

## **Educators' perspectives on the capacity of WIL programs to broaden Office Management and Technology competencies of students at UoTs**

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**Abstract:** Educators who teach future employees are collaborating with industry to bridge the gap between industry and higher education by developing an industry-relevant curriculum that ensures students are fully equipped with skills that will better prepare them for future employment. Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) not only produces a capable workforce but also strengthens the relationship between higher education institutions and companies, as well as providing opportunities for on-the-job income. With these advantages in mind, students may find it necessary to engage in work-integrated learning to become employable and productive citizens of our nation. The purpose of this study is to give educators' perspectives on the ability of WIL programs to widen students' Office Management and Technology (OMT) competencies. The outcomes of a qualitative case study involving ten educators from the Central University of Technology (CUT) Bloemfontein Campus revealed that not all OMT capabilities are deemed basic to WIL involvement. The research found that OMT educators believe that students' expertise in website design and development is not required for them to participate effectively in WIL.

**Keywords:** Educators, Office Management and Technology competencies, UoTs, WIL

### **1. Introduction**

In several ways, the findings of this study are intended to benefit businesses, educators at Universities of Technology (UoTs), and students interested in pursuing a career in administration. Employers would benefit from recruiting more qualified and ready-to-work employees, as well as perhaps saving money on recruiting costs. Educators would be more informed about the current competencies needed in today's corporate office, as well as the areas where education needs to improve (Zegwaard and Rowe, 2017). Students would be better prepared following corporate expectations, resulting in improved employability skills and the capacity to function more efficiently in the workplace. Receiving feedback from supervisors when students are given WIL experience in the form of criticisms, complaints, or recommendations can help to improve the OMT program and students' achievement. The OMT department should establish a full awareness of its strengths and weaknesses based on constructive or critical assessments, allowing adjustments to be adopted and good features to be stressed when possible. This will enable course content and instruction to be tailored to the demands of today's employers (Bridgstock, 2017). This should help educators come up with the most innovative and effective ways to prepare students for Work-Integrated Learning. As a result, the OMT department will be well-positioned to produce graduates with cutting-edge technical abilities.

The Central University of Technology takes a keen interest in finding suitable placements for students, and educators visit students at least once a year to help their occupational learning. According to Zegwaard and Rowe (2017), universities must be fully responsible for student selection. However, while most institutions make every effort to identify acceptable placements for students and to visit them in the workplace daily, this is not always possible due to many students engaged and most educators' heavy lecture duties. Furthermore, colleges might address this by allocating one or two educators who are devoted to WIL visits and are not taking classes, maybe on a roster basis. This will enable all instructors to be aware of what is happening in the workplace and to commit time to this task. During WIL, they will need to share part of their lecture duties with others. Therefore, both educators will have a better understanding of what is expected of them and will be able to include more relevant WIL training in the classroom.

While there appears to be a lot of interest and scholarly discussion in the literature about employability, there are still substantial gaps in data that connect effective acquisition of work-ready skills to the impact on graduate employability and employment, including long-term job repercussions (Winchester-Seeto and Rowe, 2017). There have been few empirical types of research on employability. In addition, curricular reform with employability as a basic component is required, so that students may recognize and immediately tie their learning experience to the desired graduation capability. Advancing postsecondary students' education is vital to preparing them for a life-long job in their field (Zegwaard, Campbell, and Pretti, 2017). As a result, given the extensive discussion currently in the literature, employability is likely to be a prominent study route and topic of academic debate for some time to come.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The problems of increased technological advancement, business restructuring, and market globalization confront higher education institutions. These issues exacerbate the challenge of producing the kind of graduates required by businesses in this ever-changing world of work (Mkhize, 2017). Employers are also concerned about the quality of graduates offered by universities in terms of competencies. Given these facts, the purpose of this study project was to evaluate educators' perspectives on WIL in widening Office Management and Technology students' professional abilities in both classroom-based learning and work-based learning. Many recent studies have indicated that the issue of improvement in office technology and other skills demanded by the dominance of global markets has influenced the administrative profession, both positively and negatively (Mkhize, 2017; Sibuqashe, 2017 and Peach, Ruinard, and Webb, 2014). This dilemma impacts not just secretaries in the workplace, but also institutions of higher learning and students pursuing a career in Office Management and Technology. According to the conclusions of OMT educators, there is a skills gap in the OMT curriculum, which results in students failing to perform adequately during WIL and being unprepared for the world of work. As the corporate world becomes more demanding and employers become more discriminating, the first new difficulty for today's secretary is learning those high-level skills, knowledge, and talents without which they are not competitive. Most executives now require fewer but higher-quality secretaries. A high degree of administrative competence, or administrative professionalism, is most likely the key to success in the workplace in this circumstance (Mkhize, 2017).

