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FINANCIAL GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY IN RETAIL SMMEs: STUDY OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING POLICY

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Abstract

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This evaluation of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) with Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise (SMME) retailers in South Africa arose from observations that vocational education goals required in this sector are not being achieved.

Qualitative methodologies were used, including dialogic interviews and questionnaire surveys of purposive samples of SMME retailers, tertiary vocational educators and retail students, as well as insights from large retailers and skills development facilitators. Findings indicate lack of consensus on WIL strategies, and that for WIL within retail SMMEs to succeed, small business management capacity and entrepreneurial competence need to be supported by pre-WIL processes and mentorship strategies. To promote work-based learning within SMMEs, recommendations are made for policy review by W&RSETA management, vocational educators and small business development organisations.

Keywords: Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises, SMME, Work-Integrated Learning, Work Based Learning, Co-Operative Education, Mentoring, Graduate Employability

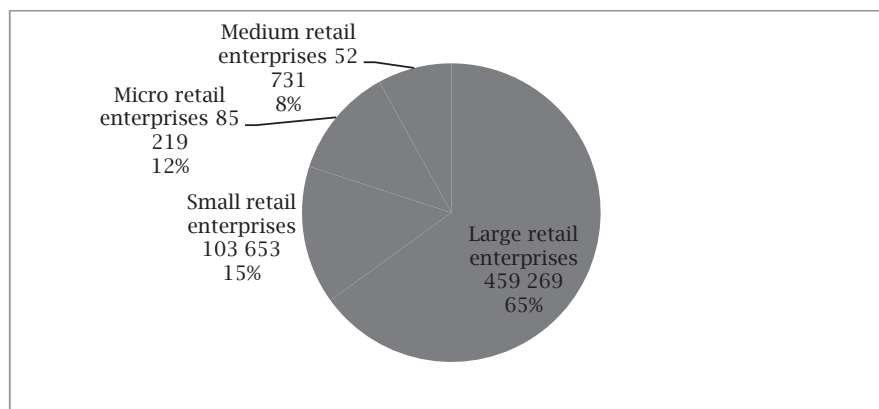
1. INTRODUCTION

The Wholesale and Retail (W&R) sector is a significant component of the South African economy and is a major employer. W&R is the fourth largest contributor to Gross Domestic Product and almost 30 000 registered retail enterprises employ 19% of the economically active workforce (Statistics SA, 2014). By 2030, 90% of new jobs should be created by small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs),

and about 79% of SMME businesses will be in the retail sector (Republic of South Africa 2012). This highlights the need for education and development in the sector, including the availability of work placements and other forms of Work Integrated Learning.

The relative employment and, therefore, career potential, by retail enterprise size, as shown in Figure 1, reflect the dominance of large retail corporates.

Figure 1. Employment by enterprise size in the retail trade



Source: StatisticsSA, 2014

Reinforcing the retail employment dominance by the relatively few large corporates, the W&R Sector Skills Plan (W&RSETA 2014:30) notes that “about 86% (24343) of the 27553 registered enterprises in this sector consists of small and micro enterprises, compared with 9.5% (2325) medium size and 4,5% (885) large corporate enterprises”. Unfortunately no reliable data are currently available as a basis for defining retail SMME capacity and competence criteria for effective WIL placement and mentoring. However, the W&RSETA (2013 and 2015) acknowledges that micro and small enterprises are least likely to have the capacity to supervise WIL students effectively; indicating that the 2325 medium size enterprises (with 51-150 staff) should be prioritised in terms of defined capacity criteria, for WIL placements. These statistics emphasise the importance of research into WIL in the retail sector and to identify ways to better involve medium (and maybe small) retail enterprises in WIL.

