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DOI: [https://dx.doi.  
org/10.18820/24150525/  
Comm.v26.10](https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150525/Comm.v26.10)

ISSN 2415-0525 (Online)  
*Communitas* 2021  
26: 167-178

Date submitted:  
28 January 2021

Date accepted:  
03 August 2021

Date published:  
31 December 2021

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# THE ROLE OF WORK- INTEGRATED LEARNING IN PREPARING JOURNALISM STUDENTS FOR THE WORKPLACE

## ABSTRACT

*Over a broad spectrum, South African employers complain about the workplace readiness of newly graduated tertiary students. It is against this background that this article explores the role of work-integrated learning (WIL) in preparing tertiary journalism students for a work environment. Over the years, internship programmes in academic journalism training have proved to be the most efficient way to prepare students for the workplace. At the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria, South Africa, a six month work-integrated learning module, in which the media and communication industry were directly involved, proved crucial for the success of the journalism training programmes and was widely accepted and welcomed by employers and industry mentors. This article investigates the importance of preparation for WIL in the field of journalism. It further examines how undergraduate journalism students perceive the WIL programme and how they work towards rendering themselves employable in the media industry. The findings indicate that a combination of theory and practical training is important in journalism education to produce graduates who are work ready.*

**Keywords:** work-integrated learning; journalism; students; media; academic WIL supervisors; industry WIL mentors; experiential learning; internship; workplace readiness; employability

## INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The work-integrated learning (WIL) experience provides a bridge for students between the academic present and a professional future. Students are given the opportunity to apply and merge the theoretical knowledge gained in their academic studies to “real world” workplace practical experiences. This article investigates how WIL prepares students for a career by providing an opportunity to develop relevant professional skills. A three-way partnership between the student, the workplace organisation, and the training

provider (a tertiary institution) requires all parties in the relationship to assume definite responsibilities, perform specific functions, and achieve benefits as a result of their involvement (Martin & Hughes 2009: 8).

Although the programmes might be similar, WIL is different from experiential learning, service learning, internships and other related programmes. WIL is a structured form of experiential learning in a learning programme focused on the application of theory in an authentic work-based environment. On the other hand, experiential learning is seen as a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Simply put, it means learning by doing. Service learning is applied learning directed at specific community needs and is integrated into the curriculum and learning programme (TUT 2013). Perhaps the most familiar form of experiential education is the internship (CHE 2011). This programme became popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Katula & Threnhauser 1999: 247). Today it thrives in colleges and universities, renamed as WIL.

WIL focuses primarily on enhancing students' learning, and to this end several curricular, pedagogical and assessment forms have been developed in response to concerns about graduation, employability and civic responsibility (CHE 2011). Examples of this include action learning, apprenticeships, cooperative education, experiential learning, practicums, problem-based learning, project-based learning, scenario learning, service learning, team-based learning, virtual learning, work-based learning, work placement and workplace learning. While there are relationships and connections between these theories of education, what is important is that these are separate terms with separate meanings.

The term WIL describes an approach to career-focused education that includes classroom-based and work-based forms of learning that are appropriate for the professional qualification. What separates WIL from the broad concept of learning-for-work is the emphasis on the integrative aspects of such learning. It can further be described as an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the benefit of students and workplaces (CHE 2011). The concept is growing in stature in the tertiary education sector (Billett 2009). It is not just work experience, although it can include such an element, but rather a much more structured consideration of the relational interdependence between the feature of the workplace and the engagement of workers (Billett 2009: 232). It places radical emphasis on the process of learning in a workplace environment. Students learn as much about themselves as they do about the media industry (Forde & Meadows 2010). As Billett (2009) explains, WIL offers an important opportunity to explore the kinds of knowledge and range of experiences required for students to apply effective practice in the work environment.

According to Northeastern University (in Katula & Threnhauser 1999: 240), WIL is a process and accomplishment that takes place beyond the traditional classroom and that enhances the personal and intellectual growth of the student. Such education can occur in a wide variety of settings, but usually takes on a "learning by doing" aspect that engages the student directly. It is not tied to a specific discipline but requires a student to integrate theory and real work experience. As Martin and Hughes (2009: 9)

state, students are expected to exercise their professional, ethical and technical skills judgement to the best of their ability.