### **Research objectives**

The main research objective is to examine Educators' perspectives on the capacity of WIL programs to broaden Office Management and Technology competencies of students at UoTs

The minor research objectives are:

1. To explore the educators' perceptions of the office management knowledge they consider foundational to effective participation in WIL programs at CUT.
2. To examine the educators' perspectives on the influence of WIL programs on the broadening office management and technology competencies.

### **Defining Work Integrated Learning**

It should be recognized that the expanding worldwide need for work-ready graduates in the workplace necessitates more WIL in the education sector (Cooper, Orrel, and Bowden, 2010). The necessity of WIL demonstrates that comprehending the word and its constituent components cannot be overstated. WIL is defined by Reddan (2017) as an activity that connects academic learning with its application in the workplace. It is commonly used to characterize scenarios in which students spend time in the workplace as part of their learning (Schilling and Klamma, 2010) to broaden their professional abilities and work-related repertoire.

According to Sattler (2011), the word WIL arose to provide fresh meaning to the concept of cooperative education. A cooperative education takes into account the mix of classroom-based instruction with hands-on job experience. Brookfield (2012), on the other hand, proposes that WIL be used as a catch-all phrase for learning that happens when pursuing industrial and professional practical experience in an official postsecondary degree. As a result, it can be deduced that WIL tries to expose students to industry situations to provide them with the necessary practical work experiences. WIL, according to Brookfield (2012), is articulated through six imperatives: work readiness; life-long learning; human and social potential; internationalized thinking; knowledge transfer; and career development. In agreement with this viewpoint, I see WIL as benefiting the future employee (that is, the student) in a variety of ways, including broadening their critical thinking, increasing the transferability of job-related abilities, and improving their job readiness. Finally, literature states that WIL must be purposeful, organized, real-world focused, and accredited within an educational system that takes into account the student, teacher/supervisor, curricula, teaching practices, and the social role of education (Dressler and Keeling, 2007; Brookfield, 2012).

### **Defining employability**

The terms employability and work-readiness are frequently used interchangeably. According to Rowe and Zegwaard (2017), work-readiness is a collection of circumstances essential for obtaining first employment, whereas employability is a collection of abilities that are required but not enough for obtaining employment. Whatever phrase is chosen, it is important to examine a graduate's ability to be both employable and work-ready to maximize their prospects of employment. In recent years, the concept of employability has shifted from an emphasis on largely technical skills and traits perceived to be necessary of graduates for them to be considered work-ready to a broader concept incorporating non-tech abilities and traits, to a wider notion encompassing non-technical areas such as networking and professional identity (Bridgstock, 2017). Both conceptualizations

emphasize an individual's capacity to get desired work (by the development of adequate human capital), as opposed to realized employability (the actual attainment of desired work) (Sachs, Rowe and Wilson, 2017). Most extant definitions of employability see it as a collection of abilities, both general (e.g., collaboration, organizational, communication) and discipline-specific (e.g., engineering, law, or social work), as well as personal characteristics (e.g., self-confidence, resilience, discipline) that are relevant to employment and required by industry (Zegwaard, Campbell, and Pretti, 2017).

