

**WALKING THE WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING ROAD OTHERS HAVE  
WALKED BEFORE BUT AVOIDING THE IMPLEMENTATION POTHoles:  
A TRANSDISCIPLINARY APPROACH**

**Abstract**

**Walking the Work Integrated Learning road others have walked before but avoiding  
the implementation potholes: A transdisciplinary approach**

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South Africa's high unemployment rate of nearly 27% makes education, training and skills development a national priority. Academics have recognised the imperative to produce qualified, skilled and work-ready graduates. A work integrated learning (WIL) partnership model was developed to fast track student placements into industry, facilitate them gaining relevant work experience and increasing their employability. Successfully implemented with Human Resource Management students, the model is being implemented by a different discipline, Commercial Accounting, with the hope of achieving similar successes.

This conceptual paper presents a comparison and reflection on the transdisciplinary approach taken by departments in different faculties of the same institution. The purpose is to present a working WIL model as a road already travelled, bypassing identified 'potholes', documenting the planning and preparation strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The aim is to encourage academics to embark on transdisciplinary WIL projects with full awareness of the challenges and benefits involved. The changing South African education landscape, human resource development and international calls for education-industry-government partnerships provides the context, with experiential learning the theoretical framework for the transdisciplinary approach. An overview of lessons learned and adaptations made are

outlined. Value is added on three levels: strategic, theoretical and practical ones. Strategically, this paper contributes to national skills development imperatives. Theoretically, the WIL body of knowledge on initiatives across higher education disciplines is increased. Practically, contribution is made to implementation effectiveness of a revised, working WIL model to enable young Accounting discipline graduates to enter the workplace with confidence.

**Keywords:** commercial accounting, human resource management, industry partnership, transdisciplinary, skills development, transdisciplinary, work integrated learning

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## **INTRODUCTION**

South Africa (SA) celebrated 20 years of democracy in 2014. The country, the 25<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, has a population of close to 52 million people (Statistics SA, 2011), of whom nearly 70% are under the age of 35 years. The country's high unemployment rate makes education, training and skills development a national priority. A National Development Plan: Vision 2030 guides the government in its endeavour to create 11 million jobs and to reduce the unemployment rate to 6% by 2030 (South Africa, 2011a). It is clear that the education sector has a big role to play in providing an educated and skilled workforce. The post-school education sector is specifically involved in the development of qualified, skilled and work-ready graduates. One education strategy that is seen to contribute to this is that of experiential education, with its concept of work integrated learning (WIL). SA's higher education landscape consisted of 25 public higher education institutions in 2014. The University of Johannesburg (UJ) was established on 1 January 2005, as a merger between a traditional university and a Technikon (university of technology) and offers programmes designed to

prepare students for the world of work and for global citizenship. The WIL model outlined is evidence of the striving to bridge the gap between classroom and the world of work.

A WIL partnership model was developed by UJ's Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) to fast track student placements into industry, facilitate them gaining relevant work experience and increasing their chances for employment after graduation. The model was piloted and successfully implemented with Human Resource Management (HRM) students in 2013. This paper describes how the lessons learned from the 2013 and 2014 implementation of the HRM WIL Partnership Model have been used to introduce the model into another faculty and discipline (Commercial Accounting) at the university, with the aim of achieving similar successes.

This conceptual paper presents a comparison and reflection on the transdisciplinary approach taken by two departments in different faculties of the same institution. The purpose of this paper is to present a working WIL model as a road already travelled, bypassing the identified potholes. The aim is to encourage academics to embark on transdisciplinary WIL projects with full awareness of the challenges and benefits involved and, more specifically, to share the lessons learned during the process.

The changing South African higher education landscape, the National Development Plan and the international call for education-industry-government partnerships provides the context for this paper. Experiential learning/ WIL provides the theoretical framework for the transdisciplinary approach. Recent research indicates that the HRM WIL model contributed to economic and social development for students, higher education and industry partners. These elements are important to ensure a vibrant society, particularly in the SA context.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature was reviewed under the sub-headings below. Included as part of the literature review is an elaboration of aspects that makes this paper relevant in a country where almost 60% of unemployed people have never worked before, the majority of these being youth, and 9 out of 10 businesses would rather hire someone with experience (Blom, 2015).

### **South Africa: Developing its Human Resources**

Approximately 30 million South Africans are under the age of 35 and of these 12.5 million were unemployed in 2011: the official unemployment rate is at 25.2% (Statistics SA, 2012). SA's Human Resource Development Strategy (South Africa, 2010a) acknowledges that complexity of the workplace is growing. This is accelerated by the impact of globalisation on national economies, production and trade, thus requiring greater flexibility and capacity in the workforce. Education and training are clearly key aspects to achieve this. Itin posits that it is becoming increasingly clear that the current education paradigm that guides the educational process 'from kindergarten through doctoral programs' is not working (Itin, 1999: 97). New approaches and models are thus needed.

