



The role of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in enhancing employability skills: graduate perspectives

Nombeko Felicity Dwesini
Senior Coordinator for Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)
Community Engagement & Internationalization
Walter Sisulu University
South Africa
ndwesini@wsu.ac.za

Abstract

This paper investigated the role of WIL in enhancing students' employability skills in one comprehensive university in South Africa. It explored which employability skills graduates perceive to be enhanced as a result of participating in a WIL programme. This was achieved by utilizing a qualitative research approach in collecting data. Thirty recent graduates who completed a National Diploma in Small Business Management (ND: SBM) with a compulsory component of WIL at the end of 2015 were interviewed and two focus group discussions were conducted. While it has been reported that WIL is an important feature that assists learners to be work-ready when they complete their qualifications, there is paucity of published work that is based on students' perspectives in this area. A lot of research on graduates' employability based on the perceptions of employers and those of academics have been published. The present work attempts to fill that gap. All graduates interviewed believed their self-confidence, communication skills, teamwork skills, time management, and professionalism have improved significantly due to their participation in a WIL program. It is hoped that findings from this review will provide an opportunity for academics to understand the learning that has occurred during students' WIL experience. This work is therefore related to Tourism and Hospitality as the students from these disciplines also undergo WIL. The findings are thus also relevant to them.

Keywords

Work-integrated learning, employability skills, graduate employability, work placement, work-ready

Introduction and background

Within the higher education sector internationally as well as in South Africa Department of Education (1997), there have been calls for increased graduate employability Saunders and Machell (2000). A number of studies have raised concerns over the work-readiness of graduates not because they lack disciplinary knowledge but due to lack of generic employability skills, (ACNielsen Research Services, 2000; ACCI/BCA 2002) as cited in Mclean & Keating (2008). A report by the Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration (BIHECC) (2007) notes that:

Broadly speaking industry representatives are satisfied with the technical or discipline-specific skills of graduates, but for some there is a perception that employability skills are under-developed (BIHECC, 2007).

In South Africa, the findings of a study by Grissel and Parker (2009) revealed a gap between employers' expectations and graduates' readiness. In another study by Neale-Shutte & Nel (2013) in South Africa, graduates indicated that they need more practical experience and



preparation for work before graduating, as they believed this would greatly improve their employability. The Department of Higher Education and Training in its White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2014) in South Africa notes that learners exiting universities are often described by employers as lacking the skills needed. It is believed that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions to equip learners with both a strong knowledge base and generic employability skills required in the workplace. It is further suggested that tertiary institutions could improve graduates' attributes and employability skills by integrating work-integrated learning (WIL) into all the academic programs that they offer. This paper determined whether graduates perceive that WIL has enhanced their employability skills or not. It explored which employability skills graduates perceive to be enhanced as a result of undertaking WIL placement. While it has been reported that WIL is an important feature that assists learners to be work-ready when they complete their qualifications, there is paucity of published work that is based on students' perspectives in this area. It is hoped that the findings of this research would provide an opportunity for academics to understand the learning that has occurred during students' WIL experience. Gaps in students' preparation for the workplace will also be established and addressed.

Context of the study

This study was conducted with recent graduates from the ND: SBM in a comprehensive university in South Africa. Although the comprehensive university where the study was conducted requires that ND: SBM students complete a six (6) months WIL experience before they graduate, to date there is no study on the contribution of WIL to the development of students' skills especially employability skills in this academic programme. The ND: SBM involves two and a half (21/2) years of class attendance at the university covering the Small Business Management curriculum. This national diploma provides a broad understanding of the establishment and management of a business. The programme provides both an academic and theoretical foundation and the applicative practical business skills suitable for the emerging entrepreneur or business novice. WIL is a significant component of the ND: SBM. Before students leave the university for the industry in order to undertake WIL all the final year ND: SBM students must go through a work-preparedness program (WPP). Amongst other aspects the WPP focuses on employability skills necessary for the workplace. The WPP teaches students to be accountable for their own skills development during the WIL period. The development of skills such as interpersonal communication, time management, problem solving, self-confidence, assertiveness, professionalism, positive attitude towards work, interview skills, CV writing, planning and organization skills during the WIL placement is emphasised. During the six (6) months students are placed in various small, medium and even large companies, government departments, non-government organisations, community organizations and municipalities for exposure to different areas that are part of their curriculum. This is done to ensure that the university produces graduates with employability skills that would facilitate students' transition from university to the workplace.

Work Integrated Learning and graduate employability

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely considered instrumental in assisting new graduates acquire employability skills to function effectively in the workplace. WIL refers to a range of activities or programs that integrate academic learning with its application in the workplace. It is incorporated into academic programmes in an attempt to make students work-ready. As stated above there is an agreement in the literature that WIL is one teaching and learning strategy that institutions of higher learning can use to enhance the employability of the graduates they produce. To achieve this, tertiary institutions have a choice of which WIL programme/s to design and implement.



