregular hours and high-pressure environment, has been identified as a factor that complicates students' ability to balance work and academic responsibilities (Brown et al., 2019). Maintaining a balance between gaining practical experience and achieving academic success is particularly challenging in culinary education, where students face the rigorous demands of hands-on learning in professional kitchens. To enhance the effectiveness of WBL programs, educational institutions need to address these challenges through strategies like mentorship programs, flexible scheduling, and academic support services to reduce the risk of incomplete studies among culinary students.

Although WBL has been heralded as a revolutionary approach to skill development in culinary education, its effects on the learning progress and completion rates of culinary students have work-based learning programs in culinary education, thereby guaranteeing the comprehensive development and readiness of future culinary professionals.

Student Engagement During the WBL Program

Smith (2012) highlights that active participation is a core element of WBL involvement. By engaging in workplace activities, contributing to projects, and participating in discussions, students can apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations and gain a comprehensive understanding of their field. Jones (2020) further notes that goal-setting is a crucial factor, with a positive correlation between setting clear learning goals and student motivation. Students who define their objectives are more likely to be engaged in WBL activities and effectively focus their efforts.

Conversely, Brown et al. (2019) argue that reflective activities are essential for bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Regular reflection enhances students' understanding of theoretical concepts in real-world contexts, supporting lifelong learning and skill development. Additionally, Turner and Smith (2022) stress the importance of effective communication skills in professional settings. Their research examines how strong communication abilities impact teamwork and positive workplace relationships, with engaged students developing these skills through their WBL experiences (Smith & Smith, 2024).

Student Performance During the WBL Programme

A comprehensive assessment of student performance during work-based learning (WBL) involves evaluating how effectively students implement and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts (Ossenberg et al., 2020). According to Sudjimat et al. (2019), both theoretical and practical learning significantly impact student performance in WBL. This approach allows students to apply their academic knowledge in real-world hospitality scenarios, enhancing their skills and fostering engagement. It also provides opportunities for gaining insights and improving skills, which are crucial for successful learning and growth.

Performance is assessed using various criteria, including professionalism, skill development, engagement, academic achievement, and the ability to integrate feedback (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Sudjimat et al. (2019) note that WBL offers practical experience that not only develops job-specific competencies but also creates a positive learning environment that motivates students to excel. Success in WBL is measured by how well students apply theoretical knowledge to industry-relevant challenges (Ossenberg et al., 2020).

Proficiency encompasses both technical and soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, which are vital for professional success (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Increased engagement in WBL

activities and active participation leads to better learning outcomes and skill development (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Additionally, reflective practices and feedback from supervisors are crucial for enhancing student performance (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Professionalism, demonstrated through a strong work ethic, also contributes to performance (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Ultimately, assessing WBL performance involves evaluating outcomes like timely project completion and the achievement of set competencies, which prepare students for future career development (Ossenberg et al., 2020). Greater interaction during WBL activities is linked to improved learning outcomes and skill growth (Ossenberg et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative methodology, gathering data from various sources, including both primary and secondary materials. Interviews were conducted with participants who had experienced WBL in the 4–5-star hotel industry across the state of Malaysia. Prior consent was obtained from all respondents before they participated in the study. The interview protocol instrument was used to gather specific information pertinent to the study's objectives, employing both primary and secondary data collection methods (Wilcox et al., 2012). In 2019, a total of 115 students completed WBL, while 62 students did so in 2020, across Malaysia. Data saturation was achieved by the sixth respondent, after which the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

4. Results and Discussion

The demographic profile of the six students from the Work-Based Learning (WBL) program provides valuable insights into their backgrounds and experiences. Aged between 23 and 25, these informants fall within the typical age range for students approaching the completion of their diplomas or advancing their education. They come from various regions across Malaysia, highlighting the program's broad geographic reach. Table 1 below shows the demographic information of the informants.

Table 1: Informants' Profile

Code	Age	Home Address	Organization during WBL	Current Activity
WBL 1	24 years old	Kulim, Kedah	Park Royal Penang	Doing an internship for her degree.
WBL 2	23 years old	Nilai, Negeri Sembilan	Lexis Port Dickson	Working at FnB restaurant
WBL 3	23 years old	Georgetown, Penang	Cititel Penang	Doing an internship for his degree.
WBL 4	23 years old	Kulim, Kedah	Ombak Villa Langkawi	Internship for his degree.
WBL 5	23 years old	Permatang Pauh, Pulau pinang.	Ixora hotel Pulau Pinang.	Working at Ixora hotel Pulau Pinang.
WBL 6	25 years old	Seberang Perai, Pulau Pinang.	Ixora hotel Pulau Pinang	Works in a factory canteen.

The results indicated that all informants completed their WBL at various esteemed hospitality establishments (4 and 5-star hotels), such as Park Royal Penang, Lexis Port Dickson, Cititel Penang, Ombak Villa Langkawi, and Ixora Hotel Pulau Pinang. This range of placements reflects the program's strong industry connections and the diverse learning environments it provides. Currently, the informants are involved in a mix of further education and professional roles. Two are interning for their degrees, one works at an F&B restaurant, one continues at Ixora Hotel Pulau Pinang, and one is employed in a factory canteen. These roles highlight the practical application of their training and the program's effectiveness in aiding their career transitions. Overall, the demographic profile illustrates the WBL program's success in offering varied, valuable industry experiences and supporting students' academic and professional growth.

