Article

Work-Integrated Learning in the Context of COVID-19 among Open and Distance Learning Stakeholders in Two Namibian Institutions of Higher Education

Lovisa Kandali Nghipandulwa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7602-627X
University of Namibia
knghipandulwa@unam.na

Martha Namutuwa
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1518-2993
Namibia University of Science and Technology
mnamutuwa@nust.na

Petrina Batholmeus
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2693-5919
Namibia University of Science and Technology
pbatholmeus@nust.na

Enzy Kaura
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0665-5051
Namibia University of Science and Technology
ekaura@nust.na

Ezekeil Gwinyai Kwembeya
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9584-2897
University of Namibia
ekwembeya@unam.na

Lilian Pazvakawambwa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0523-5063l
University of Namibia
pazvakawambwa@unam.na

Abstract

This study sets out to explore the impact of COVID-19 between 2020 and 2021 amongst open distance learning (ODL) stakeholders in conducting and managing work-integrated learning (WIL) at two local institutions of higher learning in Namibia, namely, the University of Namibia and Namibia University of Science and Technology. Data were obtained from 32 students, 32 industry-based supervisors, and 12 academic WIL coordinators who participated in the study. Key challenges experienced among stakeholders included lockdown restrictions, COVID-19 protocols such as social distancing, remote working, limited time to cover required content, internet or technology challenges, inability to conduct physical supervision visits, and delays in placements of students. Despite all these challenges, opportunities emerged that enabled all these stakeholders (students, industry-based supervisors, and academic WIL coordinators) to achieve WIL goals. Increased use of technology, virtual

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platforms, and flexible learning experiences became vehicles to enhance resilience and achieve WIL pedagogical goals. Key recommendations from participants included the need to adequately support students with technological devices and skills, improve effective communication amongst stakeholders, and incorporate workplace counselling in WIL.

Keywords: COVID-19; higher education institutions; open distance learning; stakeholders; work-integrated learning; Namibia

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is embedded in the curricula of most higher education institutions' programmes in Namibia to enhance graduate employability. As an educational pedagogy with well-defined practices and assessment activities, WIL relies on three stakeholders, namely, the students, industry supervisors, and academic WIL coordinators. WIL involves a wide range of educational activities designed to apply theoretical and practical learning within a workplace (Atkinson 2016).

The COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020 and 2021 disrupted WIL practices in Namibia. Consequently, different models and forms of WIL were adopted to cater for students' WIL placements during the COVID-19 pandemic in the ODL context. The forms and models used included ePre-WIL programmes, simulated WIL, remote WIL, project-based opportunities, and virtual apprenticeships, to name but a few (Gamage 2022; Prior et al. 2020; Wood, Zegwaard, and Fox-Turnbull 2020).

Although there is a debate on the shortcomings of some new WIL models and their success stories, there is a consensus that COVID-19's disruption of the industry has compelled higher education institutions to rethink WIL best practices, particularly in the ODL sphere. The pedagogy of WIL plays a significant role in ODL by providing an opportunity for working adults and those who have challenges in accessing education to supplement their training with hands-on practice.

In Namibia, the extent to which COVID-19 affected the application of WIL in ODL has not been empirically explored. Taking into consideration the challenges that emerged due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two higher education institutions (HEIs) in Namibia collaborated to explore challenges in conducting and managing WIL for ODL students from 2020 to 2021. This study sheds light on the experiences of WIL stakeholders in managing WIL during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it highlights the challenges encountered in WIL placements as well as recommendations on the WIL practice in ODL in the context of the pandemic at the institutional, national, and international level.

Background

WIL in ODL has multiple stakeholders, namely, academic WIL coordinators, industry-based supervisors, and students (Brewer et al. 2021). These stakeholders have different roles and responsibilities. The students have the responsibility to ensure that they are

placed in a real-life working environment, focused on their field of study, where they learn through the experiential process. Industry-based supervisors, also referred to as industry mentors, are responsible for the supervision of the students during the WIL period. Their responsibilities are to provide learning support and progress feedback. The academic WIL coordinators oversee and liaise with industry-based supervisors and assess the students' performance during the WIL programme. The effectiveness of WIL is determined by the collaboration amongst the stakeholders based on needs, purposes, roles, commitment, responsibilities, and clear agreements for all parties (de Beers, Petersen, and Van Vuuren 2020).

