

Beyond The Classroom: How Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Enhances Technical And Vocational Education And Training (TVET) Graduates' Employability In South Africa

Sakhile Phiri¹, Babalwa August²

¹Department of Development Studies, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa, ²Department of Development Studies, Nelson Mandela University South Africa.

How to cite: Phiri, S.; August, B. (2026). Beyond The Classroom: How Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) Enhances Technical And Vocational Education And Training (TVET) Graduates' Employability In South Africa. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21558>

Abstract

South Africa is experiencing high youth unemployment, prompting the government to encourage partnerships between employers and higher education institutions. This study investigated the effectiveness of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in enhancing the employability skills of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) graduates. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with eight employed engineering graduates from a TVET College in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole who completed a mandatory 24-month WIL placement and graduated between 2018 and 2020. Thematic analysis revealed that WIL enhanced key employability skills, such as teamwork and adaptability, and developed networking and self-awareness competencies. The findings provide empirical support for the efficacy of WIL in bridging the gap between academic learning and practical workplace requirements, thereby developing employability skills needed for the labour market.

Keywords: employability, TVET, WIL, graduates, engineering.

1. Introduction and Background

South Africa faces a significant challenge: youth unemployment currently stands at 46% (Stats SA, 2025), and many young people are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Higher education, particularly Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, plays a crucial role in addressing the skills needs of young people and promoting economic development and job creation (Nogcantsi & Mbatha, 2025), aligning with national development goals (National Planning Commission, 2012). Work Integrated Learning in the TVET setting refers to classroom and workplace learning, including internships, learnerships,

apprenticeships, and job shadowing. Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has been identified as a key intervention to enhance graduates' employability by integrating theory with practical workplace experience (Ferns et al., 2025). This study investigated the impact of participation in WIL programs on the employability outcomes of TVET graduates from their own perspectives. While previous literature acknowledges the value of WIL (Brewer et al., 2020; Dwesini, 2017), there is limited research focusing on the experiences of TVET graduates. The argument here is that while literature has made a significant contribution by highlighting various ways in which work integrated learning is contributing to the employability of graduates, it has been weak in bringing the voices and experiences of these TVET graduates into the discussion (see Mesuwini et al. (2023); Ngubane et al. (2024)). This paper shares the findings of a study that sought to address this gap by exploring the perspectives of employed TVET engineering graduates on how WIL has contributed to their employability.

2. Employability and Work Integrated Learning in the TVET sector

In the current global context of complex economic challenges, graduate employability skills have emerged as a key priority for higher education (Wallis, 2021). Graduates' attractiveness to their prospective employer and their survival in the labour market are dependent on the employability skills they possess (Dwesini, 2017; Loer Hansen & Daniels, 2023; Ogunwale, 2022). A key goal for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills development systems is ensuring that learners possess the necessary skills to enter the workforce and those relevant to the labour market. (Abd Rahman et al., 2025). Collaborative efforts between TVET colleges and industry provide an opportunity for industry to articulate its expectations of graduates and for graduates to be aware of the skills and attitudes required of them in the workplace (Jackson, 2010).

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) defines WIL as an umbrella term that describes curricular, pedagogy, and assessment practices of different disciplines that integrate formal learning and workplace exposure (Ruthnam & Kgware, 2026)[CHE], 2011). In South African TVET colleges, WIL involves short industry student placements in the student's specific career/field of study and longer placement periods for the National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) students. NATED N6 students are placed in the workplace on an 18-month internship for Business students and a 24-month internship for Engineering students (SSACI, 2013). The TVET curriculum has been criticised for being rigid and outdated, thereby failing to prepare learners for the world of work (Kana & Letaba, 2024; Vuthela & Ngumbela, 2024). Subsequently, the TVET sector has come under scrutiny for failing to make an impact on the economy by addressing skills shortage of qualified workers (McGrath et al., 2020; Simon Field & Álvarez-Galván, 2014), bringing employability to the fore.

