

# PROMOTING WORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES: THE UNILAB PROJECT EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

Concerns about how higher education (HE) should not only provide students with subject-specific knowledge, but also equip them with transferrable, work-related skills, have led to a growing interest in work-based learning (WBL) and employability skills courses in HE. Several such initiatives have also involved partners from outside the EU. One such project, UniLab, bringing together universities from Belarus and Azerbaijan, as well as Spain, Austria, and France, aimed to contribute to the modernisation of HE in the three partner (i.e., non-EU) countries through convergence with the collaborating EU universities. This was to be achieved by enhancing partnerships between enterprises and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), raising awareness of the importance of WBL among policymakers, and offering soft skills courses to students. The current paper explores the experiences of staff members within the four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus involved in UniLab and the challenges they faced in promoting WBL, both within their institutions and among relevant external stakeholders. It finds that their efforts were stymied by 1) discrepancies between the universities' curricula and the needs of employers, 2) a lack of awareness among employers of the importance of WBL and 3) limited technical infrastructure and professional capacity to implement more innovative WBL practices within their institutions. The research also identifies several enabling factors, such as universities' connections with key stakeholders, student involvement, and the exchange with EU partner universities. Looking beyond the UniLab project, the current paper considers the role that external factors, including institutional and political contexts, play in the implementation of WBL, and reflects on the importance of a context-engaged approach.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The notion that HEIs are not only centres of academic excellence and scientific research, but should also contribute to the training of tomorrow's workforce is not new (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). With the massification of higher education (Hornsby and Osman, 2014), which initially began in industrialised nations, but has in recent decades expanded beyond the "Global North", the primary responsibility of universities shifted from delivering exclusively subject disciplinary knowledge to equipping the next generation of workers with the skills and competences they need to compete in the global labour market. There is a growing understanding among policymakers and higher education professionals that this requires a closer integration of higher education and employment. Research suggests that HE students who gain work experience either within or outside of the curriculum enjoy increased employment premiums compared to those who do not (Cedefop, 2021). Student

projects that are realised in collaboration with industry have also been found to help students develop new skills and competences (Baaken et al., 2015).

Work-based learning (WBL) has emerged as the umbrella term and overarching strategy in HE to formally incorporate such experiences in students' academic trajectories. The term WBL encompasses many different activities and forms of learning, as reflected in the definition set by the Interagency Group on Technical and Vocational Education and Training, which describes WBL as 'all forms of learning that takes place in a real work environment' (IAG-TVET, 2017, p. 2). Talbot (2019) usefully proposes categorising WBL into three types; the first is part of a programme wholly located within an educational institution and is designed to facilitate entry into the workplace ('employability'). Examples of this include placements and internships. The second type sees students dividing their time between the educational establishment and the workplace, and is often referred to as an apprenticeship, while in the third type, students are based entirely in the workplace. The successful implementation of the first and 2<sup>nd</sup> type, in particular, thus depend on a close collaboration and alignment between the educational institution and the workplace.

Although WBL has become much more widespread and well established (especially in Europe) since being described as the 'new pedagogy for new times' by Boud and Symes two decades ago (2002, p. 15), this imbrication with the labour market remains a challenge for many HEIs. Based on their international case study report, Dadze-Arthur and colleagues (2020) conclude that for many HEIs, WBL represents a 'novel and unexplored terrain, for which most are neither structurally, financially, pedagogically or institutionally equipped' (p. 8), but that there is significant variation among disciplines, and institutional or country contexts and cultures. While their report emphasises the importance of HEIs developing their own tailored WBL solutions, and showcases how certain "trailblazer" institutions promote WBL in innovative and contextually specific ways, the authors acknowledge that WBL is an inherently collaborative endeavour which requires the close involvement of the workplace or industry. As Lester and Costley (2010) astutely note, 'Work-based learning will only 'work' if the *work environment* is capable of supporting learner-managed, reflective learning at an appropriate level' (emphasis added). Whereas the 'willingness and capacity of the HE learning provider for structural, institutional, operational and cultural changes', as described by Dadze-Arthur and colleagues, is undoubtedly an important factor in the successful implementation of WBL in HE, the 'impetus for change' which they highlight cannot emerge solely from the educational institution itself, but must also be mirrored by a similar openness and readiness among the collaborating industries and local authorities.

