

## **A Work-integrated Learning case study investigation of an Internship Program at a higher learning institution in South Africa**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the internship programmes offered at a higher learning institution by severely understaffed departments serving the institution with various tasks. This understaffing and backlog of workload creates a potential wealth of work-integrated learning (WIL) through internship programs, boosting student experience while improving institutional inefficiency. This study used qualitative data collection methods, including interviews and questionnaires. The study explores the internal experiences and challenges, highlighting the significant impact of internal contributions within severely understaffed departments. The WIL framework and the Knowledge Skills Abilities (KSA) model are employed to establish how universities implement curriculum design and pedagogies in their courses, programs, and modules to prepare students for the real world. The paper's findings and conclusions recommend how institutions may improve the placement program.

*Keywords: Work Integrated Learning (WIL); Knowledge Skills Abilities (KSA); Workplace Experience; Performance/Experimental Skills, Dedication, Self-confidence and creativity, Mentoring /Supervision and Knowledge Transfer*

### **Introduction**

Higher education plays a critical role in evolving knowledge wealth. It serves as the engine of social change through engaging and producing practical, active skills transfer, creating networks, and actively enriching entrepreneurial mindsets in an already-ailing economy. This robust need to exercise the shift in the educational space has exponentially risen, such that globally, curriculum design, pedagogy, and community engagements should ensure the collaborative effect of employers and organisations to bridge the skills and knowledge gap. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) (South African Government, 2014) differentiates five forms of work-integrated learning (WIL) as the following:

1. virtual or simulated learning,
2. work-directed theoretical learning (WDTL),
3. problem-based learning (PBL),
4. project-based learning (PJBL),
5. workplace-based learning (WPBL),
6. practicum placements,
7. service learning, etc.

The Regulations (South African Government, 2018) for WPBL Agreements list nine forms of WPBL that require selection:

1. Apprenticeship
2. Learnership
3. Internship for the 'N' Diploma
4. Candidacy (postgrad for professional)
5. Student internship. Category A (for certificates and diplomas in HEQSF)
6. Student internship: Category B (requirement professional registration)
7. Student internship: Category C (for QCTO qualifications)
8. Student internship (SAQA qualification & vacation work)
9. Graduate internship (got qualification to gain workplace experience)

The HEQSF and Council on Higher Education CHE (2014) specify work(place)-based learning criteria. CHE Good Practice (2011) advocates four distinct (2-5) WIL curricular modalities. Therefore, this case study examines student internship categories B and C, where OdeL HLI graduates would have obtained either a National Diploma or a bachelor's degree.

Talent management engagement in organisations is motivated by the technology, innovation, and 4IR that the students are disruptively utilising, promoting the need for collaborations between the educator, the student, and external organisations and sectors to develop student employability, motivation, and global citizenship opportunities (Oke & Fernandes, 2020). Unlike universities of technology, the traditional universities of higher learning in South Africa are no strangers to integrated learning challenges; thus, there is a gap to equip courses in a pedagogically meaningful and substantial manner in preparation for student employability (Bozalek, Ng'ambi, & Kilfoil, 2015; Winberg, Finn, Sheridan, Engles-Hills, Jacobs & Kent, 2022). As the Skills Development Act aims to develop strategies and improve the workforce's skills, providing for leadership, financing skills development, and regulating employment services, universities must afford quality student internship programs (Skills Development Act, 2000).

Work-integrated learning in higher institutions should align with the SDG's goal of ending poverty and hunger and ensuring everyone can reach their full potential in dignity, equality, and a healthy environment by 2030 (United Nations, 2023).

The European Commission (EC) (2007:1) recommends that schools take an active role in developing teaching methods, enhancing teaching quality, and expanding knowledge about teaching and learning to meet the complexities of society and educational demands (Strasbourg, 2012). Therefore, the course content pedagogy requires the student's capabilities in an experiential, ongoing training thread where student professional development is enabled (Harris, McCarthy, Wright, Schutz, Boersma, Shepherd & Ellington, 2020). Students must be equipped both theoretically and professionally. Thus, there remains a qualitative need to assess this criterion. Traditional universities must reassess the curriculum where there is a need for more. There is a high unemployment rate among South African university graduates, resulting in dire poverty-stricken communities. To mitigate the high unemployment rate, there is a need for WIL to bridge the gap between the academic world of study and the reality of the work situation.

