

Humanities graduates experiences of participating in work-integrated learning at the University of Johannesburg

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This study presents the findings of postgraduates' experiences of participating in work-integrated learning (WIL) at the University of Johannesburg. A qualitative research approach was used because it focuses on how people make sense of experiences to comprehend individual social realities. Sociology graduates who participated in 120-hour internships were more likely to face unemployment after graduation than social work graduates who engaged in internships spanning 900 to 1200 hours. Results suggest that while WIL can enhance career readiness, prolonged, immersive experiences optimize employment outcomes. This study provides unique insight into the complexities of the implementation of WIL in the fields of humanities and social sciences which are not traditional areas of focus for WIL in South Africa. Given the high levels of unemployment in South Africa, WIL holds out the promise that by gaining exposure to the world of work young people may improve their employment prospects.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning (WIL), universities, humanities, inclusion, internships, sociology

THE CONTEXT OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA

While there are many interpretations of work-integrated learning (WIL) two major conceptions of WIL have emerged in South Africa, both of which are contested in various ways. In the first conception WIL primarily serves the purpose of providing work experience to young people as obligatory requirements of their studies. In some fields and professions, students must complete a work-based learning component to complete their studies (or be eligible for graduation). The Department of Higher Education and Training (2014) argued that "universities should seek to build strong partnerships with employers in order to promote the expansion of workplace training opportunities, especially in those areas where qualifications or professional registration depends on practical workplace experience" (p. 41).

The second conception of WIL sees it as part of a broader strategy to alleviate youth unemployment and as a vehicle to bring more young people into employment. In South Africa youth aged 15-24 years, and 25-34 years continue to have the highest unemployment rates at 59.7% and 40.7% respectively (Stats SA, 2024). In this conception WIL mainly serves the purpose of addressing youth unemployment but also provides workplace exposure to young people who otherwise would struggle to enter the world of work.

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) defines WIL "as an umbrella term to describe curricular, pedagogic and assessment practices, across a range of academic disciplines that integrate formal learning and workplace concerns" (CHE, 2011, p. 4). The emphasis on hands-on experiences in WIL reflects a commitment to producing graduates who are not only academically proficient but also well-prepared for the challenges and demands of the labor market. WIL was introduced to address concerns about graduates lacking employability skills and civic responsibility. "Internships are a significant component of WIL, which aim to provide graduates with increased knowledge and preparedness for the labour market" (Bilsland et al., 2014, p. 144).

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Structure of the Work-Integrated Learning Program

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) sociology honours internship program includes a 120-hour practical experience designed to provide students with on-the-job training, professional networking, and insight into sociological practice (Department of Sociology, 2022). Key elements include supervision from a university staff member (university-qualified with two years of experience), structured growth activities like attending meetings and team-building exercises, and adherence to ethical standards. Students are responsible for securing internships, submitting required reports, and completing evaluations from supervisors. Training must align with educational standards, and flexibility is offered to complete the hours part-time or full-time during the program (Department of Sociology, 2022). The social work internship includes key elements aimed at integrating theory with practice. Students complete internships across the second, third, and fourth years of the Bachelor of Social Work program, focusing on micro, meso, and macro practice levels (Department of Social Work and Community Development, 2021). Social work internships combine academic theory with practical application. Students work with real clients under supervision, progressively building skills each year. By their fourth year, they acquire advanced knowledge in social policy, research, and management. These internships emphasize ethical decision-making, cultural sensitivity, and critical thinking, integrating classroom learning with real-world challenges (Department of Social Work and Community Development, 2021).