WIL's influence on employability capability development appears as a prevalent issue in the literature (Hall, Pascoe, and Charity, 2017; Messum, Wilkes, Peters, and Jackson, 2017; Reddan, 2017), supporting current improvements in the evaluation of WIL initiatives and programs. However, WIL experience alone does not guarantee employment results for students and graduates. To be genuinely effective, such experiences should be integrated into the curriculum and supported by pedagogical practices implemented throughout the program to maximize learning possibilities (Bates and Hayes, 2017). Finally, the quality of student learning, particularly the development of employable skills, must be evaluated. However, assessing the development of employability skills is a difficult enterprise that necessitates tests that are carefully structured around ideas of closeness and authenticity (Kaider, Hains-Wesson, and Young, 2017) and one that has funding implications for higher education institutions (Bilgin, Rowe and Clark, 2017).

### **Measuring the impact of WIL on employability**

WIL refers to a variety of experience and practice-based learning paradigms (e.g., service learning, cooperative education, work-based learning) and activities (e.g., internships, fieldwork, volunteering, project-based work, simulations, clinical placements, practicums) (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017). WIL programs are a critical technique for strengthening employability skills in students and improving job results for graduates, particularly in areas not normally associated with employment results. WIL is expected to enhance employability outcomes for students in two ways: first, by providing chances for students to gain confidence in professional practice and a deeper knowledge of the value of employability skills; and second, by developing skills such as teamwork, professional judgment, communication, and problem-solving (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017).

### **Promoting employability through curriculum design**

Despite the rising body of research supporting WIL as an effective method for increasing employability, WIL experience is not a guarantee of success. WIL activities, as Clarke (2017) and others have emphasized, must be meaningful, relevant, and consciously linked and matched with the university curriculum if they are to be effective (Sachs et al., 2017). Indeed, new research reveals that the link between WIL and enhanced employability may be less straightforward than previously imagined. Employability as a concealed component of the curriculum benefits no one since it cannot be articulated. Rowe and Zegwaard (2017) emphasize the necessity of scaffolding employability before, during, and after a student's stay at university to increase their understanding of career alternatives from an early stage. An employability framework is provided to show how this might be accomplished in practice through career development learning, industry contacts, and student activities at four critical transition stages in a student's career: transition towards, transition into, transition through, and transition up. The employability framework was created to be used as a tool across disciplines, and it makes an important addition to WIL studies.

### **Situated Learning Theory**

This article used situated learning theory, which highlights the social and contextual component of learning and focuses on the individual as a learner (Cooper, Orrel, and Bowden, 2010). It also recognizes the limitations of abstract classroom knowledge transfer when conditions are vastly different. Learning is defined as a relational process that takes place in a given environment and involves both novices and experienced participants (Sattler, 2011). Students can serve as protégés of experienced workers in the workplace and learn by active engagement in debate, imitation, and observation of the experienced employees. Thus, learners develop knowledge, skills, and abilities through genuine peripheral engagement in generally stable and delimited communities of practice (Smith, Lave, and Wenger, 2009). Contact with experienced practitioners also assists beginners to enhance their understanding and expertise, eventually leading to their practice (Sattler, 2011).

The method of learning in communities of practice through help, cooperation, and observation differs from that of school (Smith, Lave, and Wenger, 2009), where individuality is valued through assignments, exams, and examinations rather than a collaborative effort. As a result, situated or contextualized learning reacts to various student learning styles and is seen as a significant aspect in improving student motivation and learning among at-risk kids by certain experts (Ikavalko and Martinsuo, 2000). The situated learning theory demands learners to have access to communities of practice and expects host organizations to actively participate in providing chances for learners to watch, discuss, and try out various techniques (Sattler, 2011). Furthermore, some research indicates

that the contextual learning theory favors learning that occurs outside of educational institutions while undervaluing the contributions of school-based knowledge acquisition (Trede, 2012). Nonetheless, WIL may be considered as a practical implementation of a group community of practice because student groups are frequently assigned and affiliated to organizations to engage in various activities as part of their curriculum requirements.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Research design**

A research design, according to Burk, Scurry, Blenkinsopp, and Graley (2016), is a plan for performing a study with control over issues that may interfere with the validity of the findings. A study design describes how the instrument was created following the study objectives, how the phenomena of WIL and academic and professional competencies were investigated, and how participants (OMT educators) were sampled, accessed, and studied to conclude the study topic.