WIL is essentially a three-way partnership among the major stakeholders - student, university and the host employer. WIL benefits for the stakeholders are numerous and well documented in the literature. Students are gaining practical experience by applying lecture room learning in a 'real world' work environment. This involves observing theory in action and the opportunity to integrate theory as well as receiving feedback on the ability to apply it. Students also get an opportunity to refine and develop new professional skills. It is also believed that employers prefer graduates that have gone through WIL from those that have theory only. The literature reveals that employers also benefit from WIL programmes in the following ways: provision of low-cost temporary, motivated employees; and building a pipeline of skilled employees. Both employers and students are provided with an opportunity to determine whether there is a suitable 'match' for permanent employment in a non-threatening environment. The WIL partnership is an opportunity for the employer to establish close links with higher education institutions (HEIs) and therefore influence the university's curriculum to suit employers' specific needs. Benefits for the university include close links with industry which ensures up-to-date curriculum; enhancement of the image of the university, faculty or department; and a better qualified graduate.

A thorough literature search on graduate employability reveals that this concept is defined in various ways. Yorke (2004) defines the concept as:

A set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations which benefits themselves, the workplace, the community and the economy. (Yorke, 2004).

Some studies view employability in terms of graduates finding jobs and maintaining them through the learning of new skills necessary for different functions in the company. Paadi (2014) concurs with Hillage and Pollard (1998) in Rajab (2015) who are of the view that: "employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required". They further note that graduates' employability is not only about a graduate obtaining a job but it is also about the student being able to apply what he learnt and acquired from higher education. Employers expect new graduates to possess specific skills such as logical thinking, quick learning, communication skills, flexibility, ambition, high levels of motivation, creativity, critical thinking, initiative, teamwork and time management Lester (2013). Employers further believe that it is the responsibility of HEIs to produce graduates with employability skills. Employability skills are those skills employers deem necessary for the successful functioning of newly appointed graduates in the workplace. According to Stoner and Milner (2010) employability skills are skills needed for life-long learning and a successful business career.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) (2007), in their report, 'Time well spent: Embedding employability in work experience' define employability as: positive attitude, self-management; teamwork, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy and application of information technology. The CBI (2007) places emphasis on graduates possessing a positive attitude as key factor underpinning their employability; whether the individual has a can-do approach, a readiness to take part and contribute, openness to new ideas and a drive to make these happen. It is widely believed that employers expect graduates to not only obtain the employability skills, but to also be able to demonstrate these skills effectively. Literature suggests that workplaces place great emphasis on graduates' general attitude towards work, communication skills (verbal and written), work ethic, teamwork skills and analytical skills. The Edge Foundation (2011) notes that employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competencies from their university qualifications but require graduates to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes which include team-



work, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities. Paadi (2014) concludes that some of the most sought after skills or desirable graduate attributes in the workplace are team work, communication, analytic and critical thinking and computer skills. In their separate ways' these references commended highly the role of work experience and WIL as means of gaining skills for employability.

The Problem

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has been suggested as a learning method to reduce the skills gap in graduates. However, not all WIL programmes equip learners with employability skills. It is therefore important to evaluate the contribution of a WIL programme on graduate employability. Also, although the comprehensive university where the study is conducted requires that ND: SBM students must complete a six (6) months WIL experience before they can graduate, to date there is no study conducted on the contribution of WIL to the development of students' skills especially employability skills.

Aims and objectives of the study

Given that the literature review shows growing importance of graduate employability skills, the primary goal of this research was to assess the role of the WIL component of the ND: S BM in developing students' employability skills.

Specifically, the research objectives addressed in this research are:

- To determine the perceptions of recent graduates who completed the ND: Small Business Management about whether WIL helped them develop their employability skills or not.
- To explore which employability skills have been enhanced as a result of participating in a WIL programme.

Research questions

Do recent graduates from the ND: SBM perceive that WIL placements have developed their employability skills?

What graduate employability skills have been enhanced as a result of doing WIL as perceived by recent ND: SBM graduates?

Significance of the study

The findings of this study will help the academic department offering the ND: SBM to establish the gaps in student preparation for work placement, identify shortcomings and therefore revisit its WIL programme.