Table 2 below effectively summarizes the qualitative findings, linking key themes with supporting quotes from the participants.

Table 2: Summary of Qualitative Research Findings on Work-Based Learning (WBL) in the Hospitality Industry

Theme	Key Findings	Informant's response
Understanding of WBL Module	Extensive knowledge is crucial. It reflects the depth of understanding and the practical skills that students gain during their hands-on learning experiences. New skills must be learned, specific knowledge and skills must be applied appropriately, and ways to enhance work with limited guidance should be discovered by students in the workplace (Zehr & Korte, 2020).	Informant 4 *"From what I understand, 4 of the modules consist of Malay cuisine, cold kitchen, hospitality procurement and culinary production. Each of the 4 is a very different thing that we can gain a lot of knowledge from each module".*
Efforts to Complete the Module	Employees consistently perform well and complete tasks given, demonstrating a high level of discipline (Almita et al., 2023). It was mentioned that a great deal of discipline is necessary during the completion of the WBL module.	Informant 1 *"The most important effort I make is a dedication to every task given by the chef because discipline is crucial for students to achieve a good WBL assessment and gain real-world industry experience".*
Challenges during WBL (Assessment)	In the 1970s, sexual harassment at work was a form of violence that needed to be stopped (Maran et al., 2022). This presented the greatest challenge during completing the WBL assessment for the informant.	Informant 3 *"Additionally, sexual harassment remains a serious problem, perpetuated by normalized inappropriate behavior and societal stigmas".*
Problem during WBL	Someone being unfairly treated at work will result in a negative impact on work performance. (BrightHR, 2010). This attitude cannot be held in a workplace, according to the informant.	Informant 2 *"In addition, the management also practices an attitude of injustice in evaluating student performance, where students who should get better do the opposite".*
Participation of Industry in Successful WBL	The monitoring of activities and progress is carried out (What Is Monitoring, 2023). It has been expressed by the informant that monitoring student placement has had a positive impact.	Informant 2 *"In addition, my HR will monitor once a month to see if the student is showing excellent performance during the internship at this hotel".*
Performance Feedback (Industry)	An individual observes or perceives something. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Feedback can improve the performance of a student, according to the informant.	Informant 5 *"Industry also helps, in a way that the chef can reprimand us with what we have to do that can improve our performance".*
WBL Program Overall Performance Rating (Students)	It is expressed as a numerical value to indicate its effectiveness or familiarity (Collins, 2019).	Informant 4 *"We have to realize that in the industry we have to follow the needs and requirements of the industry itself. So, I rate my performance during WBL as 80%".*

Based on the themes retrieved, the inter-rater reliability table was used to establish the first category, which pertains to the factors influencing Work-Based Learning (WBL) Programs. Further to the process, a set of codes is developed, e.g., into a codebook, often by an individual moving back and forth between the data and a working set of codes, merging, renaming, redefining, or removing codes along the way. The codes are then heavily informed by prior literature and thereby largely deductively derived; informed by the data and literature in a cyclical approach and thereby largely abductively developed; heavily informed by the data and thereby largely inductively discovered; or the approach may be at some intermediate position between these distinct points. A sample of the data is then coded by multiple researchers independently before the consistency of their coding is assessed (Stuart et al., 2002).

Figure 1: The Factors Impacting Engagement and Performances Towards WBL Among Culinary Arts Students

