

MANAGING WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING STRENGTHS, OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS IN THE EMERGING SOUTH AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

It is critical for the current rapidly changing education, government and business environments that training providers provide practical application to enhance theoretical learning in education, training and development programs. There is a need for effective and efficient work integrated learning (WIL) project leaders who aim to develop future-fit graduate or employee skills and competencies. Empirical research was conducted to identify, confirm and present the strengths, opportunities and risks (weaknesses and threats) in WIL projects in the emerging South African context. The qualitative research method entailed a classical two round Delphi technique and inductive content analysis. The key findings reveal that WIL project strengths include gaining a competitive advantage, forging industry partnerships and creating employment opportunities. Key weaknesses include the lack of a WIL project strategy, having limited skills and a lack of marketing competencies. Key opportunities include enhancing a diverse range of skills, creating new markets and further study with WIL. A key threat is the changing landscape. The theoretical contribution of this study is that it adds to the body of knowledge on WIL projects in South Africa, Africa and other developing economies. The research contribution is the use of the Delphi technique to gain validated consensus on WIL project management criteria. The practical contribution lies in the WIL SWOT matrix that can be utilized by WIL project leaders, managers and administrators to effectively and efficiently evaluate their WIL and other education, training and development projects.

KEYWORDS: work integrated learning (WIL); WIL project; South Africa; SWOT; manage.

INTRODUCTION

Business, government, economies and societies benefit from the effective and efficient leadership, management and administration of projects; especially education, training, development and work integrated learning (WIL) projects. Increased productivity results from effective and efficient recruitment of skilled graduates, increasing organizational performance, resulting in increased benefits for all. Thus organizations gain a competitive advantage over competitors by identifying and managing the strengths, opportunities and risks in their WIL projects, providing them with growth opportunities for interaction in the local, national and international marketplace (du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2014). Measuring and managing the return on investment of learning and development projects by identifying the strengths, opportunities and risks of these projects lead to effective project management and the effective recruitment, engagement and retention of talent within organizations (Buckley, 2016).

Due to the globalization of markets, talented people are mobile and attracted to organizations that provide talent development via workplace learning and WIL projects. All countries require training providers, leaders, managers and administrators to ensure that WIL projects link theory to practice, build skills and competencies, and increase employability and performance of graduates and employees for workplace excellence (Reinhard, Pogrzeba, Townsend & Pop, 2016).

Literature trends reveal that there is a gap in knowledge with limited empirical research studies on how WIL projects are managed (Chong, 2014; Jacobs & Dzansi, 2015), both in the workplace and by education and training providers,

especially in developing or emerging economies (Khampirat & McRae, 2017). South Africa (SA) is an emerging economy that thrives on job creation, employability and entrepreneurship opportunities, largely due to its high unemployment rate, especially amongst graduating youth. The research question for this study focused on the criteria and factors WIL project leaders and managers employ to manage and evaluate WIL projects. The research purpose was to identify, confirm and present the common strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) of WIL projects in the emerging South African context. For the purpose of this paper, risks will be presented as the weaknesses and threats.

This study contributes to theory, research and practice. On a theoretical level, the contribution of this study lies in the additional body of knowledge on the SWOT of WIL projects in SA. The empirical evidence on WIL project management in South Africa contributes to new knowledge creation for Africa and other developing economies. On a research level, the study contributes in the use of the qualitative classical Delphi technique to gain consensus on WIL project management SWOT criteria. On a practical level, the WIL SWOT matrix resulting from this study is a project management tool that WIL project leaders, managers and administrators will find useful to effectively and efficiently evaluate their WIL and other education, training and development projects.

This paper presents the introduction, recent literature trends on WIL project management, the research method employed to conduct this study, the significant findings of the study, a discussion of the findings, the implications and applications of the findings, and the conclusion with recommendations for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current trends in the literature are presented under these subheadings: WIL in South Africa; WIL project management in emerging countries; and analyzing the SWOT of WIL projects.