Research methodology

This was a small-scale case study undertaken with thirty (30) recent graduates from the ND: SBM who completed their WIL programme at the end of 2015. An exploratory study was conducted using a qualitative research design via in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) argue that qualitative research is used mostly in the study of complex people situations. An example is that of researching people's perceptions like in the present study. In this study, methodological triangulation was used which involved multiple qualitative methods to collect data. A literature review was first conducted to confirm the purpose of the study and to formulate interview questions. This was followed by in-depth interviews of recent graduates on



their perceptions on whether WIL has improved their employability skills and what skills do they believe have been enhanced because they undertook WIL. Thirty (30) recent graduates were invited to take part in this research by responding to open-ended questions and all of them agreed to be interviewed. Responses to the questions were requested in students' own words so as to gain their unconstrained viewpoints. Questions for the interviews were determined beforehand and all participants were asked the same questions. Participants were asked to state whether the WIL placement enhanced their skills as well as to identify employability skills which they believed they acquired as a result of the WIL placement. It should be noted that a pre-determined list of employability skills was not presented as in many studies. These graduates were targeted because it was believed they still remember very well what happened during their WIL placement. In addition to the qualitative survey two focus groups were used to provide qualitative graduate data.

Target population and sample

The target population for the present study included all graduates that were completing the ND: SBM program (N= 120) in 2015 who also completed the six (6) months WIL programme. The non-probability convenience and purposive sampling method was employed to choose participants. According to this sampling method participants are chosen on the basis of being available. According to Tustin, Lighthelm, Martins and van Wyk (2010) convenience sampling is useful in the exploratory phase of a research project. A total of 30 participants were interviewed and each focus group comprised ten (10) participants. A total sample of 50 participants was achieved. The responses from 30 in-depth interviews and the two focus group discussions were analysed using content analysis. Verbatim responses were used where necessary to reflect graduate perceptions as honestly and accurately as possible. Ethical guidelines and consent practices were followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed of their right not to participate in the study if they so wished. They were also assured of anonymity and they were not incentivized, in any way, to participate.

Results and discussion

The literature review conducted in this study confirms that WIL enhances graduates' employability skills. The results of the in-depth interviews as well as those of the focus group discussions reveal that participants had positive experience of the WIL programme. They believe participation in WIL programmes gave them opportunities to experience significant skills development. Participants were asked if they perceive that the WIL experience has equipped them or improved their employability skills. They were also required to list the most significant skills they believe they learnt or improved as a result of the WIL placement. Participants were allowed to explain their responses. When participants were asked if WIL placement equipped them with employability skills all of them answered in the affirmative.

The top key employability skills that were frequently mentioned by participants both in the interviews and in the focus group discussions were: self-confidence, communication (oral and written), team work, professionalism, time management and computer skills. These are the employability skills mentioned in the literature. Participants attribute the enhancement of these skills to the WIL exposure they experienced.

Self-confidence

Self-confidence is the top key employability skill participants perceived as having been improved as a result of WIL placement. This is the perception of all participants. Participants reported that as part of what they were doing they had to write reports on their activities for each month and



these were to be presented to their supervisors once a month. This, according to the participants enhanced their writing skills, presentation skills and self-confidence a lot. Participants mentioned that at university they were required to make group presentations sometimes but during the WIL experience one had to present one's own work as an individual. One participant commented that:

Working closely with seniors and having to present my report to my manager increased my self-confidence. It was nice knowing that I also contribute to the success of the organization I worked for.

Another participant stated that:

Getting feedback from my supervisor which was positive, after my presentation boosted my confidence. It makes you believe you are doing meaningful work that is appreciated by your superiors.

Another participant reported that:

Being allowed to attend staff meetings, take minutes, and even make contributions during discussions enhanced my self-confidence. The greatest boost of self-confidence is positive feedback from your supervisor.

Communication (both oral and written)

Graduates also mentioned that they improved a great deal in both oral and written communication since they were to write reports and present them once a month.

I gained presentation skills at the university. The difference is that here presentations are treated seriously than at the university. That meant I had to prepare well for the presentations.

All participants reported that they dealt with clients during their WIL placement. They consulted and advised clients and therefore had to use their communication skills and customer service skills. One participant had this to say:

WIL assists us because at school we learn a lot of theory without really putting it into practice but during WIL we learn how to apply the theory we gained at university. Everything becomes real during WIL. Some of us had to compile business plans for clients.

Teamwork

Participants believe their teamwork skills were greatly improved. One graduate said in her section every day they would start with a short meeting where they would agree on their goals for the day and at the end of the day they would report on whether these were achieved or not; if the goals were not achieved one would have to give reasons for not achieving them and say how the situation would be remedied. Comments received were:

I was working alone but I still had to communicate with others in other sections. I regard this as teamwork.

Another comment received with regards to teamwork was:

You cannot work alone because another person knows the work more than you. You may also know something that other people do not know. So you have to be a team player. We learnt that in the workplace you also



depend on others and therefore it becomes important to respect other people's opinions.

