



Accelerating Graduate Employability through Work-Integrated Learning


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ABSTRACT

Work integrated learning (WIL) encompasses educational experiences that merge academic knowledge and practical application in a professional setting, benefiting both students and the existing workforce. The objective of incorporating WIL into education is to foster the integration of theoretical understanding by engaging students in a combination of academic coursework and hands-on work-related activities. With the rise in unemployment, WIL appears to help organizations to get graduates that have all the attributes and skills relevant in the world or work, thereby expanding and growing their businesses ensuring greater prosperity for all concerned. The aim of this article was to assess the role Work Integrated Learning in accelerating Graduate Employability. Four WIL coordinators from different academic programmes that offer WIL as a module participated in this paper. Data was analysed using Thematic analysis, following Braun & Clark steps. The study revealed a direct correlation between academic performance and practical application in the professional setting. This paper therefore argues that WIL programmes can contribute immensely to the overall development of graduates and increase their chances of employment. The study revealed that WIL coordinators should review placement arrangements to improve WIL. This study found that Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has a positive effect on graduate employability and skills development, and that university WIL coordinators should review placement arrangements to ensure that students have enough training and development prior to placement.

KEYWORDS

Work integrated learning; learning; graduate employability; skills.

INTRODUCTION

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in higher education encompasses a range of activities and experiences that integrate theoretical knowledge with practical applications within academic curricula. WIL includes various forms such as work placements, internships, practicums, project-based learning, and service learning. It is a collaborative initiative between industry and higher education institutions aimed at enhancing student learning by enabling the application of theory to real-world contexts (Bates, 2011).

According to Yorke and Vidovich (2014), WIL is gaining increasing visibility and significance in the global tertiary sector beyond traditional disciplines like nursing and education. This indicates that the importance of WIL is recognized across diverse academic fields. Billet (2011) further highlights the growing prominence of WIL in higher education. WIL in undergraduate degrees has gotten a lot of attention in recent years as a strategy for strengthening professional practice and preparing new graduates to meet industry standards.

According to Martin et al. (2011), WIL is widely considered as one of the best mechanisms to enhance graduate employability. Work-integrated learning (WIL) plays a crucial role in equipping graduates with the necessary skills and experience for the professional realm. Final year students are exposed in real work environment, applying theoretical understanding to the real world. This integration is key because students are exposed to directors and managers who are future managers, creating network that will help them after graduation.

According to Wilton (2012), there is a widespread belief that WIL plays a significant role in enhancing students' employability skills. Furthermore, it is considered crucial for students to be job-ready and improve their chances of employment. As stated by McIlveen *et al.* (2011), WIL prompts undergraduates to engage in self-reflection regarding their learning experiences, develop a deeper understanding of the professional world related to their field of study, and acquire the ability to navigate various contexts effectively - all of which are vital for securing employment after graduation.

This article explored the relevance of Work Integrated Learning in accelerating these graduates' employability and skills development. Furthermore, to explain this, the present study was grounded on the following study objectives:

- a. To ascertain whether Work Integrated Learning contributes to graduate employability.
- b. To investigate the relationship and relevance between the curriculum of the qualification and workplace demands, and whether they contribute to graduate employability.
- c. To investigate WIL coordinators' and workplace mentors' experiences of current mentorship and supervision of WIL.
- d. To recommend strategies and policies that could improve the quality of interaction between the parties involved in Work Integrated Learning to improve graduate employability.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) defined.

According to Brooks and Waters, work-integrated learning (WIL) has emerged as an essential educational approach that enhances student learning, development, and job prospects. According to Mtiki (2021), the concept of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) provides colleges with a framework that enables them to produce graduates who are prepared for the workforce, while still adhering to national accountability standards. The primary objective of WIL is to enhance the employability prospects of graduates and simultaneously contribute to the growth of the economy. Specifically, placement-based WIL experiences are regarded as essential criteria when hiring graduates.

Employability defined.

According to Yorke (2011), the terms employability and work-readiness are often used interchangeably, but they have slightly different meanings. Work-readiness refers to the conditions that a person must meet in order to secure an initial job, whereas employability refers to the skills and abilities that are necessary for employment but may not guarantee it. To improve their chances of finding employment, it is preferable to view a graduate as both marketable and work-ready, regardless of the specific terminology used.