Whose responsibility it is to prepare students for the labour market is a question that is also widely discussed in relation to the development of graduates' soft skills, which Andrews and Higson (2008) identify as one of the three key components – besides work experience/work-based learning, and knowledge of discipline-specific issues – of graduate employability. In their research on the perspectives of employers and graduates towards graduate employability, they found that employers across Europe expect graduates to be "employment-ready" when they join their company or organisation; that is, not only equipped with discipline specific "hard skills", but also "more generic interpersonal and communication competences" (p. 419). These findings suggest that employers consider it the task of universities to equip graduates with such competences. In fact, according to Succi and Canovi (2020), the "blame game" on whom to hold responsible for teaching graduates these skills has been ongoing between universities and employers for the last 30 years. Succi and Canovi warn that this has drawn attention away from the importance of HEIs, with employers and students recognising their shared responsibility to work together towards higher levels of graduate employability. To counter this, the authors call for stronger partnerships between the different stakeholders.

This call has been taken up by various initiatives across the EU, which aimed to develop a stronger orientation towards employability and the labour market within HE. This has included the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education's (EURASHE) work on "Professional Higher Education" (PHE). Similarly, the project "Integrating work-based learning and entrepreneurship in Higher Education" (WEXHE) establishes university-industry collaborations to improve "the balance between practical and theoretical learning in HE" and to address "mismatches between the skills sets of graduates and the skills they require during early careers" (WEXHE, n.d.). Outside of the EU, the project "Introducing work-based learning in higher education systems of Armenia and Moldova for better employability of graduates" (WBL4JOB) 'aims to enhance partnership between enterprises and higher education institutions and to increase graduates' employability through development and implementation of supporting policy, legal framework and generic, flexible Apprenticeships Higher Education Model' (WBL4Job, n.d.). The frameworks and models developed as part of this and other projects tend to be 'inspired by European practices' (WBL4Job, n.d.), and are transferred to the non-EU contexts to boost the employability of HE students.

The WBL4JOB project was initiated in part to address challenges in Armenia and Moldova that are to some extent typical of post-Soviet states. While a relatively high share of the population hold university degrees, graduates struggle to find employment, especially in the field in which they undertook their studies (Jonbekova, 2015; Lichy and Khvatova, 2019; Gvaramadze, 2010). This is no less the case in Azerbaijan, where, according to a survey conducted by a youth agency, 60% of 8,921 surveyed youths work in areas that are not relevant to their university degree (NAYORA, 2018), a mismatch Sadirkhanov (2009) traces back to a lack of coordination between HEIs and rapidly changing labour market demands. This has been confirmed by the findings of other studies (Amirova and Valiyev, 2021; Gille-Belova & Titarenko, 2018), which report that employers in both Belarus and Azerbaijan encounter difficulties in finding graduates with appropriate soft skills. In a similar vein, the World Bank, in its country analysis of Azerbaijan, calls for strategic reforms to increase the relevance of higher education, as it feeds into the economic competitiveness of the country (The World Bank Group, 2018). The Bologna process, which intended to initiate this modernisation process, has been implemented to varying degrees in the two countries. Belarus in particular, which only joined the European Higher Education Area in 2015 - a decade after Azerbaijan - continues to struggle to meet the requirements for convergence with EU countries, especially in relation to graduate employability.

Against this backdrop, the UniLab project, funded by the Erasmus+ programme, was established in 2020 to improve cooperation between higher education institutions and industry. The project originally brought together eight universities from three partner (i.e., non-EU) countries; Russia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, as well as universities from Austria, Spain and France. It aimed to develop tools and resources to make the participating Azerbaijani, Russian and Belarusian universities more labour market-oriented, thus boosting graduates' employability. The project took a holistic, learner-centred and collaborative approach, and involved multiple stakeholders from both within and outside the universities. Project activities included setting up a student portal, through which employers could recruit students for internships, placements, or graduate jobs; establishing curricular and extra-curricular modules and courses to help students develop generic soft skills; and raising awareness about the importance of university-industry collaboration among employers, local authorities and national policymakers. An ancillary objective of the project was to strengthen career centres and services in the participating universities, given their key role in this stakeholder collaboration. The project provided equipment and resources for career centres, and laid out standards and guidelines aiming to strengthen their orientation both towards learners and employers, thus sparking what Dadze-Arthur and colleagues (2020) describe as the "impetus for change" that is necessary for implementing WBL and employability-oriented provision.