Six (6) participants out of the thirty interviewed believe their teamwork skills were not enhanced to the maximum because there were not enough opportunities for teamwork where they were placed for WIL. This indicates variations in the extent to which employability skills are improved or gained due to undertaking WIL. This could be because different workplaces focus on certain skills areas during placement.

Time management and organization skills

The majority of participants reported that their time management skills were enhanced a lot because they were given tasks with timelines to complete the tasks. This meant that one had to strive to meet the deadline set. It was also reported that punctuality was emphasized during the WIL experience. In most workplaces participants had to record the time they arrived at and the time they left the workplace.

Professionalism

Professionalism was also mentioned frequently by the participants. They say this skill goes hand in hand with customer service which was emphasized in the workplace.

Computer literacy

All participants believed they gained basic computer literacy at university as their academic programme includes 'end-user computing' as a compulsory subject. The participants believed WIL programme had gone a long way in improving their computer skills.

This was a good opportunity to practice what we learnt at the university. For example, we learnt power point skill at the university but we rarely used it. During the WIL placement we used power point a lot in preparing our presentations.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study has obtained rich descriptive information from graduates who have recently completed a WIL placement. It is clear from the findings that WIL placement has a positive influence on employability. The findings concur with the current literature which confirms that WIL equips students with employability skills. The data collected in this study via literature review, interviews and focus group discussions provide strong support for the role of WIL in enhancing graduate skills. Participants reported that during the WIL period they acquired knowledge, skills and abilities they believe they could not acquire in the classroom situation.

All graduates interviewed believed their self-confidence, communication skills, time management, teamwork skills, professionalism, and computer skills have improved due to participation in WIL. It must be noted that while the cohort studied here show significant skill developments which they attribute to undertaking WIL as part of their curriculum, the findings for another cohort may be different.

Further research is recommended which will track these graduates' performance in employment. Also, this is an exploratory study. It is recommended that a larger study involving other academic institutions offering similar programmes should be conducted. Such a study would determine the



contribution WIL makes to developing students' employability skills and to validate the findings of the present research.

Limitations

This is an exploratory study and therefore it is limited. The study explored the perceptions of one group of graduates and therefore the sample is not representative of the population and the findings cannot be generalized although other disciplines main gain useful information from them which could support their WIL endeavours. The study also relied on self-reporting which may produce bias.

References

- Confederation of British Industry. (2007). *Time well spent: Embedding employability in work experience*. CBI: London. ISBN 978-0-85201-654-1.
- Department of Education. (1997). Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education. Pretoria: DoE.
- Department of Higher Education & Training. (2014). White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Pretoria: DHET.
- Grissel & Parker. (2009). Graduate attributes: A baseline study on South African graduates from the perspective of employers. Pretoria: HESA.
- Leedy, P. D. & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design*. 9th ed, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lester, M. 2013. *Six business skills every graduate needs to develop*. <http://career-advice.monster.com/in-the-office/starting-a-new-job/business-skills-for-new-graduates/article.aspx> [Accessed on 30 April, 2016].
- Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D. & Lewin, J. (2011). Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates: Research commissioned by the Edge Foundation.
- McLennan, Keating, S. (2008). Work-integrated learning in Australian Universities: The challenges of mainstreaming WIL. ALTC NAGCAS National Symposium, June 2008, Melbourne.
- Neale-Shutte, M. & Nel, H. (2013). Examining the evidence: graduate employability at NMMU. *South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE)*, 27(2), 437-453.
- Paadi, K. (2014). Perceptions on employability skills necessary to enhance human resource management necessary to enhance human resource management graduates' prospects of securing a relevant place in the labour market. *European Scientific Journal*, August 2014 special edition, 129 – 143.
- Precision Consultancy. (2007). *Graduate employability skills: report prepared for the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration*. August, 2007, 1 – 83. Available at <http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/bihecc> [Accessed on 03 June 2016]



Rajab, R. (2015). Building a cooperative learning partnership between the workplace and the institution to enhance employability: 9th Researching Work & Learning Conference, 9 - 11 December, 2015, School of the Arts, Singapore.

Saunders, M. and Machell, J. (2000). Understanding emerging trends in higher education curricula and work connections. *Higher Education Policy Journal*, 13 (3), 287 – 302.

Stoner, G. and Milner, M. (2010). Embedding generic employability skills in accounting degree: development and impediments. *Accounting Education*, 19(1-2), 123 – 138.

Tustin, D. H., Lighthelm, A. A., Martins, J. H. & van Wyk, H. (2010). *Marketing research in practice*. Pretoria : UNISA Press.

Yorke, M. & Knight, P. T. (2004). Embedding Employability into the Curriculum. Higher Education Academy, York.