Although SMME development is one of the South African government’s priority programmes, the *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor* survey (Herrington, Kew and Kew 2014: 18) highlights South Africa’s record of declining entrepreneurial and small business development and the need for more information about the drivers of entrepreneurship and SMME developmental barriers. Such data limitations have been a hindrance to SMME growth and employment (Republic of South Africa 1995; Amra, Hlatshwayo and McMillan 2013: 6). The Bureau of Market Research (2013) confirmed the survivalist nature of the majority of retail SMMEs, with a survival rate of only 43.3% after five years.

Significant to the achievement of inclusive WIL objectives, therefore, is the survivalist nature of small enterprises, measured in terms of sales growth, employment creation and career scope, as perceived by WIL students and educational institution placement staff. Slow progress is being made with SMME financial literacy, skills development funding and regulatory policies, which are constraints for both business investors, and vocational WIL placement officers and aspiring retail career students (Small Enterprise Development Agency 2014).

The purpose of this exploratory paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of current WIL policies and practices in South African retail education and workplace skills development, with the investigative focus on tertiary student WIL within retail SMMEs. The paper adopts a utilisation-focused evaluation approach (Patton 2008), seeking to:

- Identify and prioritise WIL developmental policy and strategy for vocational education roleplayers, towards the achievement of conditions necessary for retail SMMEs to participate effectively in co-operative education programmes; and
- Recommend W&RSETA, DHET and other stakeholder interventions for enhanced participation of retail SMMEs in effective WIL activities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Academic Vs Practical Knowledge

According to Garraway (2010), knowledge in the workplace and knowledge in the university are structured and acquired differently and used for different purposes. Although theoretical knowledge gained through academic study is important, the need for knowledge learned through practise is essential (Grosjean, 2007), although difficult to apply in the workplace (Bibby; 2007

Academic learning is known as Mode 1, while practical learning is known as Mode 2, learning (Schwandt, 2005; Grosjean, 2007). Mode 1 focuses on relatively fixed competencies based on relatively fixed bodies of scientific knowledge that are applied to well define situations. Mode 2 learning, on the other hand, is a context-driven, holistic form of knowledge and is learned outside formal institutions. Mode 2 learning engages personality, intellectual and craft skills (Rochford, 2007), and is not just about learning in the workplace but continues into lifelong learning (Jonsson, 2007). Workers who experience Mode 2 learning develop holistic skills, making them more flexible, versatile and able to cope with the work environment.

According to Schwandt (2005) Mode 2 learning is now the preferred model for a growing emphasis on learning and professional practice in the workplace. This is supported by Winberg, Engel-Hills, Garraway and Jacobs (2013) who argue that, to ensure a strong basis for practice, students need disciplinary knowledge, but to develop a strong understanding of practice, students need situated knowledge.

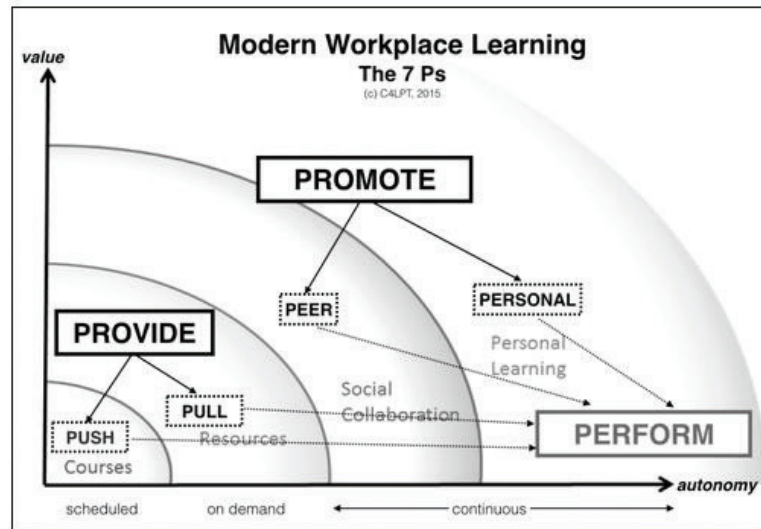
2.2. Learning Management Practices

WIL is typically defined as ‘career-focussed learning which integrates theoretical knowledge with workplace practical application, within a vocationally designed curriculum’ (Patrick *et al* 2008:5). Effective WIL can play a significant role in the readiness of graduates to contribute to the world of work (Coll and Chapman 2000; Ellinger *et al* 2010).