The aim of this study is to better understand how staff involved in the UniLab project (both academic and non-academic) in participating universities in partner countries initiated such change, both within their institutions and beyond. It considers the enabling factors and challenges that they encountered in implementing the project activities and in collaborating with universities within their own country as well as abroad. While much research on student and graduate employability has focused on the views of students and employers (Sarkar et al., 2016; Cai, 2013; Succi and Canovi, 2020), the perspectives of university staff, and especially non-academic staff supporting career guidance and services, have rarely been under investigation, despite being crucial to the re-orientation of the institutional culture and despite their role as intermediaries between students and employers. This research aims to address this gap, specifically in a geographical context which is underrepresented in research on innovation in HE, and where, as indicated above, there are significant internal and external pressures to reform HE for better graduate employability.

The research will also shed light on how such initiatives may unfold against the backdrop of various challenging external factors and unexpected changes to the make-up of the project consortium. In the case of UniLab, the project implementation was severely impacted by major world events, specifically, the Covid-19 health crisis and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The former severely restricted possibilities for travel and collaboration among EU and non-EU partners, while the latter led to the four Russian universities' involvement in the project being terminated prematurely. The war furthermore impaired the Belarusian partners' ability to travel abroad for the participation in study visits, even once Covid-19 related restrictions were lifted. In light of these challenges, the current study focuses solely on the experience of the two Belarusian and the two Azerbaijani universities. It takes into consideration how these exceptional circumstances affected their work on the project, and especially their collaboration with each other and with the EU partners.

The current study thus sets out to answer the following research questions:

- How was the notion of WBL and employability training conceptualised and operationalised by the Azerbaijani and Belarus partner institutions participating in the UniLab project?
- What were the enabling factors and barriers in the implementation of the UniLab project specifically, and WBL more generally, for the participating HEIs in Azerbaijan and Belarus?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research is a qualitative, small-scale study. In the tradition of interpretative, social constructivist research (Cohen et al., 2018), it aims to understand the experiences and perceptions of research participants and place them within the wider social and institutional contexts in which they occurred. The research draws from four interviews held in October 2022, several months before the end of the project. Interviews were held with a single representative, or "key informant", of each of the non-EU partner universities, except for one interview, in which two members of staff participated. The table below contains information on the participants' role within their institution. All interviews were conducted online, using video conferencing software, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. They followed a semi-structured format (Horton et al., 2004), whereby the interview was structured according to a set of themes and questions that had been identified based on the research questions, but was conducted in a way which allowed for other topics to emerge spontaneously.

Participant number	Country	Type of institution	Role within their institution
1	Azerbaijan	Public university	Head of International Projects Division
2	Azerbaijan	Public university	Deputy Vice Rector for International Affairs <sup>1</sup>
3	Azerbaijan	Private university	Project Manager
4	Belarus	Public university	Head of the Department of Economics and Management
5	Belarus	Public university	Project Manager and Professor

Table 1 - List of research participants, the type of institution they work at and their roles.

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis (TA) approach, and followed the six steps of TA as laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). After initially surveying the data, codes were generated and clustered into themes. Given the open-ended, exploratory nature of the research, this process was highly inductive, and codes were generated from the data itself. While not explicitly intended as a comparative study, the small number of participants from two related contexts and their shared involvement in the UniLab project inevitably prompted questions about how the Azerbaijani and Belarusian experiences resembled or differed from each other. This comparative approach also informed the organisation of codes into themes and the analytic narrative in which they were embedded through the write-up.

## FINDINGS

### The UniLab project: an impetus for change

For all interviewees, the UniLab project was an opportunity to initiate change in their institutions. Participants from both Azerbaijan and Belarus reported that they had previously witnessed a significant mismatch between the skills and competences provided by HEIs and those needed by employers. They especially noted the growing demand among employers for graduates with soft skills, and saw it as their institution's responsibility to develop students' employability and work-related skills in order to create what most interviewees described as a better "product" (i.e., graduate) for employers. They understood the UniLab project as a means to achieve this goal through multiple avenues. On the one hand, new courses and learning activities for students, developed as part of the project, would equip them with the more generic work-related competences that were lacking in the standard curricula. On the other hand, the project involved reaching out to employers, both to gain a better understanding of their expectations and requirements, as well as to advocate for students, to seek out new opportunities for them, and to persuade employers of students' potential to make meaningful contributions to their company or organisation. All interviews emphasised the novel aspect of this approach in their country. In the following paragraphs, the barriers that they faced in bringing about this change, and the strategies they used to overcome them, will be outlined, as well as interviewees' perspectives on the added value that participation in the UniLab project brought with it.