Employability is defined by Yorke (2014) as a compilation of accomplishments, skills, knowledge, and individual qualities that enhance graduates' chances of obtaining employment and achieving success in their desired careers, ultimately benefiting themselves, the labour market, the community, and the economy.

WIL typologies

There are various forms of work integrated learning (WIL) available. The initial categorization includes Placement, Practicum, internship, Co-op group, sandwich course, field experience, field work, and finally work study (Mpu et al., 2022; Shaleh et al., 2022). All these typologies are aimed at increasing employability chances for university graduates. The following table shows the different types of WIL and their descriptions.

These WIL typologies range in learning emphasis or structure, but they give chances for learning in a work environment incorporated in the university curriculum. Therefore, this present article focuses on the first type of WIL (placement) and its contribution to graduate employability.

Table 1.*Types Of Work Integrated Learning*

WIL TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Placement	This is an umbrella phrase that refers to all organized job experiences. The main emphasis is placed on exploring career options and enhancing employability through the development of professional skills.
Practicum	This form of WIL focuses on the development of professional competencies and completing professional registration standards as defined by an approved authority such as the HPCSA in nursing, medicine, physicians, psychology, and certified public accountants and auditors.
Internship	This is job experience under the direction and supervision of a seasoned expert. There is extensive learning and realistic previews of the work industry.
Co-op group	This is a supervised professional and employability skill development program that alternates between full-time study and full-time employment throughout the academic term.
Sandwich courses	This is a supervisory job in the student's prospective career. It occurs during a break from studying. One example is a law graduate becoming a lawyer.
Field experience	Work experience is connected to degree content and is intended to prepare students for professional practice.
Field of work	Participation in job activities, site visits, and other means provide exposure to the workplace. This experience serves as research or entry learning for a certain academic area.
Work study	Concurrent job experience does not necessarily need to occur in a formal work environment. It is often linked to overall professional and personal development.

Source: adapted and modified from sterling, 2016

Significance of WIL (Placement) in accelerating graduate employability.

In the article "Employability skill development in work-integrated learning," Jackson (2015) stated that work-integrated learning (WIL) has been found to enhance graduate job preparedness by boosting students' confidence in their workplace abilities, increasing their awareness of industry essential skills, and fostering a greater respect for the working world. While there is limited empirical evidence on the transfer of graduate skills and inconsistent findings regarding learning transfer in general, WIL can facilitate the process of transferring academic abilities to the workplace.

Additionally, WIL promotes collaboration between higher education institutions and businesses, which is crucial for developing curricula that align with both community needs and industry requirements (Smith, 2012). He also argued that WIL offers students a better return on investment as it meets employers' demands for work-ready graduates while providing them

with skilled employees at a low cost (Abeysekera, 2006). Furthermore, WIL contributes to national productivity, particularly during times of economic uncertainty when governments strive to compete globally (Smith, 2012). The main objective of this paper was to examine the role of Work Integrated Learning in enhancing graduate employability.

Theoretical grounding

This research is based on the principles of Human Capital theory, which emphasizes the importance of investing in education and training to achieve personal goals. According to Dhaoui (2013), Human Capital theory is crucial for managing the value of human resources and society, as it has a significant impact on various aspects of individuals' daily lives. In line with this, Becker (1993) defines "human capital" as an individual's collection of knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health.

Furthermore, Bowen (1977) describes human capital as the combination of knowledge, skills, drive, and energy that individuals utilize to create products and services. This concept suggests that individuals who actively participate in education and training will enhance their abilities, knowledge levels, employability prospects, and future earnings.

Overall, this study draws upon the Human Capital theory to explore how investing in education and training can positively affect individuals' personal development, employability, and financial outcomes.

METHODS

The researchers adopted a qualitative research methodology in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept being studied. The purpose of using qualitative research was to delve deeply into the subject and develop an in-depth comprehension of it. WIL has a significant value in creating employability chances for students, and coordinators have a huge responsibility in managing the whole process. In this case, interviewing participants to develop the initial understanding of the problem and draw preliminary conclusions is key. Themes were generated from the data as explained in Braun and Clark (2006).