In order for SA to develop as a 21st century economy the gaps in critical skills required for a range of social, economic and education strategies need to be closed. Recent education, training and economic policies have emphasised the need for workplace-based learning: the National Development Plan (South Africa, 2011a) speaks to the massive expansion of the further education and training sector, the increasing need for linkages between post-school education and work places and the funding of internships and work experience programmes. Skills shortages contrasted with the high rate of national unemployment are indicative of a

mismatch between the supply of and demand for skills. Work integrated learning (WIL) has been identified as one way of closing this gap, with industry and education working together.

### **Experiential Learning: Theoretical Framework Underpinning WIL**

Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience. Experiential learning theory has evolved, with John Dewey (1938) attributed to being the ‘father’ of the theory, with other contributors being Kurt Lewin, Donald Schön (1983) and David Kolb with his experiential learning model (1984). In essence, the theories are based on the premise that learning is enriched by actual doing, and that certain skills are best acquired in an authentic workplace, under guidance and supervision of someone with relevant experience. In South Africa, the publication of the Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide (CHE, 2011) has popularised the term work integrated learning. The country’s legislative, policy and human resource development documents highlight the need for workplace experience as an aspect of skills development, with industry participation a key element of success for such a model. Despite the numerous advantages of WIL to the various participants (Dressler & Keeling, 2011) there are also some challenges, specifically with development of industry partnerships (Choy & Delahaye, 2011). This said, WIL it is firmly entrenched in the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (South Africa, 2013).

### **Transdisciplinary Approach to WIL Implementation**

The Oxford English dictionary definitions for the adjectives transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary are aligned and indicate something relating to more than one branch of knowledge. The authors of the paper have taken a transdisciplinary approach in two regards: the model developed for HRM students is transferred and integrated for Commercial Accounting students allowing members of the team to contribute knowledge

and skills and collaborate with other each other from an HR, an Accounting and an Education Management perspective.

### **HRM WIL PARTNERSHIP MODEL: DEMARCATING THE ROAD**

UJ supports a 'learning to be' teaching, learning and assessment philosophy and strategy. This philosophy is embraced by the Faculty of Management in its aim to create graduates who are 'future-fit leaders'. Within the faculty, the department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) offers a variety of qualifications in the Human Resources Management (HRM) programme. A WIL partnership model was researched and conceptualised for pilot implementation in the HRM Diploma qualification in 2013. The aim was to meet national, sector and institutional imperatives, as well in an attempt to bridge the gap between theoretical lectures and practical industry experience for the HRM students. The model aimed to ensure that graduates would be equipped with the basic HRM skills, attitudes, values and knowledge for ease of transition into a formal workplace as HR Practitioners and HR Professionals (De Vos, 1998; South Africa, 2007).

The HRM WIL partnership model was implemented in five phases: design, develop and approval phase; preparation phase; implementation phase; evaluation phase; and review phase. Each phase consisted of identified processes (Taylor & Govender, 2013). This model was successfully implemented in 2013 (98 student participants), with a revised version implemented in 2014. An exciting development occurred in 2014: the Faculty of Financial and Economic Sciences (FEFS) requesting support for the introduction of this WIL model into the National Diploma (ND): Commercial Accounting, a first time inclusion of WIL in the Faculty.

## **COMMERCIAL ACCOUNTING: TYING ITS SHOELACES TO WALK THE WIL ROAD**

The Department of Commercial Accounting is one of the four departments in FEFS and the only department in the faculty that exclusively offers diploma qualifications. For 2015, participation in the newly introduced WIL programme is voluntary, with students able to opt not to participate without having an adverse impact on their academic marks. This would allow a data base of participating companies to be established. The main objectives of introducing WIL in the Department were to (i) have graduates who are not only academically competent but also ready to transition into the professional working environment more easily (ii) foster closer relationships with companies and other organisations that have a need for the accounting graduates and (iii) to assist students to be more capable of integrating knowledge..

The first objective is achieved by teaching students additional professional skills that will ease their integration into the workplace: CV writing, interview skills, job-searching skills, business etiquette, personal branding and reputation management, work-readiness and presentation skills. These skills that had not previously been offered to students in the Faculty as part of the curriculum. The second objective is addressed by having the department's WIL coordinator, as well as students themselves, approaching organisations for work placement opportunities as part of the WIL programme. To address the last objective, an integrated assignment that all third year students are required to do was introduced simultaneously with the WIL programme. The assignment integrates the four subject disciplines and is a group assignment where students have to contend with the realities of working in a team.