Employability is a multidimensional concept for which there are many approaches, but no single universal definition. However, the study favoured competence-based approaches to employability, which focus on the identification and development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that contribute to effective performance in the labour market (Römgens et al., 2020). To that end, the employability skills framework developed by Jackson and Chapman (2012) and consisting of ten employability skills and forty competencies, was adopted to interpret and analyse the employability outcomes of the WIL programme in this study. Furthermore, the study assumes Oliver's (2015) pedagogical position on the interplay between WIL and employability.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Grounded in a qualitative interpretive case study design, the study provided in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of individual graduates during the WIL placement. Secondly, it provided a contextual understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of WIL in enhancing graduate employability (Creswell & Creswell, 2003). This study relied primarily on Yin (2017) for an understanding of case study research.

The study used purposive sampling to focus on eight employed engineering graduates from a TVET College in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole. In total, eight interviews were conducted, with four male and four female interviewees. All alums graduated from the Eastcape Midlands TVET College between 2018 and 2020. Three of the participants graduated with a Civil Engineering diploma, and five with an Electrical Engineering diploma from the Eastcape TVET College. Data collection began only after ethical clearance was granted by Nelson Mandela University's Central Research Ethics Committee. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in English, with a combination of open-ended and more structured questions. Open-ended questions were asked to explore participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of WIL on their employability and employment outcomes. However, more structured questions were used to identify the skills enhanced by the WIL programme. A pilot study was conducted to ensure that the interview questions were unambiguous and would achieve the research's purposes (Malmqvist et al., 2019).

The collected data was analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke (2006) Six steps of thematic analysis are used to identify patterns and meaningful themes related to developing employability skills. The analysis involved deductive use of an employability skills framework and inductive identification of emergent themes.

4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

This section presents analysed data to interpretively understand TVET graduates' perspectives on the effectiveness of WIL on their employability. Themes have been generated and used, with pseudonyms for excerpts from some of the participants.

4.1. Employability skills developed during WIL placement

This section of the analysis evaluates the skills developed through work during the WIL placement. Developed skills are those acquired by graduates during their WIL placement. The first theme from the data analysis was that graduates stated significant development in written and verbal communication skills.

"I am a shy person, so I hated standing in front of people, most of the time I prefer to communicate via email. During the internship I got used to doing presentations and communicating with a team and in my current job I am less nervous" (Neliswa).

Secondly, participants emphasised the importance of WIL in developing their ability to work effectively with others.

"Yes, basically it came down to me not getting along with certain person of certain group of people, in fact you are not supposed to allow personal feelings to disturb effective communication in the work-place. At the end of the day everything should run as a well-oiled machine when there's no communication between certain sections it might prevent us from reaching our specific outcomes and goals. Its more about learning to communicate whether you like it or not" (Jonathan)

Jonathan models reflective practice by articulating his key takeaways from navigating a difficult situation. He demonstrates that communication is an ongoing learning process rather than a fixed trait. His growth exemplifies how experiential learning opportunities like WIL can stretch individuals beyond their comfort zones and transform perspectives on relating to others. Significantly, the study revealed that graduates developed self-awareness through their WIL experiences. They acknowledged personal strengths and areas for improvement, demonstrating an understanding of their behaviour patterns and the value of adapting to different work environments.

"So when I started working I had to be self-aware in a manner that I tend to be impatient sometimes when you work with other people you cannot be impatient you have to understand that other people have their own ways of doing things. I know that sometimes when I want things done, I wish I could do them right now those are the type of things that I had to understand going into whatever job I am going to. It's okay you know that you can

be impatient so you need that when you go to this place you understand that when you go to this place you shouldn't panic if things didn't go the way you want them to be” (Bongani).

In addition, self-reflection was also highlighted as an essential aspect of developing self-awareness, as a person may understand that their personality traits impact how they work with others. Research shows that reflective learners who consciously evaluate their behaviour and skills become motivated to refine them further (Ramadi et al., 2016). The WIL context generated authentic feedback that significantly enhanced graduates' self-awareness.

“Like for instance when it comes to...there a course during my placement, electronics I had a difficult time in actually completing....not really completing the task on time but everything for me was like I was like a dead last, I always had to be the last one to submit and get the concept of what the concept was about. I learnt that I am lacking when it comes to patience. I don't have patience and I am afraid of failure as well, I don't want to fail at something I just want to be right all the time. If I intend on doing something and finishing at certain point in time I want it to be like that” (Amanda).