Although some organisations will not be able to offer an extended work experience or a suitable workspace in which to carry out the student project, they may still be able to offer the student valuable opportunities. In such cases it is important that the student honestly assess his/her ability to work independently (without constant supervision), often away from the organisation. The Covid-19 pandemic offered ample examples of just such a situation in 2020.

Moreover, students must maintain high standards of professional behaviour during the placement. This includes meeting the ethical expectations of the employer. They must also be punctual regarding the daily routines of the workplace in which they are placed. They should not conduct themselves in a manner that prejudices the professional status or reputation of the employer, or disclose any confidential information or matter related to their work. These qualities result from good preparation by the training institution for WIL. It is important for journalism educators to take students' preparation seriously. The researchers are of the opinion that it can assist students to perform better during their WIL programme and ultimately render them more employable.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

This article explores the functionality of WIL and how the programme can render students employable. It investigates the importance of preparation for WIL in the field of journalism. The following objectives were identified:

- ◆ Examine the extent to which undergraduate journalism students perceive the WIL programme as important and how they work towards rendering themselves employable in the media industry;
- ◆ Expose students to the real world of the workplace while still studying and drawing their attention to what can be expected from them as interns or junior journalists;
- ◆ Raise awareness of some of the issues involved in the media industry; and
- ◆ Address the importance of partnerships in the field of journalism education.

## BACKGROUND

Coll *et al.* (in Martin & Hughes 2009: 19) state that a key purpose of WIL is the notion of providing graduates with the comprehensive skills desired by potential employers. WIL experiences within the curriculum have shown to support the development of behavioural competencies (Dressler & Keeling, in Martin & Hughes 2009: 19). This is crucial because it has been a challenge for tertiary institutions to provide students with behavioural skills. It is frequently reported that universities do not sufficiently emphasise the development of these skills to prepare graduates for professional life (Coll *et al.*, in Martin & Hughes 2009: 19). According to Bell *et al.* (in Martin & Hughes

2009: 9), a knowledge base alone does not guarantee a new graduate employment; in fact, the personal attributes and capabilities of a graduate are considered to have a greater influence on success in the workplace. Martin and Leberman (2005: 57-58) state that asking for help is a positive reaction, but becoming dependent on other people's instructions is not. It is important to remain proactive, not reactive, because employers value people who use their initiative to overcome problems and who think creatively to add value to the company. Students must learn to manage their time, plan, set goals and specific targets both personally and professionally, and take ownership of and responsibility for their WIL programme (Martin & Leberman 2005: 57-58).

In a world of constant change, career education cannot provide enough knowledge to suffice for a substantial portion of a lifelong career. As the largest university of technology (UoT) in South Africa, the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) constantly strives to become the specialist in just-in-time education, in other words providing a continuous upgrading of knowledge skills. This practical knowledge is provided in a variety of modules and variations in contact and distance learning programmes to undergraduate students when and where they need it. Such just-in-time education will in future become the trademark and strength of UoTs (TUT 2013).

Theoretically, both students and employers will know and be able to judge accurately the value of such programmes (Du Pré 2009). Working and living is becoming increasingly interwoven, and inseparable in character and content. In this new culture of learning, basic undergraduate degree training as it exists now will be replaced by instantaneous measures of knowledge and skills acquisition, and UoTs will have to provide leadership in this respect. Re-skilling, up-skilling and multi-skilling activities will have to be distributed creatively over the careers and lifetimes of students. In this process, new and interactive relationships (partnerships) will have to be forged with local and international employers and knowledge providers (Winchester-Seeto *et al.* 2010: 69).

UoTs should lead the revolution in the development and creation of a new generation of knowledge workers who are able to identify the needs and challenges of society, and the final solutions thereto. Undergraduate journalism students will have to take their WIL programme seriously if they are to make a difference in society and the media industry. Against this background, the findings of this article will help university supervisors and workplace supervisors in the media industry to maximise the WIL experience for journalism students.

It is the policy of TUT that cooperative education (WIL) must be integral and credit bearing to all academic programmes as part of its teaching and learning strategy. Cooperative education is considered the umbrella concept for the cooperation between the university, industry, commerce and the public sector to enhance experiential learning as part of WIL (TUT 2013).