Chronic understaffing within various departments and portfolios has led to significantly excessive workload backlogs, affecting service quality standards. South African universities' responses to this challenge include implementing internship programs and providing employment opportunities for students while addressing the excessive in-house workload backlog. This paper explores interns' experiences within these departments, assesses the significance of their contributions, and examines the implications of intern deployment within the framework of work-integrated learning. Additionally, this study seeks to explore and assess how integral the WIL is for a higher learning institution (HLI) support department in South Africa by assessing the intern students and the training staff members who monitor and mentor such student interns. The exercise aims to establish the outcomes and determine whether these learning experience mechanisms and mentorship add value to the student. These aim to develop resilient, reflective students to enhance their abilities by developing talent and providing evidence of their studies. They are additionally aimed at aligning a pedagogical reflective overview of the curriculum development of such courses.

## Theoretical Framework

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is an established pedagogical practice that connects academic and workplace experiences (Billett, 2009). It enriches student learning by merging academic knowledge with practical work, fostering collaboration between educational institutions and employers. WIL boosts skills, work experience, and employability, preparing graduates for successful careers and advancing industry and society. Benefits of the WIL Framework include improved employability, practical application of theory, skill development, industry-ready graduates, and institutional-industry partnerships. From the perspective of three departmental involvements at higher learning institutions, it matters that WIL programmes implemented expose students to industry stakeholder experts for capability development enhancement and appropriate competency standards (Jackson, Riebe, Meek, Ogilvie, Kuilboer, Murphy & Brock, 2023). The Knowledge Skills Abilities (KSA) framework is necessary for establishing compatibility among candidate skills to compensate for and supplement student capabilities and job specifications. Work Integrated learning pedagogical strategies at higher education institutions are designed to integrate academic learning with practical work experiences in real-world settings as a means of bridging the gap between theory and practice, preparing students for the demands of the workforce, and enhancing their understanding of academic concepts through hands-on applications (Ojo, 2019). WIL is commonly used in various

educational institutions, including universities, colleges, and vocational training centres, to provide students with opportunities to gain relevant work experience and develop employability skills (Winborg & Hägg, 2023).

Mechanisms for continuously ensuring student improvement include innovation and integration through the extension of their internship program, especially when there is a willingness to advance their skills and capabilities. Currently, at the HLI in question, the student intern contracts are short-lived, thus putting the students at a disadvantage as they require an extended period to grasp practical skills. As much as all HILs only employ their graduates through government subsidies, it is almost impractical to employ skill-fitting graduates from other universities of technology as well as outside colleges, as the degree programs offered at universities do not cater to the multimedia specialised requirements, thus revealing how university courses lack WIL integration in their curriculum (Que, 2021). Therefore, this paper reveals the need for practical WIL incorporated into the curriculum of degrees such as multimedia-related degrees. This study does not dispute those other courses are not exposed to such, but rather, from the interviews, the multimedia specialised skills reveal the need for a WIL incorporated curriculum. The HIL student intern graduate's skillset reveals the requirement for introducing a compulsory modular WIL program, which will provide a space to groom more skilled students to address the skills gap.

