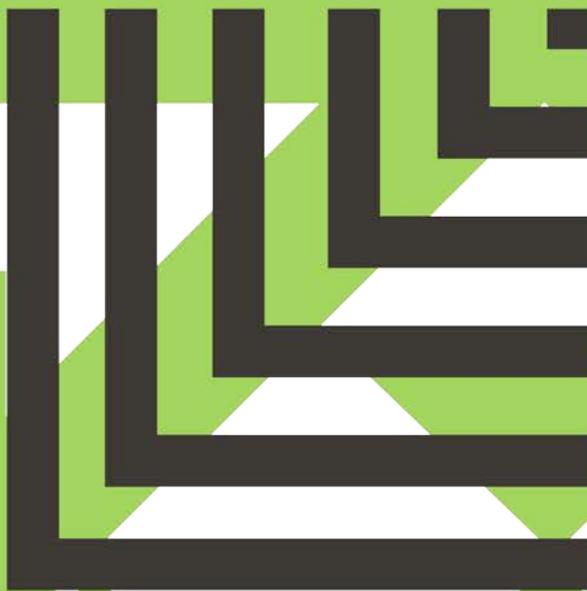


Demand and Supply for Work Integrated Learning Student Intern Placements

Green Skills Methodology Case Study

Prepared by Lameez Eksteen, Glenda Raven, and Zoë Visser



Introduction

What is the status of this research?

In 2013, GreenMatter appointed WWF-SA to implement the Bridging into Work (BiW) programme. One of the foci within this programme is improving the scope and quality of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements for student interns within the biodiversity sector. This research was conducted at the inception of the programme and then annually over a period of 3 years (2013-15) over June/August (the period when universities start to explore the placement of students for the following year). The results were used to inform the interventions undertaken by the BiW Programme, and have not been made publically available. Dr Glenda Raven was the Project Lead for the BiW Programme, conceptualising the methodology used in this research, together with Lameez Eksteen, the Skills Development Officer who undertook the research within the WWF-SA Environmental Leaders Programme (ELP). Over the three years the methodology was refined and is still being reworked based on data received and needed.

Purpose

What problem or question motivated the research?

WWF-SA was tasked with undertaking research to confirm the extent of the gap between the supply of biodiversity-related Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements for Universities of Technology (UoTs) students, and the demand for these placements within sector partner organisations. A typical challenge in WIL is that many students who are required to complete a compulsory work placement (student internship) as part of their qualification are often unable to find a suitable and relevant placement in the workplace. These students are unable to qualify as a result, and struggle to begin a career in the sector. Many people working in the sector suspected that there was a mismatch between demand and supply, but there was insufficient evidence to understand the real nature and scope of the gap, or to design interventions that address it adequately. By improving the alignment between demand for and supply of WIL student interns, GreenMatter and WWF-SA aimed to support more skilled people to bridge into work in the biodiversity sector.

Design

What methodology was used?

The methodology used for this research evolved over the three years of the research. Year 1 had a broader mandate of informing the development of the WIL programme. Thereafter the approach and methodologies became more quantitative as the ELP proceeded with other interventions to address quality issues. Questionnaires were adjusted year on year to improve the data required to assess the gap and to streamline the research process. In Year 1 of the research, generic information on internships was collected from employers and universities. In Year 2, universities and employers were surveyed to quantify their WIL placements. This resulted in a double count of WIL placements¹. Therefore, in Year 3 only universities were

¹ Employers surveyed were those with whom universities already had established relationships to place students from universities, so demand figures from employers were really a reflection of the supply from universities, in most part.

surveyed to establish the number of placements that were required and the number that they had managed to secure, preventing double counting.

Step 1: Create a participant list

Supply: Seven Universities of Technology (Cape Peninsula University of Technology; Central University of Technology; Tshwane University of Technology; Durban University of Technology; Mangosotho University of Technology; The University of South African; and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University) offer biodiversity-related learning programmes (including Horticulture, Nature Conservation, Game Ranch Management, Environmental Management, Environmental Health, Agricultural Management and Marine Science). WIL coordinators and/or relevant lecturers or heads of learning programmes were identified and added to the spreadsheet as research respondents.

Demand: In Year 1, 33 employers were included in the demand-side sample. These employers were drawn from a list previously compiled in another skills development initiative context. This was increased to 47 employers in Year 2, as a result of regional workshops convened in the programme which brought more employers into the fold. Participants included national, provincial and local government agencies, NGOs and some private companies. The list was still limited, due to time and staffing constraints (engaging employers is usually a time intensive exercise, requiring dedicated resources). Private nature reserves, for example, were not included in the research. Once host organisations were selected, potential respondents (usually within HR departments) were identified through a process of internal referral. Their contact details were added to the database of research respondents.

Step 2: Develop and disseminate questionnaires

During the first round two questionnaires were developed in an Excel spreadsheet, one for the employers group and one for the university group, and disseminated to the contacts identified in Step 1 via email. The initial email contained a background of the GreenMatter project, the relationship with WWF-SA, and a description of how the data they provided would be applied.

The **supply-side questionnaire** for UoTs captured information about the number of students requiring placement each year, and the number of students currently placed. It also captured more detailed information about the student internship requirements, including *inter alia* the demographic details of current student interns, their qualifications, and the duration of their internship, as per the figure below. With a broader programmatic focus, it also elicited responses regarding the quality of mentoring and funding for internships.