This self-reflection indicates that self-awareness is context-specific; people can develop self-awareness in the environments in which they operate. This finding aligns with Bennet's (2018) suggestion that self-awareness is key to helping students understand their own thinking processes and how they can impact their learning in the workplace. The interview data provided evidence that authentic workplace activities have enabled graduates to develop communication, teamwork and self-awareness competencies. Participants reported gaining hands-on experience in real workplace settings during their placements.

4.2. Employability skills enhanced during WIL placement

Enhanced skills are defined as existing competencies that graduates possessed before WIL placements, which were then strengthened, expanded, or refined through their application in an authentic professional context. WIL experiences require graduates to adapt to new workplace rules, organisational cultures, and professional environments. This process enhanced the graduate's adaptability, as highlighted in the excerpt below.

“...I had to adapt to the workplace rules, you know in terms of how I am supposed to behave. At work there a code of conduct that you have to live by from the way we dress and how we address other colleagues. So I had to adapt to new those rules and I think also working with people from different cultures was interesting I had to understand that other cultures do things differently.” (Amanda)

In addition, exposure to industry-specific technologies, software, and workflows during WIL significantly enhanced graduates' technical literacy and their ability to apply their technical

knowledge in practical settings. Graduates reported strengthening adaptability, communication, technological competencies and other established abilities through authentic work application (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). This aligns with the continual development of existing skills at higher levels of complexity, a key tenet of Career Development Learning as espoused by Bridgstock and Jackson (2019).

4.3. Graduate perceptions of their employability after WIL

The findings from this research reveal that WIL encourages students to reflect on their own learning and to develop a better understanding of the world of work and how they can utilise the skills they have developed across different work contexts. The work placement enhanced the self-efficacy of graduates. The graduate's express confidence in their abilities in these areas, attributing it to regular application and practice of adaptability, teamwork, technology and communication skills during WIL placements. This is highlighted by Busi, Melisa and Amanda below.

"In terms of my adaptability I think I am very competent, I no longer get worried when I move to different departments, I have learnt that adaptability is part of the job, and it never stops because you have to adapt to new jobs, new managers new technology, it's just never stops you continue as you go" (Busi).

"when it comes to technology, they introduce something new every time so I cannot give myself a 10, maybe I will give myself an 8, because tomorrow they might come up with something new and I might still have to learn. I use technology on a daily basis since I am in the technical space, because we use technology to update all our work systems" (Melisa).

"Communication is important for almost everything I do at work, I use communication daily because I have to report to my supervisor and manager in terms of progress on the work that I do." (Amanda).

The finding that successfully demonstrating skills in unfamiliar professional contexts enhanced graduates' confidence mirrors Bandura (1997) seminal theory highlighting mastery experiences as key drivers of positive self-efficacy beliefs. Thus graduates' successes during WIL serve as a signal of capability, which fosters innate beliefs in their own capacity to carry out tasks and overcome obstacles (Bandura, 1997).

5. Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into TVET graduates' perspectives on the effectiveness of WIL in enhancing their employability skills. The findings demonstrate that WIL plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and the

practical demands of the workplace. The experiences of the eight engineering graduates highlight the significant enhancement of key employability skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and technology literacy through their mandatory WIL placements. These insights have implications for policy and practice, underscoring the need for a well-structured, effectively implemented WIL framework within TVET programs to improve graduate employability and address youth unemployment in South Africa. Future research could explore the experiences of a larger, more diverse sample of TVET graduates across different disciplines to further validate and generalise these findings.