<sup>1</sup> Research participants number 1 and 2 belonged to the same institution.

## **Institutional and governmental barriers to the implementation of the project and WBL**

As publicly funded (in the case of three of the four universities) or publicly recognised institutions, the HEIs under investigation faced limitations in adapting their provision to the demands of the labour market, as they are also directly accountable to their respective national authorities. Interviewees from both countries reported facing significant governmental restrictions in adapting the curricula in their institutions to improve students' workplace-preparedness. For example, for the participating public university in Azerbaijan, ratifying a new Master's was a long and complicated process, and required the approval of the Ministry of Education. Compared to their Azerbaijani counterparts, the Belarusian participants were even more constrained by such regulations, both at the state and institutional level. One interviewee reported that scheduling placements which followed the "European model", i.e., that lasted more than several weeks, was difficult within their academic calendar and degree structure. Centralised career centres also did not feature in university regulations. Instead, staff in individual faculties were responsible for liaising between students and employers. They were primarily tasked with assigning graduates who received government scholarships (who make up around half of the students in one of the participating universities) to mandatory two-year placements, which were primarily hosted by state-owned entities or public institutions such as schools.

### **Cultural barriers: Differing attitudes among stakeholders**

In addition to such formal barriers as the institutional structures and state-level regulations outlined above, interviewees also emphasised how their efforts to implement the UniLab project also came up against what can be termed "cultural barriers". These were especially prevalent in Belarus, where established forms of WBL were not aligned with the principles of learner-centred, labour market-responsive WBL, as envisaged in the UniLab project. This started with the assignment of placements. In what one interviewee described as a "remnant of the Soviet era", students still expected to be assigned a placement, rather than seeking one out for themselves. Companies that hosted students, especially state enterprises, had little interest in actively involving students, and as a result, the placement was a "formal agreement" rather than a real learning opportunity for students. By contrast, private companies were more likely to integrate students in their everyday business, and especially welcomed students who were more advanced in their studies. A similar discrepancy between private and public companies was noted by Azerbaijani interviewees, who also noted a "generational gap" between international companies that had recently arrived in the labour market, and local, more established companies. Among the latter, the notion of "learning on the job" was still novel. Instead, they expected their new employees to arrive with fully developed skills. Large, international corporations, however, had a more open mindset, and, in their quest for young, qualified workers, were initiating closer collaborations with universities.

### **Strategies for addressing barriers: responding to context-specific challenges**

Just as the challenges that interviewees in Belarus and Azerbaijan faced in implementing the project were similar in some regards, but differed in degree and nature, the strategies they developed to overcome said challenges also varied according to their context. While in Belarus, the structural barriers prevailed throughout the project, in Azerbaijan, interviewees explained how they and their colleagues managed to circumvent certain regulations. Requirements relating to the curriculum could be bypassed by retaining the title of a module, but adjusting the curriculum content. Moreover, the Azerbaijani partners who had been working in similar EU-funded projects for many years found that there was a noticeable shift in attitudes of government authorities towards the modernisation of HE, and an ever-growing

appetite for international partnerships. As one participant summed up, 'project by project, bureaucracy and governmental obstacles are getting softer and softer [...] it's a matter of time'. According to interviewees, this change was driven primarily by key individuals with ties to the universities (e.g., former alumni), who, due to their position within the government or government agencies, were able to push for a stronger labour market orientation in higher education.

A similar strategy, of reaching a group of stakeholders by engaging individuals and using their social networks to bring about change, was applied by one HEI in Azerbaijan in order to involve students more actively in WBL and employability training. Specifically, the institution in question engaged students as "career ambassadors" to support the career centre's activities. This "internship" proved popular among students, whose tasks included promoting career centre events and administrative work, but who were also invited to attend meetings with employers and other stakeholders. In Belarus, factors such as the lack of centralised career centres made this kind of stakeholder engagement and networking through personal connections more challenging. The Belarusian interviewees also noted a reluctance among employers to establish new partnerships, and how this had been further exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic, political instability in Belarus, and the war in Ukraine. Given these circumstances, it becomes evident that the personal mobilisation of stakeholders, whether students, employers or government officials, as it was employed in Azerbaijan, could not be easily transferred to the Belarusian context.