The Problem

On the global arena, COVID-19 pandemic challenges were reported by the World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE), and through webinars with member universities strategies on WIL management during the COVID-19 pandemic were discussed. Kay, McRae, and Russell (2020) state that the COVID-19 disruption had a heavy impact on student learning, programme delivery, risk management, staff capability, and industry engagement. As a result of these hurdles, the education systems faced significant challenges including WIL coordination.

Regionally, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the South African higher education landscape, and HEIs were faced with WIL challenges caused by the unprecedented pandemic (Universities South Africa 2021). The desktop study scan conducted at 26 public universities in South Africa revealed that the work-based learning WIL modality was the most affected due to lockdowns and occupational health and safety regulations (Universities South Africa 2021). In Namibia, the extent to which COVID-19 affected the application of WIL in ODL has not been empirically explored. This study, therefore, attempts to understand how COVID-19 impacted WIL activities in Namibia. The results could be used to inform current and future WIL practice in ODL under similar constraining circumstances.

Objectives

The main objective of the study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected WIL stakeholders in ODL in various themes. The specific objectives were to (1) determine the challenges encountered in ODL HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) establish opportunities created in managing WIL in ODL during and post COVID-19 pandemic, and (3) establish strategies that could be employed to enhance WIL in ODL.

Literature Review

Many adult learners are not able to enrol for full-time or part-time modes of learning due to their responsibilities and locations. ODL is, therefore, an important strategy used to accommodate students with different needs and demands (Musingafi et al. 2015).

Kampera and du Plessis (2014) refer to ODL as the choice of distance students in terms of content, time, place and pace of learning, method of instruction, and nature of assessment. Despite the importance of ODL and its general benefits, WIL stakeholders faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, which warrant investigation and adjustment thereafter.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, workplaces globally were inaccessible to most students for WIL placements. This prompted the adoption of online technologies for teaching and learning in many institutions around the world (Merisi et al. 2022). WIL practitioners subsequently resorted to alternative models to ensure that students could complete their WIL requirements and activities (Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe 2020). Digitalisation and terms such as eWIL, virtual placements, remote work and more were introduced during the pandemic. Gamage (2022) describes eWIL as a mode that incorporates emergent technologies such as smart virtual assistants, immersive team applications based on virtual and augmented realities, and cloud-based systems and solutions that combine several of these technologies. In Australia, for example, virtual projects were successfully developed for health students who were unable to undertake WIL at workplaces (Prior et al. 2020). Virtual versions of WIL, however, come with different challenges.

Gamage (2022) argues that WIL can only be fit for purpose if it is in sync with contemporary realities and prepares students to adapt and respond to fast-paced work and a growing digitalised world. Although virtual and other models of WIL have emerged from the pandemic experience, there are likely to be near- and long-term economic challenges due to the pandemic. WIL opportunities, especially work placement types of WIL, may be fewer as the industry recovers (Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe 2020). Investigating the changes and experiences of WIL during the COVID-19 pandemic will, therefore, enable higher education institutions to adjust and address the problem at hand. Dean and Campbell (2020) emphasise that post-COVID-19, higher education institutions need to inquire into the needs of industry and community. This will assist them to explore how they can work together, think outside the box, and design authentic experiences for student cohorts. These also need to be quality assured to fulfil students' learning outcomes and industry experience.

Work-Based Learning, a Model of WIL within the ODL Context

Sobiechowska and Maisch (2006, 270) define work-based learning (WBL) as "a programme of study where learners are simultaneously full-time employees whose programme of study is embedded in the workplace." Abukari and Ahmed (2019) argue that WBL, a model of WIL, is appropriate for the ODL context. They posit that WBL is often applied to distance and open learning students, as these are adult learners who are usually in full-time employment.