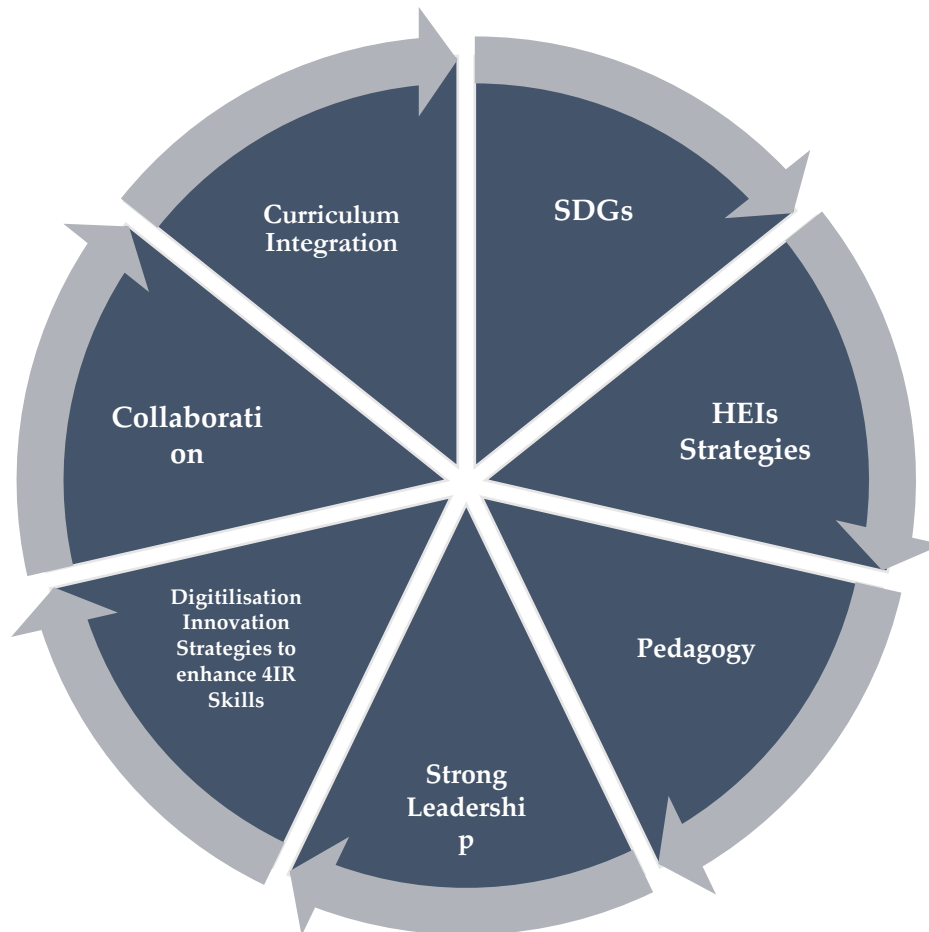
Some interns have indicated how their employment expectations were met, citing the misalignment of what they enrolled for about their degree certifications and module criteria. However, interns still appreciate their experiences and expect more exposure. The Components of the WIL Framework are necessary to drive internships:

1. Academic Curriculum Integration: WIL merges practical work into the academic curriculum, enabling real-world application of theoretical knowledge in a professional context.
2. Workplace Experience: WIL places students in field-relevant workplaces, offering internships, co-op, apprenticeships, or placements as per institution and industry requirements.
3. Learning Objectives and Reflection: WIL sets clear objectives for skill development during placements, with regular reflection to connect experiences with academic learning.
4. Collaboration: WIL thrives on solid collaboration between educational institutions and employers. Employers provide valuable work experiences, while institutions offer support and oversight.
5. Personal and Professional Development: WIL enhances technical and soft skills, including communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and adaptability, which are crucial for personal growth and workforce success (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri, & Suman, 2022).

The literature reveals a variety of work-integrated learning programs aimed at improving educational quality. Such theory programmes range from situated learning theory, action theory, boundary crossing, pedagogy of the workplace, critical education theory, action learning, transformational learning theory, and the Turning Experience into Learning Framework (Stirling, Kerr, Banwell, MacPherson & Heron, 2016). Based on the above, the following WIL Innovative framework is proposed.

### WIL Innovative Framework

The below WIL Innovative Framework seeks to demonstrate how pedagogy can be demonstrated through curriculum mapping and reflection, enhancing student experience and leadership while adhering to governance structures and SDGs.



*Figure 1: WIL Innovative Framework*

This framework establishes how pedagogical achievement can be demonstrated through curriculum mapping and how it is integrated to support the program in enhancing student skills. However, before engaging in pedagogies, the article recommends the inclusion of SDG criteria as they reveal many misalignments in most higher learning institutions' strategies, their module content design that reveals the incoherence and misalignment with the ODeL, curriculum design, assessment, and tuition policies whose capability is to align with student upskilling and growth, preparing them for the actual work environment, and how they add value to society at large (Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018). The SDGs reveal Such ailments, whose mandate is to ensure a plan of action for people, the planet, and prosperity while strengthening universal peace and greater freedom and balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental (United Nations, 2023).

The interviewed support departments ensured training outlines that provided interns with the ability to render their services through a set of performance agreements to serve the operational plan, the ICT strategy of academic focus and student-centeredness, the university catalytic niche through a qualitative response from the clients, the quantity of products produced by the student, and progressively track the progress of the student. Collaborative efforts and curriculum integration into the WIL programme remain essential. The knowledge, skills, and ability transfer help equip, prepare, and get the student ready for the real world; thus, their evaluation of the knowledge and skills through the hours of internship form part of the performance appraisal, which eventually makes up the entire course module as per the pedagogical curriculum mapping (Ismail, 2018).

