

THE **SABPP**[™]

FACT SHEET

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WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING:

CAN IT MITIGATE THE COMPETENCY CHALLENGES OF THE NEW WORLD OF WORK?



Introduction

Globalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) are shaping how the new world of work is evolving. For example, various forms of digital technologies are enabling employees to work anywhere and at any time. The realities of this world of work that contemporary organisations need to deal with include rapid technological advancement, accelerated business innovation, flexible work arrangements and increased workforce diversity. Compared to traditional work models, modern employees are expected to work in technologically advanced environments where jobs are more psychologically and emotionally demanding (see the Sage 2024 report on the Changing face of HR¹ and the previous SABPP Fact Sheets on the disruption of traditional careers², on future readiness and employability³, and on the changes in our relationship with time⁴). This necessitates augmented competencies that are expected from employees, which has massive implications for organisations.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) can be a valuable tool for academic institutions to work together with employers to mitigate the challenges of developing the competencies for the new world of work. WIL exposes students to this new world of work. This enhances their employability and fosters realistic work expectations. This Fact Sheet will unpack the competencies that are likely to be developed by means of WIL exposure. The Fact Sheet can be read in the context of the revised National HRM Standards, which was launched in September 2023 as the People Practices and Governance Standard to take into account the evolving world of work.

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Conceptualising the meaning of work-integrated learning

According to Coll and Eames (2007) there are numerous terms that explain work-based learning, notably cooperative education, workplace learning, work-integrated learning (WIL), internships, and experiential learning. In the United Kingdom (UK), WIL is normally referred to as sandwich placements, while in the United States of America (USA) the terms 'cooperative education' or 'internship' are more often used. Sandwich degrees in the UK, cooperative education and internships in the USA, as well as WIL as a form of experiential learning in Australia apply to structured programmes linking formal classroom learning with practical work-based activities (Jackson, 2013). In the South African context, Winberg, Engel-Hills, and Jacobs, (2011) found that cooperative education, experiential learning, WIL, and work-based learning are the prevailing terms. It can therefore be concluded that, no matter the country, the link between academic and work-based activities is an important feature of WIL. To have a clearer understanding of WIL, the various terms will be clarified below:

- ▶ Work-based learning is referred to as learning through work, the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills either at the academic institution or in the workplace (Ferns, Campbell, & Zegwaard, 2014).
- ▶ Experiential learning has its roots in the philosophy of Dewey (1938) who proposed a well-structured experience related to work-based learning. This led Kolb (1984) to conclude that experiential learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through practical experience. WIL is considered an important feature of universities of technology (UoTs) that directly connect academic institutions with the world of work.
- ▶ Cooperative education is a method of education which includes a partnership between the academic institution, the workplace, and the student for the purpose of gaining work experience.
- ▶ Practicum is a period of work that provides the student with the opportunity to gain practical experience in the real world as part of an academic programme.
- ▶ Internships involve short-term work exposure in which a student receives training and gain experience in a specific field or career area.

The terminology described above not only reiterates the established link between academic and work-based activities, but also highlights the existence of an industry partnership that benefits the student, workplace, and academic institution. The glue that holds the partnership together is the academic programme or curriculum that makes provision for the inclusion and alignment of the different learning sites and activities. The common denominators are:

- ▶ the two distinct settings of learning (one the academic institution and two in the workplace),
- ▶ a three-way partnership,
- ▶ and the curriculum as the basis for the link between the learning sites and industry partners.



The benefits of work-integrated learning

WIL has numerous benefits for students, business and industry, and academic institutions. The benefits for students include career enhancement, financial rewards, enhanced interaction between the employers and academic institutions, increased employability, a more inclusive educational experience, and attaining generic and specific attributes vital to employment (Ricks and Williams, 2005). WIL engagement enables students to gain a realistic understanding of the realities of their chosen career and to connect theory with practice, while applying the acquired knowledge in a workplace setting (Atkinson, 2016). Employers tend to favour work experience that helps students prepare for employment when recruiting graduates.

WIL provides a preview of the expectations and competencies needed in the workplace. Sattler and Peters (2013) suggested that employers who provide WIL opportunities tend to prefer to hire graduates who have gained WIL exposure (Bates & Bates, 2013). When student learning from real-life situations is efficiently assessed and managed by academic institutions, it ensures future-fit graduates who are ready for the workplace.