Moreover, Abukari and Ahmed (2019) conducted a study in Ghana to explore the inclusion of work-based learning in ODL, and they found that the potential benefits of

integrating a work-based learning model into their current ODL approach in a developing context would enable programmes to be tailored to meet the practical developmental needs of the workplace and society at large.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

WIL has emerged from the foundations of the Experiential Learning Theory as formulated by Dewey (as quoted in Kolb and Kolb 2005, 193). The Experiential Learning Theory is described as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb as quoted in McCarthy 2010, 132). Furthermore, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory stipulates the nature of experiential learning, and his cycle explains that the process of knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

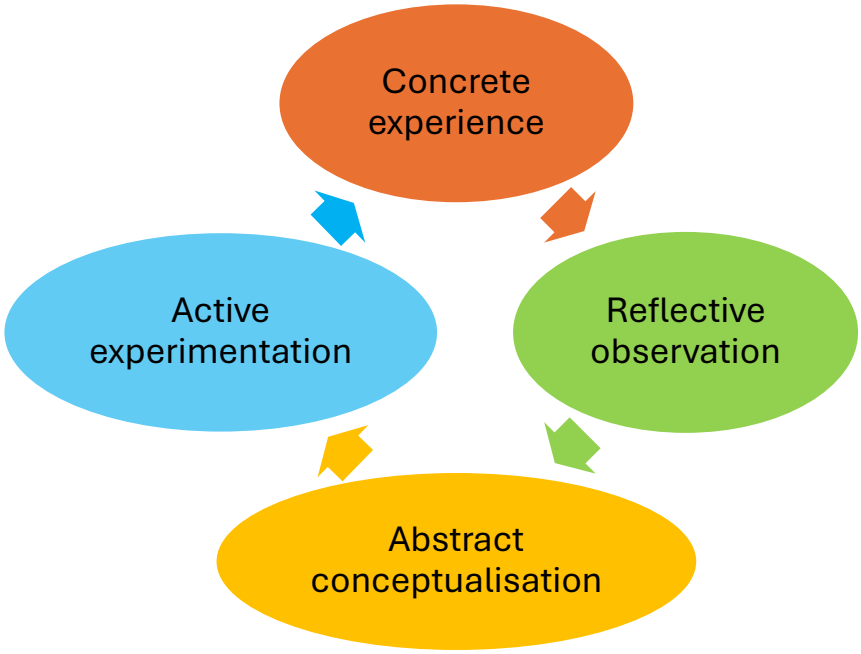

Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984)

The cycle, as explained by Mughal and Zafar (2011), highlights the following about experiential learning: learning is a process, not an outcome; learning is driven by experience; learning requires a learner to resolve conflicts through a dialectic process; learning carries a more holistic and an integrative view; learning requires the individual to interact with its environment, and knowledge creates knowledge.

Connectivism Learning Theory

This contemporary theory suggests that learning is shaped by technology. This is one of the recent theories that is applicable to the recent events in WIL, especially in ODL. The

traditional theory discussed above was developed before learning through technology was introduced. This kind of learning is referred to as actionable knowledge and occurs outside of people, whereas learning occurs inside people in the Experiential Learning Theory and other traditional learning theories (Voskoglou 2022). In this digital era, people retrieve information stored in databases and operated through technology. Therefore, information changes constantly due to interactions with new information, people, and technology.

Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative design. Creswell and Creswell (2018) assert that qualitative research enables a deep understanding of an unexplored phenomenon. The researchers chose this design to gain an understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted WIL management in the ODL space from the perspectives of WIL stakeholders, namely, the students, industry supervisors, and the academic WIL coordinators at the two universities in question.

Population and Sampling

A population in research refers to a group of people with the same characteristics. In this study, 50 students who have done WIL at the two universities, 12 WIL coordinators at the respective universities, and 50 industry-based supervisors who have supervised the students during the WIL were the key players. In total, the sample size was 32 students who completed WIL in 2020 and 2021, 32 WIL coordinators from both institutions, and 12 industry-based supervisors who supervised WIL students in the years specified above. A purposive sampling technique was used as only the WIL ODL stakeholders specified above were approached. Only the School of Education and the School of Commerce were selected at the respective institutions for inclusion in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected using face-to-face engagements and online platforms. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to participants who met the inclusion criteria and who indicated their willingness to participate in the study by signing the consent form.