UJ manages its WIL program across eight faculties and one College of Business and Economics (Division for Academic Planning, Quality Promotion and Academic Staff Development, 2020). The program offers a range of learning experiences designed to connect theory with real-world practice. One key aspect is simulated learning which takes place in controlled environments where students can hone their practical skills before stepping into the actual workplace (Navarro-Parra & Chiappe, 2023). There is also work-directed theoretical learning that bridges the gap between what students learn in the classroom and the challenges they will face in their careers (Regent Business School, 2024). This helps them see how academic concepts apply in real situations. Finally, the program includes workplace-based learning, which mirrors traditional approaches like internships and cooperative education (Lange, 2024). This hands-on experience allows students to gain invaluable insights and skills that prepare them for the future. According to Govender and Wait (2017), WIL helps students prepare for the evolving labor market in South Africa. It allows them to develop personal attributes that are essential for coping with workplace changes while enhancing employment prospects and career strategies. Through WIL, students also gain insight into workplace culture and learn to meet professional expectations, easing their transition from academia to the labor market. While there are clear benefits to WIL, the concerns around exploitative labor practices and the perpetuation of social inequalities cannot be ignored (Skujina & Loots, 2020). Short WIL programs can enhance workplace exposure and experience, but they can also exacerbate inequalities, particularly for students from lower incomes who find it even more challenging to manage unpaid or low-paid internships (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022). This study suggests that the time spent on WIL is a crucial determinant of successful transitions into the labor market. While shorter WIL programs may offer some benefits, the study proves that more prolonged and immersive experiences are necessary to optimize employment outcomes.

Against this background the study was guided by the following research question and objectives:

What are the experiences of University of Johannesburg (UJ) Humanities graduates on participating in WIL programs?

The focus of the study is based on four interlocking objectives:

1. To understand UJ Humanities graduates' reasons for participating in WIL.
2. To explore the experiences of the graduates in interacting with prospective employers on WIL programs.
3. To identify the strategies UJ Humanities graduates use to secure permanent employment post their WIL placements.
4. To gain insight into how WIL programs improve students' prospects of finding employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review aims to examine previous studies on WIL. The concept of WIL and history of WIL in South Africa is also explained in this chapter. It will discuss the reasons why graduates participate in WIL. Furthermore, the chapter will examine student experiences in WIL, highlighting the good and negative elements of WIL engagement. This section will go into the many notions of employability.

The Graduate Career Paradox

The career progression paradox of graduates refers to the situation where young graduates are unable to secure jobs because they lack experience, yet they cannot acquire that experience without sourcing workplace opportunities being hired. O'Mahony and Bechky (2006, p. 918) define the career progression paradox as "the problem of finding a job without prior experience." They argue that contract workers face this paradox more frequently than permanent workers because they must constantly look for jobs in a competitive and uncertain market. Graduates experience the career paradox when they try to find employment to gain skills and find out that employers seek workers with prior experience. The depth of the WIL literature and recent advances in scholarly thinking of WIL practice have allowed for further development of WIL. There are, however, challenges that need additional work. The highly individualized student experiences in work placement models of WIL continue to present challenges to good assessment practice, however, much progress has been made on how to successfully manage most of these challenges (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023, p. 9).

The Intern Economy

The intern economy is defined as "the joint demand for and supply of internship positions" (Skujiņa & Loots, 2020, p. 346). On the demand side, employers require interns because they provide new ideas, and internships are a way to recruit new employees. On the supply side, students seek internships to gain experience and get academic credit when partaking in an internship that is mandatory. According to Frenette (2013) two types of intern economies exist. One is formalized (paid internship), which is often supervised by professional bodies, and one is for fields with less structure, usually unpaid internships with less oversight from professional bodies, for example, sociology, art, social work, history, and writing. These unpaid internships are often seen as necessary to gain experience in the field and broaden networks. However, they have also been criticized for excluding those who cannot afford to work for free and perpetuating inequality (Mackaway & Chalkley, 2022, p. 228).

Companies hire students or recent graduates to work for little or no pay under the guise of gaining valuable connections in their desired field. Gollmitzer (2021, p. 2158) refers to this as "internship labor". The author explains that the prevalence of internship labor reflects the broader shift towards neoliberalism, prioritizing profit over worker protections and perpetuating a cycle of income inequality

and precarity. Mirchandani and Bhutani (2023, p. 89) share the same view that although internships help students gain work experience, they also lead “to a deepening of class disparities.” This system conditions young workers to accept insecure and precarious positions as the norm, instilling a fear of economic insecurity and promoting a culture of competition and individualism (Allais & Nathan, 2014; Gollmitzer, 2021; Mirchandani & Bhutani, 2023; Reilly, 2015). In this way, internship labor serves as a way for businesses to reap the benefits of a neoliberal economy while simultaneously reinforcing the same economic system that creates the need for such exploitative labor practices.