According to this explanation, a research design is a plan of action for a study that allows for proper evaluation from the start to the finish of the project to investigate the correlations between independent and dependent variables (Zegwaard and Rowe, 2017). By the same token, an authentic investigation of the relationship between WIL (independent variable) and the dependent variable (competence enhancement) necessitated the development of an objective tool (semi-structured questionnaires) for assessing this relationship between concepts to ensure that the results generated are credible, reliable, dependable, and generalizable to the whole population of this research. This paper, therefore, adopted a qualitative case study design to explore Educators' perspectives on the capacity of WIL programs to broaden Office Management and Technology competencies of students at UoTs.

#### **Sample size**

A sample, according to Malone, Nicholl, and Coyne (2016), is a representative fraction of a population whose results the researcher wants to generalize about. The study included 10 academic supervisors from the OMT department at the Central University of Technology in Free State.

#### **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection, according to Zegwaard and Rowe (2017), is the act of obtaining and measuring data on variables of interest in a systematic manner that allows one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and assess outcomes. The study used semi-structured questionnaires as a data collecting instrument to give varied viewpoints on the overall influence of WIL on the improvement of knowledge, skills, and capacities of OMT students to comprehend Educators' viewpoints. The researcher physically distributed questionnaires to OMT educators see (ANNEXURE A). Burnard's (1991) thematic content analysis was used to evaluate the questionnaire replies.

#### **Ethical issues**

The institution granted the researcher ethical authorization to include instructors as study participants. All research participants were informed of the study's goal and ensured of their confidentiality, which allowed them to participate. They were informed that their participation was optional and that they might resign from the study at any moment, which encouraged their active engagement.

#### **Results**

This research included ten educators, eight females and two males. Four of the 10 were under the age of 25, one was between the ages of 25 and 34, three were between the ages of 35 and 44, and the final two were between the ages of 45 and 54. This suggests that the OMT department employs a large number of young adults. One responder spoke English, four spoke Afrikaans, two spoke Sesotho, one spoke IsiZulu, and two spoke isiXhosa. In terms of qualifications, five held a university degree or diploma, while the remaining five held postgraduate degrees.

#### **Objective 1: Educators' perceptions of the office management knowledge they consider foundational to students' effective participation in WIL programs at CUT**

##### **Time management knowledge**

All educators agreed on all-time management-related issues. This suggests that professors firmly thought that time management was critical for students' effective involvement in WIL. According to Mkhize (2017), the time has become a valuable resource in today's corporate environment. Furthermore, efficient time management will assist each employee in becoming more efficient in completing their work to fulfill rigorous deadlines in a business.

### **Space management knowledge**

Except for one question on student awareness of keeping control over the physical environment in connection to their effective involvement in WIL, all respondents agreed on the questions in this section. Simulations and practical sessions in academic settings, as well as job activities and tasks in workplace settings, are often regulated by educators and work supervisors, respectively. As a result, while both contexts foster learner-centered environments, they may not necessarily be student-driven (Sibuqashe, 2017). Educators, on the other hand, did not unanimously agree that students must control their area adequately (i.e. space management) for them to effectively participate in WIL.

### **Task management knowledge**

All educators considered student familiarity with Microsoft software, such as Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint presentations, to be crucial to their effective involvement in WIL. Many respondents saw an excellent understanding of accounting and bookkeeping as crucial to their effective engagement in WIL, while the remainder had ambivalent views. This difference in viewpoint may imply that the value of bookkeeping and accounting is determined by the organizations to which students will be assigned, which vary in terms of their needs for the application of these abilities (Mkhize, 2017). Only a few educators believe that students' understanding of website design and development is necessary for effective student engagement in WIL. This means that most instructors do not consider these abilities to be vital to student engagement in WIL programs since companies do not frequently need them for effective student performance. It might also imply that the organizations to which these students are assigned lack a strong technical emphasis, and as a result, these abilities are peripheral to the job needs.

### **Knowledge of emerging technology**

All educators believed that student awareness of new technologies is critical to students' successful involvement in WIL. This might imply that, while more organizations are adopting emerging technologies, others may still be locked in the usage of older technologies, resulting in a restricted acceptance of new technologies. As a result, while knowledge transfer is crucial to student performance in professional situations, it does not apply to all talents, as not all talents are inherently transferable or require transfer. This contradicts Serdyukov's (2017) assertion about the basic relevance of task management knowledge transfer in reflecting processes in the workplace, where information obtained via experience in one circumstance is taken on by users in another area.