Universities should clearly communicate to students what WIL is about and how it relates to the curriculum of the qualification and the day-one competencies expected from graduates in the workplace (DHET 2012). Meadows (1997: 93) states that journalism education has a key role to play in offering experiences and learning

situations, which go beyond the narrow realm of the reporter in a reconstructed newsroom. In short, journalism's educational links to the academy might be usefully reviewed and strengthened to ensure that students' experiences are not confined to a long string of journalism-specific subjects, which ironically serve primarily to narrow their knowledge base and their employability. Tertiary educators should ensure that graduates are prepared for the world in which they will live and work (CHE 2011: 1). Kolb (in Katula & Threnhauser 1999: 242) indicates that learning is a process where knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Wessels (2005: 3) agrees that students benefit most from this type of learning experience because it offers them the opportunity to relate theory to practice, to experience more relevance to their studies, and to become involved in a chosen career. It also enables students to earn while they learn. In return, the success of WIL depends on the motivation and overall excellence of the students and their mentors.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on the findings of a study that followed a qualitative and exploratory research approach. Data was gathered through conducting interviews with participants, first-hand experience, and a literature study. As such, data was analysed through transcripts. Data was collected using a smart phone to record interviews. After completion, data was analysed by means of transcription. Flick (in Pritchard 2010: 14) defines transcript as "the graphic representation of selected aspects of the behaviour of individuals engaged in a conversation". Provision was made to note anything of importance during the interviews, which may not have been recorded. Seal (in Pritchard 2010: 14) notes that transcripts allow for rich data collection inclusive of nonverbal aspects.

A comprehensive literature study was made of documentary evidence from existing research in a variety of academic publications. This includes Wessels' 2005 textbook, *Experiential learning*, and similar journals, including *A problem-based learning approach to journalism education* by Meadows (1997) and *Utilising cooperative education in journalism studies* by Thomas and Goc (2002). This information was used to understand the history of WIL in South Africa and in other parts of the world. Odendaal's (2018) paper "Cooperative education and work-integrated learning" provided more clarity on the theme. This helped to understand challenges facing the media industry with the placement of students. Own observations by one of the co-authors assisted in understanding the broader concept of WIL.

WIL supervisors from the TUT's Faculty of Humanities were interviewed, as well as academics from other institutions and supervisors in the media industry (both electronic and print media). Additionally, a group of students who were doing WIL and those who completed the programme were used for data gathering.

Focusing on non-probability, purposive sampling, Babbie (2007: 184) states that sometimes it is appropriate to select a sample based on the knowledge of a population, its elements, and the purpose of the study. As the people who receive the products, it was important to interview captains of industry to gain an understanding on how

they view the students who come from universities and enter the world of work. In this regard, 13 industry representatives were interviewed, as well as 14 WIL coordinators and heads of department in the Faculty of Humanities from the TUT. From the student population, 39 students were interviewed individually. This sample included students who are doing WIL and those who have completed such a programme.

## The views of the students

The student participants indicated that WIL gives them an advantage. Once they have gone through the academic programme, they are able to adapt easily to executing instructions in the workplace, which they did not necessarily come across in a classroom situation. They stated that the training taught them to adapt to the world of work and to work independently.

- ◆ Seventy percent of students see WIL as an opportunity to progress to the next level of their career. The success of the programme depends mainly on a student's commitment. Students said that the programme provides the opportunity for them to practice what they have learnt and to understand the media industry.
- ◆ Eighty-four percent of students interviewed identified WIL as practical work that one must fulfil to be awarded a qualification.
- ◆ WIL teaches students to keep to deadlines and check on the accuracy of their reporting. In many cases, it leads to behavioural changes in the time management and professional conduct of students.
- ◆ Students commented that the work environment differs from university. The workplace teaches them to deal with real life challenges and to make sound decisions quickly.
- ◆ Students pointed out some aspects were not taught to them at university. The most prominent aspect is reporting from hostile environments.
- ◆ When applying for a job, the students say it makes a significant difference if they send their CVs accompanied by a portfolio of evidence (practical work). Employers referred to these portfolios in their interviews.
- ◆ The experience of applying for an internship varies from one student to the other. Some students wait until they complete their second year of study to find placement, whilst others start approaching potential employers in the months building up to their WIL programme.
- ◆ On the one hand, some students apply at several media institutions; while others apply at just one or two media companies.
- ◆ There is no guarantee that a student will find placement. Those who put in extra effort are most likely to find placement. Finding placement without assistance is difficult for students. It is much easier for students to find placement when there is assistance from the respective departments at the tertiary institutions.