Work-Integrated Learning as Precarious Labor

The issue of interns as precarious laborers has been debated for some time. Precarious work is

employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker. This type of work is characterized by a lack of job security, limited access to benefits, and low wages. Precarious work can include part-time or temporary positions, freelance or contract work, and jobs in the gig economy. (Styhre, 2017, p. 20).

Many companies and organizations offer internships to provide experience and training to young professionals. However, these organizations often view internships as part of the student’s education rather than work. These internships are unpaid because they are viewed as part of the student’s curriculum. Discenna (2016), Jacobson and Shade (2018) and Skujiņa and Loots (2020) argue that such internships can be exploitative, leaving interns without adequate compensation or job security. Occasionally, interns may be asked to work long hours or perform tasks generally assigned to paid employees. They may also be paid little or no wages, making supporting themselves financially tricky. These conditions can leave interns feeling undervalued or even trapped in their positions. Overall, the issue of interns as precarious laborers is complex and multifaceted. While internships can be valuable opportunities for young professionals, they can also be exploitative and leave interns vulnerable to economic hardship.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study used qualitative methods. Ethical clearance was provided by the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee at UJ prior to data collection (REC-01-192-2021). The current study presents findings from semi-structured interviews with UJ Humanities graduates (Table 1) who have participated in WIL programs. These were postgraduates who studied social work or sociology. The study was conducted at the University of Johannesburg (Auckland Park Kingsway Campus) in the Gauteng province. The data was collected from the 9th of March 2022 until the 1st of April 2022. The sample consisted of 10 Humanities graduates: four females and six males between the ages of 21-30.

TABLE 1: List of participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Qualification	Duration of internship	Employment status
Mbali	Female	25	Honours in Industrial Sociology	9 months	Unemployed
Tom	Male	26	Honours in Social Work	4 years ²	Unemployed
Thabo	Male	25	Honours in Social Work	4 years	Employed (Social Worker)
Sipho	Male	27	Honours in Social Work	4 years	Employed (Social Worker)
Bongani	Male	24	Honours in Industrial Sociology	120 hours	Employed (Did not disclose role)
Nhlanhla	Male	30	Honours in Industrial Sociology	120 hours	Unemployed
Lerato	Female	23	Honours in Industrial Sociology	120 hours	Employed (Did not disclose role)
Palesa	Female	23	Honours in Industrial Sociology	120 hours	Unemployed
Kelly	Female	27	Honours in Industrial Sociology	120 hours	Unemployed
Tshepo	Male	29	Honours in Industrial Sociology	10 months	Employed (tutor)

Participants were recruited for the study using the snowballing sampling technique. Referrals were sought from close associates in the Department of Sociology and the Department of Social Work who met the specified criteria ensuring a diverse and relevant participant pool. Participants were requested to act as social contacts to introduce us to their former classmates. Getting referrals was easy; however, setting interview appointments was quite challenging. The employed participants' availability primarily in the evening resulted in overlapping time slots, necessitating negotiations for suitable interview times. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interviews were conducted telephonically to prevent the participants and the interviewer's potential spreading of COVID-19. Technology played a crucial role in conducting the research during the times of Covid -19 lockdowns in South Africa where there were restricted movements of people. Interviews were conducted online and recorded electronically. While technology enhanced and allowed interviews to be conducted it is also coupled with the risk of interruptions due to the venues used by participants during the interview process. Newman et al., (2021, p.5) emphasizes the importance of planning for unexpected interruptions during virtual interview:

Researchers should anticipate interruptions, such as a family member walking in during an interview. This could entail developing an agreement with the participant in advance about an

² Internships in Social Work are structured over a four-year cycle of the degree programme. They are structured in the following way. First year- one week internship; second year- one hundred hours spread over seven months; third year- one hundred hours spread over seven months; and lastly on the fourth year – the internship is a year long.

exit plan, such as whether to terminate, change the subject, or continue with the research. In considering potential risks, online platforms also have the potential to provide a false sense of privacy and security to participants, and to researchers, who might otherwise be more mindful in face-to-face settings.