There are many professional challenges in planning and implementing WIL, including effective alignment and co-ordination between the various stakeholders, unrealistic expectations and competing institutional and employer demands (Engeström 2001; Bates, Bates and Bates 2007; Lester and Costley 2010).

‘Learning is becoming increasingly integrated into a person’s work life’ (Berryman, 1993:343), but ‘teaching and learning in the classroom are often not readily integrated with workplace practice’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999: 249). Hart (2015:43) therefore places emphasis on an integrated learning management approach, ‘embracing all the ways we learn at work’ as illustrated in Figure 2. Essential ingredients for promoting effective learning within this 7 Ps paradigm include personal motivation, positive mentoring and performance feedback.

Figure 2. Modern workplace learning: The 7 Ps



Source: Hart 2015:43

In widely different vocational and cultural contexts, Chickering and Gamson (1999), Eraut (2004), Ross (2007), Kramer and Usher (2011), White and Di Silvestro (Eds 2013), Jackson (2014), and Manuti *et al* (2015) reviewed WIL and vocational education barriers and best practices. Their findings underscore the importance of employability development and student eagerness to learn at work, through integrated management of formal and experiential learning in relevant workplace settings.

2.3. Employer Engagement in Workplace Learning

PhillipsKPA (2014) identified factors which influence the engagement (or lack thereof) of businesses in effective WIL processes and the consequent outcomes. Their study concluded that:

- Half of the organisations surveyed were not familiar with the concept of Work-Integrated Learning.
- Of the 264 employer responses, only 30 had taken the initiative in approaching an educational institution about WIL.
- Organisations most likely to be active in WIL are those which have operated for at least 20 years; and have more than 25 full-time employees.

2.4. Conceptual Models for WIL

Several WIL models have emerged in recent years. Blackmur (2004), Ashton and Morton (2004), Martin and Hughes (2009), Society for Human Resource Management (2012), Harris (2012), Barkhuizen and Schutte (2014) and Shellman (2014), all highlight the drivers of effective WIL within a vocational education framework, namely shared stakeholder expectations, talent development co-ordination between education agencies, academics, students, and employers.

A paradigm of integration of lecture-room and workplace learning development was formulated by the Education Development Center in Massachusetts (Lombardo and Eichenger 2010). Their 70:20:10

Learning Framework paradigm posits that effective workplace learning derives from a well-integrated framework of:

- 70 percent Experiential Learning: through structured tasks and practice,
- 20 percent Social Learning: through interaction with work colleagues; and
- 10 percent Formal Learning: through structured knowledge courses.

Cautionary perspectives on workplace learning within a small business context are sounded by Lechner and Gudmundsson (2012) and by McElyea and Van Tiem (2008), in their studies of WIL and performance improvement interventions within small businesses in the United States.

Both studies point out that 90% of USA companies are small businesses, with fewer than 100 employees; yet little has been written about how WIL and mentoring processes can be sustainably implemented in these small enterprises. Both studies underscore the need for professional learning practices within an SMME business, always in close collaboration with the owner/manager, to ensure a systemic approach to implementing workplace learning improvement.

2.5. WIL Policies and Strategies in South Africa

The pedagogical concepts and challenges of WIL, co-operative education, or experiential learning are familiar to South African vocational education practitioners (Engel-Hills, Garraway, Jacobs, Volbrecht and Winberg 2008; Groenewald 2009; Taylor and Govender 2013; Blom 2014), and are used in many organisational learning management and mentoring systems, including those of retail corporates. (Akoojee, Gewer and McGrath 2005).