WIL in South Africa

Work integrated learning or WIL in South Africa does not differ much from the international or global definition (Reinhard *et al.*, 2016). WIL is described as the workplace practice that accompanies theoretical or classroom learning. Service learning, work-based learning, cooperative learning, learnerships and internships are related concepts to WIL but differ with regard to the duration and specific period in which the working experience is implemented. For higher education students in SA, the Higher Education Act governs WIL. WIL is recommended for implementation in all modules of learning in all qualifications; however, not all university curricula have a WIL component (Coetzer & Sitlington, 2014; Jacobs & Dzansi, 2015).

The aim of WIL in South African universities is to provide students with workplace experiential learning so that graduates entering the world of work are recruited as high quality talent who have a balance of theoretical and practical knowledge (Taylor & Govender, 2017). Multiple stakeholders are involved in projects and curricula that provide WIL experience. Key stakeholders include the students, educator, employer and government (Wait & Govender, 2016). While the student takes responsibility for placement, experiential learning and WIL assessments; educators are responsible for integrating WIL into the curricula and inviting industry and other stakeholders to the WIL project. Employers or organisations enter into agreements with students as providers of the WIL experience while gaining the opportunity to observe potential future talent (du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2014; Wilson & Pretorius, 2017).

The responsibility of government in the WIL project is often unclear, especially as the policy advocator in the form of learning, development and training opportunities for youth, graduates and employees (Amadi-Echendu, Phillips, Chodokufa & Visser, 2016). A variety of partnerships can be forged with government, especially if funding and other resources are required for the WIL project. Educator partnerships with business and industry are often more successful than partnerships with government due to the many risks associated with state protocol, poor leadership, administrative delays and financial mismanagement (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Rajwee & Naidoo, 2015).

WIL project management in emerging countries

WIL projects across most developed countries of the globe provide quality workplace learning programs to meet economy, educator, government and business strategies. WIL projects in emerging economies aim to do the same yet face various risks and challenges (Turcotte, Nichols & Philipps, 2016). While educators and business partners in

developing country WIL projects seem more committed to exploring experiential learning opportunities, students and government seem reluctant. National quality assurance bodies need to demonstrate that resources being spent on WIL projects; yet there is little evidence that those resources are utilized effectively for achieving institutional, employer and student goals (Khampirat & McRae, 2017).

Ideally WIL projects in emerging countries should be regulated by quality standards and policy frameworks for implementation, assessment and outcomes management (Clark, 2014). WIL project management is concerned with student readiness for the workplace, educator-industry partnerships, quality of placement, student and manager perceptions and WIL assessment (Reinhard *et al.*, 2016). There is limited evidence of the management of quality standards, strategy, policy, procedures, monitoring, measurement, evaluations and reviewing of the effectiveness WIL models and projects (Khampirat & McRae, 2017). Developing global standards, policy frameworks and quality integrated WIL models will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of WIL projects, especially in emerging economies and developing countries.

WIL in some BRICS and other developing economies are geared to co-create social and economic justice by providing for informal and formal apprenticeships (Liebenberg, 2015); provide lifelong learning skills and competencies (Duke, 2015); and encourage organisational knowledge management via establishing communities of practice (Buckley, 2016). Emerging market WIL projects seem to be designed to create future-fit, employable graduates ready for the knowledge economy. Job and employment creation is the top priority of countries such as South Africa; hence WIL partnership models are popular as it encourages and cements relationships with business and government (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Maharaj & Mason, 2016).

Analyzing the SWOT of WIL projects

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis is a common tool used in the world of work and business. It is used mostly to evaluate the impact of project inputs, processes, people, cost, time, outputs and outcomes, especially in terms of maximising strengths and future opportunities and managing risks. SWOT analysis is also effectively used in evaluation research to undertake these goals: gather and analyse stakeholder contributions; understand the leadership and management perceptions; and to draw operational conclusions from projects and programs (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Romero-Gutierrez, Jimenez-Liso & Martinez-Chio, 2016; Wait & Govender, 2015; Taylor & Govender, 2017).