Prior to the interviews, participants gave permission to record the interviews. The first part of the interview consisted of biographical questions about the participant's family history and age and preliminary questions about their educational background. This approach aimed to establish rapport and easing interviewees into the conversation. The second section of the interview guide contained questions about the research topic, such as why they chose to participate in WIL. To protect the identities of the participants, they were given pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and a three-step process of coding was followed of open, axial and selective coding. Open coding involves the researcher assigning initial codes in a first attempt to condense the data into categories. Axial coding is a second pass through the data whereby the focus is on the initial codes rather than the data. Selective coding involves scanning all the data and previous codes; major themes are then generated with this phase of the coding process (Neuman, 2006). The idea of the coding strategy was to reduce large data into a manageable size which follows on the themes generated through the interviews.

This study utilized reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis helped the researchers identify, analyze and report patterns within the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The researchers read and re-read the transcripts so that they may be immersed in the data (Ayton, 2023). As a result, after transcribing the interviews, the responses were studied carefully, seeking common themes, metaphors and parallels, similarities, and distinctions in how humanities graduates describe their participation in WIL. This method is known as coding. According to Bryman (2004), coding helps to connect disparate pieces of information that belong to the same category. The data was split into three categories throughout the coding process: similarities, contrasts, and analogies. After a few rounds of coding, the codes were collated and the relevant data was extracted (Ayton, 2023). This process resulted in the generation of eight themes which are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Themes emerging from the research interviews.

Theme	Brief Explanation
Graduate reasons for participating in WIL	Most students participate in WIL at UJ because it is mandatory. Both Social Work and Sociology graduates knew they needed to participate in WIL to get credits.
Accessibility	Participants in this study stated they had the option of searching for their placements. The institution provides students with a list of companies to choose from. However, students are also given the option of looking for internship programs.
Graduate expectations of participating in WIL	Not only do students believe they have improved their employability by participating in WIL, but they also believe that they have developed a greater awareness of the expectations that come with their chosen careers.
Graduate experiences of interacting with employers	The participants mentioned different kinds of learning components. Some had to do the induction online due to COVID-19, and some were offered face-to-face induction and training. The results indicate that the induction and training take approximately three days at the WIL program sites.
Strategies to secure employment	It is said that graduates have high expectations after participating in WIL programs. This may be because studies on WIL often indicate that employers use WIL to screen potential employees, even though the findings indicate the opposite.
How WIL improves students' job prospects	WIL enhances the social and professional abilities of students. It aids students in establishing professional relationships.
Transition from HEIs to the labor market	Most participants in this study emphasised that WIL gave them a glimpse of their future careers. Study participants hold the view that the WIL programs provided challenging situations that workers face daily.
Participant recommendations to improve WIL	WIL program to be extended by increasing the hours. Minimal time on WIL impacts graduates as new entrants in the labor market as employers want a year's experience.

Furthermore, the transcript data were arranged into subject-specific tables. Unique or generic themes, for example, were assigned to columns. This also helped to manage and handle the data more effectively, minimizing unnecessary information during the data analysis. The following results section presents findings from the data collected. It presents the perspectives of UJ Humanities graduates' experiences of participating in WIL. It provides the opinions of Humanities graduates regarding the perceived value of their WIL experience. In addition, it provides insight into whether WIL programs lead to employment.

Our positionality was shaped by the framing of the study, data collection and analysis by the first author. The research is drawn from an MA research project in the Sociology Department at the University of Johannesburg. As a UJ Humanities graduate who has participated in WIL the main researcher was an “insider” because she had personal knowledge of the group of most of the participants. The prevailing assumption is that this intimate knowledge provided insights that an outsider would find difficult or impossible. Also, being familiar with the participants and the surroundings helped researchers gain the trust of the participants. Being the same age as some participants and being graduates of the same university made participants feel comfortable talking during the interviews.

