

# Student Reflections on the Pilot WIL Partnership Capacity Building Model in a Human Resource Management Qualification

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South Africa (SA) has a population of 50 million people. Nearly 70% are under 35 years old. The national vision aims to reduce youth unemployment using education, training and skills development initiatives.

A work integrated learning (WIL) partnership model was developed to build an industry partner base. The model was piloted in a South African university in 2013 to provide work-ready, qualified and skilled graduates entering the SA economy. Research conducted focused on whether the WIL model was a viable, cost-effective and practical solution for capacity building of potential entry-level staff.

This paper presents an analysis of the self-administered questionnaire completed by the students subsequent to their WIL experience. The background to SA cooperative education and WIL provides the backdrop. The aim of the paper is to reflect on whether the model contributed to economic and social capacity building and industry partnership development.

This paper adds value on a strategic, theoretical and practical level by contributing to national imperatives for human resource development, adding to the body of knowledge on WIL initiatives in SA and outlining a user friendly WIL partnership model to allow students to enter the world of work with confidence.

Keywords: Capacity building, human resource management, industry partnership development, student placement, work integrated learning

## INTRODUCTION

Approximately 30 million (70%) South Africans are under the age of 35, of which 12.5 million (25%) were unemployed in 2011. One of the aims of the country's National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 is to reduce unemployment to 6% in 15 years. Education, training and skills development are the tools to enable this vision (South Africa [SA], 2011).

The University of Johannesburg implements a 'learning to be' philosophy that is embraced by the Human Resource Management (HRM) Programme in the Faculty of Management. HRM qualifications aim to create graduates who are 'future-fit leaders'. In response to national imperatives and to bridge the theory-practice gap, a WIL Partnership model was researched and conceptualised. The model exposes students to the workplace to gain HRM skills, attitudes, values and knowledge; thus enabling them to make an easier transition into the formal workplace as HR Practitioners and Professionals (Taylor & Govender, 2013; De Vos, 1998).

The WIL partnership model was designed to build a partner industry base and to allocate students to approved partners for mentoring, job shadowing and project-based workplace learning. The five-phase WIL partnership model was developed and implemented over a period of 10-12 months as follows: Phase 1: Design, development and approval; Phase 2: Preparation for implementation; Phase 3: Implementation; Phase 4: Evaluation; and Phase 5: Review.

Phase 4: Evaluation, gains feedback from the lecturer, student and industry partners; and recognises partnerships. Phase 5: Review, focuses on improving the model. The focus of this paper is on the student evaluation of the model as per the survey questionnaire feedback received.

The model is set in the theoretical framework of experiential education, with an emerging focus area of partnership development as a requirement for successful implementation. A concise review of the legislative developments of post-school education, training and skills development in the SA context provides a backdrop to the study and paper.

## WIL IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND TRAINING CONTEXT

The best-known theories of experiential education include those of Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984), Lewin and Schön (Schön, 1983). In SA, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) has recently published the *Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide* (CHE, 2011), popularising the term work integrated learning. It outlines the main curricular modalities for WIL programmes and calls for new models to align workplace experience (practical) and academic interests (theory). Mention is made in several legislative, policy and human resource development documents of the need for workplace experience as an aspect of skills development, with various other terms used to identify these such as workplace-based learning, simulation, work experience and work exposure among others (SA, 2011a; SA, 2011a; SA, 2011b; SA, 2013).

In 2009, the 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were placed under a newly-established Department of Higher Education and Training (Proclamation No 56 of 2009, 2009), consolidating the post-school education and training sector under one government ministry. National skills legislation provides tax and other incentives to industry for formal upskilling programmes provided to the unemployed, including students, who are South African citizens (Skills Development Act 1998, 1998; Skills Development Levies Act 1999, 1999; SA, 2011a). The post-school education and training sector has also been re-visioned with the promulgation of the White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (SA, 2013). An implication of this for higher education is that, as more students require various forms of work exposure and experience as a formal part of their qualifications, greater pressure is placed on WIL Coordinators to ensure placement opportunities for students. The need for formalising partnership arrangements with industry is thus not only on the increase but has become an imperative (Taylor & Govender, 2013).

### RESEARCH METHOD

The research approach involved a mixed method research design using a self-administered survey questionnaire to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. A 5-point Likert scale allowed participants to rate their experience as Highly Rewarding, Rewarding, Average, Disappointing and Highly Disappointing. Furthermore, a few structured questions gathered qualitative responses and reflections on participant workplace experience.

HRM Diploma students participated in the WIL pilot project to gain a minimum of 40 hours (1 week) working experience. Of the 98 students in the two class groups, 84 completed the questionnaire, with two questionnaires being excluded from the analysis as they were incomplete.

The questionnaire was divided into six sections: Section A (Biographic data); Section B (Workplace data); Section C (Preparing for your WIL experience); Section D (Your WIL experience); Section E (Preparing your WIL Portfolio of Evidence) and Section F (Evaluating the HRM WIL model).

Exploratory frequency statistics were used to report on responses to Sections A through E. Section F sought to determine the following: would student want to work in the company; would student recommend it for future WIL placements; strengths and weaknesses of company; and student slogan describing their experience. The frequency responses and common and profound themes are reported for this section.

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

The average age of the students was 22.3 years, with 30 students being male and 52 female. Section B revealed that 52 students found the workplace themselves, with 27 being assisted by the University of Johannesburg's WIL Coordinator and three finding a placement via peers. The average number of hours worked was 40.8. While students were required to work for 40 hours, some worked for more hours and in one case for up to 80 hours. In five instances students only worked 20 hours due to placement constraints.

