
Work-integrated learning: a powerful connecting tool between classroom and industry

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Abstract: Academics believe that work integrated learning (WIL) is no longer essential and that it takes up a lot of teaching and learning time. They also believe that teaching time should be extended and that students would seek employment on their own upon completion of their diplomas and degrees. However, we are of the opinion that WIL is vital to the growth and career development of students. We determined the ‘students-employer’ perceptions on the benefits, expectations and experiences of WIL in higher education. Data that were collected through questionnaires were analysed with the use of statistical tools. We then obtained trends from the findings. We discovered that WIL is beneficial in bridging a gap between the classroom and the industry. Exchange lecturers and guest lecturers from the industry may be a plausible way to supplement WIL. Lecturers need to keep abreast of industry expectations and acclimatise their curriculum as some theories maybe obsolete and detached from practice.

Keywords: cooperative learning; work integrated learning; WIL; higher education; experiential training; university of technology; UOT.

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1 Introduction

Work integrated learning (WIL)¹ particularly in the context of this paper aims to introduce the school of accounting students in a university of technology (UOT) to work-related learning so as to equip them for the work place. In the university where this study took place, third year students of Accounting are required to spend four months (specifically from October to 31 January) on a WIL program. As a program, WIL has remained a contentious issue among academics who argue that WIL consumes teaching and learning period and should therefore be set aside so as to allow extended teaching and learning time for the last term of the year. Nevertheless, the school of counting sciences places over 70 students with an increasing number every year in private and public sector alike including retail stores, small accounting firms and department of health to mention a few. Although the school cannot place all the 300 students each year, others are still able to secure internships on their own. The WIL coordinator's criterion for placement is that top South African students get the first priority. Some of the students eventuate into longer term contract of employment while some get permanent positions from their internships organisations. It is a custom that the WIL coordinator, accompanied by academics within the school, rotationally visits these students at least once prior to their completion of WIL term. This is in line with Garraway et al. (2015) who argue that the task of the lecturer responsible for WIL is to visit students to assess their competence in carrying out practical tasks in the workplace. During these visits the students presents their role and responsibilities to the WIL coordinator and their supervisors and or managers in their respective organisations. Upon completion of the experiential training, students are expected to compile and submit their portfolio of evidence to the WIL coordinator.

There is a vast demand for students to participate in work integrated programs as its purpose is to incorporate theoretical study and real-world work experience which aims to provide a point of transformation for graduates that company's value. WIL creates a bridge between what students are taught at tertiary education and practical work experience. A student can be excellent on paper but does not possess the essential skills needed in practice and therefore this presents an opportunity for the transitioning process to take place. Experience-based learning encourages lifelong learning in that certain skills not taught in the classroom are learnt through work experience (Kolb, 2015). Hence in this paper, we argue that WIL is important and benefits the students in a pivotal way as it provides them with the opportunity to be exposed to the working environment, develop

soft skills which are difficult to imbed in the class room and thus promote their career development growth. Kolb (2015) defines experiential learning as “a particular form of learning from life experience; often contrasted with lecture and classroom learning.” In addition to this [Keeton and Tate, 1978 in Kolb, (2015), p.18] offered this definition, “learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about or writes about these realities but never comes into contact with them as part of the learning process.”

The increasing cost of gaining a higher education has reinforced the need to develop student’s graduate employability (Orrell, 2004). Rudman and Terblanche (2012) are of the view that academics ought to devise their teaching models to help bridge the gap that exists between theory and practice. Other scholars (for example Weligamage and Siengthai, 2003; Mandyoli et al., 2017) have also blamed unemployment for the huge gap between classroom and the workplace. These, among others, explain the gap that exists between the employer and the university graduate where the expectations of both parties are not met. Wang (2012) confirms that the skills that the labour market requires goes beyond what universities offer, as such universities need to keep abreast of the development in the market place and be flexible in their curriculum development activities. These skills pertaining to employability entail problem solving skills, self-confidence and team work, creative thinking and innovation (Wickramasinghe and Perera, 2010). Gragreen (2013) points to Dan Rosensweig, from the US who is of the view that higher education lags in response to technological innovation and advancement which has led to the disconnect between higher education and the industry.