In the post-1994 South African governance dispensation, vocational education institutions defined the need to provide appropriately qualified and skilled learners who could 'hit the ground running, when they entered the world of work' (Du Pre 2009:26). Combinations of formal education

curricula, coupled with 'experiential learning', have provided most of the country's middle level vocational skills in the past two decades; and have intensified delivery of commercial and industrial graduates with workplace competence.

Various government initiatives have attempted to address the gaps in workplace skills development by placing emphasis on WIL implementation for vocational qualifications (Republic of South Africa 2001; 2007; 21013b). This has been strongly influenced by professional councils, many of which contribute to curriculum development and assessment of student learning and competence in their respective occupational fields (Republic of South Africa 2011:12), but there is little published evidence to indicate that higher education institutions evaluated the effectiveness of their WIL frameworks, relative to the competence needs of specific sectors.

More recently goals have been set relative to the achievement of effective WIL for SMME businesses including:

- Increasing access to occupationally-directed learning programmes;
- Promoting the growth of a public FET (since renamed TVET) college system that is responsive to industry sector skills needs and priorities;
- Encouraging better use of workplace-based skills development;
- Supporting co-operatives, small enterprises and ... training initiatives;
- Building career and vocational guidance (Republic of South Africa, 2014).

Various other initiatives have focused on principles for effective WIL planning and implementation, types of WIL, roles of stakeholders and post-school educational institutions (Swiss-South African Co-operation Initiative 2013; Republic of South Africa 2013a; South African Board for People Practices 2014). Placement capacity within colleges, the need for employer support, placement evaluation, collaboration with SETAs and the roles of organised business formations have been stressed by South African College Principals Organisation (2014).

3. METHODOLOGY

Although essentially a qualitative study, both

qualitative and quantitative methods (Coll and Chapman 2000) were used in conducting the sampling, data collection and analysis for this exploratory study, as described below:

- A literature review, covering WIL case studies, and policies and practices from international and South African sources.
- A questionnaire completed by a convenience sample of 75 retail students, purposive samples of 20 retail SMME managers and trade association leaders, and 8 retail sector learning and development practitioners, profiling their perspectives, attitudes and recommendations regarding criteria for effective WIL within retail SMMEs.
- Semi-structured dialogic interviews with a purposive sample of 7 retail skills development facilitators and 11 vocational education and placement staff in Universities of Technology (UoTs) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges which offer retail business qualifications.
- Participation in vocational learning events, including an African Society for Talent Development conference, a W&RSETA SMME association's forum and a DHET WIL Workshop, convened as a stakeholder platform to review current policies and processes in post-school co-operative education and workplace learning.
- A focus group of 13 retail education and skills development stakeholders, who peer reviewed and critiqued the findings and assessed the validity and utility of the research.

Judgemental sampling was used to select a range of participants on the basis of their knowledge and understanding of the context and the problem, rather than trying to be representative of a population, which would not have been appropriate for such an exploratory study. The sample sizes were determined either by the specific experts that we wanted to participate in the study because of their knowledge, or by the concept of saturation, i.e. we stopped sampling when no additional new knowledge was forthcoming (Sekaran and Bougie, 2013). With regard to the student sample we sought 30 university and 30 TVET students as minimums recommended by Allen (1982), to provide a cross section of student opinions.

Table 1. Summary of data collection and sampling

Method	Sample type	Sample size	Respondents
Questionnaire	Convenience	75	Retail students
	Purposive	20	Retail SMME managers and trade association leaders
		8	Retail corporate learning and development practitioners
Semi-structured dialogic interviews	Purposive	7	Retail sector skills development facilitators
		11	Vocational education and placement staff in UoTs and TVET colleges
Participation via observation in vocational learning events	Convenience	250	African Society for Talent Development conference delegates
		15	W&RSETA SMME associations forum
		200	DHET WIL Workshop
Focus group	Purposive	13	Retail education and skills development stakeholders: W&RSETA qualifications management body.