Reflecting on the outcomes achieved helps students report writing, where students reflect and provide access points daily to establish their presence. Students report days when they could not gain access due to faulty access cards or malfunctioning computer systems, unable to retrieve their access data when entering the premises. The Impact Outcome Achievement regulates and guides mentors in various departments to reflect on how students add value and impact the department as well as the institution with the quantity of workload they produce, bringing in fresh creative energy in the office from those who have creatively impacted and explored the work done to mitigate and reduce staff overload (Mtiki, 2021). It must not be ignored that Higher education institutions (HEIs) face the challenge of weighing risks and responsibilities against the costs and benefits associated with student internships and work placements (Nkomo, 2023). This contributes to identifying potential discrepancies

between HEI strategic decision-making and actual operational practices at the program level (Odlin, Benson-Rea & Sullivan-Taylor, 2022). Throwing students as a part of the solution gap to bridge the gap requires the students to be equipped with an opportunity to unleash their potential. Performance appraisals by the institution were considered; additionally, the quantity of student work and client feedback emails qualified for the article's authenticity.

Strong leadership often involves critical thinking and excellent communication skills, which help enhance student capabilities (Duncan, Birdsong, Fuhrman & Borron, 2017). There is a need for management to expose students to digital literacies, particularly 4th Industrialization Strategies, how to utilise them to their benefit, how to make digital innovations make sense, and how we could do better for student benefit. Leaders must apply empathy to advance student efficiency, provide flexibility and freedom, and instil creativity and confidence. Gartner (2021) reiterates the necessity for managers and mentors to employ radical flexibility while leading with empathy through enablement by their executive leaders to overcome the three barriers to leading with empathy: skill gaps, mindset, and capacity. Should this be applied, the following are the benefits:

1. **Enhanced Employability:** WIL provides real-world work experiences, building students' confidence, skills, professional networks, and employability (Durham, Jordan, Naccarella & Russell, 2020).
2. **Knowledge Construction and Active learning** engage students in applying ideas, selecting, observing, identifying resources, troubleshooting, addressing challenges, and producing solutions (Wilson & Peterson, 2006). **Active Learning:** WIL engages students in applying ideas, observing, troubleshooting, and producing solutions, aligning with Kolbe's learning model (Kolb, 1948:38). The article explores multimedia internship experiences through these stages (Kurt, 2020).
3. **Application of Theoretical Knowledge:** WIL enables students to apply classroom learning to practical situations, reinforcing academic concepts' real-world relevance (Saunders, 2020).
4. **Skill Development:** WIL fosters technical and soft skill development, enhancing graduates' competitiveness in the dynamic job market (Fajaryati, Budiyo, Akhyar & Wiranto, 2020).
5. **Industry-Relevant Graduates:** WIL-equipped graduates are better prepared to meet industry needs, increasing their appeal to employers (Moni, 2021).

## Research Methodology

The research article aims to evaluate whether the university internship programme adds value to the HIL graduates to enable the university support departments, in collaboration with the academic programme qualifications mix as well as curriculum departments, to understand the lessons learnt and rectify or upgrade where they have gone wrong as this internship program is relatively new (Lu, 2021). This article aims to enable the refinement, structure, incentives, implementation, and enhancement of the student placement experience and adjust the underpinning degree curriculum where possible. This article seeks to establish students' work-integrated learning experience at a higher education institution. To probe the purpose of the study, the following research questions helped establish such experiences from students. For the above to be established, this article seeks to understand:

1. ***How have Interns adapted to the Work Experience Activities and operation of tools of trade?***

The study compiled emerging themes and information to inform programme design. It employed a case study approach, analysing data from questionnaires and interviews with eight intern participants. The analysis categorised the data into common emerging themes. The resulting themes, data summary, and interpretations were reviewed through a member check to enhance research trustworthiness. The study employs qualitative data collection methods, mainly through interviews with departmental graduate interns. These interviews explore their experiences, challenges, and contributions in severely understaffed departments. The analysis of the qualitative data is guided by the Work Integrated Learning framework to identify emerging themes and insights.

## Themes

For video productions, there are allocated timeframes for each intern, which may vary based on bookings. Video editing, graphics, and animations require varying amounts of time, depending on the video's length. There are expected attributes for interns such as: positive attitude and ability to engage with clients and team members while working effectively under pressure. Interns are expected to handle additional tasks.