WIL presents an opportunity for higher educational institutions to market their courses as vocational-oriented courses to appeal to the broader market (Abeysekera, 2006). Ayebofo (2012) outlines that there is a gap between accounting theory and accounting practice. He further points out that little effort is applied in teaching students the software needed for the practice of accounting. In addition, too much emphasis is placed on complicated theory which is hardly, if ever, used in practice. However, theory is important for students to make better informed decisions, thus a good balance between theory and application has to be achieved (Abadzi, 2016). Such skills would have to be instilled by the tertiary institutions. Lam and Ching (2007) suggest that tertiary institutions should hire faculty members with extensive industrial experience to run the internship programs so as to optimise the experience for both students and the employers. The programs should encourage constant feedback to students by employers. This could also be augmented by inviting guest lecturers from the industry regularly to share insights of what the industry expects from graduates. Additionally, tertiary institution mentors should have site visits which will allow the student, the mentor and employer to interact. There should also be clearly defined internship programs with clear objectives and tasks so that both employer and students have clear expectations.

According to Garraway et al. (2015), students are willing to do the jobs that are given to them although the workplace supervisors often report that the syllabus used by the university is outdated. This is evident in one of their findings wherein half of the workplace supervisors asserted that: “the curriculum that I was taught a few years ago is still being used in the university without any adjustments and I would love to see the curriculum get a total overhaul but whoever sets the curriculum must involve industry for the latest techniques and methods” (p.5).

Universities have begun to prioritise the above mentioned issues between the skills and competencies of graduates and the requirements of prospective employers growing

more divergent (Jackling and De Lange, 2009; Garraway et al., 2015). This is attributed to a collaborative effort of theory and practice. Hence the objective of this paper was to determine the students-employer perceptions on the benefits, preparedness and experiences of WIL in higher education. The research question therefore reads as follow; *what are the perceptions of students and employers on the benefits, preparedness and experiences of WIL in higher education?*

The rest of the paper is divided into the following aspects: literature review, followed by the design and methodology, results and discussion and finally conclusions are presented followed by recommendations and suggestions for further research.

2 Literature review

2.1 Expectation from employer

Expectations are necessarily part of every human life. Everyone has an expectation at the beginning of every activity, learning, or starting a new school. Nonetheless, employers have their own expectations from students upon entering the market. If students meet these expectations, the employer would be satisfied. Satisfaction according to Lam and Ching (2007) is the difference between perception and expectation before an internship. Friedman and Roodin (2013) have identified four main expectations of internships by both employers and students as follows;

- They serve as an evaluation tool for potential employees.
- Students are more likely to get employment.
- Career choice validation by students.
- Internships are also good in providing work experience.

Moreover, students' satisfaction on one hand is directly related to well-defined tasks, which are challenging coupled with regular feedback from their supervisors (Friedman and Rodin, 2013). On the other hand employers look for good communications skills, a strong work ethic, students who take the initiative and have good time management skills (Trier, 2003; Shaw, 2010). The expectations of the employer are qualities which include generic skills such as team work, critical thinking, and creative thinking and reflective during the course of their experiential training. Muhammad et al. (2009) assert that WIL assist interns to bridge a gap between theory and practice. However, most interns still struggle to acquire the expected soft skills such as communication, leadership, including intra-personal skills required by employers (Mai, 2012). Deficiencies in soft skills contribute significantly to the unemployment of many graduates (Ramli et al., 2013). Comparison to what the work environment modelled and the theoretical knowledge provided by university qualification, there is a need to develop a number of capabilities and knowledge know-how to guarantee life-long learning. It is also expected that the tertiary education should capacitate their students with high level of aptitude to carry out their job assignment (Almeida and Franco, 2011). Moreover, students are expected to possess interpersonal skills and leadership qualities before entering the job market (Ramli et al., 2013). Some are of the view that employers seek confident and critical thinking candidates (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011).

2.2 *Expectations from students*

According to Waryszak (1999) a cross-national study conducted in UK, Australia, and Netherlands, found that interns generally expect the workplace to be characterised by strong control from management, high commitment to the job by staff, a pleasant work environment, and little support from the supervisor. Again students expect to perform jobs/tasks relating to their field of specialisation (Zopiatis, 2007). Interns are also full of ambitions and hopes to enrich their work experience, develop technical skills, and create employability opportunities for themselves, although they have low to none expectation of benefits such as competitive training allowance and fringe benefits (Lam and Ching, 2007). In his findings Berta (2003) found that hospitality students had a high expectation for future career development in the industry. As a result, almost 85% of the participants continued to work on a part time basis while completing their graduate qualifications. In another study conducted in Hong Kong, results reveals that hospitality students had high expectation for promotion and personal growth before internship (Chan et al., 2002).