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed from recorded information. A thematic content analysis in which themes were identified and categorised into groups was applied (Burnard et al. 2008). The researchers organised the data, taking note of participants' definitions and experiences of WIL. Data was categorised and presented according to emerging themes, taking into consideration the research objectives. The key findings were reported under each main theme or category using appropriate verbatim quotes to illustrate and support the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers obtained ethical clearance from both institutions' research ethics approval bodies to conduct this study. Participants' privacy and confidentiality were upheld by requesting them to complete a consent form. Participants' personal information was protected during data collection, compilation, and reporting processes.

Results

The study was conducted to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected WIL stakeholders, and the data was collected from students, industry-based supervisors, and WIL coordinators. The samples of the participants are discussed in the next subsection.

Biographical Details

1) Students

A sample of 32 students participated in the study and, of these, 87.1% enrolled for WIL on distance, while 9.7% worked full-time, and 3.2% worked on a part-time basis. These students were enrolled in the following programmes: Education, Economics, Transport Management, Human Resources Management, Accounting, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, and Marketing. In addition, they were placed in various industry sectors ranging from agriculture, mining, construction, retail, transport, actuarial sciences, real estate, administration, education, health and human sciences, and recreation to regional councils.

2) Industry-Based Supervisors

The analysis was based on a sample of 32 industry-based supervisors from both public and private organisations as well as small business enterprises. Of the 32 industry-based supervisors, the majority (8) were from the Finance/Accounting department, followed by Administration/Human Resources (6), Languages and Maths (5), while Social Science had four, Commerce had three and Engineering had one supervisor. Most of the industry-based supervisors (87.5%) engaged or placed the students for WIL in their organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The supervisors supervised ODL students both physically and virtually.

3) Academic WIL Coordinators

The analysis was based on a sample of 12 academic WIL coordinators. Of these, 10 had coordinated ODL WIL programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic, six of whom were from the University of Namibia (UNAM) and four of whom were from Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). The academic coordinators from the two universities were from NUST's Faculty of Commerce, Human Sciences, and Education (3) and UNAM's Faculty of Education and Human Sciences (5). The rest did not indicate their faculties. With regard to the type of WIL placement, three had physical placements, seven had a mixture of physical and virtual placements, while one

coordinator indicated that she had no WIL placement as she had only become an academic coordinator in January 2022. From 2020 to 2021, two coordinators reported having 31 to 60 ODL students placed; two coordinators reported having 61–90 students placed in industry, and two coordinators reported that they had placed more than 60 students on WIL.

Results

Challenges Encountered by WIL Stakeholders in Managing ODL during COVID-19

1) Students

The following challenges were experienced by most students: lockdown restrictions, limited face-to-face interaction, remote working, limited time to cover learning content, infection exposure which resulted from direct contact with those who tested positive for COVID-19, so they had to self-quarantine for a period of two weeks.

The challenges stipulated above are attributed to physical WIL placement as opposed to virtual as results show that the majority of the students (83.3%) were physically placed for their WIL, while 16.7% completed their WIL through the various virtual modalities. For those virtually placed, challenges experienced included lack of stable internet, inadequate data, and poor bandwidth.

2) Industry-Based Supervisors

Industry supervisors cited restrictions and directives imposed by COVID-19 protocols as key challenges. Factors included schools closing unexpectedly, internet/technology issues, limited time to interact with the learners, and fear of infection and death.

At times there was limited staff to supervise students due to non-replacements after COVID-19-related deaths and illness of staff members, little time to keep students occupied and fulfil their WIL learning outcomes, and work overload on the part of supervisors.

3) Academic WIL Coordinators

Challenges experienced by industry supervisors included: falling ill with COVID-19 or attending funerals and leaving the students unattended; inability to conduct physical supervision visits, reducing the quality of the WIL output; poor internet accessibility and connectivity in some areas; some industries not being cooperative with students' placements; challenges of reporting for work amidst lockdowns; rotations to avoid congestion at the workplace causing disruptions; challenges with uploading/ downloading of documents (size of videos), and closure of workplaces.

Moreover, 60% of academic coordinators indicated that virtual WIL brought about new challenges on the part of students. They cited lack of data and technology devices, low

internet access and poor connection, especially in the rural areas, and challenges with uploading/downloading/sharing of documents online. Subsequently, students missed the online submission deadlines and had difficulties navigating online platforms being utilised for assessment and communication such as Moodle.