## **Objective 2: Educators' perspectives on the influence of WIL programs in broadening office management and technology skills and abilities**

### **Computer and technical skills**

Most educators agreed on the questions in this section. Educators agreed that placement improves students' computer and technical capabilities, such as effective word processing, spreadsheet processing, and PowerPoint presentations. All respondents agreed that placement sparks students' computer and technical talents, such as displaying high technological competency by rapidly adapting to new technologies and easily gaining new technical abilities. This might be an example of reflection-in-action among students, in which students use technical abilities and abilities in the academic environment to influence and improve assignments and activities as they execute them.

### **Abilities**

All educators agreed that student placement influenced their capacity to establish positive working relationships with a diverse staff, clients, and visitors. They also agreed that placement influenced students' capacity to preserve confidentiality. The educators' responses to the research question, which focuses on Office Management and Technology (OMT) skills and competencies, reveal that they see knowledge as essential for effective involvement in WIL programs at CUT. The purpose of this question is to gather information from academic supervisors on how they gain a strong understanding of how to sharpen and harness a range of competencies held by students. Furthermore, educators agreed on the ability of WIL placements to maintain excellent working relationships with a varied workforce, demonstrating the role of WIL in preserving confidentiality, indicating that WIL supports the transition between preparing for and functioning in a high skills work environment. This outcome is consistent with educators' widespread recognition that location influences students' creative thinking ability.

## **4. Recommendations Based On The Omt Curriculum**

The finding of this research shows that there is a skills gap in the OMT program. This implies that UoTs should consider modifying it to fit it with contemporary industry and workplace demands. This is generally

acknowledged in the research on curriculum alignment in higher education. It is also suggested that universities and colleges develop their ties with industry. This will provide the institution with access to new advancements in the industry, allowing the curriculum to be updated in response to these demands. As a result, university curricula must be both original and relevant. It is also suggested that institutions incorporate the advice of educators to strengthen the curriculum and WIL programs. WIL is an organized, evaluated learning process that uses feedback to shape the curriculum. This will guarantee that students' education is linked with and relevant to the demands of the industry.

## **5. Implications For Future Research**

Future studies should include communities affected by OMT student participation in WIL to examine their thoughts and opinions of how student involvement in WIL has influenced them socioeconomically and ecologically.

While the qualitative method offered a wide foundation for evaluating the general influence of WIL on educators' attitudes on WIL-related topics, it is unclear why these participants replied the way they did (i.e. their motivations may not be immediately clear). Future studies may require mixed research methodologies in which qualitative research data is confirmed with quantitative research to give in-depth explanations and clarifications on why participants reacted to certain questions in specific ways.

The workplace is always evolving, necessitating ongoing improvement in the Higher Education curriculum. Curriculum creation, teaching, and assessment processes must be of high quality for the HE system to generate excellent graduates. A future study might look at whether the recommendations were effective wherever they were adopted, how effective they were, and how they may be improved.

## **6. Conclusions**

All the educators who took part in this survey said that the work placement provided career guidance and provided a great insight into what an administrative job was like outside of the academic setting. The placement experience aided in contextualizing and refining students' present academic goals. The consequence is that, while work placements might give students easily available employment prospects and significant relationships, it is equally crucial to note that they can provide career clarity, which pushes students to pursue graduate degrees. Given the many challenges that face WIL programs, the partnership between organized industry and higher education needs to be strengthened to develop more communication based on the placement of the students who need to complete their WIL programs.

The CUT must incorporate into its institutional system of WIL assessment certain credible and reliable mechanisms that consider the meaningful engagement of students, mentors, and academic supervisors. The student ability for self-assessment, as well as proof of that capability, should be incorporated into this institutional evaluation policy on WIL. This self-assessment process may be cascaded down to the individual departmental assessment system, incorporating student learning philosophies and work-based repertoires into the assessment process..

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