2.3 *Benefits of WIL*

Gibson et al. (2002) acknowledges the benefits of WIL for all stakeholders although concerned that they do not occur in every program. The outcomes of WIL must be clearly articulated and provide the opportunity to enrich participants with the learning in generic and discipline specific skills relevant to their professional field. The workplace has the potential to provide firsthand experience of the corporate world. WIL program allows industry partners to utilise the students and benefit at lower economical costs (Abeysekera, 2006). Moreover, industry partners stand a better chance to monitor student performance with a view to longer term employment, and training suited to the required organisational skills (Abeysekera, 2006), links with higher institutions of learning and workplace diversity among others remain significant and in favour of industry partners in this partnership (Braunstein and Loken, 2004). It is also important to note that WIL has proved to be economical (Paisey and Paisey, 2010), employers use students who are given a stipend to complete tasks that could be executed by permanent employees paid a competitive salary. However, employers seek graduates with good communication skills, teamwork and problem-solving skills, rather than subject specialisation (Toner, 2011), including confidence, leadership qualities, and capacity to innovate.

Students stand to gain tremendously from participation in WIL program. They finally get the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practice (Fraser and Deane, 2002), are exposed to the complex and challenging environment where they are able to exercise their thinking capability, develop communication and interpersonal skills, have a point of reference for future employment, and develop problem solving skills which have been found to be deficient in accounting students (Paisey and Paisey, 2010; Maelah et al., 2011). Work placement has been found to increase students' perceptions of the relevance of their academic studies to employment, leading to greater comprehension of the academic studies themselves (Skilbeck et al., 1994). According to Hatch (2011) one of the most important advantages is the chance to select and give the intern knowledge for the future. He further points that most of the companies using WIL as a way of recruiting plan a 'good' to 'excellent' arrival on investment. It is also noted that students who undertake a WIL experience are more likely to reflect positively on their university experience (Orrell, 2004). WIL provides students an opportunity to reflect on their long

term future and fit with the career (Maertz et al., 2014; Pool and Sewell, 2007; Richardson and Blakeney, 1998). However Paisey and Paisey (2010) suggest that, the above positive features must be viewed with caution due to findings that imply that placements can be overly specialised, insufficiently integrated with the academic years of degrees and worse be boring and repetitive (CNAA, 1985; DES, 1985 in Paisey and Paisey, 2010). Learners overly gain from internship if they are able to secure a job upon completion of their degree (Zopiatis, 2007). There is also evidence that graduates with internship experience tend to receive a job offer quicker than their peers who did not get the experiential training (Gault et al., 2010; Gupta et al., 2010; Knemeyer and Murphy, 2001), thereby easing the transition from higher education into the world of work (Paisey and Paisey, 2010). The benefits of work placement include enhancing skills such as communication and the use of information technology; problem solving and team working including enhancement of students' confidence (Cook et al., 2004).

According to Wolter and Schweri (2002), WIL has the potential to offer employers "financial benefits, increased staff morale, and acquisition of skills needed in the workplace." A key advantage of WIL for participants to create networks with industry partners that they would not easily cross path with in the medium to short term or even a life time. It is important to highlight that the above mentioned gains only arise when certain conditions are met to allow a conducive working environment that provides the much needed and applicable skills rather than turning students to tea ladies and files care takers. This is supported by Acemoglu and Pischke (1998) who postulate that WIL experience differs significantly from one organisation to another depending on the nature of environment and experiential learning offered.

2.4 Disadvantages of WIL

Moody (2012) questions whether experiential learning is too costly than classroom-based learning. One might think what costs are involved in embarking on an experiential learning experience of a student? The costs might not be directly attributed to the student's pocket but it can most certainly affect the employer and possibly the learning institution as well. As in this case the WIL students are granted space at the residences over the holidays by the university, which may affect an institutional budget negatively. Employers bear the cost of hosting the student for a specified period. Costs need not only be monetary; they can refer to lost man hours where a permanent employee of the employer was tasked to orientate the learner into the environment. These lost hours can be further escalated by employees having to baby-sit students located at their company for experiential learning. Although Moody (2012) based her findings on existing employees at companies, it could be looked at in the context of this subject of students at university using experiential-based learning.