The department faced a few initial challenges when conceptualising the WIL project. Firstly, WIL has, according to the writers' knowledge, never been implemented in a Commerce

qualification before in SA and thus there are no established mechanisms and industry relationships to launch the programme. Secondly, the department does not currently have strong relationships with employer companies that employ the department's diploma graduates. This is despite the fact that the qualifications offered in the department are relevant to industry and are of a high standard. Lastly, the department has 800 third year students (intended WIL participants), which is much larger than the population of HRM students that participate in WIL. This had practical challenges in that the logistics for organising classes where additional skills are offered and assisting with the work placement of students become more complex.

The ground work and preparation for introducing WIL was begun in March 2014, 11 months before the programme was launched. From the onset, it was imperative that the Department leveraged off the extensive experience that two key advisors, Susanne Taylor (Academic Development and Support Division) and Cookie Govender (HRM Department), had with WIL. These two advisors had developed, piloted and implemented a fully-fledged WIL model for HRM students and thus are deeply knowledgeable of pitfalls involved in launching a WIL programme. The 11 months of planning involved numerous consultative meetings between the department's Head of Department, WIL coordinator and the advisors as well as meetings with external stakeholders like the Bank SETA and the Finance SETA, sectoral government entities created to foster workplace-learning in the SA economy.

The advisors forewarned that the wider staff in the department are expected to show resistance initially to the programme. The advisors' experience indicated that staff are normally negative towards change (fear of the unknown) and would perceive the WIL programme as an initiative that adds extra workload that they have to deal with. This was

done at the department's annual strategic meeting which took place 3 months before implementation. At the time, the programme had already been sufficiently planned to demonstrate to its feasibility to staff, including potential pitfalls.

The advisors also indicated the importance of having appropriate introductory sessions where the programme, its objectives, the manner of its implementation, etc are explained to students. These sessions also deal extensively with the student's role in the process, especially with regards to making an effort to secure a job placement and ensuring that they plan well in advance for transport money and appropriate work attires during the work placement. Furthermore, the advisors were also well placed to provide the department with a realistic view of the workload that goes with the WIL project and as a result the department was able to hire student assistants. The student assistants assist the WIL coordinator with tasks like recording attendance of WIL sessions, recording submission of WIL homework tasks and other related administrative tasks.

The Department also benefitted from the already existing set of WIL documents developed for the HRM model. These documents include letters given to students to present to potential employers when seeking a work placement and questionnaires to be completed by the employer and the student upon completion of the work placement. In addition to this, the list of companies which previously granted work experience to HRM students was also made available as a welcome resource.

### **LESSONS LEARNED – AND SHARED: AVOIDING THE POTHOLES**

Frank and open sharing of issues encountered with the implementation of the HRM WIL model were shared to allow obvious 'potholes' that could derail the new project. The most

important lessons learnt included: early involvement of the academic colleagues lecturing in the programme; communication with students from the beginning of the academic year; the workplace readiness programme should occur in the first term and to approach the relevant SETAs for placement opportunities. The need to differentiate roles – planner, lecturer, administrator – was highlighted, with the Commercial Accounting department appointing administrative support to manage the large number of students and hence participating companies. The need for clear and unambiguous communication may seem obvious, but was emphasised. The documents issued to students and companies were shared. The aim being two-fold: firstly to share but secondly with the intention of developing a standardised set of documents as students from both programme could potentially complete their WIL at the same company. The need for a project champion, someone who would also take responsibility for any conflict resolution, especially given the number of students involved.

Despite the extensive support and advice from the advisors, Commercial Accounting did encounter challenges of its own in implementing WIL. The first challenge was that a detailed assessment of the workload of students prior to the introduction of the WIL programme was not done. This resulted in students submitting WIL tasks late, not submitting at all or missing WIL sessions. The majority of students indicated that their normal academic workload is large and WIL was seen as an extra burden. This was worsened by the fact that the WIL project is voluntary for the students. Secondly, some students appear to be more interested in the work placement aspect and in the university letter that helps them when approaching potential employers than in the WIL sessions that teach them critical work readiness skills. These lessons will be considered and factored in to the project planning for 2016.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Derry and Fischer's (2005) statement that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning can no longer be dichotomised into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and to a place and time to acquire knowledge (workplace) resonated with the authors. WIL, as an educational strategy, allows students to bridge the learning-work experience gap: the HRM WIL placement model has shown this. Lessons learned in the implementation of the model were shared with the Department of Commercial Accounting in order to smooth the road for this department's milestone: a first programme with a WIL component in the Faculty. Many of the hurdles ('potholes' as termed by the authors) were thus bypassed. Despite this, some bumps were encountered and new lessons were learned, which will be incorporated into the review cycle – and then shared with other parties interested to travel the WIL road.

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