Figure 1: Supply-side questionnaire

Institutional information			
Name			
Institution			
Department			
Designation			
Learning programme			
Placement information			
Total number of placements required in 2014			
List organisations where students will be placed for 2015 or are placed for 2014	Number of placements per organisation	Duration of placement 2014	Duration of placement 2015
How are / were they placed?	<input type="checkbox"/> Student direct engagement with employer <input type="checkbox"/> University direct engagement with employer <input type="checkbox"/> Print media <input type="checkbox"/> Social media		Other (specify):
Are these placements funded?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No		
If yes, list funding source and amount	University budget	SETA funding	Private (specify)
What aspects of the placement are funded	<input type="checkbox"/> Furniture & equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Development	<input type="checkbox"/> Accommodation <input type="checkbox"/> Protective clothing	<input type="checkbox"/> Resources (eg. office infrastructure)

Similarly, the **demand-side questionnaire** disseminated to employers in Year 1 gathered information on *inter alia*: i) number of graduate interns and student interns hosted per annum; ii) qualification level breakdown of interns hosted; iii) duration of placements; iv) demography of interns; v) the functional focus of placements; vi) availability and quality of mentoring; and vii) funding.

Demand-side respondents in particular struggled to fill in the demographic information for current graduate and student interns placed within their organisations. By law they are required to have this information, but often the researcher was referred back and forth between HR and other employees within the organisation. In some cases the information could not be sourced, and was left out of the spreadsheet. On the supply side, it proved easier to work through WIL officers or academic staff at the UoTs, who are responsible for managing detailed information about student interns on behalf of their universities.

Step 3: Follow up via phone and email

Some of the participants filled in the questionnaire without any encouragement, but for the most part the researcher was required to follow up several times via the phone or email to ensure that it was completed and returned. A cut-off date was set, and anyone that had not returned the data by that date was removed from the research for that year. This follow-up process was quite time consuming, and dominated the researcher's time over the two months each year that the research was conducted.

Some national agencies who are key players in conservation – such as SANPARKS – did not return a questionnaire. Others, such as DEA, referred the researcher to individual departments, which meant that the data provided was not sufficiently comprehensive. Consequently, the research was not a comprehensive representation of all organisations hosting biodiversity-related WIL interns or representative of the sector.

Step 4: Collate results in Excel and analyse data as required by ongoing work of the programme

Data from questionnaires were manually captured in an over-arching excel spreadsheet. Each question was given a different tab on the spreadsheet. Graphs were then created to visually represent the data, as per the requirements of the programme (see results section).

Step 5: Follow up with specific organisations/ HEIs to ask questions related to the ongoing work of the programme

In some cases, the researcher followed up with host organisations or UoTs to probe their responses further. This qualitative research was conducted mainly in Years 2 and 3 of the research, leveraging on the relationships established in Year 1. Qualitative questions for specific respondents were generated iteratively over the 3 year research period, based on the information needs of the WIL programme of work being undertaken.

Researcher reflection on the methodology:

“It can be demotivating if research participants don't answer calls or respond to emails. Don't take it personally - people are very busy in this sector. Keep following up with them, and be polite and friendly - it will help to convince people to give you the data you need in their busy schedule.”

Lameez Eksteen, Skills Development Officer, WWF-SA Environmental Leaders Programme

Findings

What did the research find in relation to the research question?

In 2013, there was a large discrepancy between demand for and supply of WIL placements. The research found that 1545 people needed placement, and only 238 people were placed in host organisations. It was subsequently discovered that these figures were hugely inflated due to the cumulative impact of students not being placed over a number of years². Employers reported that they could not adequately fund or mentor interns, and lacked guidelines on the university standards that should be applied to the training in the experiential learning year. In the second year it became apparent that the misalignment was relevant only to few institutions.³ In the final year of the research, 6 of the 7 participating UoTs confirmed that all of their students had been placed for the 2016 academic year.

The research produced strong enough results to develop the interventions for the WIL project, which included: i) funding internships; ii) supporting relationship development between universities and employers; iii) development of an online platform for students to advertise their placement needs; and iv) a mentoring programme run by WWF-SA to train host organisations. Additionally, a quality assurance framework was developed to support employers in recruiting, placing, inducting students into the work environment, and supporting their development and assessment as a benchmark for WIL programmes. The iterative research and implementation allowed the researcher to gauge the success of WIL interventions (amongst other factors) over the course of research.

Reflections on the research

What did the researchers learn regarding the methodology?

- This methodology was cost effective. It involved only the time of the researcher, internet access, and the cost of telephone calls.
- A strength of the approach is that once relationships were developed with the researcher, most respondents were happy to follow up annually. Initially it was very difficult to build a relationship, but once established they were highly productive. These relationships also served other WWF-SA programmes.
- Had the research been more comprehensive, it could have been published for wider use.
- It would have been ideal to have had more time each year to conduct the research, or more researchers to dedicate to the project. This would have allowed a more representative sample of the sector to be consulted. In many cases, it would have been more effective to follow up with host organisations in person – additional time and human resources would have enabled this.
- Green Skills Research is really a full time job and cannot effectively be done as part of a host of additional job related duties.

² For example, 500 nature conservation students required placement in 2014, but these students were registered for many years prior.

³ Interestingly, these were the institutions that were participating less in the GreenMatter programme.

RESEARCH TEAM

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**A project of the National Research Foundation
Implemented by Rhodes University Environmental
Learning Research Centre**

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