It should be noted that although interviews were requested from interns in various departments, most information was obtained from the Multimedia Centre department. Below tables reveals the intern biographies, comprising a diverse group of ages and genders. Among the eight interns, there are three females and five males. One department has four male interns, while another has one female intern. Their qualifications range from a BA in Multimedia to a Diploma in Technology.

	Detail	Quantity
<b>Age</b>	<b>25–30 years old</b>	<b>X6</b>
	<b>21–25 years old</b>	<b>X1</b>
<b>Number of Q</b>	<b>4</b>	
<b>Number of Interview</b>	<b>4</b>	
<b>Department</b>	<b>3 X Departments</b>	
<b>Gender</b>	<b>M X 5</b>	<b>F X 3</b>
<b>Skills</b>	<b>MS Teams for enabling calls, meetings and client conversations</b>	
<b>Qualification</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia X 2</b></li> <li>2. <b>BCom In Marketing X 3</b></li> <li>3. <b>BCom Honours: Logistics X 1</b></li> <li>4. <b>BCom: Business Informatics X1</b></li> <li>5. <b>Diploma: Information Technology X1</b></li> </ol>	
<b>Time spent at the workplace on a daily basis</b>	<b>6-10 hrs</b>	

Table 1: Intern Biography

### Emerged Themes and Data Summary

Employers provide valuable work experiences, while institutions offer support and oversight. WIL thrives on solid Collaboration between educational institutions and employers. Overarching themes were identified, with the significant theme refined and confirmed as **Workplace Experience**, where students reflected on their experiences such as Collaboration and Personal and Professional Development (Haleem, Javaid, Qadri & Suman, 2022).

Some subthemes have emanated from the experiences that the students have encountered. Such subthemes are: Performance/Experimental Skills, **Dedication**, **Self-confidence and creativity**, Mentoring /Supervision **and Knowledge Transfer**. The table below substantiates the themes and in-depth data from the themes.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Data Summary
Workplace Experience	Performance/Experimental Skills	Interns discussed how their skills improved for workplace etiquette, creativity, prioritisation, time management, professionalism, teamwork, conflict resolution, empathy, leadership, and handling criticism or failure.
Workplace Experience	Dedication	Interns highlighted their commitment to enhancing technical competence, even in high-pressure situations such as recording executives and external clients, demonstrating their dedication to impressing



		mentors and peers.
Workplace Experience	Self-confidence and creativity	Interns shared how they gained self-confidence in their existing skills and knowledge context.
Workplace Experience	Mentoring /Supervision	Interns explained how mentorship benefited them, with mentors and supervisors guiding them in knowledge transfer, professionalism, soft skills, and digital applications.
Workplace Experience	Knowledge Transfer	Interns discussed how interactions with academics and peers expanded classroom learning, fostering a sense of community and ICT application. They also alluded to how these experiences had linked to their academic learning
Workplace Experience	Customer service	Interns described adapting to diverse client requests, prioritising client satisfaction, and adjusting to client briefs.

*Table 2: Emergent Themes, Sub-Themes and Data Summary*

### Discussion and Conclusions

The research questions are thoroughly analysed to conclude considering the above data summary and emergent themes; the study referenced literature to enhance the context of the case study employed.

#### 1. *How have Interns adapted to the Work Experience Activities and operation of tools of trade?*

Interns quickly adapted to work-experience activities and tools of the trade. They found the "real world" pressures enjoyable and believed these pressures improved their ability to apply their knowledge effectively. Despite their best efforts, academics struggled to recreate such desirable pressure in the classroom, with students still relying on last-minute cramming for exams and leaving creative projects until late. Problem-based learning may help, but the data and class discussions suggest that shorter work cycles and assessments offer a better solution.

Interns expressed positive feedback regarding their personal growth and increased self-confidence. Departments now see students as highly trained, creative, independent, critical, and decisive professionals with elevated work ethics. Supervisors and mentors played a crucial role in this development. They allowed students to navigate challenging situations, encouraging creative thinking and immediate problem-solving. Students noted that their work experience differed significantly from their modules. Interns valued knowledge transfer from mentors, finding it readily available and enriched by exposure to diverse expertise. They also noted that knowledge sharing among interns, admins, and other stakeholders exceeded their expectations. Interns appreciated the work experience gained from university activities and events, enabling them to use various tools as needed. The table below details how and when students allocated their time:

1. Columns that deal with the type and name of learning programmes indicate what was utilised, showcasing video production editing, photography, and conceptualisation conducted by Adobe Software.
2. In the Learning Capacity column, the students shared that they have learned from the below, and thus, there was excellent, average, or poor learning capacity.
3. On constant applications, the indication is that video productions are conducted continually; however, the students need more admin capacity due to the lack of capacity with the time number of how they applied each initiative. Regarding Microsoft, this is where the administration of reports by student interns is utilised.