Moody (2012) found that companies benefited more from experiential learning, improving employee's skills to improve efficiency, making better use of company time and resources. The cost of training might be potentially large depending on the company or department, but when compared to experiential learning to improve existing efficiency, the cost of hiring a pre trained or qualified person to slot right into the job and improve overall efficiency might be too costly. Experiential-based learning forms an attractive package that combines deep individual insights with the possibility of rational thought and reflection (Miettinen, 2000). Perhaps this could easily be seen as a

disadvantage, students reflecting on their career choice, wondering if they made the right decision after experiencing and living what they learn at university. A short stint in the 'field' might not be an accurate reflection of the overall real experience. Miettien (2000) further goes on to support the thought that experiential-based learning may well be too expensive. Lack of shared expectations between the students and employers regarding the internship (Maertz et al., 2014) including efficient managerial supervision (Cleary et al., 2013) in the workplace is also acknowledged. Moreover, lack of exposure to the relevant profession resulting from poor WIL design, meagre guidance and lack of communication is one of the major impediments of WIL (Jackson and Wilton, 2016). Perhaps institutions of learning should work closer with potential employers and draft set learning/experience curriculums that will minimise the disadvantage of high cost and student expectations led down and maximise the benefit of the experiential learning activity. Jackson (2017) further points to limited number of industry partners for WIL placements. This is in congruent with the challenges the school faces on a yearly basis where only a certain number of students secure placements for WIL due to limited number of industry partners for the university. A major setback resulting from this is that not all students get the opportunity to engage in this exercise.

3 Design and methodology

This section is built upon the literature review to help answer the research question in this study. The literature review as presented in the preceding section articulated some of the merits and demerits of WIL. The merits include amongst others, soft skills such as time management, communication, being able to work under pressure and function as a team. From the employers' perspective, WIL is viewed as a cost cutting tool whereby students are only granted a stipend and not a salary during their term of experiential learning. However, some disadvantages were also noted that some students end up doing unrelated work to their field of study which may be frustrating while employees may be left to babysit the students to get through the process and compromising their completion of tasks on time. Hence this paper seeks to answer the research question; *what are the perceptions of students and employers on the benefits, preparedness and experiences of WIL in higher education?* This research question helps investigate and understand the usefulness of WIL and its retention in the school of accounting as well as a broader higher institution of learning.

This particular research was regarded as descriptive research as the main intention was to describe *perceptions of students and employers on the benefits, preparedness and experiences of WIL in higher education* and also to come up with recommendations on whether to retain WIL or get rid of it in the school if need be. In this research, positivistic research paradigm was used as most of our data gleaned to mitigate the relevant research problem was generally quantitative in nature. This research was deemed as survey research which was defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2010) as research that involve acquiring information about a group of people with regards to their general perceptions, by means of questions that are structured in a standard 'questionnaire' layout. Questionnaires were used to obtain data, which took place in the form of mostly 'close-ended questions'. The questionnaire was divided into four sections for both the students and the employers namely:

- 1 perceptions about WIL
- 2 competence level at the beginning of WIL
- 3 level of exposure during WIL program and the last section
- 4 on demographics.

3.1 Sampling

Probability sampling was used, specifically that of simple random sampling in order to obtain data from 90 respondents. This sample included 45 School of Accounting students from a selected UOT who completed the WIL and the other 45 comprised employers who hired WIL students around Cape Town. The total companies that absorbed students around Cape Town were 77 in total accommodating about 113 students from this university. It should be noted that some companies absorbed more than one student in their organisations. This sample was obtained from WIL coordinator who has a list of students who were placed in these companies in 2014.

3.2 Validity and reliability

The Cronbach-alpha coefficient was used as a measure of internal construct of reliability and validity in this study. The Cronbach-alpha coefficient was tested on variables under three categories of the questionnaire namely perceptions, competence level at the beginning and exposure and obtained 0.903, 0.875 and 0.884 respectively. These were deemed highly reliable as any measure from 0.700 is considered to be acceptable (Jackson, 2009).