Qualitative data is frequently characterized by its lack of preset responses, allowing for open-ended exploration. In contrast, quantitative data is often obtained through closed-ended methods like questionnaires or psychological instruments. Similarly, this article adopted an interpretative technique. Interpretive research is based on the belief that social reality is subjective and influenced by human experiences and social conditions (ontology). As such, it emphasizes studying phenomena within their sociohistorical context for a deeper understanding.

According to Aspers and Corte (2019), the qualitative research method is appropriate when the researcher seeks to understand a new occurrence within a particular context, rather than trying to establish a connection between multiple elements. The objective of conducting a qualitative interview is to provide an interpretation of the interviewee's perspective on their environment. Participants should relate their own stories and make inferences from their

experiences (Kaae & Traulsen, 2020). Qualitative research's exploratory approach allows for some knowledge development (Ulian et al., (2020)). A total of nine participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study. In terms of gender distribution, seven participants were females and two were men. All participants were African and were South African citizens. The researchers interviewed four WIL coordinators from four different academic programmes. The participants in this study were limited to individuals serving as WIL coordinators and workplace mentors, aligning with the objective of the research. The study's ethical approval was duly obtained, and it adhered to the ethical guidelines mandated for academic research. The researchers obtained the letter that allowed them the right to interview participants to gather information.

In terms of reliability and validity, the present study used triangulation to obtain information from several work-integrated coordinators regarding work-integrated learning and how they manage and impart necessary skills to university students. This method improved the reliability and validity of the conclusions by cross-checking material from diverse angles.

RESULTS

Raw data from the participants was processed following Braun and Clark (2006) stages of thematic analysis. According to these authors, Thematic analysis is an approach used to identify, analyze, and present patterns or themes within a dataset. It involves organizing and describing the data in intricate detail while also highlighting the key findings. For this study, data was collected, and the following themes emerged during data cleansing:

Table 2.

Themes

Theme	Sub-theme
Students' commitment to learn their work	Acquisition of skills
Integration of theory into practice	Seamless alignment with industry standards and best practices
Demonstrated skills and competences	Practical application of academic knowledge in real-world scenarios
Positive impact on career trajectory	Professional networking and industry connections
Short period with more areas to cover	Few aspects of curriculum are covered

Students' commitment to learn their work.

Drawing from the themes that were generated by the researchers in the collected data, it was revealed that students were committed to learn their work and they have shown the enthusiasm to grasp knowledge about the work they are exposed to. From the workplace mentors, it was revealed that students were able to acquire new skills as they came empty from the classroom. There was a smooth transition and skills like communication skills and interpersonal skills were noted. The following sentiments emerged from one of the participants:

I have been mentoring students from your University and I never had problems. Your students are always eager to learn. They always want to be exposed to work, systems and practices of our company. They want to know more about their curriculum. I really appreciate the fact that I mentored them. They learnt a lot and I also gained something from them. I am going to be alone again; their absence will be felt because they were committed to work. I really appreciate them.

The aim of this WIL program is to enhance graduate employability, as the title of the paper suggests. For this to happen, it is important to pay attention to the acquisition of skills necessary to contribute to this process. In this way students have acquired skills that will help them get employed although the period is regarded as short.

Integration of theory into practice

The identification of classroom-acquired information as a critical factor emphasizes the need of theoretical foundations in Work Integrated Learning (WIL). The seamless integration of theoretical conceptions with practical applications is a core premise, with classroom activities manifesting themselves congruently in the practical realm. This symbiotic connection is shown by the placement of students in various organizations, where the application of theoretical abilities becomes critical. A prime example is the subject of Human Resource Management, where students are required to use their theoretical understanding of Human Resource Development in real-world professional settings. Specifically, in training and development programs, students are expected to apply and integrate their learned knowledge with the demands of real-world professional practices.

Participants have indicated that most students have adapted easily and their theoretical understanding of certain concepts about the field helped them adapt easily. The following excerpts emerged:

Your student's proficiency demonstrates how well your curriculum aligns with industry requirements. Their easy assimilation and knowledge of the conceptual frameworks used inside our organization highlight the seamless quality of the integration process. Notably, their ability to translate theoretical understanding into practical application in authentic work situations demonstrates the educational framework's effectiveness in cultivating practical acumen and facilitating a smooth transition from theoretical knowledge to real-world professional contexts.