The data collected was analysed manually, using simple descriptive statistics for the questionnaire survey and content analysis for the

interviews and workshops.

The study was approved by the CPUT Ethics Committee and all respondents received a letter of

information and informed consent. Methodological and data triangulation, and peer debriefing and member checking (through continuous discussions and feedback with stakeholders) provided the strategies for increasing rigor as suggested by Padgett (1998: 95). These strategies were further supported by a final focus group to peer review the outcome of the study – the focus group was comprised of experts in retail education, skills development and retail qualifications. These strategies provide confidence in the validity of the findings.

4. FINDINGS

In this section, the findings from each of the main data collection methods are presented and then a summary of the findings is presented in Section 4.6

4.1. Initial Exploratory Research

4.1.1. Interview with DHET Chief Director: Work-Integrated Learning

The DHET established a WIL Unit to overcome strategic problems affecting students and graduates, many of whom are unable to complete their learning programmes because of the unavailability of opportunities for the vital and compulsory WIL component, due to weak industry-institution relationships. Even graduates face barriers to entering the world of work because they lack relevant work experience. Because of these problems the DHET has been steering post-school education and training (PSET) institutions, like SETAs, to forge partnerships with TVET colleges, thereby opening up possibilities for WIL partnerships within commerce and industry.

Furthermore, DHET officials are planning to update education and work policy frameworks, to support Workplace Based Learning (WBL), which, in addition to WIL, includes learnerships, apprenticeships, internships, and employment candidacy.

In recent months, reviews of the effectiveness of vocational education and skills learning strategies have been initiated by educational governance thought-leaders and talent development practitioners. Two such events are noted below.

4.1.2. Department of Higher Education and Training: WIL workshop

Convened by the DHET and the National Skills Authority, this WIL Workshop aimed to promote enhanced WIL policy and implementation. The value of pre-WIL ‘virtual workplace’ active learning, before students are deployed for practical WIL application, in a real workplace, was highlighted. Furthermore, building on the pre-WIL principles, partnerships between tertiary education institutions and major retailers in terms of materials development, funding of simulated ‘practicum stores’, student WIL preparation, workplace competence assessment and quality assurance were emphasised – these are key components of the Schools of Excellence programme being implemented by the W&RSETA

4.1.3. African Society for Talent Development: Annual conference

This conference of learning and development practitioners emphasised the development of WIL strategy towards effective involvement of SMME workplaces. This involves institutional curricula and learner competence assessments done collaboratively by line management and academy educators, with learning paradigm shifts from a former ‘70% classroom focus’ to ‘70% workplace learning support’, in partnership with line management. Such ‘workplace learning support’ partnerships lead to effective outcomes, where competent branch managers are designated as WIL mentors. In the collective opinion of the conference delegates, a similar WIL mentoring strategy is viable for education institutions’ partnerships with regional SMME co-operatives.

4.2. Retail Stakeholder Survey Questionnaire Responses

Collective responses to the survey questionnaire and dialogic interviews with the sample of 121 retail sector stakeholders are summarised below. The stakeholder profile, based in major urban regions, included:

Students (of whom 93% had WIL experience, though seldom with an SMME);

- SMME owner/managers and trade associations (of whom 84% had hosted a WIL student, though not necessarily as an SMME);
- Academic staff, work placement officers and independent retail skills development facilitators (of whom 100% have had some WIL involvement);
- DHET and SETA management and retail learning & development practitioners.

4.2.1. Perceived WIL Benefits For SMME retailers

Perspectives on the benefits for SMME retailers providing WIL varied considerably. Responses were strongest on the SMME ‘community reputation’ benefits of student competence and employability; and on the potential entrepreneurial value for the SMME management of a ‘tech-savvy’ and career-motivated young student.