Sections C to E required students to rate their experiences regarding the preparation for, the actual WIL experience and compilation of their Portfolio of Evidence (PoE). It is encouraging to see that 90% of students rated their experience as being between Highly Rewarding (30.1%) to Average (26.9%). Only 10% of students rated the preparation phase as being Disappointing (7.5%) or Highly Disappointing (2.5%). This good feedback is due to workplace preparation workshops held early in the year and to issuing WIL documentation to students to enable them to identify their own workplaces well in advance of the compulsory placement.

The findings from Section D dealing with the actual WIL experience similarly reflected a high satisfaction rating, with 94% of students rating their experience as being between Highly Rewarding (46.5%) to Average (16.1%). Only 6% of students rated the WIL phase as being Disappointing (2.7%) or Highly Disappointing (3.3%).

In Section E, insight surrounding the preparation for the Portfolio of Evidence was sought. Students had to submit their portfolio as part of the assessment requirements for one of the third year modules. For this section, 90% of students rated their experience as being between Highly Rewarding (30.1%) to Average (26.9%), with only 10% of students rating this phase as being Disappointing (7.6%) or Highly Disappointing (2.4%).

Questions 1 and 2 in Section F asked students if they would want to continue working for the company upon graduation and if they would recommend the company for future WIL students. Of the 81 students who responded to Question 1, only 8 indicated that they would not consider this; citing reasons such as being an international student who would be returning to the home country; distance from home to the company; the attitude of staff and the small size of the organisation as reasons. However, from the following comments one gets an appreciation for the learning the students have achieved in the short time and the value of the WIL programme: "An eye-opening experience to what I am studying and why I do all the modules"; "... I got employed after completing my WIL programme."; "The HR staff is very supportive and always willing to help."; "I have learned so much in a week."

Seventy-five of the 81 respondees who answered Question 2 indicated that they would recommend the company for future WIL placements. The six who would not cited reasons such as poor company culture; lack of manager support and the small size of the company for their response. Reasons offered as to why they would recommend the company for future placements are: "They are willing to support and show learners how they run their operations."; "They took us seriously and there are opportunities for final year students every year."; The organisation places its goals and employees first and encourages skills development."; The organisation is willing to help in any possible way for students to gain experience in the workplace."; "There is sufficient support from mentors and they understand the WIL.".

Questions 3 and 4 in Section F took the form of a form of a SWOT analysis with students requested to reflect on the strengths and opportunities (Question 3) and then the challenges and threats (Question 4) of their WIL experience. In analysing the responses, some recurring and profound themes emerged, presented in the table below.

TABLE 1. HRM Diploma Student SWOT Responses on WIL and the POE Experience

Strengths	Opportunities
Adapting to change	Job opportunities opened up
Building self-confidence	Networking/relationship building
Motivation	Transferable skills acquired
HR-relevant and communication skills	Relevant HR experience
Deeper understanding of classroom theory	
Challenges	Threats
Finding a company/ dealing with rejection of applications	Fear of failure as the PoE replaced a test
Wide range and confidential nature of HR work	Short duration of WIL experience
Transport costs	Pressure to deliver the PoE
Unfriendly staff/ fitting in	
PoE mismatch with work at company	

The last question in Section F requested students to write a slogan to describe their WIL experience. The slogan that best encapsulates the general reflections of this research group is expressed in the following response: "WIL: the path to better employment." Other slogans include: "Reality is so much better ☺"; "One step to my future career success!!!"; "Knowledge is power"; and "Beyond amazing.". Evidence that the WIL experience was not always easy is obtained via comments such as "Challenging, difficult but awesome" and "Fun educational, but challenging", made in five instances. 22% of the students mentioned that transport costs were a challenge. At the university, 66% of students study under the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, a student study loan facility.

Communication of the requirements of the WIL programme, including the need to dress appropriately and travel to the workplace, must be highlighted early in the academic year to enable students to plan appropriately.

This study found that student feedback regarding the model and their learning experiences in the workplace was largely positive. The strengths and opportunities expressed may be viewed as benefits of WIL to the student, university, industry and country. The positive national and international impact of these reflections are documented by several authors in other research studies as detailed by Dressler & Keeling (2011). The challenges and threats highlighted by the students will be taken into consideration during the Review Phase 5 of improving the WIL Partnership model.

According to the findings of the research study, the purpose of the model to build industry partnerships in order to ease the stress on students in securing WIL placements was achieved. However, it must be noted that encouraging students to secure their own workplaces promotes responsibility and capacity building as well as allows the institution to build its existing industry partnership base. It is recommended that communication to students regarding WIL POE and assessment requirements should be incorporated into the student Learning Guides. It is acknowledged that five days is a short time for a WIL programme. The duration of the placement should ideally be increased to at least 80 hours or 2 weeks, thereby addressing some of the threats raised by students.

## CONCLUSION

This paper reported on student reflections after implementation of the WIL Partnership model in the HRM Diploma at a university in SA. The study found that the piloted WIL Partnership model provided a highly rewarding experience for students contributing to employment initiatives, bridging the academic theory-practice gap and creating future-fit, work-ready graduates. The conclusion is that the WIL Partnership model does contribute to capacity building for enabling future graduates to enter the workplace confidently.

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