The use of the SWOT analysis to evaluate WIL projects or educational programs is however very limited (Clark, 2014). Romero-Gutierrez *et al.* (2016) used the SWOT analysis to evaluate a postgraduate master's degree in environmental education through student perceptions. The study made use of an online SWOT open-ended questionnaire and obtained 44 student feedback reports. Data was subjected to content analysis and the researchers concluded that the use of the SWOT analysis with a Likert rating scale clearly identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of this educational program.

Jain and Pant (2010) used a SWOT analysis to evaluate the environmental management system of the TERI University in New Delhi. The SWOT analysis identified the major environmental concerns of the university in order to develop an environmental policy and plan. In 2000, a SWOT was used to evaluate Asian education. The published general guidelines led to a SWOT matrix for their educational sector. This matrix identified 12 strengths, 13 weaknesses, 10 opportunities and 9 threats (Lee, Lo, Leung & Sai On Ko, 2000; Lee & Sai On Ko, 2000). This SWOT matrix was adapted and used for the purpose of conducting the current empirical research conducted in South Africa.

Parrage, Conzales-Cancelas & Soler-Flores (2014) provides guidelines on the use of the SWOT analyses as a WIL evaluation strategy as follows: consolidate the strengths of those factors that enhance the WIL project reputation, outputs and economic contribution to country and continent; minimize the weaknesses of those factors that cause an unfavourable position for the project and include resources, skills and activities that do not develop students positively; maximize the opportunities of those factors that are positive, favourable and exploitable allowing for a competitive advantage; and reduce the threats of those risk factors of the project that work against ultimate successful performance of the project.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research method section of this paper presents the research design, participants and sample, instruments and procedure, analysis and ethical considerations.

Research design

The research design employed a multi-phased qualitative approach to gain consensus on WIL project evaluation criteria. The Delphi technique and inductive content analysis formed the basis of the design. This research study is embedded in the constructivist paradigm. The ontology is that reality is the lived truth. The epistemology is that knowledge is co-created by researchers and research participants who are specialists, professionals and practitioners of WIL in SA. The axiology is based on the fact that the values and judgements of participants become the accepted truth.

Research participants and sample

The research population consisted of the WIL Project Leaders of the 23 public higher education institutions or universities in SA. A purposively selected sample population of 5 universities with a targeted 40 WIL project leaders, managers and administrators as specialists in the field formed the sample population. Only 12 participant responses were included in the final analysis yielding a response rate of 30%. This is considered to be an effective, acceptable, reliable and valid sample size for this research design (Lee & Sai On Ko, 2000).

Research instrument and procedure

The classical Delphi technique (Coetzer & Sitlington, 2014; Abery, Drummond & Bevan, 2015; Field, Yates, Koppi, McBratney & Jarrett, 2017) was employed with a two round circulation to allow for data saturation. Criteria for WIL project management was extracted from the literature in the categories of WIL project strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (Lee, Lo, Leung & Sai On Ko, 2000; Lee & Sai On Ko, 2000).

Participants were requested to use a 7-point Likert agreement scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the SWOT criteria that they would use when undertaking a strategic SWOT analysis or evaluation of their WIL projects.

Research analysis

The analysis involved collating the results and compiling the criteria for the SWOT analysis from the averages of each of the SWOT matrix criteria. The principle for inclusion or exclusion for the SWOT matrix was based on the 7-point Likert scale. All criteria between 4.5 and 7 were included and deemed as agreed to by all participants for inclusion in the SWOT matrix. With 4 being the midpoint or neutral point, all criteria with 4 or nearest to 4 were deemed to be neutral, namely ratings of 3.5 to 4.4; and hence included in the second round of Delphi, yet excluded from the final SWOT matrix. All criteria between 1 and 3.4 were deemed as disagreed with by the panel and hence excluded.