Academic WIL coordinators, however, managed to liaise with industry-based supervisors to mitigate these challenges. Students were allowed to record their WIL activities and send links to their institutions. In addition, the institutions increased data for internet connectivity to enable interactions through online platforms. The quotes below reflect some of the academic WIL coordinators' encountered challenges:

> Sometimes supervisors from the industry would get ill with COVID-19 themselves or be out of office for a funeral, leaving the students on their own or being supervised by a colleague.
>
> The inability to physically visit the students at work to see them at work was a challenge because physical interaction elicits more information on skills, knowledge, and work ethics.
>
> I experienced that some students did not do their WIL on time and as a result, we had to allow them time to do the WIL after COVID-19.
>
> Lack of internet in some areas was a cause of concern.
>
> Some important areas of industry were not fully cooperative with the students.
>
> Some students were taking too long to catch up or understand most of the work/activities carried out by HR practitioners.
>
> The challenges were many, such as not coming to office everyday to reduce congestion due to COVID-19 regulations.
>
> Uploading of documents [size of videos], links, and closure of schools in some cases did not go down very well. As a result, students had to watch online videos in order to complete their activities accordingly.

Recommendations to Improve WIL Experience

1) Students

Students provided suggestions on how their WIL experience might have been improved. One student indicated that during WIL placement, the communication with the students should be improved while six students recommended that the WIL period be extended to at least three months. Students further recommended that institutions should provide enough data for the internet connection and the necessary devices, as well as work-based counselling services.

2) Industry-Based Supervisors

The industry-based supervisors suggested the need to adjust the period of internship from three months to six months. In addition, HEIs should maintain contact with industries, organise ICT tools and resources in advance, immerse students in work-ready seminars to enhance soft skills, and provide counselling on mental health issues. Despite the hiccups faced, the supervisors managed to overcome these challenges by adhering to COVID-19 restrictions, providing off-site assignments, making up for lost time, giving extra lessons, rationalising the syllabus, utilising mobile platforms, and going virtual.

3) Academic WIL Coordinators

Some of the academic coordinators felt that the current system of placing students under WIL is fine and commendable, while others provided suggestions on how WIL placements in the ODL context can be improved. According to them, WIL management can be improved by creating WIL centres on campuses that will run the comprehensive coordination of providing services to all students (full-time as well as ODL students). The online platform (Moodle WIL programme) could also be utilised or strengthened by providing more demonstration videos of scenarios in the workplace and similar content to prepare and complement WIL.

Opportunities That Emerged for WIL in ODL During and Post COVID-19

Students highlighted that their experience taught them to realise that technological opportunities created by the pandemic helped to enhance WIL management. Out of 29 students who responded, 51.7% utilised different technologies during their WIL such as Microsoft Teams, followed by 20.7% who used Zoom, as well as 10.2% who used other forms of technology such as Google Meet, Google Classroom, Edmodo, WhatsApp, and cell phone text messages. Other positive aspects noted by all stakeholders include effective communication through various platforms, flexible learning, resilience, teamwork, and empathy among team members.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the challenges experienced by ODL stakeholders (students, industry-based supervisors, and academic WIL coordinators) during WIL placements were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In as much as some of these challenges are known to be inherent to the WIL practice itself, such as lack of supervision and shorter duration of placements, students had to grapple with additional challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic because of the public health restrictions that were put in place by the Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services. The challenges included the risk of contracting COVID-19, going on self-quarantine for a period of two weeks, remote working, the sudden shift to online learning and related technological challenges, anxieties, and lack of counselling support.

These results are not only unique to Namibia. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2022) conducted a worldwide study to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education two years on from the disruption of COVID-19. They established that the sudden shift to a total reliance on the digital world brought technology-related challenges and it exposed inequalities in higher education with regard to a lack of basic requirements for digitalised education and learning. This trend was noted to affect particularly developing countries.

Similarly, this study posits that technology-related challenges emerged predominantly as the most problematic area for all stakeholders. Students in this study cited unstable internet connections, poor bandwidth, and limited internet devices provided by their respective HEIs. Poor network hindered students from performing tasks on time. Some students could not complete all learning activities via virtual placement and needed to be physically placed in keeping with their programmes. Academic staff had difficulties in uploading documents or videos of large sizes. Industry-based supervisors equally had to shift to transferring knowledge using web-based tools. Consequently, this calls for more concerted efforts with regard to effective communication amongst stakeholders in the ODL context in order to address issues and challenges timeously. This is an approach that stakeholders in ODL should certainly consider in future.