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Section A: competence level at the beginning of the WIL experience

Section A presents results and discussion on competence level of students at the beginning of WIL with responses from both the students and the employers.

These results looked at how both the students and employers perceived the students preparedness at the beginning of the students WIL experience. It was aimed at determining whether students coming from tertiary education commencing in-service training were prepared for the world of work.

4.1.1 Employers

Majority of employers felt that the students were equipped with the necessary skills needed for the operation of basic Microsoft Office programs. Furthermore, they agreed that students had the necessary competencies to handle internet operations. The syllabus taught at the selected UOT in the School of Accounting incorporates a compulsory end-user computing module which equips students with basic computer usage as well as an introduction to the Microsoft office program. The students are also exposed to Pastel application and System Application and Process (SAP) at foundational level prior to their

completion of diploma. Therefore, it is not surprising that employers felt that the students were adequately equipped in this regard.

Table 1 Competence level at the beginning

	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>					
	<i>Students</i>			<i>Employers</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Students were able to perform duties according to their job description	39	3.41	0.637	40	3.20	0.687
Students were competent at working with Microsoft Office programs	40	3.48	0.751	40	3.33	0.694
Students were competent with Internet operations	40	3.60	0.672	39	3.46	0.720
Students had good communication skills	40	3.55	0.639	40	3.28	0.679
Students were competent to work and handle different personalities	40	3.45	0.677	40	3.03	0.800
Students were competent at managing their work and time	40	3.40	0.632	40	2.95	0.815
Students were able to work under pressure	40	3.38	0.667	40	3.15	0.736
Students were competent at meeting deadlines	39	3.46	0.600	40	3.13	0.757
Students were able to apply classroom knowledge effectively	40	3.20	0.791	39	3.21	0.732
Students were competent at using pastel	40	3.05	0.932	38	3.03	0.854
Students were competent at using the SAP system	39	3.10	0.995	39	3.21	0.864
Students were competent at capturing accounting transactions	39	3.38	0.815	38	3.26	0.795
Students were well-equipped as a result of their education	40	3.40	0.709	40	3.30	0.791
Students were well-organised and are goal-driven	39	3.46	0.555	40	3.45	0.677
Students enjoyed working in teams and were helpful to others	40	3.55	0.639	40	3.43	0.747
Students were eager to learn new things	40	3.68	0.474	40	3.65	0.622
Valid N (listwise)	37			35		

4.1.2 *Students*

Most of the students indicated that the job description given to them assisted them in making the change from tertiary base learning to the world of work and also gave them the ability to connect with their employers at a professional level. Minority of

the students however disagree that the job description given to them was related to their career objective. Again results indicate that majority of students found WIL program helpful and given the students the opportunity to apply the work done in class room into the workplace. Although there was a degree of discontentment from a smaller percentage of the students regarding this view which may be a result of students who find themselves misplaced in terms of performing tasks that are irrelevant to their field of study. 89 percent the of students were able to work in teams and to handle different personalities and adapt to different employment situation with an exception of 11% that disagreed to working well with others in a team and being able to handle different personalities.

Figure 1 Students’ competence at managing their work and time (see online version for colours)