#### a) **Benefits of tools of trade and Work Experience:**

The institution uses various methods to enhance intern knowledge, including workshops, in-house training, online virtual interventions, and mentorship within the unit. For video production, interns utilise software like Adobe Premiere for editing, OBS for live video streaming, and video and photography equipment. MS Teams is employed for administrative purposes, such as communication and meetings. The duration of student activities depends on the specific event or video project. Interns are also engaged in public relations tasks, including event coordination, marketing, and advertising, with a strong focus on maintaining the brand. Oracle is used to create

and retrieve purchase orders and check requisitions. It serves administrative needs, including managing leave days and updating admin credentials—a discussion forum fosters idea exchange and knowledge sharing among interns. Additionally, interns use MS Outlook on laptops to be client liaisons, send emails, and request quotations to ensure smooth event management. Social media platforms focus on understanding posting restrictions and legalities, keeping the institution's brand awareness in mind.

Tool	Why did/do you use it?	Is it beneficial for work-integrated learning?	How did/do you use it?
<b>Adobe Premier Pro</b>	I use it because it is a user-friendly, industry-leading video editing software.	Yes, it is beneficial.	I use it whenever there is footage that needs editing – Combining, cutting, copying and rearranging footage and audio.
<b>MS Teams</b>	I use it because it offers a convenient and professional way of communicating with stakeholders.	Most certainly	I use it mainly for attending meetings with clients/stakeholders. Sharing and downloading files
<b>OBS</b>	I use it because it is a robust live-streaming software, and it's free to download.	Yes, it is beneficial.	For all the livestreaming projects. I get to incorporate video files/projects and MS Teams.
<b>Coordinating PR Events</b>	I use it to develop the database for guests of people attending the events/ Plan and coordinate events.	It is very beneficial for work-integrated learning. Yes, it provides exposure to how to overcome challenges when dealing with events with many audiences. It teaches more responsibility in your work.	Most of the time, I use the following when coordinating an event. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance register</li> <li>• Checklist</li> </ul>
<b>Oracle</b>	To apply for leave/ To check my payslip, put in leaves and check leaves applicable for me as an Intern/ To create purchase order and retrieve purchase order, check requisitions.	It is beneficial for work-integrated learning and beneficial because it allows us to perform the work.	I log into oracle then I see how many days I have, and then apply for a leave/ Login using my laptop with my credential.
<b>Social Media Platforms</b>	To communicate with my colleagues, we use or branding.	Yes	I take pictures of the branding and then send them to our marketing group.
<b>Discussion forum</b>	Meetings.	Yes	We will arrange a meeting and then attend the meeting to discuss marketing.
<b>MS Outlook</b>	Sending RFQ.	Yes	Sending using Laptop.

Table 3: Benefits of tools of trade and Work Experience

## b) Orientation Initiatives



The table below showcases the components of the intern's engagements, such as how graduates experienced orientation and whether it was preparation for what they are currently doing. Therefore, the responses in the table below were from the graduate interns. The paper seeks to establish how the student graduate interns receive the intern orientation programme as the feedback helps boost the internship ram. Interns have indicated how human resource contracts, timetable templates, responsibilities, roles, and functionalities could improve. The interns suggested that the mentors and the organisation departments could expand on expected deliverables.

Similarly, the interns added that they gain experience, which adds value to their professional lives. They are happy with components such as alignment with their degrees, report-writing skills, and mentorship and supervision skills. However, like any programme, additions such as improving the placement process, human resources contracts, enhancing student graduate curriculum vitae writing, and preparing their professional side are required.

