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## **WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING FOR OFFICE MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY GRADUATES IN AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING IN THE EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE OF SOUTH AFRICA: A SELECTED REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The tremendous changes in the global economy do not only affect institutions of higher learning but also students during Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Hence, there is a need for the higher institution to meet the requirement of the workplace to better prepare their student. The objective of this study was to determine how WIL enhances the Office Management curriculum (or Office Management practice) for the employability of graduates. The study was framed within the qualitative research paradigm based on a selected review of literature to allow for a comprehensive summary of existing studies on WIL and their major findings on WIL and the employability of graduates. The findings revealed that there was evidence that improvement is needed in the curriculum and the study recommended that new skills and attributes need to be incorporated curriculum and that the curriculum should be reviewed regularly.

### **INTRODUCTION**

To ensure South African graduates possess industry relevant skills and experiences, industry exposure during the learning period has become focal in higher learning. Work Integrated Learning (WIL) program is one of the strategies that higher educational institutions have adopted to improve educational outcomes and ensure their attractiveness to industry. With an increased need to ensure graduate employability and fitness for the labour market, WIL programs are receiving widespread consideration the world over (Vailasseri, Long & Joordens, 2021). The essence of WIL in Higher education institutions is to increase student exposure to industry.

Over the years, there have been debates on the efficacy of WIL with some scholars arguing that WIL enhances knowledge acquisition and attitude development through out of the classroom exposure. In contrast some scholars have argued that WIL tends to result in exposure and focus on non-essentials which cannot be deemed important for the educational development of students. Furthermore, the WIL concept has been linked to entrepreneurial courses and not those in Office Management (Amadi-Echendu, Phillips, Chodokufa & Visser, 2016:23). With the high rates of unemployment, it has become essential to consider WIL in relation to such fields as Office Management and Technology.

There is a misfit between the skills profile of graduates from South African higher educational institutions and industry requirements (Römgens, Scoupe & Beusaert, 2020). The study makes specific reference to Office management Technology graduates as a special case study given the wide changes affecting them owing to the technological revolution. The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), in particular, has meant that Office Management student now face specific employability needs that relate to abilities in the use of ICT and office related technologies including robots, artificial intelligence and 3D printing technologies. The lack of specific skills relate to the 4IR has partly resulted in poor absorption of graduates into the labour market and contributed to the high rate on unemployment in South Africa. This problem has resulted in calls for curriculum reform and the strengthening of WIL pedagogical approaches (Omoruyi, Olamide, Gomolemo and Donath, 2017:1). However, more research has become necessary to explore the actual contribution of WIL to industrial innovation and productivity. Given the problem statement stated, the objectives of the study was to determine how WIL enhances the Office Management curriculum (or Office Management practice) for the employability of graduates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study was framed within the qualitative research paradigm based on a selected review of literature to allow for a comprehensive summary of existing studies on WIL and their major findings on WIL and the employability of graduates. The literature review methodology can be considered relevant as it allows for condensing previous findings and point to possible future directions for the WIL research agenda. In adopting the literature review methodology, the study takes the perspective that research in WIL has matured, and significant findings exist and if adequately summarised can lead to better conception of the phenomenon and inform future research (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006). It was considered that researchers who have focused on WIL are likely to have found evidence that can lead to improve understanding of WIL, employability and skills development among graduates.

The study follows a selected literature review methodology based on the analysis of key findings from previous empirical studies on WIL, skills acquisition and employability. The literature review scope out emerging and recent themes in WIL by focusing on recently published articles that have received significant citations because they have advanced certain critical themes in relation to WIL. Considering the need to integrate themes in relation to WIL that allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in relation to the employability of graduates, empirical articles will be reviewed and key themes will be identified, compared, and summarised thereby providing key findings of the literature. A literature review data collection and analysis template summarising key themes, findings, and concepts from the literature was used during the analysis. The saturation point was deemed to be the point when no new information emerged from the retrieved literature. Based on the thematic analysis new research directions can be identified thereby expanding perspectives of WIL as vital in the employability of graduates.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review presented in this section considers WIL as a strategy for addressing the skills requirements of learners and promoting their fitness for employment and absorption into the labour market. In respect of the research objectives stated earlier, the literature review tackled three broad areas, namely: (1) benefits of WIL on graduate employability, (2) WIL and graduate employability as well as (3) curriculum enhancement through WIL.

### **WIL and its benefits to higher education students**

WIL is widely considered to be an indispensable component of the educational curriculum in many higher education institutions across the globe. It is considered to be a powerful way of linking theory with practice and an important way of increasing graduate readiness for the labour market. In their study of WIL, Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) inform that, the benefits of WIL lies in its relevance in improving chances of transition from university to work situations. WIL is believed to be a powerful approach in creating work readiness (Zegwaard, Johansson, Kay, Mcrae, Ferns & Hoskyn, 2019). In a study of synchronised industry and academic skills, Blaxell and Moore (2011) provide that employers seek both technical and generic skills in prospective employees. Generic skills include: loyalty, integrity, skills, enthusiasm, integrity, motivation good communication and teamwork among others. On the other hand, technical skills are task-based and are those required for the performance of certain specific tasks (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Mkhize, 2017).

WIL is believed as one way of enhancing both technical and generic skills. Generic skills are described as broad skills that apply to many industry disciplines and that are critical for continued employment whereas the technical skills are job specific. In contrast, technical skills are specific and are based on the performance of specific tasks and duties among the OMT graduates. WIL tend to provide prior exposure to certain critical tasks and the acquisition of skills for performing them before real absorption in the labour market. In McGunagle and Zizka (2020), WIL is argued to be relevant and important in the development of four critical dimensions of employment which relate to assets possessed by the individuals, and these are deemed to consist of the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of an individual. Attitudes and general knowledge usually form a significant part of generic skills for employability. Other three dimensions for employability which are facilitated by WIL include presentation of an individual in interviews and curriculum vitae, deployment (matching of skills and authority) as well as the state of the general economic environment. WIL is believed to be essential in the development of the right attitudes, skills and other necessities that capacitate graduates for employability.