The initial SWOT matrix consisted of 20 strengths, 13 weaknesses, 9 opportunities and 8 threats. Inductive analysis of the weighting allocated to the rating scale allowed for the averages of the matrix to be calculated. The final WIL project SWOT matrix consisted of the following criteria: 15 strengths, 11 weaknesses, 8 opportunities and 4 threats. For the purpose of this paper, these criteria were synthesized into these key SWOT factors: 3 strengths, 3 weaknesses, 3 opportunities and 1 threat.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was secured for the research study from the institution of the researchers. The research participants were invited to participate and they provided consent for their participation in this study. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Participant responses were allocated unique numbers to ensure that their identities were protected. The data gathered was used for research and development purposes only.

FINDINGS

The research findings are presented under these subheadings: strength factors of WIL projects; weakness factors of WIL projects; opportunity factors of WIL projects; and threat factor of WIL projects.

Strength Factors of WIL projects

After analysis, three key strength factors of the WIL projects in SA were extracted from 15 strength criteria as follows: having a competitive advantage (7), establishing collaborative partnerships (6) and promoting employment skills (2). The competitive advantage factor was derived from seven criteria. The collaborative partnerships factor was derived from six criteria. The employment creation factor was derived from two criteria. Table 1 presents the three strength factors with a description of their criteria.

Table 1: WIL Strength Factors and Criteria

Strength	Total Criteria	Description
1. Competitive advantage	7	Advantage over other local HEIs; less competitive pressure; good operational strategy; policy & strategy; WIL Project Leader; innovative WIL project; financial resources.
2. Collaborative partnerships	6	Industry partnerships; preferred WIL partners; recognition for other HEIs; community partners; government grants; sponsored resources.
3. Employment creation	2	Sustainable WIL project; sustainable employment.

Weakness Factors of WIL projects

The analysis found three key weakness factors for WIL projects in SA as extracted from 11 weakness criteria as follows: lack of WIL project strategy, limited skills and average marketing ability. The lack of strategy factor was derived from five criteria. The limited skills factor was derived from two criteria. The average marketing factor was derived from four criteria. Table 2 presents the three weakness factors with a description of their criteria.

Table 2: WIL Weakness Factors and Criteria

Weakness	Total Criteria	Description
1. Strategy	5	Lack a good strategy; internal operating challenges; immobility of WIL project; industry-HEI misalignment; limited research & development.
2. Limited skills	2	Build limited student skills; Inexperienced WIL Project Leader.
3. Average marketing ability	4	Limited marketing & exposure; employment competitiveness; recurrent need for resources; weak image.

Opportunity Factors of WIL projects

The analysis revealed three key opportunity factors for WIL projects in SA as extracted from eight opportunity criteria as follows: providing diverse skills, options of new markets and further study and WIL. The diverse skills factor was derived from four criteria. The new markets factor was derived from three criteria. The further study and WIL factor was derived from one criterion. Table 3 presents the three opportunity factors with a description of their criteria.

Table 3: WIL Opportunity Factors and Criteria

Opportunities	Total Criteria	Description
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1. Diverse skills	4	Students gain diverse skills; global skills; WIL project is trans & multidisciplinary; aligned to emerging trends.
2. New markets	3	Emerging markets in Africa & BRICS; transfer WIL project to other HEIs; aligned to national & international imperatives.
3. Further WIL and study	1	Ability for further WIL & future study.

Threat Factor of WIL projects

After analysis, only one key threat factor emerged for the evaluation of WIL projects in SA as extracted from four threat criteria as follows: changing landscape. The changing landscape factor was derived from four related criteria. Table 4 presents the threat factor with a description of its criteria.