A sub-theme emerged under the broader theme of theory integration into practice, emphasizing the participants' capacity to effortlessly connect theoretical knowledge with industry standards and best practices. This sub-theme highlights the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in not just closing the divide between academic theory and real-world implementation, but also ensuring that such implementation adheres to recognized industrial norms.

Demonstrated skills and competences.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences have proved to be effective in eliciting a wide range of skills and abilities among participants. Participants in the program successfully showed a comprehensive set of practical, job-specific abilities that not only correlate with academic theory but also fulfil the changing needs of real-world professional situations. The identification of these abilities, which range from effective problem-solving and critical thinking to proficient project management and inventive work methods, demonstrates the practical influence of WIL on participants' skill development. The immersive aspect of the program allows for the application of theoretical ideas in actual work environments, resulting in the confirmation and strengthening of practical competences required for success in their industries. This validation procedure not only confirms the WIL approach's efficacy.

From the interview that was conducted, it emerged that students demonstrated abilities and showcased their talents. They can work and they are ready to be absorbed by industries. Some of the participants have indicated that:

The assistance offered by lecturers has greatly reduced our obligations. Our main goal was to expose students to real-world problems and allow them to use their brains. I had the privilege of mentoring pupils who had quick learning ability and readily adapted to shifting surroundings. These people effectively displayed their talents and did their jobs flawlessly, completely harmonizing with the overriding theme of shown skills and competencies.

A sub-theme emerged within the wider theme of proven abilities and competencies, focusing explicitly on the participants' capacity to apply academic information learned during their educational journey. This sub-theme highlights the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in connecting theoretical knowledge with practical application in real-world work environments.

Positive impact on career trajectory

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) participation provides hopeful projections and appraisals of its tremendous influence on participants' long-term career paths. By design, the curriculum acts as a vital catalyst in developing students into professionals who are well-prepared for the dynamic demands of their different vocations. WIL experiences not only improve participants' immediate employability but also greatly contribute to their overall career development. The program's important role in developing the skills, knowledge, and practical acumen required for success emphasizes its effectiveness in transforming participants into career-ready professionals. This recognition goes beyond the immediate advantages of skill learning, stressing WIL's long-term positive impact on students as they navigate and grow in their professional lives.

The sub-theme of professional networking and industry contacts in the framework of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) emphasizes the importance of participants building and cultivating important ties within their areas. This sub-theme emphasizes that WIL not only provides students with real job experiences, but it also acts as a platform for individuals to

create meaningful connections with industry leaders, mentors, and peers. Participants actively connect with experts, forming relationships that continue beyond the educational context.

Challenges and prospects

The integration of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) into educational frameworks is subject to a careful analysis of its benefits and drawbacks, with the primary goal of improving students' employment chances. A noteworthy worry stems from the observed influence of the WIL length on certain students, which results in non-completion of their allotted academic curriculum, as outlined in the logbook.

In the current educational paradigm, the recommended length for Work-Integrated Learning activities for enrolled students is generally three months. However, mentors from other groups have expressed concerns about the shortness of this time commitment. Mentors who supervise students in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs have expressed particularly strong concerns. In this context, the mentors argue that students enrolling in TVET programs are required to commit a significant amount of time, namely eighteen months, to practical experiences. This differs significantly from their counterparts.

The concerns that were discovered with the temporal scope of WIL highlight the need for a critical re-evaluation of the current duration. The incongruity between the three-month WIL term and the prolonged practical commitments required by TVET programs stimulates reflection on the current model's applicability and flexibility. Addressing these problems is critical to increasing the effectiveness of WIL efforts and promoting equal experiential learning opportunities across several educational areas. As a result, an investigation into possible changes to the temporal configuration of WIL is required, thereby accommodating the distinct needs of various academic programs and facilitating a more harmonious integration of practical experiences within the overarching educational framework.

This disparity highlights an important point, implying a possible disadvantage for university students. The short period of WIL for university students may restrict their complete coverage of critical components within their logbooks, reducing the depth and breadth of practical experience. This worry emphasizes the importance of conducting a nuanced analysis of the temporal aspects of WIL programs, considering the individual requirements, and learning objectives of various academic environments to promote equal and thorough educational experiences for all students.

