

THE POWER OF HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN SHAPING CHARACTER AND PERCEPTION: A SOCIAL CHANGE DIMENSION

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Abstract

This paper explores ways in which a higher education curriculum contributes towards social change by developing certain traits among students including a change in attitude towards the 21st century and thereafter using the WIL module as the impetus. The contribution of higher education is realised with the use of Work Integrated Module (WIL) as part of the curriculum in most of university of technology. Through WIL knowledge and skills are put into practice to enable students to look at the world as a unit. The study followed a mixed method approach to gather information wherein interviews including a questionnaire were used to assess how WIL contributes towards social change in enlarging students' horizon by strengthening their character including their future career. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather information about students' perceptions regarding their experiences on how to cope with changes in the world through the transfer of standards, skills, values, and technology acquired in both higher education and at the workplace. Qualitative data were systematically arranged and categorised into common themes. Inversely, quantitative data were analysed statistically. From a total of 50 students, a sample of 30 students, who enrolled for the Work Integrated module was used. The findings showed a change in perception amongst many students. They started looking at the world holistically and were enthusiastic in applying knowledge, technology, and values they have learnt. While their attitude changed, their soft skills improved too. This study concludes that the higher education curriculum through the integration of WIL shape up students' attitude by exposing them towards applying knowledge systematically, adopting technologies, skills, and ethical values that bring change in the society and better ways of solving problems.

Keywords: *Curriculum, higher education, social change, students' perceptions, WIL.*

1. Introduction

The workplace has become a source of knowledge and skills acquisition which students can use to plough back to the society to change some practices that do not yield progress. The contribution of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in producing students with different competencies plays a huge role in higher education. WIL can set a stage for social change because it does not only command a crucial role in the curriculum design, but it complements the curriculum by developing students who use knowledge objectively to have a holistic view of the world by also tapping into the real-world wisdom and modelling appropriate behaviour. Social change in society may be because of the expediency needed in providing solutions to specific social problems faced in a society. Thus, learning from others' wisdom and experiences in the workplace plays a role in deepening and changing students' perception to enable them to cope with change and to solve problems. WIL can improve students' work readiness and the ability to transfer theoretical knowledge, skills, and technology into the practical implementation to contribute towards influencing change in the society where they live (Freudenberg, Brimble, & Vyvyan, 2010, p. 43).

2. Literature review

2.1. The benefit of WIL

The cardinal feature of WIL lies in the placement of students in professional environments to bring synergy between knowledge acquired at university with practice and culture of the workplace (Smith & Worsfold, 2015). This implies that the workplace application of technology and a display of professional behaviour and other skills in the performance of daily activities, is recognised as one of the most crucial factors in contributing towards social change to give the society new direction in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, and better standards. Furthermore, the use of advanced technologies that students are exposed

to during WIL placements equips them with new skills that shape them for their future careers (Gribble, Dender, Lawrence, Manning, & Falkmer, 2014). The implication is that changes in technology can contribute towards transforming certain cultural practices for the betterment of the society. The WIL module thus indirectly set a stage for social change by integrating academic learning with workplace learning to help students to connect and derive greater meaning from different knowledge types (Sattler, Wiggers, & Arnold, 2011). The idea is further supported by Sattler et al., (2013) who is of the idea that WIL through its co-extra-curricular nature can influence change and adaptation to new technologies to enhance social norms (Sattler et al., 2013). Furthermore, student employment prospects are enlarged (Smith, Ferns, & Russell, 2014).

2.2. WIL's contribution in the development of character

WIL programmes also place emphasis on critical thinking, creative solutions in solving complex real problems as well as developing students to become leaders and managers who can also initiate change in the digital world (Gannon, Rodrigo, & Santemà, 2016). Similarly, Mutalemwa, Utouh, & Msuya (2020) adds that employers want to see competencies such as initiative, self-awareness, ethical skills, stress tolerance, ability to solve conflicts, a sense of responsibility and active citizenry amongst graduates. The implication thereof is that universities help to shape and prepare responsible citizens who can improve communities. Furthermore, WIL opens possibilities for students to gain situated knowledge, skills, and experience (Orrell, 2018).

3. Theoretical framework

To create a balanced educative experience for students Dewey, one of the progressive educators who believed in practical wisdom to compliment knowledge including attitude, came with the idea of bringing a balance between cognitive and practical knowledge experience (Dewey, 1938). The implication is that students can use the knowledge they have gathered in the classroom to solve real world problems. Dewey's initiative further aimed at bringing an end to the "separation of the ideas of the world from the ideas of the classroom" to develop a fully educative experience through the real world of work (Dewey, 1938). Dewey's work set the stage for constructivist theorists whose philosophy of learning aimed to expose students to the dynamics of the real world by emulating proper behaviour, and re-construct their knowledge to improve' perception and the ability to apply logic in social contexts (Dewey, 1938). This paper is thus underpinned by Dewey's theoretical framework which places an emphasis on recognising a balance between different knowledge types to enable students to develop students' character and to enable them to have a broader view of the world.

4. Aim of the study

The aim was to investigate how Higher Education through WIL expand students' horizon by equipping students with knowledge, skills and technology that can be used for the benefit the society.

4.1. Research questions

- I. To what extent does Higher Education through WIL shape students' character, attitudes, and perception.
- II. Do WIL activities impact on social change?

4.2. Research objectives

- I. To explore the extent to which WIL offer students the opportunities to build character, change attitude and perception towards using knowledge, skills and knowledge acquired in higher education to bring change in the society.
- II. To determine the effect of change among students that translate into their ability to deal with social challenges.