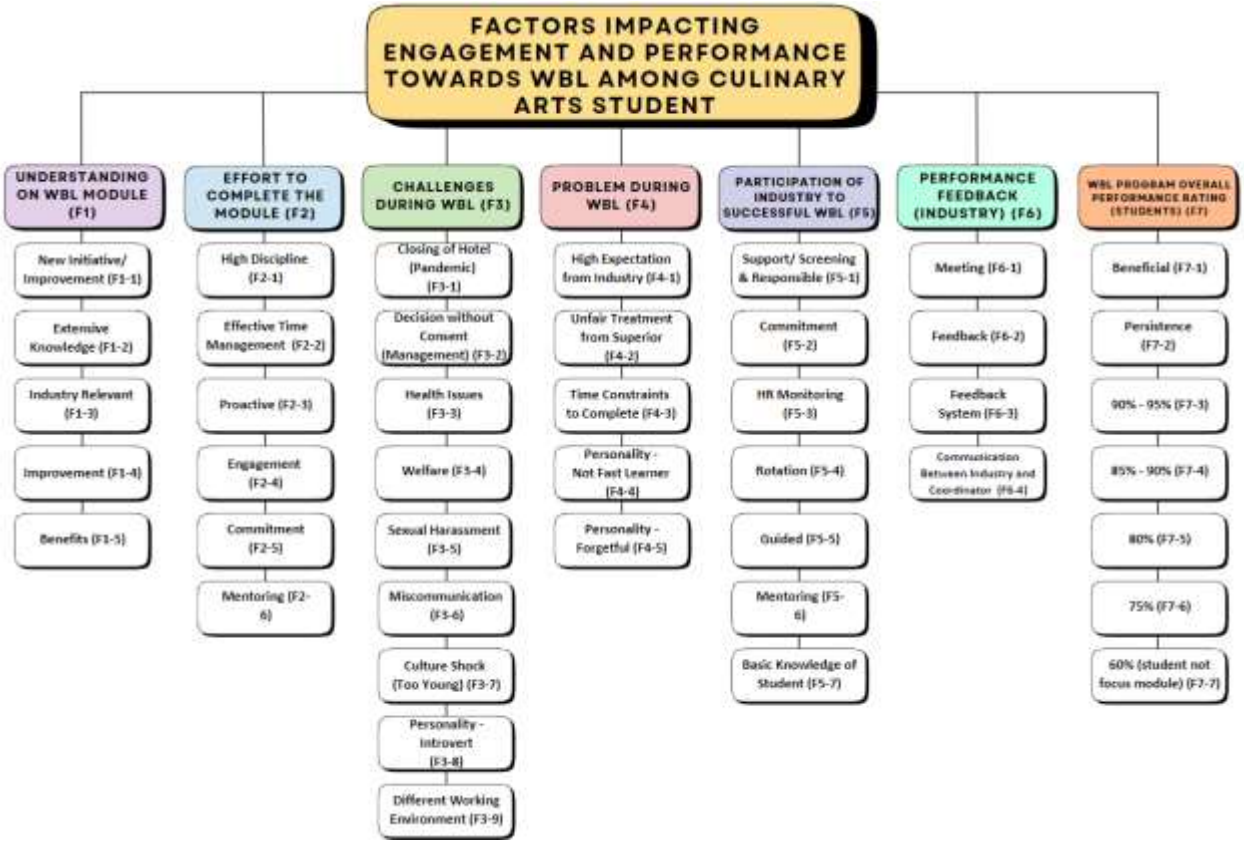


Figure 1 above showed that extensive knowledge was the most frequently reported factor by informants, with 83% indicating its significance. Feedback was the next most common factor, mentioned by 67% of participants. Additionally, both unfair treatment from superiors and performance-related meetings during WBL were each reported by 50% of the informants. The lowest reported factor, at 16%, represented the least frequently mentioned issues impacting the WBL program. A mind map was created using data coded and themed from an inter-rater reliability table, focusing on the factors affecting the WBL program.

Results identified seven factors impacting student engagement in the WBL program, with four factors most frequently cited by informants from the Diploma in Culinary Arts Management at UiTM Pulau Pinang Branch. Extensive knowledge emerged as the highest-rated factor, voiced by 83% of the informants, indicating its critical importance. The WBL program has also implemented strategies to support students' professional growth by providing opportunities to engage in real-world situations and gain practical experience (Stalheim, 2020). Among the six informants, three identified high discipline, effective time management, and proactivity as key factors in completing the WBL module.

According to Smith and Johnson (2021), active participation is the fundamental aspect of WBL involvement. Additionally, Jones et al. (2020) found that goal-setting is a guiding factor, with a positive relationship between goal-setting and student motivation. Students who clearly define their learning goals are more likely to engage in their WBL activities and effectively direct their attention and efforts (Handajani et al., 2024). In this research, the feedback method used to gather performance information was the second most frequently mentioned factor, with a frequency of 67%. However, many informants reported experiencing unfair treatment from superiors in the hospitality industry, with this factor being highlighted by 50% of participants. Additionally, while completing the WBL module, informants faced challenges that led to discomfort, including instances of sexual harassment, this was supported by Sobri et. al., 2022 that found students' negative work-based learning experiences are less likely to deter them from continuing their careers in the hospitality industry.

Moreover, as the hospitality industry expands, so does the demand for educational frameworks that align with market needs and produce skilled professionals. Based on the literature discussed, the essential role of WBL in bridging the gap between theory and practice, emphasizing the importance of a dynamic learning environment, strong mentorship, and adequate resources. The findings indicate that a well-structured WBL program enhances student engagement, learning outcomes, and preparedness for the hospitality industry. Research shows that the quality of the learning environment significantly impacts WBL engagement and performance, with higher levels of engagement linked to modern kitchen facilities, well-organized training programs, and positive mentor-student relationships.

Besides that, challenges such as insufficient resources, inadequate mentoring, and inconsistent work environments can hinder student success. To maximize the benefits of work-based learning and reduce the risk of incomplete studies, the study underscores the importance of addressing these challenges through initiatives like mentorship programs, flexible scheduling, and academic support services.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors affecting WBL engagement among culinary arts students. By understanding and addressing these factors, educational institutions can enhance the design and implementation of WBL programs, ensuring the thorough preparation and development of future culinary professionals. These findings contribute to the broader discussion on improving WBL programs, ultimately supporting the growth of the hospitality industry by producing skilled and well-prepared graduates.

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