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THE ROLE OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN DEVELOPING DESIRABLE ATTRIBUTES FOR THE EMPLOYABILITY OF OFFICE MANAGEMENT GRADUATES AT A SELECTED INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A SELECTED REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Work integrated learning (WIL) is considered to be essential for higher education pedagogy in South Africa. As a result, it has become essential to determine its actual role in the development of favourable attributes for the employability of graduates. The study reviewed selected literature on Work-integrated learning of Office Management Graduates at a Selected Institution in South Africa. The search indicated evidence that areas where the curriculum needed improvement in classroom learning and workplace learning. The literature indicated also that curriculum should be reviewed regularly, and both the University and the industry should play a significant role in better prepare the graduates to meet the requirements of the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

The rate of joblessness in South Africa has maintained a steady rise over the years. According to Yu (2020, Stats SA reported that graduate unemployment rose from 27% in first quarter of 2018, to 28% in the second quarter. Regarding these statistics, Thomas-Francois, von Massow, and Joppe (2017:83) stress that unemployment in graduates is a worthwhile study since theory suggests the economy in South Africa should encourage critical skills that will produce enough jobs for graduates. Work integrated learning (WIL) is considered to be essential for higher educational pedagogy in South Africa. As a result, it has become essential to determine its actual role in the development of favourable attributes for the employability of graduates. Wedekind and Mutereko (2016) assert that the educational pedagogy and employability of individuals is a widely debatable issue in South Africa because of the talk about the lack of curriculum responsiveness to the industry needs. The apparent mismatch is because curriculum responsiveness encompasses multiple factors such as employer's needs and other stakeholders' perspectives on WIL to enhance the employability of higher education graduates. The authors also argued that there are many studies on the employability of graduates; however, there was no single view as to what makes people employable and what employers' responsibility was in terms of training.

The role of WIL in developing desired cognitive, behavioural and intellectual capabilities for employability of Office Management has been poorly understood over the years relative to science subjects (Said, Friesen& Al-Ezzah, 2014). As a result, the WIL programmes for Office Management learners have been weak. This problem has, to some extent, accounted for the poor employability of Office Management graduates. Higher institutions can be criticised for failing to produce graduates with the skill that meets the need of industry. In addition, the rapid changes in technology make it difficult for universities to produce the skills the employer wants. Azuka (2009:197) argues that further research on current job markets should focus on curriculum research and development in collaboration with the industry. This study explored the role of WIL in developing favourable cognitive, intellectual, and behavioural attributes for the employability of higher education learners from a selected institution in South Africa. The study conducted a selected literature review on one database on university curriculum and industrial activities. The questions that guided the study were what is the role of work-integrated learning in developing desirable attributes for the employability of Office Management Graduates at a selected institution of higher education in South Africa.

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a narrative overview of selected literature where key studies were selected and reviewed so as to provide an integrative summary that informs on the role of WIL in developing desirable attributes for the employability of graduates. Narrative overviews of literature are deemed important in providing a general perspective of phenomena of interest and they provide essential summaries for future research (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006). Additionally, WIL is now a mature research area that has been an interest to researchers over many years thereby making it essential to provide a narrative literature overview that summarises what has already been done and creates useful future directions. The narrative literature was expected to be based on recent articles that have been published in peer-reviewed journals related to Office management students in South Africa in the past two years. The inclusion criteria for the articles were also based on frequently cited articles as well as those which are based on empirical studies. Selected articles were analysed and the procedure was continued until when the point of data saturation was reached and the review was stopped. This overview of literature was expected to yield useful data on the role of WIL in developing desirable attributes for the employability of graduates. This study was specific to WIL in relation to Office management graduates from a University in the Eastern Cape. Thus, the study also ensured that the selection of articles that refers to graduates from the Office Management Department, especially with the focus on those undertaken in the Eastern Cape. Selected articles were analysed in terms of the methodologies adopted, key findings as well as recommendations provided. Unique findings, common patterns in data results as well as methodological limitations will also be provided to ensure that a comprehensive overview of the literature is provided.