5. Methodology

5.1. Research design

A mixed methods approach was used to collect data. The quantitative, non-experimental responses on how WIL improve student perception and impact on social change through the application of practical knowledge, technologies, and soft skills that are ploughed back to the society. A self-administered questionnaire analysed statistically were used to collect quantitative data, whilst qualitative data were

collected by using a semi structured interview schedule coded manually into themes (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014).

5.2. Sample and sampling

Both purposive and random sampling were employed. Out of a population of 50 students only a sample of 30 male and female students aged between 20-23 was used wherein 10 were interviewed whilst a questionnaire was distributed to 20 respondents.

5.3. Methods

The researcher used a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview schedule to collect data.

5.4. Data analysis

Data obtained through a self-administered questionnaire were analysed statistically whilst qualitative data obtained from participants were recorded, transcribed, and analysed systematically from content to codes, patterns and to emerging themes using content analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

6. Findings

Responses from a questionnaire were as follows:

- + Statement 1: 100% of respondents strongly agreed that WIL practical experience whereby knowledge, skills and technology including soft skills are put to test that contributes to shape character.
- + Statement 2 98% of respondents strongly agreed that WIL enlarges their horizons and change their perception of the world better, whilst 2% disagreed.
- + Statement 3: 100% of respondents all strongly agreed that Higher Education have power to sytematised knowledge by instilling a sense of objectivity and logic on how to view the world.
- + Statement 4: 90% of the respondents strongly agreed that knowledge and skills acquired from higher education including WIL have an indirect impact in changing traditional practices of society and contribute to the advancement of society. 10% agreed.
- + Statement 5: 90% of the respondents strongly agreed that WIL strengthens soft skills and graduate attributes, whilst 5% agreed and 5% disagreed.
- + Statement 6: 94% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that through WIL their confidence increased, and it impacted on improved performance in their studies. 4% disagreed.
- + Statement 7: 98% strongly agreed that Higher Education create a foundation for growth, maturity, and shape them to be responsible citizens who can manage and lead. 4% agreed.
- +Statement: 92% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that higher education qualifications should become mandatory for all citizens for the development of all whilst 8% disagreed.

Themes that emerged from qualitative data:

- Change in attitude, development of other skill and its impact on social change.
- Benefit for students, Higher Education, and Industries
- Personal development, work readiness and social change

6.1. Discussion of the findings

6.1.1. Change in attitude, development of other skills and it impact on social change. Being given tasks to solve problems students learn more about the importance of teamwork, communication, resilience, and conflict resolution (cf. Gribble, 2014). Participants also indicated that in navigating through complexities their perspective broadened and their attitude in terms of looking at the world. To that effect, WIL makes provision for students to change and to sharpen some of the competencies they already possess. According to (cf. Dewey, 1938) this strengthens and bring a balance between cognitive, practical knowledge, experience, and competencies. This further impact on change in society due to the expediency needed in using appropriate skills and technology to provide solutions to specific social problems (cf. Sattler et al, 2013).

6.1.2. Benefit to students and higher education. It has been revealed that WIL create a unit where a university, students and industry interact not only to establish a match between industry needs and educational skills but to capacitate students as members of the society with knowledge, practical skills, and technology. One of the participants indicated that WIL placement made a difference in their lives by learning certain expertise from those with experience that they adopted to bring effectiveness and efficiency on approaching real world problems and how to cope with complexities. WIL also create a relationship between organisations and Universities of Technology (UoTs) to enhance career-oriented education curriculum alignment to the needs of industries and contribute towards improving student employment prospects (Smith, Ferns, & Russell, 2014).

6.1.3. Personal development, work readiness and social change. Participants indicated that they learned and gained from real life experiences, and this contributed in improving their performance as they comprehend the relationship between theory and practice. It was also highlighted that through WIL students experience growth, maturity, self-awareness, and confidence including improved human relations that enables them to work with people of different backgrounds and disciplines (cf. Orrell, 2018). Other opportunities that were reported as gains for students are situated knowledge, skills and experience which gives students enables students to participate with ease and become conversant with employability needs resulting to smooth transition from university to career trajectory (cf. Orrell, 2018). Competencies such as interpersonal communication and problem-solving skills were also highlighted as being developed.

The discussion revealed the power of higher education in bringing change in the lives of people which enables them to view the world objectively through the knowledge, skills and competencies that are acquired through the integration of WIL. It has also added some weight towards students' development by not only preparing students for the workplace but highlighted the significance of close ties between universities and industries. For students some of the benefits they gained from WIL placements included the reinforcement of concepts and skills learned in the classroom, obtaining workplace skills, learning different software programs industries that improves student's efficiency. It can be added that WIL has attracted considerable attention as an instrument for enhancing professional practice and developing work-readiness in new graduates by enhancing skills outcomes management, and problem solving. It is thus important that the competency profile of a graduate should not only include discipline specific knowledge, technical skills, workplace generic cognitive skills, but the focus should also be placed on attitudes and behavioural attributes that contribute towards personal development and the ability to cope with changes.

7. Conclusion

It can be concluded that WIL is not about putting knowledge into practice, but it relives competencies by putting them to test in real practical situations. The opportunity created by Higher Education for students through WIL creates an opportunity for student to model and relive professional behaviour, ethical practices, communication, teamwork, managing change, using technology, applying logic, managing conflict, and solving problems are skills and others that indirectly impact on change in perception amongst many students. It is thus important that the competency profile of a graduate should not only include discipline specific knowledge, technical skills, workplace generic cognitive skills, but the focus should also be placed on attitudes and behavioural attributes that contribute towards personal development and the ability to cope with change in the real-world context for students to change their lives and that of communities where they live. In addition, the paper contributes to literature about the contribution of Higher Education through WIL towards social change in emulating advanced practices accompanied by technology in the workplace that contribute towards advancing society.

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