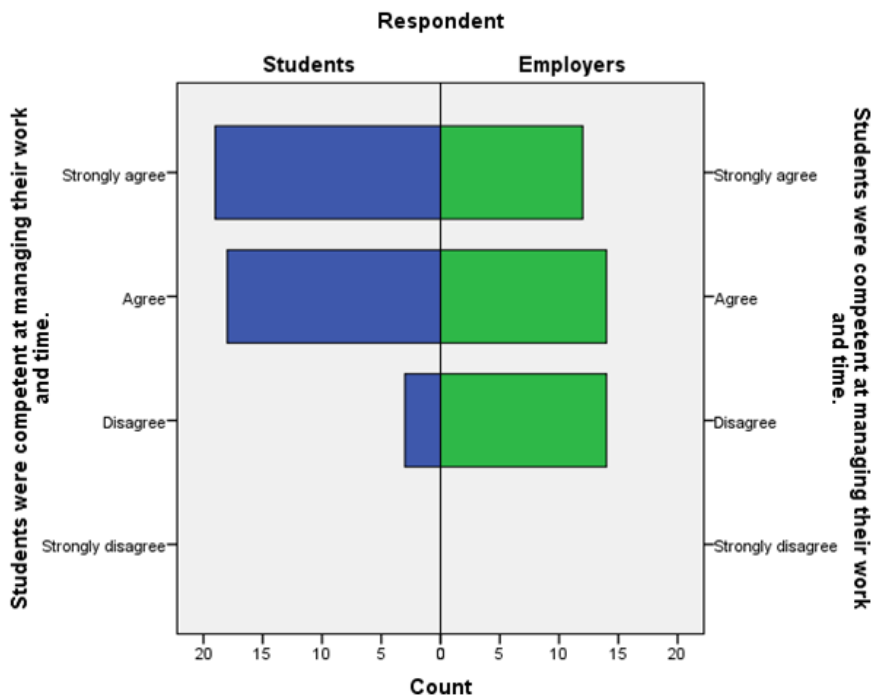


Table 2 Chi-square on student’s competence at managing time and work

<i>Chi-square tests</i>					
	<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymptotic significance (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact sig. (1-sided)</i>
Pearson chi-square	9.038	1	0.003		
Continuity correction	7.470	1	0.006		
Likelihood ratio	9.654	1	0.002		
Fisher’s exact test				0.005	0.003
Linear-by-linear association	8.925	1	0.003		
N of valid cases	80				

It is evident that both the students and the employers shared the same views about student's readiness at the beginning of WIL as the chi-square for both students and employers responses were not statistically significantly different with the exception of work and time (please refer to Figure 1 and Table 2). Although, employers found students unable to manage work and time on one hand, the students viewed this differently. Interestingly, Trier (2003) found that this is highly expected of students by employers.

4.2 Section B: the perceptions about WIL

This section presents results and discussion on the perception of students and employers about WIL.

Table 3 Perceptions about WIL

	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>					
	<i>Students</i>			<i>Employers</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
CO-OP is important to exposure of students to the industry	40	3.68	0.474	40	3.75	0.630
CO-OP is relevant to students career development	40	3.53	0.599	40	3.68	0.656
It is possible that CO-OP will increase students chance of getting a job	40	3.40	0.632	40	3.60	0.709
CO-OP is beneficiary to students financially	40	3.23	0.620	40	3.45	0.677
Students receive good training through CO-OP	40	3.35	0.700	40	3.40	0.632
CO-OP increased students understanding of classroom knowledge	40	3.33	0.829	40	3.40	0.810
Classroom knowledge is sufficient without CO-OP	40	2.73	1.012	40	2.90	1.128
It is important for institutions to expose their student to CO-OP	40	3.60	0.632	40	3.50	0.599
The CO-OP is well-managed/ well-administered by the institution	40	3.05	0.815	40	3.15	0.834
Valid N (listwise)	40			40		

Notes: CO-OP should be interchanged with WIL.

4.2.1 Employers

Majority (94%) of employer respondents agreed that WIL was important to the students in that it exposed them to the industry. It was previously noted that Friedman and Roodin (2013) identified four main expectations of internships by both employers and students. This high percentage coincides with student's beliefs that internships or WIL can serve as career choice validation. Exposure to WIL could encourage or even discourage the students in their chosen field. Again majority of the respondents agree that WIL increases

the students' chances of finding employment after university. Although the WIL program does not guarantee employment, the mere possibility that it could improve a student's chances is encouraging especially since the unemployment rate in South Africa averages at 25%. Of all the employers, 95% also agree that it is important that institutions of learning expose their students to WIL in its entirety, the perceptions of WIL by the employer are overwhelmingly positive and it can be suggested that this is as Friedman and Roodin (2013) suggest students are more likely to get employment and career choice validation.

4.2.2 Students

In the research conducted 92% of students who agreed that WIL is important for exposure to the work/industry world of their respective careers and no students felt that WIL is irrelevant to their exposure in the work world. These students supported the findings in Smith's study which indicates that students felt that WIL experience provides the opportunity to gain and apply knowledge, skills in an immediate and relevant setting (Khalil, 2015). 95% of students further agreed that WIL education helps with the development of their careers while 5% of the students disagreed. In 95% of the feedback received, it was found that students agree that having done WIL improved their skills and practical knowledge. This helps with basic experience and allows students to be ahead of students who come directly from the university, since the former students have already been in the working environment.