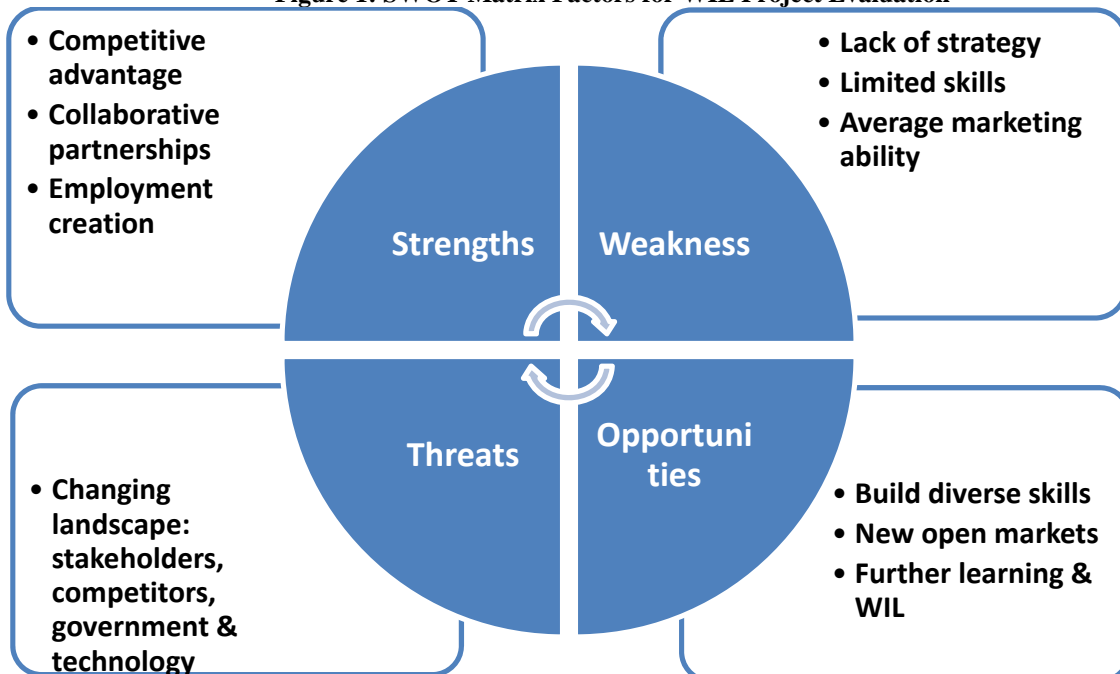
Table 4: WIL Threat Factor and Criteria

Threat	Total Criteria	Description
1. Changing landscape	4	Changing stakeholder needs; new competitors; adverse government policies; advancing technology.

DISCUSSION

This empirical study aimed to identify and present the WIL SWOT matrix derived for the evaluation of South African WIL projects. The aim was achieved successfully using the qualitative Delphi and inductive content analysis instruments. The findings are significant for universities, training providers, business, government, other partners, as well as for South Africa, Africa, BRICS countries and globalization. Figure 1 presents the overview of the WIL SWOT matrix with the key factors.

Figure 1: SWOT Matrix Factors for WIL Project Evaluation



(Source: Authors)

The first key strength factor indicates that WIL projects should aim to gain a competitive advantage over other similar institutional WIL by empowering students with employability skills using an operationally sound WIL project guided by legislation and policy. Furthermore, having a reputable WIL project leader with innovative abilities and adequate financial and other resources allows the WIL project to gain a competitive advantage. This strength factor is a significant finding for the country, especially for comparisons with WIL projects in other emerging countries and economies. The second key strength factor identified collaborative partnerships with industry, other universities, local community and government as significant for shared resources, especially financial resources. The third key strength factor identified employment skills as significant to the sustainability and success of the WIL project, especially with regard to students gaining employment readily due to the project.