Academic staff also gain network opportunities with business and industry, providing institutions access to resources, current technology, and practical knowledge. Staff involved in WIL can develop and maintain contact with the world of work to forge and sustain collaborative research, access scholarships, and establish consultancies. Time spent in industry assists academics in designing relevant curricula, ensuring that it meets the needs of both the student and the world of work. WIL programmes are frequently advertised as a reason for potential students to select one institution over another.

WIL placements used by employers as a way of immersing students into the work environment offer the ideal platform to recruit graduates (Bates and Bates, 2013). According to Dwesini (2015) students with WIL exposure bring new/existing concepts and trends from academia to the attention of industry, thus benefitting them in the following ways.

- ▶ WIL students can be used as temporary employees, building a pipeline of skilled employees.
- ▶ WIL students can provide backup for full-time staff.
- ▶ During WIL placements, both employers and students are provided with an opportunity to determine whether there is a suitable 'match' for permanent employment.
- ▶ The WIL partnership provides an opportunity for employers to establish close links with academic intuitions and therefore influence the university's curriculum to suit the needs of business and industry.



Competencies developed through work-integrated learning

Competencies can be explained as sets of behaviours necessary for achieving results in the workplace. Two types of competencies are likely to be developed through WIL participation - broadly labelled 'hard' and 'soft' competencies. Hard competencies involve the technical job-related expectations and soft competencies relate to human interaction and teamwork. The following competencies can be developed through WIL (Bachoo, 2023; The changing face of HR in 2024).

- A** **Knowledge of the industry** is crucial for students to cultivate realistic expectations conducive to career progression.
- B** **Work experience** relates to the amount of time spent in business and industry performing particular jobs. Experience gained enables students to make better career-related decisions. It also enhances technical and decision-making skills.
- C** **Technical competencies** imply the know-how to perform specialised jobs. This can also include knowing and understanding policies, procedures and processes that apply to the workplace.
- D** **Digital competencies** relate to the ability to interact with the various forms of digital technology that characterise contemporary organisations.
- E** **Leadership** is a crucial competency for the new world of work as leaders need to navigate a complex environment where both relationships and production is of utmost concern. This implies designing and managing jobs as well as motivating and supporting staff.
- F** **Emotional intelligence** is the ability to comprehend and control one's emotions in a positive way to effectively communicate and interact with others. Emotional intelligence means individuals know and understand themselves, thus they better understand the emotions and behaviours of others. It also includes displaying empathy and being able to fit into the social structures of society. Emotionally stable individuals advance stable relationships and interactions in the organisation.

G **Social intelligence** is the ability fit is in as part of social groups in society, notably in the workplace. It also means connecting with others in a deep and meaningful way. Social intelligence is crucial to support and develop employees in the workplace.

H **Intercultural understanding** is the ability to interact and get along with a diversity of individuals in the workplace. WIL is likely to expose students to gain better intercultural understanding.

I **Critical reasoning** needs to be cultivated by students as this enables them to apply critical thinking to the environment they work in. Critical thinking facilitates better decision-making, communication and problem solving.

J **Communication** is the ability to speak and interact in a manner that effectively conveys intended messages

K **Decision making** is part of the lives of all humans. It is imperative that students be exposed to leaders, managers, and peers to act as role models for good decision making. Enhanced emotion intelligence and self-awareness can lead to better decisions being made.

L **Problem solving** is the proficiency to apply creative and innovative solutions to new and/or existing problems. Problem solving is crucial in the contemporary workplace that expects individuals to be creative and productive. Problem solving can be facilitated by a combination of experience, perception, personality, and situational factors.



Conclusion

The new world of work requires an emphasis on the continuous development of both hard and soft competencies of employees. WIL is a way for academic institutions to better prepare students for the expectations of business and industry. WIL can serve as one of the learning and development methods that organisations can collaborate and co-create with universities. The SABPP National People Practices and Governance Standard (PPGS)⁵ suggests that organisations consider a variety of learning and development methods. The emphasis though is on an integrated L&D approach that meets the identified organisational need and enables employees to develop new knowledge and skills. WIL can also serve as one of the interventions that helps foster the talent and workforce ecosystems of organisations. The PPGS articulates HR's role in fostering these ecosystems.