The institution to be analysed in this study typifies many rural HEIs in South African provinces that are not ranked within the top 10. The study focuses on Walter Sisulu University (WSU) which ranks number 21 (Unirank, 2021:1). WSU in terms of its vision has positioned itself as a unique

developmental university. It has identified its anchor niche areas as rural and urban development and positioned itself as a responsive, innovative and comprehensive developmental university that specialises in these two niche areas. WSU wants to transform its programme and qualification mix (PQM) to respond better to local, regional and national developmental imperatives. It wants to embed values in its programmes so that it can produce a new and unique kind of graduate. WSU positions itself as a developmental university that can produce a new kind of unique graduate. However, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in its audit report on WSU the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) indicates that over the years the university has enrolled approximately 20% more students than its carrying capacity (CHE, 2011:11). This has resulted in the physical infrastructure of WSU being placed under enormous strain and overstretching its provision of educational resources.

LITERATURE

The broad aim of this study was to explore the role of work-integrated learning in developing desirable attributes for the employability of Office Management Graduates at a selected institution of higher education in South Africa. Given the high rate of unemployment and the significant interest in WIL in both education and the labour market, an assessment of the efficacy of WIL in attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural development of graduates is important. The sections below review existing literature on the WIL concept and findings on its role in developing desired attributes among graduates. In this way the WIL concept is seen to be a specific initiative within other initiatives for driving graduate employability. Shivoro, Shalyefu and Kadhila (2017) provided that related to WIL are other concepts which can be called by different names but which aim to contribute to employability by developing the attitudinal, cognitive and behavioural attributes of students. A general university level for the employability of graduates that relate to WIL involve the emphasis of such general attitudes as professionalism, communication as well as work ethics while curriculum wide dimension for the development of employability can involve a module that specifically attends to graduate employability (Shivoro et al, 2017). Chowdhury (2020) asserted that other concepts related to the employability of graduates may be implemented through work-based or work-related learning that is ingrained within the entire curriculum. The key observation is that there are many strategies in use but the final goal is simply the realization of better employability for graduates. In some cases students can have a specific module within their curriculum to cover for the employability of graduates while in some instances part time work and university interactions are arranged parallel to the main curriculum. When considering the above, the WIL concept can be considered to be just one dimension of employability that has been of interest in the higher education system. In many cases what differ among these concepts is simply the names that are used to identify them. Similar notions of employability may be named differently by different higher learning institutions.

The emergence of the WIL concept

Educational transformation has been a critical element of post-apartheid South African Higher education. Apartheid era educational ideologies were meant to advance racial segregation and limit the quality of education among the black population. With the new political dispensation of 1994,

it became necessary to transform educational systems in a manner that addressed past injustices and improved the quality of education. This transformation has been to foster increased access and quality of higher education (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). This has led to curriculum reforms that deviated from limiting employability capacity of black people to ensure economic participation of everyone. The realization that not everyone can be employed led to the need for self-employment and entrepreneurship as well as the need to expand existing competencies. Within this need for transformation, WIL has been considered a key element of improving the quality of education to increase employability and contribute to reducing poverty, inequality and unemployment.

WIL is a concept that is broadly recognised and categorised in many ways. It encompasses several notions such as service learning, internships and practical work that are included for the acquisition of career skills (Bridgstock, Grant-Imaru & McAlpine, 2019). The main characteristic of WIL is the establishment of initiatives that allow students to have some industry experience during their time in higher education. Principally, WIL initiatives are based on increasing work readiness by ensuring that learners get an opportunity to apply theory into real practical situations. When the WIL concept became popular in university curricular, it was initially perceived to be strongly relevant in practical oriented subjects rather than entire disciplines. As a result, in disciplines such as Office Management, the concept has not been fully explored. As provided in Chowdhury (2020), a successful WIL programme requires the establishment of strong links with the industry. This will ensure that industry willingly contributes to the education system and active engagement is then promoted. It would also require ensuring that the curriculum is appropriately designed to be industry based. In this regard, WIL implies university – industry linkages and partnerships characterized by collaboration in ensuring work-readiness of graduates from higher educational institutions.