Research fields should be conceptualized as fluid not static, complemented by notions of assumed researcher insider/outsider status always being in flux. This approach also offers a way of understanding how and why the interactions with different participants take place as they do. (Kerr & Sturm, 2019, p. 1145)

RESULTS

Graduate Reasons for Participating in Work-Integrated Learning

Many students justify their participation in WIL by stating that it is necessary to acquire a qualification. For instance, students studying Social Work and Sociology are required to complete an internship as part of their studies to gain practical experience and improve their chances of finding employment after graduation. WIL is a mandatory course requirement for both Sociology Honours and Social Work graduates; however, the duration of participation in WIL programs varies. Mandatory WIL programs are usually for credits. Students cannot graduate without completing certain hours. In the case of Sociology students, 120 hours must be completed at the postgraduate level, and 900 to 1,200 hours of WIL for Social Work students at UJ. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) such as UJ implemented mandatory WIL into their curriculum to prepare students for the labor market before they graduate. Most participants reported that their WIL experience enabled them to gain valuable work experience in their field of study. For instance, Bongani shared:

Because I was looking for something which was closely related to my degree to the knowledge that I have so I could have a chance to have some practical work rather than theoretical knowledge in my field. Therefore, those are the reasons I participated in the internship and of course another one, it was part of the requirements of the degree.

Mandatory WIL is not something the research participants planned to participate in; some were surprised they were required to participate in WIL to obtain their qualifications. The responses from the research participants indicate they had limited information about the WIL programs. According to Hora et al. (2022) while internships may be a vehicle for the transformation of a person from a student to a budding professional, they may also serve to reproduce inequality by making these experiences inaccessible to thousands of students who lack sufficient financial or social capital to locate and pursue these opportunities. It was indicated during the interviews by mostly Sociology graduates that they found out about WIL at honors level. For instance, Mbali explained how she learnt about WIL:

Uhm, I had heard about it like in passing because when you're about to finish your degree, you hear about these things because you are preparing to find a job. So, how I heard...fortunately or unfortunately I don't know but fortunately with me it was a minimum requirement with the Department of Sociology for you to complete your honors degree you needed to finish WIL.

Gaining access to these WIL programs was somewhat easy for these graduates because UJ had connections to specific organizations willing to host interns. However, there were issues with finding placements aligned with the graduates' career interests, especially for graduates who wanted experience in companies that specialize in their career interests. Although UJ gave graduates a list of companies to choose from, these graduates had to research and network to find suitable placements, which could be time-consuming and challenging. Some graduates also faced challenges securing placements due to high competition among applicants. Additionally, some companies had limited resources or were not interested in taking interns, which further limited the options for interns.

In this context, it is vital to note that graduates were encouraged to conduct research before participating in WIL. Conducting their research helped students identify the best organization they want to work with, which will provide them with relevant skills related to their degree. According to Hurst et al. (2023, pp. 62–63) interns are likely to have a rewarding WIL experience when their career interests and skills match the job description. However, the results suggest that some students settled for any organization to complete the required hours to attain their degree. In doing so, these students may not have learnt the necessary skills which can defeat the purpose of WIL.

Work-Integrated Learning Effectiveness

Graduates were asked about their experiences in participating in WIL. Responses shed light on the effectiveness of WIL in improving graduates' work readiness, job performance, and overall career outcomes. Several studies (Govender & Taylor, 2015; Mutereko & Wedekind, 2016) have examined the efficacy of WIL programs, with most suggesting positive outcomes for graduates who engaged in these programs. However, the results of the study indicated that WIL effectiveness on employability outcomes depends on the time spent on WIL. Other factors that can influence the efficacy of WIL programs include program design, student engagement and employer involvement. Lerato shared her experience during the induction and training, which lasted for about two to three days:

From the induction perspective I met with my supervisor in the internship program virtually of course, and she just outlined the things that she had kind of set outside for me to do and take on those roles. She then also took me through I would say day to day things that I would be taking care of and just how I would be assisting as an intern. Those were just part of the induction portion. In terms of training, between my internship supervisor as well as another employee for the Centre for Social Change, they actively trained me for a lot of the tasks that I was doing when it came to research.

According to Dwesini (2017) on the first day of business, host employers are required to induct WIL learners to help them become acquainted with the new surroundings. Moreover, interns learn more about their role within the organization during the induction. The research participants' response indicates that training was provided to help the student learn more about their role as an intern. However, some interns did not receive any training. For instance, Nhlanhla shared:

There is no training really there's this internship because we gave you an honors bursary that of which you have to work for eight hours but in that internship, but in that internship, you get valuable work experience in a sense of "we prepare you for the work environment" so it will prepare you for the work environment.