4.2.2 Perceived WIL Problems for SMME Retailers

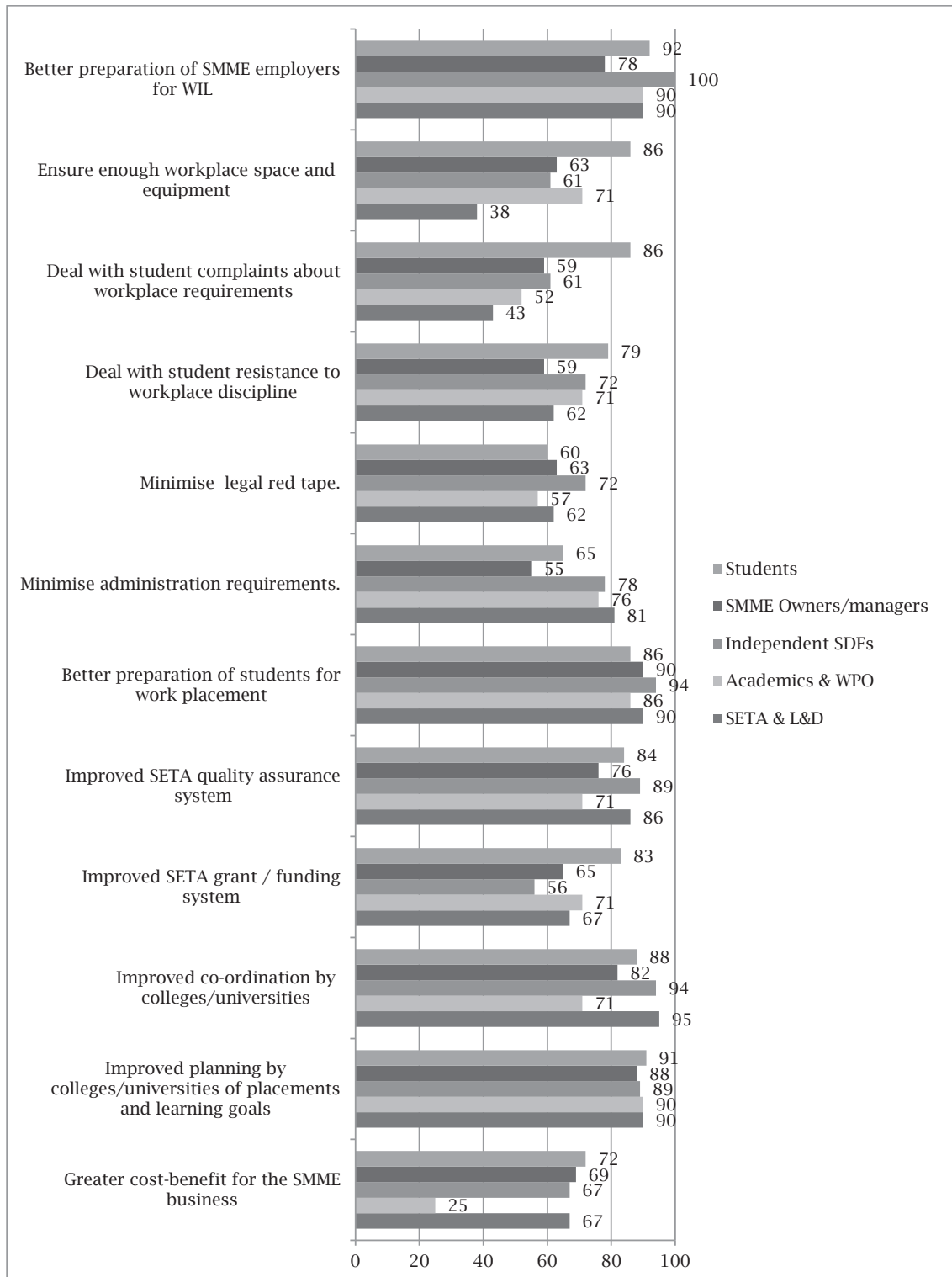
Responses highlighted the widely held perception that SMMEs do not have adequate time or business expertise to mentor students effectively. This may explain the reluctance of students to be placed in SMMEs for their workplace learning phase. Administrative WIL requirements were not seen as a significant problem.