WIL and the development of abilities

Significant studies such as those of Shivoro, et al. (2017) found evidence that many universities rely on the theoretical classroom curriculum and WIL to increase the employability of graduates. The essential ingredient within the curriculum and WIL is the enhancement of intellectual, behavioural, and cognitive attributes that are deemed important for driving industries through productivity and competitiveness. As such, the role of WIL in enhancing employment has been widely observed. As explained in Fahimirad, Nair, Kotamjani, Mahdinezd and Feng (2019), employability is broadly a function of generic and technical skills. These skills are personal attributes that a learner is expected to develop over years of education. WIL is meant to ensure that the theoretical skills acquired in classrooms and lecture rooms are applied in real situations. In this regard, WIL can be an attempt to develop a holistic individual with both theoretical and practical strength in certain areas. In the labour market abilities relate to skills and any capabilities that are favoured by employers as they are seen to be essential for employment (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). A key ingredient for ensuring that required attributes are adequately impacted by the graduate relates to the willingness, desire and capacity to make the WIL programs a success. For the benefits of WIL it appears vital for three parties to adequately possess the willingness to make WIL a success. These parties are the higher educational institution, the student as well as the industry. Effective and adequate cooperation of these is likely to enhance the success of WIL.

The final goal of industry is to acquire highly productive employees whose competencies are relevant for organizational competitiveness and contribution to economic growth. This is seen to be achievable only if the workforce has the right competencies. These economic objectives are considered to be achievable if the workforce possesses the generic and technical requires as necessary. Generic skills are broad and may tend to be universal across disciplines and they include time management, communication ability, innovativeness, teamwork, a positive attitude to work and creativity. Generic skills tend to enrich the worker for broad industrial situations. Technical skills are seen to be more aligned to a job and to foster employability both generic and technical skills are expected. WIL is specifically considered to be an essential part in the development of all types of skills especially job-related technical skills.

The essence of WIL can be considered within Chowdhury's (2020) argument that traditional classroom-based education is meant to address the theoretical components of disciplines without effectively addressing how this theory is applicable in real life situations. WIL is then considered to be a way of closing the application gap by ensuring that the theoretical components are linked up to real practical situations. Whereas generic skills are mainly groomed through interactions and other activities in learning institutions, technical skills are largely practically acquired. As such, in many WIL programmes, students get attached to workplaces and are given industry-based coaches and mentors who are expected to ensure that students acquire skills in real situations. The expectation is that theoretical work acquired in classrooms is strengthened and converted to meaningful skills through WIL attachments. These premises have meant that WIL has got global appreciation and has been applied in many ways meant to specifically meet different situations.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of the study was to determine the role of work-integrated learning in developing desirable attributes for the employability of Office Management Graduates at a selected institution of higher education in South Africa. The role of WIL in developing desired cognitive, behavioural and intellectual capabilities for employability of Office Management has been poorly understood over the years relative to science subjects. As a result, the WIL programmes for Office Management learners have been weak. This problem has, to some extent, accounted for the poor employability of Office Management graduates. The apparent mismatch is because curriculum responsiveness encompasses multiple factors such as employer's needs and other stakeholders' perspectives on WIL to enhance the employability of higher education graduates. There is a mismatch between the curriculum and what the employers need. Hence, the study recommended that the University Management should communicate with the employers on what is needed in the industry so that these needs should be included in the curriculum. In addition, the rapid changes in technology make it difficult for universities to produce the skills the employer wants. The study recommended that universities should purchase and train students in new technology.

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