In the study conducted by McLennan, it was observed that a recurring concern is the insufficient availability of accessible resources to provide Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities (McLennan and Keating, 2008). Lack of proper arrangements and signed Memorandum of Understanding between the university and the hosting organization delays the placement of students and this affects the graduation of students as well.

Another most important challenge that delays the proper implementation of WIL is workload of some academics. Participants who were selected in one of the Eastern Cape universities indicated that WIL is not regarded as a module yet there is a lot of administration

required. They also highlighted that training and development of academics who are visiting students to various organisations is needed. Some academics, according to one of the participants, were not trained on WIL program and were required to visit and assess students. This is in line with what Zanko et al. (2011) explained in respect of the institutional support of WIL. According to Zanko et al. (2011), an insufficient backing from institutions for work-integrated learning (WIL) can greatly impact the resources accessible to academics in developing and implementing WIL programs.

From here, where do we go with WIL?

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has been successfully implemented in several nations, demonstrating its usefulness as a pedagogical technique. WIL programs have demonstrated to be effective in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application across a variety of educational settings, boosting students' professional preparation. Globally, the favourable outcomes have positioned WIL as a key technique for developing experiential learning and preparing employees for the changing demands of many sectors. South Africa has embraced and continues to use Work Integrated Learning as an intrinsic component of its educational structure, in line with the international trend.

Furthermore, the continued commitment to WIL in the South African setting demonstrates an understanding of its transformational potential in providing students with practical skills and competences. South Africa's incorporation of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) showcases its dedication to cultivating graduates who possess not only strong academic abilities but also the capacity to effectively apply their knowledge in practical settings, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical learning and real-world experiences. WIL's continuing implementation in South Africa demonstrates its enduring importance in contributing to the country's educational goals and the holistic development of its workforce.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in South Africa is at a crossroads, with the potential to influence the country's workforce development and educational environment. As the country grapples with the challenge of aligning academic curricula with the changing demands of the modern job market, a planned and coordinated approach is critical. A complete framework for WIL must be developed, one that smoothly interacts with current academic frameworks while establishing strong connections with industry stakeholders. To achieve the seamless integration of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, institutional policies, educational approaches, and assessment processes must be reevaluated. In addition, a commitment to continual research and assessment is critical for improving and enhancing WIL programs and guaranteeing their relevance and success. South Africa can create a talented and adaptable workforce by building symbiotic partnerships between university and business, encouraging innovation and sustainability in the ever-changing global economic landscape.

Stakeholder relationships as a pillar of WIL

Ensuring ongoing communication and collaboration with important parties is of utmost importance when developing and executing a Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) program.

According to Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, and Fletcher (2008), managing the expectations and competing demands of stakeholders can pose challenges.

Training and development for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) coordinators is critical because it plays a critical role in maximizing the efficacy of WIL programs, particularly in boosting graduate employability. Comprehensive training for WIL coordinators should be prioritized since it guarantees that students placed in varied organizational contexts have a clear awareness of their duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, such training enables WIL coordinators to define specific goals for hosting companies, producing a unified framework for program execution. The resulting coherence and alignment of expectations among students, coordinators, and hosting organizations significantly contributes to the smooth operation of the WIL program. As a result, prudent investment in the training and development of WIL coordinators not only improves the overall quality of WIL experiences but also strengthens the link between academic learning and practical application, improving graduates' employment chances.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discovered favourable association between classroom learning and practical application in the workplace contributes significantly to the body of knowledge in two ways. Firstly, it validates the usefulness of South Africa's educational system, confirming that the knowledge provided within academic institutions correlates meaningfully with the needs of real-world circumstances. This validation is useful for both academics and policymakers, since it provides confidence that curriculum design and instructional approaches promote practical skill acquisition. Secondly, the findings emphasize the critical significance of work-integrated learning in bridging the theory-practice divide. Recognizing this link highlights the need of establishing and extending programs that allow for hands-on experiences, enhancing the academic journey and equipping students with the competences required for success in their future professional activities. As a result, our findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the symbiotic link between classroom learning and workplace application, directing future educational efforts and improving overall workforce preparation quality.

Study limitations

The study was conducted in a selected university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. Findings of this study were obtained from the selected WIL coordinators and workplace mentors. Therefore, findings of this study may not be generalised to all WIL coordinators and workplace mentors in different organizations and universities.

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