4.2.3 WIL Policies and Strategies for More Effective Work Placement of Students

Figure 3 reflects the weighted percentage frequencies of respondents’ priority ratings for improved WIL placement strategy with SMME retailers. Highest stakeholder priority ratings reflect the diversity of perceived needs for:

- enhanced institutional WIL planning and co-ordination of SMME placements and workplace skills learning goals;
- improved preparation of students for SMME workplace realities;
- Institutional accountability for quality assurance of SMME workplace management and mentoring standards; and
- enhanced W&RSETA funding of cost-benefit incentives for effective SMME participation in WIL programmes.

Figure 3. Priority of strategies for more effective work placement of students (%)



4.3. Summary of Key Findings

Based on the literature review and stakeholder perspectives, the overall findings indicate that perceptions of WIL are aligned with national socio-economic and vocational education strategies which aim to strengthen SMME businesses, specifically for inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurial and youth skills development.

- **Stakeholder consensus on perceptions and attitudes to WIL**

Evident in the findings is consensus regarding the value of well integrated and effectively implemented retail student WIL with SMMEs, in terms of vocational education, skills development, employability and career scope.

Not evident, however, is consensus regarding criteria for WIL effectiveness, processes for co-ordinating academic and workplace learning modalities; and strategies for cost-effective synergies between education governance agencies, large corporates and SMME workplace mentoring. Reflecting this diversity of WIL perceptions, a seasoned stakeholder described South African WIL policy and implementation as a 'vigorously contested terrain'.

- **Academic staff and work placement officers**

Almost all academic and work placement staff recognise the value of career-relevant WIL, in its various modalities. Concerns expressed relate to the need for a well-defined WIL framework, credible for employers and students alike; and for credible criteria for SMME workplace learning assessment and quality assurance.

- **Students**

All students surveyed are eager to gain relevant workplace experience and skills towards a recognised qualification. Most expressed preference for WIL within a large business where they could gain sound practical exposure and be able to show this 'reputable business' experience on their CVs. Few students believe that SMMEs will meet these 'competence' and 'employability' criteria.

- **SMME retailers and trade associations**

Many SMME retailers recognise the value which they themselves gained from practical workplace experience; and want to help 'make a difference' in their communities, as well as improve their business competence with student talent. Adequate time for student WIL mentoring duties in small enterprises is frequently identified as a 'major constraint'. Regional SMME co-operatives, twinning with large retailers and financial support should therefore be built into WIL policy for cost-effective workplace learning.

- **DHET and SETA management and learning and development practitioners**

Most DHET and SETA management, as well as independent learning and development practitioners, are aware of the current diversity of

WIL interpretations and therefore support the need for a national WIL policy and regulatory framework. Proposals from educational institutions are urgently needed, especially relating to education and work curricula, capacity-building of SMME co-operatives for WIL support and funding of competent WIL mentors.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE RETAIL SECTOR

Cognisant of the need for 'academic interaction with social partners, investigating the contribution of universities to economic and social development' (Kruss, Haupt, Visser and Aphone 2013: xi), and based on the key findings, recommendations are now made for mobilisation of strategies for effective WIL placement with competent, committed SMME retailers.

Recommendations are based on the principles of Modern Workplace Learning (Hart 2015:43) as illustrated in Figure 2; and are summarised for consideration and collaborative endorsement by W&RSETA and DHET thought leaders, retail vocational education practitioners and SMME developmental roleplayers.