The first key weakness factor, the lack of a WIL strategy, is significant. This finding reveals that WIL projects fail due to not having a clear strategic direction, experiencing operational problems, inflexible WIL project, misaligned to partnership strategies, and a lack of WIL project research and development. The second significant key weakness factor is that the WIL project provides a limited range of primary and secondary skills to students and the WIL project leader has a limited range of skills. This factor can and should be managed with the assistance of the collaborative partners. The third weakness factor of average marketing ability is highly significant to increasing partnerships, competitive advantage and employability. Without a good, loud public image, the WIL project does not gain credibility, competitiveness or resources, especially financial investments.

The first key opportunity factor is that WIL projects can provide a range of diverse skills to students for discipline specific, communication, management and other skills sets. Students with a diverse set of skills can compete in other emerging countries, BRICS economies and the global marketplace. Hence, the second key opportunity factor is that new markets emerge for South African graduates to enter both locally and internationally due to the WIL project. WIL projects are ideally placed to provide employment and further study options, including further WIL experiences; hence the third opportunity factor of further learning is significant for the emerging country, continent and world.

There is only key threat factor, changing landscape, identified for SA WIL projects; yet it is highly significant finding. A changing landscape is a norm in developing countries such as South Africa, especially with regard to changing stakeholder needs, new competitors, adverse government policies and changing technology. In SA, this finding alerts WIL managers to the threat of unintended and unforeseen changes due to external factors and partners. This finding is definitely common to all BRICS and other developing countries and probably also common to the changing global environment.

Although significant findings emerged from this empirical research, this study also faced a few limitations. Only a small sample of the SA public higher education institutions was used; hence generalizability is compromised. The participant sample does not include all industry sectors and affects inference of these WIL SWOT factors and criteria onto all sectors of the economy. There was limited empirical research knowledge on the use of the Delphi technique to analyze the WIL SWOT criteria which could have comprised the analysis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERIAL APPLICATION

The findings of this study have positive implications for application, especially for the leaders, managers and administrators of WIL projects in SA, BRICS and other emerging economies and developing countries. The WIL SWOT factors and criteria in the form of the WIL SWOT matrix enable WIL projects to be evaluated and improved quickly and easily. On evaluation, WIL project managers can maximize their strengths and opportunities, and minimize their weaknesses and threats.

The implications of this research study and its findings for SA, Africa and BRICS countries are that it presents credible evidence of WIL project strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats similar to those of other developing countries. SA may not be at the forefront of WIL provision; yet there is evidence that WIL projects are evaluated with the will to improve them.

The implications for global WIL projects and policy are that the WIL SWOT matrix may provide a useful tool for WIL evaluation policy as well become a tool for comparisons between countries. Furthermore, other countries may become informed of what to expect when engaging in WIL projects in the SA environment.

CONCLUSION

This paper presented the empirical research conducted to validate WIL SWOT criteria to evaluate and improve WIL projects in South Africa. In order to extract the key WIL SWOT factors and provide a WIL SWOT matrix for SA, adapted international WIL project criteria were subjected to a Delphi consensus with local participants. The findings indicate that there are three key SWOT factors for WIL project strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, with only one significant threat factor. All factors are consistent with a developing country context where the landscape changes rapidly, new markets are available, competition is high, employment is a priority, partnerships are collaborative, and diverse skills are an advantage.

This paper also presents the significance of these findings to South Africa, Africa, BRICS countries and the global marketplace. If WIL projects are of high quality where the strengths and opportunities are maximized and the risks (weakness and threats) are managed and minimized, they can attract global markets and organizations as WIL partners, providing international employment for talented, future-fit graduates.

The recommendation is for further research to be conducted to empirically validate the WIL SWOT matrix and its factors with selected participants of this study, by using it to evaluate selected WIL projects. Further research on whether the matrix, factors and criteria are aligned to other sectors in the developing SA, BRICS and other emerging economies are recommended. It is only when WIL projects are evaluated, improved and enhanced to engage students and other stakeholders that it becomes instrumental as an effective and efficient change agent tool towards individual, business, government and socioeconomic upliftment.

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