From the responses of the research participants, it seems that the internships are not structured in the same way. This means that because some students receive training and some do not, the students do

not have access to the same level of skills development. Additionally, some students may be given responsibilities and tasks that challenge their abilities, while others may be relegated to menial tasks.

Due to their temporary status and position within companies, interns are frequently allocated low-level tasks throughout their internships. This misalignment between their theoretical learning and nature of intern work might lead interns into feeling like they are overqualified for their assigned tasks. Inequality in internship experiences can also lead to disparities in the quality of education and preparation for future careers. (Rose, 2023, p. 439)

Work Experience Gained Through Work-Integrated Learning

Research has emphasized gaining work experience as one of the benefits of participating in WIL. Aprile and Knight (2020) states that placements provide authentic opportunities for learning practical skills and building professional understanding that are vital for effective preparedness for professional work. What is questionable, however, is the reliance on these forms of WIL learning for producing professional readiness. For a well-rounded preparation, opportunities to deconstruct and critique these experiences and use existing knowledge to build new problem-solving strategies for professional work must follow this type of experience. “Alternatively, other forms of non-placement WIL such as problem-solving projects that connect theoretical knowledge to practice must be provided for students to learn the important professional skills of decision-making, critical reflection and problem-solving” (Aprile & Knight, 2020, p. 880). Research participants in this study stated that they gained valuable work experience at their WIL placements. Tom expressed gaining valuable experience:

Yeah, I would say so but still you know after your course you go to work. Let’s say you go to work so maybe do you see how independent you are when you’ve got people who are working so I think that you can see yourself their cause if you’re doing an internship by just learning. So, in terms of competency, you can see that you are committed enough when you are in a real working environment but internship wise practically, we could cope with everything the way doing the first day is a challenge but with time, you learn how they do things. What I saw when I was doing my internship, I can tell that your experience is there, but you need to make sure that you learn as much as you can.

Some participants have reported that they did not gain sufficient work experience due to the duration of their WIL program. Specifically, these responses came from Sociology graduates who had completed WIL for only 120 hours. As a result, they did not perceive WIL to be as valuable as Social Work graduates did. For instance, Kelly shared:

I cannot necessarily say valuable it was just some experience, I cannot really say valuable maybe if it was for like a longer period of time maybe I would’ve gained like more experience but it wasn’t really something that needed too much work it was almost like easy stuff you know sometimes yes there was some difficulties but it wasn’t something that you could say oh okay I actually didn’t know how to start this and now I’ve managed to gain this experience, it was just some experience it wasn’t really valuable, valuable.

The reported dissatisfaction contrasts with the positive perception of WIL reported by most Social Work graduates who found the experience more valuable. The positive perceptions of some participants highlight the potential impact of program variations. As argued by Rowe et al., (2022) employability is not the only ultimate outcome of WIL. WIL is also a key pedagogical strategy for

achieving a range of other learning outcomes that incorporate intellectual, social, and personal development along with responsible citizenship.

Compensation

No research participants received financial compensation at their WIL placements. Interns tend to accept unpaid internships because they view them as investments in their future professional networks, skill sets, and personal brands (Gollmitzer, 2021). Sipho explained that they did not receive any financial compensation because their internship was a course requirement.

No, we were not getting paid as interns on undergraduate and postgraduate because it's a course requirement, so we are not supposed to get paid simply because we are going there to render the services, report back and then they give us marks based on the work that we have done.

Some research participants reported having financial issues because they had to pay for transportation. Thabo expressed: "The first two years I had to pay myself then on my 3rd year I had a bursary so I could say the bursary could help here and there but it wasn't enough." Palesa also expressed: "No, it was unpaid I used my own transport."

This response highlights the inequity of unpaid internships, as they often require individuals to have the financial means to cover their living expenses, which may not be accessible to everyone. Moreover, the lack of compensation reinforces existing barriers to entry for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not have the financial privilege to take on unpaid work. Research participants believe that the experience and connections they gain through their internship will be beneficial in securing future job opportunities. Additionally, some interns accepted unpaid internships simply because they did not have other options and needed to gain experience to be competitive in the labor market. Students experience numerous pressures because of participating in WIL placement. These pressures stem from the fact that WIL programs are time-consuming and unpaid, the additional expenditure associated with the placement, and the financial issues.