### **Collaboration through UniLab**

Despite their different circumstances, all interviewees reported how participating in the UniLab project contributed to their efforts to bring about positive change in their institutions. Interviewees highlighted the soft skill courses for students, which were developed by the consortium, and which addressed an evident gap in their institutions' employability training provision, responded to the demands of the labour market, and could be implemented without too many difficulties. The extent to which the partners benefited from the other project activities varied among the participating institutions. The Azerbaijani partners highlighted the study visits to the EU universities, and took inspiration from seeing how WBL is operationalised there. At the same time, they found that these visits threw into stark relief the discrepancies between the resources and infrastructures available at the European institutions and the situation in interviewees' home institutions/countries. Some interviewees felt that the EU partners did not always understand how this impeded the UniLab project implementation, nor how difficult it was to initiate changes in the curriculum, let alone to broader university structures or government requirements. While the interviewees had made efforts to circulate the insights they gained from the UniLab project among their colleagues, a lack of English skills, or in some cases, a reluctance among more senior staff members to introduce change, posed additional challenges.

Overall, however, the Azerbaijani partners were hopeful that a change in attitudes across all stakeholder groups was underway, and that students could play a significant role in driving this change. The UniLab project, they stressed, had been unique in involving students directly in study visits to EU countries and other project activities, instilling in students a strong interest in more innovative, learner-centred forms of WBL. Similarly, the opportunities for collaboration among institutions within the same country were highlighted as an advantage of the project, as it allowed institutions operating in the same national context but with different institutional structures and cultures - depending on whether they were private or public, and on how much previous experience with EU-funded projects they had - to learn from each other and to find shared solutions to overcome the barriers of implementing WBL.

## DISCUSSION

According to the findings outlined above, all interviewees understood WBL and employability training as an essential strategy to respond to the pressure that their institutions were under to become more responsive to the labour market. This pressure resulted from both employers' and students' expectations not being met, reflecting findings from studies undertaken in both partner countries which highlight the mismatch between HEIs' learning provision and the demands of the labour market. In relation to the "blame game" on whether it was the responsibility of employers or universities to develop students' employability skills, the interviewees saw it primarily as their institutions' duty. However, they also recognised the crucial role employers played in creating an enabling environment by offering opportunities for WBL and for collaborating with HEIs. There was therefore a sense of frustration among interviewees at the lack of employers' understanding of the importance of WBL and its value, especially among local employers who assumed that the graduates they employed would arrive fully prepared for employment, i.e., not need any further training, while at the same time expecting them to have a range of soft skills that went beyond the academic training provided by universities.

The interviewees' accounts also provide interesting insights into the conditions that are necessary for WBL to be implemented successfully, and reaffirm the importance of several enabling factors identified by Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020), including 'a purposeful division of staff roles involving teaching staff, employer-facing staff, student-facing staff and professional services personnel'. Such a division could be (to some extent) observed in Azerbaijan, where dedicated career centres with designated staff, and supported by additional student "career ambassadors", allowed for an effective division of labour and made it possible for employers and other stakeholders to be targeted effectively whilst also attending to students' needs. By contrast, in Belarus, a less centralised institutional system, in which many of these tasks were handled at the faculty level, made it difficult to alter institutional procedures, let alone bring about change within the institutional culture. While this could be read as a lack of what Dadze-Arthur and colleagues describe as institutions' 'willingness and capacity [...] for structural, institutional, operational and cultural changes', the experience of the non-EU partners involved in the UniLab project shows how this willingness cannot be reduced to a single factor. Instead, it should be understood as the outcome of multiple elements which are highly contextual and are interwoven with the institutional structures and broader political realities in which HEIs inevitably operate.