Results on perceptions indicated that both students and employers had similar views about the perception of WIL regarding career development, enhancing chances of employment and the need for institutions to expose students to WIL. These findings are in line with (Abeysekera, 2006; Zegwaard and McCurdy, 2014). Interestingly both the students-employer responses on class room sufficiency without WIL were relatively lower than other responses on all variables under the perceptions.

4.3 Section C: level of exposure during WIL

Table 4 Exposure during WIL

	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>					
	<i>Students</i>			<i>Employers</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Students level of Microsoft Office competence has improved	40	3.63	0.628	40	3.68	0.616
Students have gained more exposure of Internet operations	40	3.65	0.622	40	3.68	0.656
Students are more competent at managing their work	39	3.74	0.498	40	3.73	0.599
Students are now more flexible with their work than before	40	3.68	0.572	40	3.60	0.632
Students have gained more experience of communication skills	39	3.77	0.485	40	3.65	0.662
Students do understand the reporting structure in a work environment now	40	3.70	0.464	40	3.73	0.506

Table 4 Exposure during WIL (continued)

	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>					
	<i>Students</i>			<i>Employers</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Students understand the importance of time management better	40	3.75	0.494	40	3.60	0.672
Students understand the use of technological equipment better	40	3.63	0.540	40	3.50	0.716
Students are more emotionally stable at work than before	40	3.65	0.533	39	3.64	0.707
Valid N (listwise)	38			39		

4.3.1 Students

98% of the feedback indicated that students agreed that having done WIL, has helped many students with communication skills. Being part of a team meant that students needed to communicate and ask when not sure of how a process works, so when doing WIL students came to realise how important it is to talk and converse with others and learn from the rest of the team or surrounding. Majority of the students agreed that only after doing the WIL one realises how the working structure is within a finance or business environment. When working for medium or large companies one is able to see the complete structure of a business organisation. Understanding the business structure also allows students to grow and see where they fit in and gives the entire WIL students a drive to work toward the next stage.

Technology is one of the fastest growing aspects within the working industry and all you know there is always something new happening at all the time. The students that have been involved in WIL have the advantage over other students since they had the opportunity to experience the systems in a practical environment. Students indicated that this is useful to them since it helps them understand the importance of the technology trends which take place.

4.3.2 Employers

Majority of employers felt that the students were much more flexible and comfortable with their work than when they started. They also reported that students had grown in competency level at managing their work and time after the exposure. Apart from that they felt that students were emotionally stable than when they arrived.

The last category of variables demonstrate that exposure of students led to understanding of the importance of time management. The chi-square in Table 5 depicts the agreement from both the employers and the students on students' appreciation and understanding of time management after their experience with WIL. This is important to note as it emphasise the need for retaining WIL for School of Accounting students. This is key because employers did not coincide with the students on work and time management at the beginning although after the exposure the employer feels that students have improved, are more capable of managing their work and time, and appreciates the importance of time management better.

Figure 2 Students’ understanding of the importance of time management (see online version for colours)