A concerning number of WIL participants stated that they do not purchase necessities, such as food, because they do not have enough money. Also, in South Africa bursaries fund most students; some must pay student loans and tuition and support their families from the bursaries. As a result, unpaid WIL programs in developing countries such as South Africa may further exacerbate poverty levels. Although, the South African government has prioritized skills development and education to solve unemployment and poverty, unpaid internships make the government's efforts to alleviate poverty negligible. (Grant-Smith et al., 2017, p. 19)

Career Progression of Interns

The research participants reported going the extra mile to secure permanent positions at their WIL placements. However, none were offered employment. This finding suggests that WIL placements alone may not guarantee full-time employment, and other factors may be at play when securing permanent positions. When asked about strategies that graduates have used to secure employment at their WIL placements, Sipho shared:

And then where I was doing my fourth year internship, I tried to say "okay I am done now registered as a social worker here is my CV And everything and I am available" and they understand that and then they were honest with me to say "yes you have done a great job end everything however please know that there were students before you and a lot of you guys were

doing exceptionally well so when there is a vacant post for a social worker we usually go back to those that we have started with then we moved to the other ones and stuff and so forth and so forth...”

Thabo also shared: “...these organizations they have a way of hiding obviously as a student you must get a qualification first before you ask for a job and also, they have their own systems of employing or recruiting people.”

These statements from Sipho and Thabo raise the question of whether interns are not being offered permanent positions due to limited job opportunities or if all the interns are given the same excuse. Most were given the same excuse when applying for permanent positions. From the research participants' responses, it seems that the interns already knew that their role as contract workers would not be anything either than that.

DISCUSSION

The issue of unpaid internships raises concerns about the exploitation of young workers. While internships can offer valuable learning opportunities and hands-on experience, the lack of compensation can contribute to the precarity of interns. Frenette (2013) uses the term provisional labor to refer to interns improving their employability while providing cheap labor. The intern's uncertain role benefits host organizations since it permits individuals with varying levels of dedication, excitement, and aptitude to execute professional duties. The problem with WIL programs is that they give companies cheap, temporary workers or a leeway to hire employees without taking risks. In general, this makes work more precarious. For organisations that offer unpaid internships, they hold the assumption that they compensate interns through work experience (Hurst et al., 2023). Several studies show that unpaid internships have little impact on future employment chances, implying that unpaid WIL programs may not be as vital to career preparation as thought in previous years (Discenna, 2016; Frenette, 2013; Gollmitzer, 2021).

Unpaid internships contribute towards a precarious labor market where employers exploit students' labor while avoiding legal responsibilities and compliance with labor standards. Interns accept low pay or no pay to gain the necessary work experience required by employers, referred to as “discounting.” (O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006, p. 931)

Interns may also accept low or no pay because they have limited bargaining power. They may not have the skills or experience required for higher-paying jobs, or they may be facing competition from other similarly skilled workers, therefore, they may have to accept whatever pay is being offered to them to secure work.

In South Africa there is a long history of exploitation within the labor market from the era of Colonization to Segregation and through to the Apartheid period. One scholar defined apartheid as

an attempt of the capitalist class to meet the expanding demand for cheap African labour in the era of industrial manufacturing capital; at the same time, it is the realization of the demand of White workers for protection against the resulting increased competition from Black workers. (Wolpe, 1972, p. 427)

This history has created a deal of skepticism about unpaid work, even that which is for internships or for learnerships, the connotation of labor that is not paid for brings back the memory of the history of racialized oppression.

One of the dangers of unpaid internships is that it plays into tensions that arise when employers hire young interns to replace older workers without having to remunerate them at the same rate. This does not deal entirely with the overall unemployment situation in society as it merely displaces one category of workers with another one. In conditions of high levels of unemployment as we see in South Africa, programs such as WIL provide hope to young people to at least feel they have a foot in the door of potential employers. Learnership programs are one of the programs established by the Skills Development Act, Act No. 97 of 1998 to address skills shortages, work-based learning and unemployment. The learnership program is characterized by both theoretical and practical on the on-the-job-training leading to a recognized national occupational qualification (Davies & Farquharson, 2004; Kruss et al., 2012). The other areas of contestation are that the well-intentioned programs such as WIL, learnerships, vocational courses and internships have tended to postpone the youth unemployment crisis rather than provide a long-term solution. Some scholars have argued that these programs have tended to 'warehouse' the youth by keeping them in perpetual training without providing sustainable solutions to the crisis (Hamilton & Baatjies, 2012).