### **WIL pedagogy systems for the employability of OMT graduates in the 4IR context**

The 4IR has had notable impacts on the skills and the pedagogy framework required for the acquisition of these skills among OMT learners (Amadi-Echendu, et. al, 2016). New technologies including artificial intelligence, machines for virtualisation, robots and general web based platforms have meant a need for a new curriculum and new pedagogical ways for the curriculum.

WIL tend to be a a key pedagogical dimension to promoting the acquisition of industry relevant skills and attributes for the employment of graduates. WIL is considered to be relevant in the promotion of technical skills that are directly linked to OMT. Essentially, technical skills relate to those specifically involving the use of the new technologies and other work specific attitudes for the OMT graduates. WIL is strongly deemed to be relevant in the promotion of real and actual skills for operating key technologies and for performing key tasks as necessary (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017)

### **The role of WIL on graduate employability**

The role of WIL in graduate employability lies in the existence of a gap between classroom learning and industry expectations (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). WIL, is therefore considered to be an effective way of filling the skills and expectations gap as it is an opportunity for matching classroom learning and industry contexts.

Through WIL, learners are exposed to real workplace situations where they are expected to have an overview of their attributes in relation to workplace demands. Mkhize (2017) provided that WIL enhances collaborative teaching and learning. It does so by allowing an employer of industry person to teach and instill expected skills to the learner. Arney (2022) provides that WIL enhances graduate employability by exposing them to real workplace situations during their learning phase and allowing for the acquisition of essential skills and attributes. As such, WIL increases graduate employability by attending to skills gaps through providing workplace-based coaching, teaching and learning. It also enhances graduate employability through strengthening classroom based generic and technical specific skills.

### **Curriculum enhancement through WIL**

The premise of enhancing curriculum through WIL relates to the need to align higher education with industry skills requirements (Mkhize, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). As provided in Rowe and Zegwaard (2017), higher education is expected to produce graduates who are ready for employment in industries and the curriculum is at the centre stage of meeting these expectations. Consequently, curriculum reform has been a feature of the educational provision in many societies and countries that have undergone transformations across the years. As provided in the literature of Mzangwa (2019) in a study of educational transformation in South Africa, shifts in education in the country have been related to the political shifts from apartheid to democracy and the new imperatives to solve social evils of poverty, inequality and unemployment.

The Education White Paper 3 of 1997 is the main impetus for providing a shift in the transformation ideology which was also better simplified in the National plan which entails the view of adequately increasing the productive capacity of higher education curriculum (Du Preez, Simmonds & Verhoef, 2016). It is within this ideological view of transformation that the adoption and strengthening of WIL should be viewed. In this regard, WIL can be considered to be an enabling educational component that was established to ensure the higher educational curriculum attends to national problems that include unemployment and poverty. WIL, therefore, is an enrichment component within the curriculum that was established to strengthen high education so

that it is composed of industry fit graduates. Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) conceptualized WIL as an essential concept of work-readiness or employability.

The essential component of work-readiness are generic and discipline specific skills that are meant to ensure that graduates become adequately prepared for employment. Mkhize (2017) reveals that WIL basically involves the fusion of workplace experience with theoretical knowledge that is acquired through in-class learning. The final output is an individual with theoretical and workplace practical skills that boost the capacity for better productivity in the workplace. In appreciating WIL as an enriching component in the curriculum, it should be appreciated that the curriculum is the entire set of all the learning experiences that students undergo before they finally graduate. WIL is an enrichment in most curricular that entails a broad range of practically oriented methods of learning that include such initiatives as practical projects, service learning, simulations, internships as well as service learning (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). WIL is also an enrichment in the curriculum as it keeps the university abreast of developments in industry to meet future job skills demand. It also allows the employers to learn the capabilities of the graduate and what the university produces in terms of job-ready graduates (Bergami, 2008:78). Dealing with curriculum design with the specific focus on changes in society and professional field, Letschert and Kessels (2003) advocated that curriculum development should focus on integrated socio-political process. Nieuwenhuis, Smulders and Sessink (2021) propose a model of designing curriculum whereby the design start from outside (Employer) and moves inwards the curriculum developers (Lecturers). The author argued that such responds may offer the opportunity to respond to the developments in the field, and the agreements serve as then a frame of reference.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to determine how WIL enhances the Office Management curriculum (or Office Management practice) for the employability of graduates. In respect of the research objective, the literature review tackled three broad areas on the benefits of WIL on graduate employability, WIL and graduate employability as well as curriculum enhancement through WIL. The study follows a selected literature review methodology based on the analysis of key findings from previous empirical studies on WIL, skills acquisition and employability. The literature review scope out emerging and recent themes in WIL by focusing on recently published articles that have received significant citations because they have advanced certain critical themes in relation to WIL. The findings revealed that there was evidence that improvement is needed in the curriculum and the study recommended that new skills and attributes need to be incorporated curriculum and that the curriculum should be reviewed regularly. The study was limited in scope as it was based on literature only and the number of documents was based on purposive and convenience criteria thereby limiting the scope of the study. Additionally, the study relies on the literature review strategy only. Future research may have to consider mixed research designs to explore WIL and graduate employability in OMT. Despite these limitations, the study has provided in-depth and makes a strong foundation for further studies.

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