<b>Orientation items</b>	<b>Yes /No</b>	<b>Adds Value</b>	<b>Doesn't add value</b>	<b>Could improve</b>
Overview of the placement process	<b>No</b>			
Responsibilities, roles and functionalities	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Adds value</b>		<b>Could improve</b>
Legal/HR contracts	<b>No</b>			<b>Could improve</b>
Timetables	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Adds value</b>		<b>Could Improve</b>
Report-writing and Submission	<b>Yes</b>			
Mentor/Supervisor Feedback session	<b>Yes</b>			
Curriculum vitae skills	<b>No</b>			
Aligned with your degree of study	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Adds value</b>		
Would you prefer to carry on with this workstream or do something else?	<b>Yes</b>			
Knowledge of drafting job application process	<b>No</b>			

*Table 4: Orientation Initiatives*

## Findings

Universities must adhere to robust work-integrated learning and community engagement campaigns to equip their students with internship programmes that align with various Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030. These goals include addressing inequalities within and among countries while protecting human rights and promoting gender equality (United Nations, 2023). Higher learning institutions should design WIL programmes that foster collaborations with communities through community engagements and organisations sustaining long-term relations for the provision of student internships as well as curbing social injustices through job creation (Lamrabat, 2013). Situated learning is embedded in a social situation and cannot be separated from it Lave & Wenger (1991:67). Socially responsible HLI student internship programme provisions mitigate the current unemployment and unskilled labour challenges associated with the lack of practical engagements offered by degree programmes without work-integrated learning.

Additionally, Kolbe's learning cycle incorporates concrete experiences followed by observation and reflection, to form ideas, which are then tested in new situations, creating fresh experiences (Kolb, 1984: 89). By providing students with workplace exposure, higher learning institutions support the SDGs' goal of fostering sustainable, inclusive economic growth, promoting shared prosperity, and ensuring decent work opportunities for everyone, considering varying levels of national development and capabilities (United Nations, 2023). The findings from the interviews with OdeL HLI departmental interns reveal the following key points:

1. **Internship Significance:** OdeL HLI's internship programmes offer a valuable employment opportunity for students, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application.
2. **Institutional Benefits:** The presence of interns within severely understaffed departments has a positive impact on workload reduction, leading to enhanced efficiency and improved service.
3. **Implications for Intern Deployment:** Careful matching of interns' skills and interests with departmental needs optimises their contributions, creating a symbiotic relationship between interns and departments.
4. **Extension and possible contractual transformation of employment:** where mentors and supervisors establish and enhance the competency levels and high-skill performance of student interns to enable the transformation of an internship programme to permanent employment, as this adds value to the student as well as the organisation at large.

### Discussion on Recommendations

Based on the study's findings and within the context of the Work Integrated Learning framework, the paper proposes the following recommendations:

1. **Internship Programme Enhancement:** Institutions should actively enhance and expand the length of their internship programmes across various departments, providing more opportunities for students to gain practical experience.
2. **Administrative Efficiency:** The institutions should implement healthier workforce management practices to ensure mentors can relieve each other of their duties without compromising departmental operations or intern benefits.
3. **Curriculum and Pedagogical Improvements:** Institutions should align their curricula and teaching methodologies towards SDGs and industry demands, emphasising practical skills and problem-solving abilities to equip student graduates for the real-world workforce better.
4. **Intern Wellness:** Interns must be exposed to wellness programmes such as financial wellness, health wellness, work relations, and many other components that equip student capabilities.
5. **Soft-Skill Efficiency:** Interns require soft skills, experience, and exposure as it enables them to boost their confidence on how to construct emails, use business language, attend professional workshops, and receive several adequate mentorships that address and guide how they should conduct themselves professionally.
6. **Innovative digital transformation and 4IR:** In a world of innovative digital transformation that aggressively expands exponentially, interns must be exposed to and mentored on how to use digital transformation appropriately, as even though they might not be able to engage for the benefit of their workspace, mentorship will assist them in learning how to utilise technologies.
7. **Customer-centricity:** Interns must be exposed to and mentored on how customer-centricity remains a priority and how it feeds into the organisation's strategic intentions.
8. **Leading with Empathy and Critical Thinking:** Mentors must show empathy to the student intern to enhance flexibility, kindness, and confidence in students while ensuring they add value to their growth, keeping them aligned with the SDGs.

### Conclusion

This study underscores the potential of HLI's internship programmes to address the challenges severely understaffed departments pose. The departmental interns' experiences highlight their positive impact on reducing workload backlogs while providing valuable learning opportunities. The paper's recommendations focus on enhancing the internship programme, administrative efficiency, and curriculum design to create a transformative experience for interns and the institution. Embracing the work-integrated learning framework will lead to a more holistic preparation of students for the demands of the real-world workforce.

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