## The role of work-integrated learning in preparing journalism students

- ◆ The student participants acknowledged that it is important to accept work on a voluntary basis to hone their practical skills.
- ◆ In the group of 2017, students were interviewed to find out how many applied, searched and sent out their CVs to different media employers. Eighty percent of them applied during their second year whilst the other 20 applied in their third year. Of the 80 percent, only 25 percent applied in the first semester and the rest applied late in the second semester (Student 1 - 39 2018).

## The views of academic WIL supervisors

Academic WIL supervisors shared the view that WIL is an integral part of students' training and is at the centre of students' success. They say UoTs especially must pay special attention to preparing students for the world of work and developing their skills. TUT's journalism programme constitutes 30 credits for WIL in the curriculum. The academics interviewed see this is a clear indication of how important WIL is. They say it plays an important role in nurturing students' skills.

Universities are expected to take responsibility for placing students in the industry and supervisors have to keep close contact with possible employers to facilitate this. Academic WIL supervisors pointed out that the success of WIL is dependent on the commitment of the WIL supervisors. The major task of the academic WIL supervisor is to collaborate with the media industry and the mentors to monitor the progress of the interns.

TUT Journalism has a dedicated WIL supervisor who understands the needs of both the student and the employer. This approach goes a long way to assist students to find placement, and it impacts positively on throughput.

Academics suggest that for WIL to be successful, it is important that preparation begins in class. This kind of preparation must include non-technical and life skills like communication, discipline and assertiveness (Academic WIL Supervisor 1 - 14 2018).

## The views of industry WIL mentors

Mentors in the media industry demand that higher education institutions should provide a strong knowledge base to students. They require the students to enter the workplace ready for work. They suggest that theoretical knowledge does not necessarily guarantee a good product. Mentors say that most importantly WIL improves students' work readiness and the ability to convert theoretical knowledge into practical implementation.

There is a view that journalism diplomas provide students with the theoretical knowledge, but without the environment that enables the student to practice what they have learnt in class, they may not succeed in their craft. Some industry mentors stated that if the mentor does not take the programme seriously, the students might not succeed. Mentors say that if students are in an environment where they can practice, regardless of the institution they come from, they will get a sense of how the newsroom operates.

In terms of WIL, they expect interns to be multi-skilled in all media platforms. During training, there is trial and error that allows employers to guide students to be professionals, which gives students the opportunity to make mistakes without it damaging their confidence.

Mentors indicated that WIL helps them to spot the talents interns may have. For example, some interns will excel in soft news, while others will prefer hard news. Media industry mentors further state that academics need to reflect upon the direction the industry is going and shape the curriculum accordingly. It is also important for academic WIL supervisors to visit students in the workplace (WIL Mentor 1 - 13 2018).

## FINDINGS

Analysing the data as gleaned from the three groups (students, supervisors and mentors) and the literature study, the role played by WIL in preparing students for the work place included some fundamental questions:

- ◆ What is the role of WIL as a preparatory method for journalism students?
- ◆ Do students take WIL seriously?
- ◆ Are students from the University prepared adequately for the workplace?
- ◆ Is there a positive relationship between theory and practicals for WIL to be successful?
- ◆ To what extent does WIL influence the journalism curriculum?
- ◆ How difficult or easy is it to find placement?
- ◆ What is the importance of partnerships between industry and universities?

The findings collected from the responses include the following:

- ◆ WIL is an integral part of journalism studies, especially for undergraduate students;
- ◆ Learning by doing was found to be a cornerstone of students' success;
- ◆ Preparation for WIL needs to begin in the lecture hall before students enter the workplace;
- ◆ A combination of theory and practical training is important in journalism education to produce graduates who are work ready;
- ◆ Media industry mentors must work closely with universities for students to do well, as the industry stands to benefit, whilst universities increase their throughput;
- ◆ The industry and universities have to understand the importance of partnerships;

- ◆ Academics need to visit students regularly in their workplace, while keeping abreast of changes in the media environment;
- ◆ Students need to have a good understanding of what WIL entails and how they can best render themselves employable.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Having identified some of the challenges facing students in their search for WIL opportunities, the article makes recommendations that could support students, academic WIL supervisors, and media industry mentors to make WIL succeed.