References

- Abd Rahman, N. H., Zubairi, Y. Z., Jani, R., Abdul Batau, M. F., Shamsudheen, M. I., Ishak, N. A., Hanafi, H., & Abdul Bahri, E. N. (2025). Governance structures and systemic challenges shaping the future of the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) workforce. *Education + Training*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1108/et-11-2024-0508>
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. Macmillan.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Brewer, M., Ferns, S., Lewis, S., Childers, J., & Russell, L. (2020). Interdisciplinary project-based work-integrated learning: The Australian good practice guide. *Australian Technology Network*.
- Bridgstock, R., & Jackson, D. (2019). Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(5), 468–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2019.1646378>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design*. Sage publications Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Dacre Pool, L., & Sewell, P. (2007). The key to employability: developing a practical model of graduate employability. *Education + Training*, 49(4), 277–289. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400910710754435>
- Dwesini, N. F. (2017). The role of work integrated learning (WIL) in enhancing employability skills: Graduate perspectives. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 6(2), 1–9.
- Ferns, S. J., Zegwaard, K. E., Pretti, T. J., & Rowe, A. D. (2025). Defining and designing work-integrated learning curriculum. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 44(2), 371–385. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2399072>
- Jackson, D. (2010). An international profile of industry-relevant competencies and skill gaps in modern graduates. *The International Journal of Management Education*, 8(3), 29–58. <https://doi.org/10.3794/ijme.83.288>
- Jackson, D., & Chapman, E. (2012). Non-technical competencies in undergraduate business degree programs: Australian and UK perspectives. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(5), 541–567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.527935>

- Kana, N., & Letaba, P. (2024). The reshaping of curriculum transformation to address the 21st-century skill sets and employment prospects during the Fourth Industrial Revolution era: A case of the South Africa TVET colleges. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 38(2). <https://doi.org/10.20853/38-2-5854>
- Loer Hansen, S., & Daniels, K. (2023). Why employability matters. In (pp. 2–12). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803926513.00012>
- Malmqvist, J., Hellberg, K., Möllås, G., Rose, R., & Shevlin, M. (2019). Conducting the Pilot Study: A Neglected Part of the Research Process? Methodological Findings Supporting the Importance of Piloting in Qualitative Research Studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, 160940691987834. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919878341>
- McGrath, S., Ramsarup, P., Zeelen, J., Wedekind, V., Allais, S., Lotz-Sisitka, H., Monk, D., Openjuru, G., & Russon, J.-A. (2020). Vocational education and training for African development: a literature review. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 72(4), 465–487. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1679969>
- Mesuwini, J., Thaba-Nkadimene, K. L., Mzindle, D., & Mokoena, S. (2023). Work-integrated learning experiences of South African technical and vocational education and training lecturers. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 24(1), 83–97.
- Ngubane, P. B., Mncube, D. W., & Ajani, O. A. (2024). Exploring experiences of TVET graduates' work-integrated learning in a rural ecology: the case of TVET colleges in KwaZulu-Natal. *International Journal of Research in Business and Social Science* (2147-4478), 13(5), 803–812. <https://doi.org/10.20525/ijrbs.v13i5.3366>
- Nogcantsi, B., & Mbatha, L. L. (2025). Whispers of potential: Barriers to qualification completion of National Accredited Technical Education Diploma programmes in a selected TVET College. *Transformation in Higher Education*, 10(1), 600. <https://doi.org/doi:10.4102/the.v10i0.600>
- Ogunwale, S. (2022). Five key trends shaping the new world of work. World Economic Forum Future of Work. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/09/five-trends-endure-world-of-work>
- Ramadi, E., Ramadi, S., & Nasr, K. (2016). Engineering graduates' skill sets in the MENA region: a gap analysis of industry expectations and satisfaction. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 41(1), 34–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2015.1012707>
- Römgens, I., Scoupe, R., & Beusaert, S. (2020). Unraveling the concept of employability, bringing together research on employability in higher education and the workplace. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(12), 2588–2603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1623770>
- Ruthanam, M., & Kgware, M. (2026). Work-integrated Learning in Environmental Health: A Cross-Program Perspective of Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 88(7). <https://doi.org/10.70387/001c.158593>
- Simon Field, P. M., & Álvarez-Galván, a. J.-L. (2014). *A Skills beyond School Review of South Africa*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264223776-en>
- Vuthela, M. F., & Ngumbela, X. (2024). An Investigation into the Effectiveness of the TVET Curriculum in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. *Journal of Public Administration*, 59(3), 620–641. <https://doi.org/10.53973/jopa.2024.59.3.a18>

- Wallis, R. (2021). Career readiness: developing graduate employability capitals in aspiring media workers. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(4), 533–543. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1931666>
- Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage publications.

Article in Press