A significant outcome from this study was that all stakeholders' mental health was affected as a direct result of the impact of COVID-19, and that there was nothing much done to address this risk. The World Health Organization (WHO 2022) equally noted that a great number of people worldwide reported psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. As for post the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO recommends integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) within all aspects of preparedness and response for all public health emergencies.

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic forced stakeholders to initiate innovative WIL models that ensured students' learning took place uninterrupted. Dean and Campbell (2020) provide an overview of this shift by inventing the term "panicgogy" to describe the sudden shift to online teaching offerings and remote WIL by higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study's results also highlight a similar pattern for Namibia. A major shift to the online teaching and learning mode took place at both Namibian institutions under this study. This shift, however, appears not to have had an impact on the mode of placements in Namibia, as the majority of placements still took place physically (83.3%). This could imply that either stakeholders were unable to shift swiftly to other modes, or there were limitations that made it difficult for them to embrace other forms of WIL models, especially those related to technology.

The findings further reveal that innovative interventions adopted by stakeholders were not only limited to the online teaching and learning mode, but also included the use of

platforms on technological devices such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and more. Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe (2020) established that WIL during and post the pandemic generated new learning opportunities, such as showing leadership in a new space (online), self-management skills, using new tools, including development of communication skills via different tools (such as Zoom), and expanding knowledge.

Of concern, however, are the difficulties that most stakeholders in this study encountered with technology use. Virtual WIL presents significant challenges for student learning, for example, the inability to directly observe a colleague completing a task, the blurring of work and personal spaces, and the limited exposure to the nuances of workplace communication. This is in alignment with Zegwaard, Pretti, and Rowe (2020) who explored students' experiences of remote WIL during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that the transition to remote working introduced new challenges relating to work environment and technical difficulties. Although the study was conducted in a different context, the challenges seem to be universal worldwide as they highlighted the industry supervisors' inadequate supervision at times.

Moreover, Dean and Campbell (2020) highlight the need to shift away from the prevalent focus of WIL on work placements and diversify the practice of WIL while ensuring quality delivery of diverse forms of WIL. In contrast to these findings, this study highlights that the only way out of the normal mode of WIL employed amongst the ODL students in Namibia was virtual placement at 16.7% or a combination of both physical and virtual.

The fact that work-based learning through physical placements dominated placements amongst ODL students in Namibia reinforces the notion that work-based learning is likely to be the first choice of students in ODL contexts because these students are often employed and likely to undertake WIL at their respective workplaces. Abukari and Ahmed (2019) also argue that work-based learning is often applied to distance and open learning students, as these are adult learners who are usually in full-time employment. The Experiential Learning Theory emphasises the importance of experience and its role in the learning process (Cherry 2019). These study findings affirm the industry's significant contribution to the skills development of students, and this continued in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as revealed in this study.

Interestingly, stakeholders in this study emphasised the need for work-based support in the form of counselling in order to provide support as a result of trauma caused by COVID-19. Once more, this emphasises the intertwined relationship between students, higher education institutions, and industries in the context of ODL.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Institutionally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unexpected disruptions to educational practices, and WIL practices were no exception in the context of ODL. Students under

the ODL mode of study are particularly vulnerable due to long distances and remote locations and technology-related challenges such as poor networks and bandwidth.

In the implementation of WIL within the ODL context, stakeholders faced multiple challenges that need to be adequately prepared for in case of future similar pandemics. These challenges ranged from poor internet access to lockdowns and isolations, and Covid-19-related illnesses, among many. Challenging aspects require the attention of all the stakeholders and continuous engagement between institutions of higher learning and industries to ensure quality learning outcomes.

This study's findings shed light on challenges and opportunities that emerged as a direct result of COVID-19's impact on WIL in ODL. Moreover, useful recommendations to address similar scenarios in the future were captured. They included work-based counselling, increased internet data for students, and technology skills capacity building. Most importantly, all ODL stakeholders are required to be ready to enhance technology in the event of future pandemics.

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