### Find your area of interest in media

Students should establish their area of interest, where they want to specialise in, as soon as possible and work towards achieving that goal. They need to know what the employer expects from them. They should pay special attention to practical work, which would enhance their CVs when it is time to apply for WIL. Students must always ask for assistance and support from their institutions.

### Feedback on practical work

Students must request feedback from both lecturers and mentors without feeling intimidated about what kind of advice they might receive. They need to be open-minded in order to be successful. Where there is reflection, there is growth. It is also important for students to monitor new trends in the media. The media industry is competitive and constantly requires new skills. It is important for students to be multi-skilled in the era of digital media.

### Do voluntary work for campus-based media platforms

Students must be proactive and do volunteer work while on campus in order to gather as much hands-on experience as possible. In the case of TUT Journalism, students do practical work with local campus community radio stations TUT FM and Tshwane FM. They also cover stories in and around the community of Soshanguve that are published in *Rekord Noweto* through a partnership with Caxton Newspapers. Students do not necessarily have to wait for when they are ready to do their practical training to start doing some practical work. During university recess, they might also find placement with a media house in their hometown to do more practical work.

### Visit mainstream media companies

Where possible, students must job shadow senior journalists even if it is just for a weekend. This forms part of students' training. To a certain extent, students get a feel of how the workplace operates, and gradually learn. Every experience is worthwhile. This could also give a student an advantage by the time they leave campus to start their WIL programme.

## Keep up with what is happening in industry

The success of every university and its departments is in its throughput rate. It is important for universities to produce students who are ready for work.

WIL supervisors must monitor new industry developments to keep students relevant and up to date. It is important for WIL supervisors to keep good relations with the industry in which they operate. They further have to understand the students' needs, and guide and assist them.

Media organisations operate differently. It is important for students to understand the existing differences between all forms of media before they apply for placement. Understanding the different ways of operation can also be advantageous for the student. WIL supervisors in the newsroom are busy and have limited time because of their deadline-driven work. It is better when a student "hits the ground running" without constantly relying on the guidance of the supervisor.

## Keep students informed

Mentors must listen to students' concerns and attempt to understand what is affecting their performance. Special sessions on WIL where the supervisor shares information or get industry experts to address students on various issues on the subject will be beneficial. Colleagues from Cooperative Education at the university, media industry mentors, and former students of the department, who are able to speak at a WIL seminar, is strongly recommended. Alumni can share their experiences, whilst media industry mentors can share advice on what employers need or expect from trainees.

## Collaborate with the university

Media industry mentors must work closely with universities. In the end, they are both looking for good products. If students do well, industry and universities stand to benefit. They must request guidance from the university WIL supervisor on techniques to create a reflective environment for the student. They also need to provide feedback on a regular basis to both the student and WIL supervisor. If there is a problem with a student he/she is mentoring, a WIL supervisor can assist to avoid possible conflict. Moreover, a formal memorandum of understanding (MoU) and evaluation documents are crucial to the success of WIL.

## CONCLUSION

WIL is an integral part of journalism education and there could hardly be a better starting point for aspiring journalists. Partnerships between universities and the industry, and the commitment of all parties in the training process remain the key to the success of WIL.

The history of WIL shows that it has been around for many years, although it may have been called by different names in the past. As Du Plessis (2015) suggests, "... the impact of the changing nature of work and the capacity of educational institutions to prepare their students for this changing environment has been of concern to many

governments. What is expected of students during these WIL experiences is that they gain new knowledge, understanding and capabilities, and that they master skills considered essential to particular workplace practices”.

The constant changes in the media landscape will force mentors and academics to plan the WIL road ahead with care. Students who participated in this study suggested that the practical work they do at the university is good. It helps them to prepare for the work they want to do in future; for example, how to compile stories for radio and television, and how to write for print and online publications. In this regard, WIL proves to be an integral part of journalism training.

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