Organisations that are seeking to partner with universities for WIL can engage the SABPP's Head of Research and Assurance. The SABPP accredits universities for their HRM qualifications and has numerous national committees such as the Higher Education Committee and HR Research Initiative through which it can engage universities.

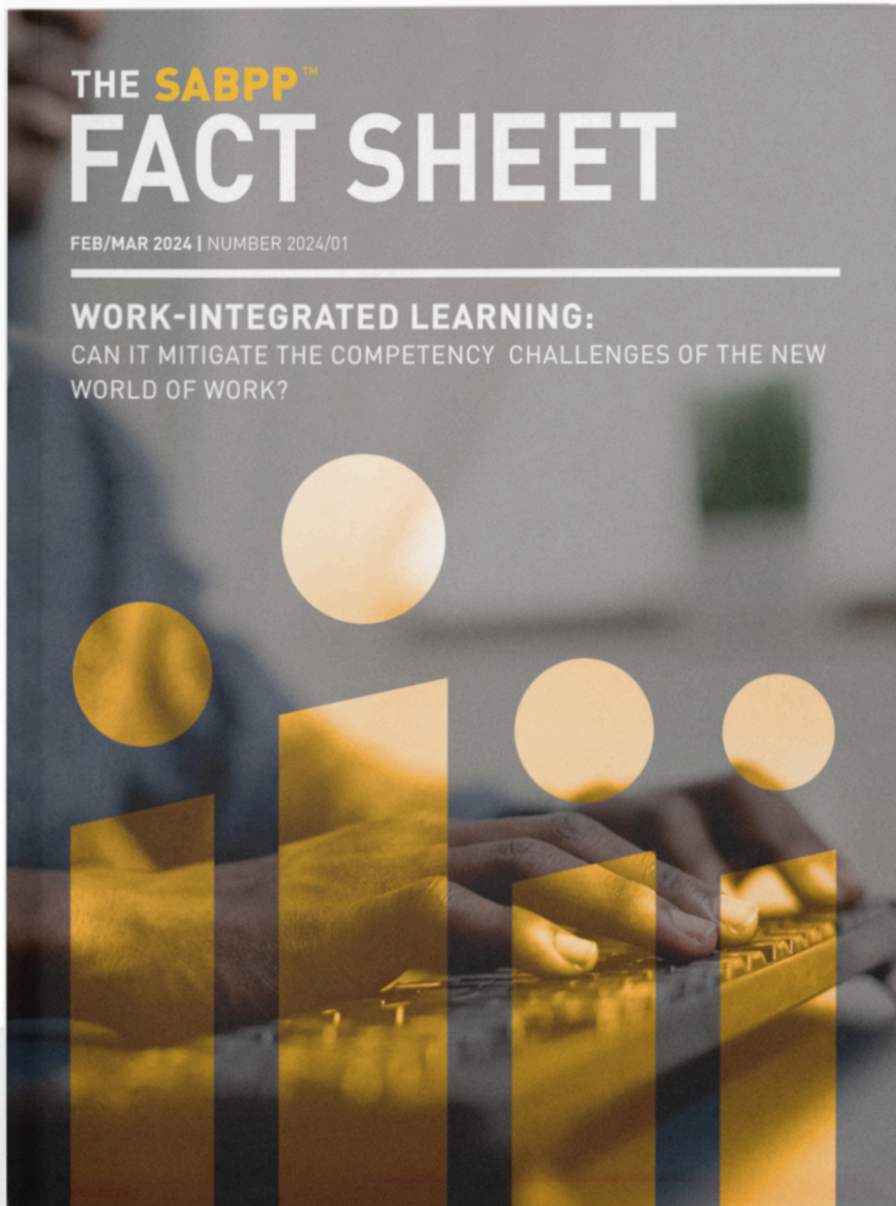
The list of accredited universities can be found here: <https://www.sabpp.co.za/membership1/accredited-higher-educational-institutions>



5. <https://docs.mymembership.co.za/docmanager/8b191c28-797a-4c3d-b249-8b6e5691fe86/00160683.pdf>

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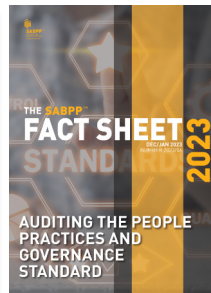
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