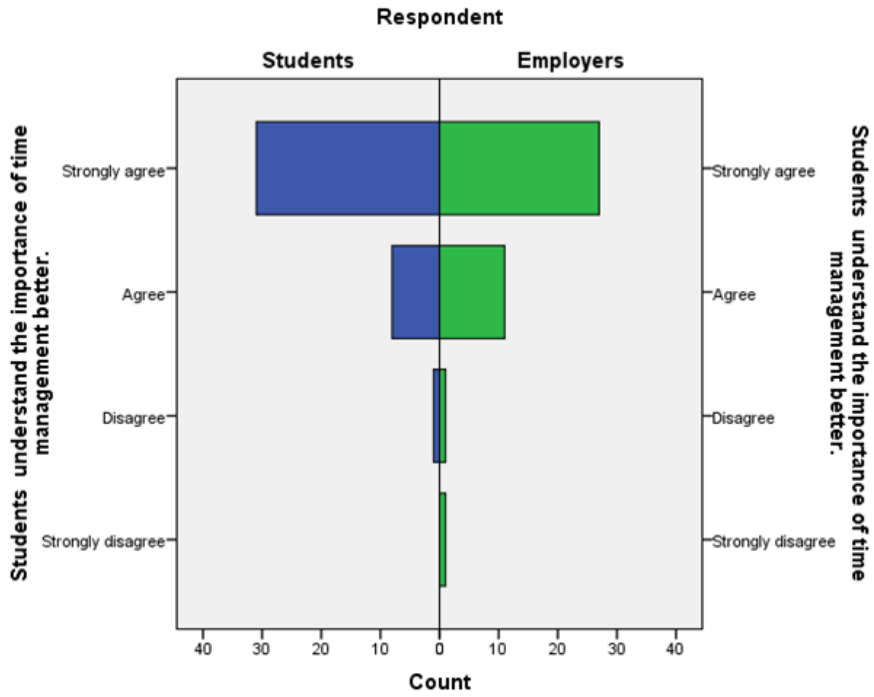


Table 5 Chi-square on students’ understanding of time management better after the exposure to WIL

<i>Chi-square tests</i>					
	<i>Value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Asymptotic significance (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact sig. (2-sided)</i>	<i>Exact sig. (1-sided)</i>
Pearson chi-square	0.346	1	0.556		
Continuity correction	0.000	1	1.000		
Likelihood ratio	0.353	1	0.553		
Fisher’s exact test				1.000	.500
Linear-by-linear association	0.342	1	0.559		
N of valid cases	80				

5 Conclusions

The objective of this study was to determine students and employers perceptions of the benefits, expectations and experience of experiential training between the students and the employers. In order to achieve these results, questionnaires were distributed to School of Accounting students in a selected UOT who have been exposed to work integrated programs as well as their employers. The findings of this research regarding the competence level at the beginning, perceptions and exposure to WIL between the

students and the employers reveal that indeed the WIL enhances experiential learning as well as employment outcomes for accounting graduates. The students who responded to the questionnaire survey were pleased with their WIL placements as the program gave them an opportunity to network and enhance their learning through hands-on experience. Furthermore, students recognised the value of WIL, resulting in greater student satisfaction with their education.

With the information gathered from the data analysis it can be concluded that in-service training highly benefit students. It is a well-known fact that students struggle to find employment after school. However the results indicate that 94% of the students strongly agree that work exposure programs increases their chances of employment. The congruence in perceptions is also indicative that students come to acquire relevant knowledge to a certain extent. The Major findings also shows that through the work integrated program, students were also able to build up their own inter-personal skills such as being better at communication (98%), being able to work under pressure and managing their work and time well. Basically students acquired skills that they were never going to be taught elsewhere other than in the work place. Thus showing that WIL is a vital tool for connecting classroom and industry by encouraging developmental learning for students towards their growth and career development.

6 Practical implications, limitations and suggestions for further research

WIL acts as a medium to bridge the expectation gap between theory and practice. The higher institutions of learning should strategise with the employers to identify relevant gaps which can be addressed in order to meet the expectations of the employer. The employers should give training to the staff that mentors students during experiential training in order to meet the expectations of the students, in terms of getting good experience so as to prepare students for the world of work. Also the students should be exposed to tasks which cultivate time management and meeting the deadlines of the employer. The employers should at least open the job opportunity for the students even after the WIL to decrease the unemployment of graduates. Besides, WIL should be compulsory and entrenched in the curricula for the program due to its importance for career development of the students. It is deemed essential for curriculum developers to allocate credits for WIL to enhance involvement and coerce every student to partake in this exercise. Also different forms of WIL should be imbedded in the curriculum including non- placement WIL such as on campus projects, industry mentoring, community service learning and virtual client as Jackson (2017) and Jackson and Collings (2018) purported.

The limitations of this study lies on the premise that the findings are only applicable to one school of Accounting in a UOT. The sample size is also limited to one group (the class of 2014). A time series analysis should be considered for future studies to establish trends on exposure and involvement on WIL by both the students and the employers. A comparative study between universities on WIL programmes should be considered.

A need for further research on strategic initiatives on how to attain an integrative model between higher institutions and the industry on the development of curriculum that meets the demands and expectations of the employers would be necessary in this field.

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Notes

- 1 Although previously known as cooperative education (CO-OP) within the target population for this paper, WIL is a much popular and recently used terminology. These two terms are also often used interchangeably. However, we chose WIL for the purpose of this study. Any reference to CO-OP, especially in the presentation of findings, should be interchanged accordingly.