Such realities made themselves particularly noticeable in an international collaboration such as the UniLab project. Exceptional external circumstances - resulting primarily from the pandemic and the war in Ukraine - especially affected the Belarusian partners. In their case, these circumstances significantly stymied the development of 'productive partnerships between universities, employers, industry, vocationally-oriented learning providers, and other non-traditional stakeholders', a further enabling factor for WBL identified by Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020). For such partnerships to emerge, a basic consensus and stability across society is needed. In its absence, stakeholders remain isolated and rarely initiate new forms of collaboration. Even in more favourable circumstances, such as those in Azerbaijan, such partnerships will inevitably be operationalised differently depending on the particular history of university-industry collaboration in the country in question, and on the type of organisation, as well as the attitudes of individual stakeholders and the broader economic and political situation.

These findings raise the question of the validity of a universal model of WBL being implemented across multiple contexts, and suggest that, as Felce (2010) argues, WBL needs to follow a "context-engaged approach", starting with stakeholders considering 'different foci, understandings and definitions of WBL before [an HEI] can identify its own understandings for its unique context' (Felce, 2010, p. 23). While the international



collaborations made possible through Erasmus-funded projects such as UniLab play an important role in facilitating knowledge exchange and setting innovative practices in motion, this should not come at the cost of neglecting the partner institutions' particular context, nor fail to consider the limitations as well as the possibilities inherent to this context. The interviewees overwhelmingly focused on the European model of WBL as exemplified in the EU programme country institutions, and the limitations and barriers preventing them from achieving this model themselves, rather than on the context-specific possibilities for change that could be realised in their own environment. Such a self-reflective approach is especially important for the implementation of WBL that goes beyond the establishment of formal university-industry agreements, institutional procedures and extracurricular employability courses, but that initiates a pedagogy that, as Dadze-Arthur et al. (2020) describe, 'bridges unhelpful binaries between theory and practice, knowledge and competence, and classroom and work-site' (p.43). This kind of learner-centred, context-engaged pedagogy cannot be implemented purely through a top-down approach as part of the "Europeanisation" of HE and WBL in the EU's partner countries, but can only be sustained if stakeholders across various sectors and fields are driven by a shared impetus for change.

## LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Analysing and evaluating more thoroughly whether such a process is underway in any of the participating institutions was not within the scope of the current study. For this, more longitudinal research and a larger and more diverse range of research participants would have been necessary. Instead, the current study offers a snapshot of the implementation of WBL in four universities in Azerbaijan and Belarus as a result of their participation in the UniLab project. Rather than focusing on the specifics or practicalities of this implementation, the study investigated the general understanding and vision of WBL in these institutions and the internal and external barriers and limitations they face in realising their vision, while also shedding light on relevant cultural and sociopolitical factors. While the interviews conducted with institutions' staff members were the main source of data collection, it is important to note that the author, as part of the eucen team coordinating the project, was heavily involved in the project's final stage. This provided ample opportunities for observing the project's evolution and for discussing it informally, both with EU and non-EU partners. However, it also raises questions about the author's positionality and bias within the project, as well as the degree to which interviewees' answers could have been affected by their relationship as project partners.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting large scale studies that involve various stakeholders, such as employers, students, HE managers and government authorities. Combined with comprehensive baseline studies of the state of WBL and employability training in HEIs across the post-Soviet nations that have joined the European Higher Education Area - similar to those already undertaken at a smaller scale as part of the UniLab project (UniLab 2020a; UniLab 2020b) - these could contribute to our understanding of the contextual factors affecting the implementation of WBL in these countries, and help institutions formulate context-engaged strategies that are both learner-centred and responsive to the labour market.

## CONCLUSIONS

The partner institutions in Azerbaijan and Belarus, like so many universities around the world engaged in WBL, faced significant challenges in reconciling the shifting demands of the labour market with the rigid structures regulating HE. However, as this research has shown, the challenges they face are specific to the cultural and sociopolitical context of the two countries, and especially to the particular circumstances that arose as a result of the Covid-19 health crisis and the war in Ukraine. Implementing WBL is highly complex, and even in two contexts that are similar in many regards, including their shared Soviet history, their membership in the European Higher Education Area, and the growing pressure HEIs face in addressing the mismatch between employers' requirements and students' expectations, their experiences differ significantly based on current circumstances and the degree to which previously established institutional cultures and procedures continue to be implemented. Despite these specific circumstances, the experiences of the UniLab partners also highlight the universal importance of strong collaborations with stakeholders, a learner-centred approach, and an openness towards change at the institutional and governmental levels in order to implement innovative WBL and boost graduate employability.

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