5.1. W&RSETA: Report Endorsement and Mobilisation

W&RSETA executive management participated positively in this 'WIL with retail SMMEs' evaluation project, describing it as 'an important mandate for our facilitation and co-ordination', and endorsing the need to strengthen retail SMME management competence, to build effective WIL mentorship, practical skills learning and student employability outcomes. To this end, it is recommended that:

- Policy documents, including SMME Funding and Skills Support Policy, South African College Principals Organisation (2014) small business work placement programme criteria and Retail 'School of Excellence' learning strategies, should be reviewed and accelerated, where appropriate.
- Steps in implementing these recommendations for enhanced WIL policy and process endorsement, should be led by W&RSETA management and board representatives, to define and mobilise capacity criteria for increasing WIL placement with competent SMMEs, within the Sector Skills Plan objectives.
- Throughout the phases of educational institution consensus around policy and process review and mobilisation towards enhanced quality and quantity of WIL within SMMEs, W&RSETA management and representatives of retail employer organisations should play a facilitative role, towards collaborative achievement of the socio-economic transformation vision of the NDP and the NSDS objectives.

5.2. HET and TVET Institutions: Strategies for Effective WIL with Retail SMMEs

Noting that this evaluation topic was initiated during a progress review of the W&RSETA qualifications management body, it is recommended that the

findings and strategies should be considered by a group of vocational educators. Agenda items for a W&RSETA-led review of effective WIL with retail SMMEs should include:

- Shared understanding of WIL / Co-operative Education policy and processes; supported by HET / TVET evaluations of institutional WIL effectiveness with retail SMMEs, for policy and strategy consideration.
- SMME 'due diligence' criteria needs analysis and capacity developmental insights, to enhance WIL mentoring and quality assurance capacity.
- Agreement on HET and TVET institutional steps, including WIL strategies with retail SMMEs, for consideration by SETA, DHET and DSBD management.
- Given the cross-sectoral implications of enhancing WIL within SMMEs, it will be important for recommendations to be referred to a SETA CEOs Forum, for collective engagement with DHET and National Skills Authority thought-leaders.

5.3. DHET: WIL Policy and SMME Capacity-Building Review

DHET officials are aware of WIL policy and process stakeholder dissonance, leading to the recent DHET / National Skills Authority WIL Workshop, which was the platform for a range of commissions to debate the way forward towards more socio-economically effective national strategies for WIL and workplace competence.

The DHET Chief Director: WIL has undertaken to submit enhanced WIL policy, process and funding infrastructure recommendations to the Higher Education and Training Ministry in the near future. It will therefore be opportune for well-defined policy and process inputs from the SETA CEOs Forum and vocational educational stakeholder engagements to be tabled with DHET senior management, for collaborative consideration.

5.4. DSBD: SMME and Co-Ops – Capacity and Support for WIL Effectiveness

Many stakeholders highlighted the fundamental need for SMME retailers to be capacitated in order to enhance the numbers and quality of effective workplace learning and skills development for aspirant WIL students.

The policy review process within the recently-formed DSBD has also been noted; and discussions with the chair of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Small Business Development indicated a readiness for policy enhancement proposals. SANCOC and SASMEF leadership have interacted with DSBD officials, striving to build commitment to co-operative SMME developmental strategies, including small business incubators and WIL twinning with large corporates.

- Once the consultative steps recommended earlier are achieved, WIL roleplayers should engage with W&RSETA and DSBD officials, in order to define SMME capacity criteria, funding and regulatory policies for business management competence, with incentives for effective WIL capacity and quality assurance.

- Dependent on the policy outcomes of the recent DHET WIL Workshop, the work-based education regulatory framework may require further research into effective organisational twinning and WIL implementation in retail SMMEs.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review and the stakeholder responses and perspectives reported in this study, the key findings are broadly aligned with the national socio-economic strategies to strengthen SMME businesses, towards inclusive entrepreneurial and youth skills development, for economic growth and sustainability. There was general consensus on the value of well integrated and implemented WIL programmes, both for the students and for the retail firms. However, problems exist with regard to time available for staff in small firms for mentoring of students, and with students' preferences for WIL placements in larger, well known retailers. Finally, there is a lack of consensus on a WIL framework, with a national WIL policy being needed.

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