Employer engagement is one of the key issues that emerged from the study. University degrees, strong interpersonal skills, and relevant work experience are highly sought after by today's employers. Skills that used to be expected of professionals with seven to 10 years of experience are now expected of entry-level candidates. According to several studies, Bowen (2016), Govender and Wait (2017), and Baert et al. (2021), WIL gives students a chance to get practical experience and make connections in their field. In characterizing the kind of engagement required by employers, Jackson et al. (2017) recommend that the role of mentoring and supervising work placement students has the potential to enhance resumes and improve future job and promotion opportunities of host organisation employees as it demonstrates an ability to lead others. Developing awareness among human resource and senior management staff on the benefits of developing junior and middle management in mentoring roles, with the intention of relieving time-poor senior management, is important for potential and active host organisations. In addition, the benefits of using new graduates as friends for peer mentoring purposes should be promoted by host organisations.

In this study, it was found that research participants accepted their unpaid internships because it was a requirement, meaning they had no option to negotiate their compensation. They also participated in the programs to gain work experience so that they can easily enter the ever-changing labor market. O'Mahony and Bechky (2006) state that employability is a valuable individual resource that can be enhanced to help people face a constantly changing labor market characterised by unpredictability and insecurity. This implies that employability differs from employment, in that it relates to the ability to market oneself in external labor markets. While mandatory WIL may have some benefits in terms of building employability and professional skills, it also restricts students' choices and may lead to a focus on simply gaining academic credits rather than true engagement with the work experience.

Graduates said that WIL helped them develop industry-specific skills, gain practical work experience, and build relationships with industry professionals. Graduates also noted that WIL enhanced their ability to work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and solve problems in a professional setting. However, some graduates also identified challenges such as having to arrange their own transport and fund travel to the internship site and back to campus. A study by Hurst et al. (2023) indicated that both

paid and unpaid interns often need to apply for jobs elsewhere when their contract ends due to the limited opportunities available at the WIL sites. Often, graduates find themselves in entry-level roles that require little to no qualifications, with limited opportunities for advancement.

There are several reasons why this paradox exists. Firstly, there are often more graduates than jobs available in certain fields, in this case humanities. This means that employers can afford to be selective when it comes to hiring graduates and may prefer to hire those with experience over those with qualifications. Additionally, many graduates lack the skills and experience needed to make an immediate impact in their field. This means that they may need to spend some time developing their skills and building their experience before they are able to progress.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this article highlighted the exploitation of graduates through unpaid work experience which has become a widespread practice in many industries. Employers often use the promise of a permanent position to lure graduates into these programs but often fail to deliver on these promises. This leaves graduates with limited options for gaining paid employment, as they must compete against others who have already experience through unpaid internships. Furthermore, mandatory WIL programs do not necessarily provide graduates with the skills and experience they need to become employable. Many of these programs are poorly structured and do not provide graduates with meaningful work experience. However, this article has shown that in some instances the effectiveness of WIL depends on the time spent on WIL.

Overall, while there are clear benefits to WIL programs and unpaid internships, the concerns around exploitative labor practices and perpetuation of social inequalities cannot be ignored.

While the labor market may be challenging for humanities graduates, there are still opportunities for them to gain valuable skills and prepare themselves for the workforce. Universities and institutions must adapt to these changing demands and provide adequate support for humanities students as they navigate their careers. Moreover, universities and institutions must take responsibility for improving the quality of education and supporting humanities graduates as they navigate the job market. This includes providing access to career services, mentorship programs, networking opportunities, re-evaluating curriculums, and offering interdisciplinary programs that incorporate skills. Future research needs to focus on the humanities skills that employers deem valuable. By researching these skills, higher education institutions and WIL supervisors will be able to prepare interns for the labor market.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), WACE (www.waceinc.org), WIL Australia (www.acen.edu.au), and the University of Waikato (www.waikato.ac.nz).

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion including recommendations.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights into how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

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