

Promoting Responsible Citizenry in Higher Education through Work Integrated Learning in South Africa

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Abstract— Social responsibility is often associated with the private sector, without noticing the contribution made by higher education in promoting responsible citizenry. South Africa faces socio-economic challenges that require responsible citizenry to be encouraged. This paper explores how higher education develops students into responsible citizens in their engagement with communities through the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) module. The paper is underpinned by Freire's (1974-2000) theory, which seeks a connection between education and socioeconomic development in which university students show acts of responsible citizenry by committing to acts of love and care for communities. The study employed a mixed-method approach in gathering data. To gather quantitative data, a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to students to assess how higher education promotes responsible citizenry qualities through Work Integrated Learning activities in their interaction with communities which were analysed statistically. In determining the impact of change in communities in their interaction with higher education, qualitative data was gathered using focus group discussions that were thematically analysed. The findings revealed positive change among community members in learning about alternative ways of lessening poverty while students developed graduate attributes of responsible citizenry.

Keywords: Communities, engagement, Higher education curriculum, responsible citizenry, WIL.

I. INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher learning like the private sector contribute towards promoting responsible citizenry as a social change approach when students share knowledge and skills they have acquired to improve the lives of local communities [1]. Since South Africa faces several socio-economic challenges, it is important to use the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) module as one of the constituents of the curriculum to encourage responsible citizenry by bringing change in perspective among students that influenced them to contribute change in communities they engage with. In developing students to be responsible citizens, students need to show care and love for others and support those in need. The Truman Commission report recommends a curriculum that commits to responsible citizenry including a display of leadership qualities by universities in the society [2]. Aligned with this virtue, is the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by higher education in engaging with communities to help them find alternative ways of managing poverty [3]. Therefore, the commitment displayed by higher education responds to the call to show care to communities and to pass on values that develop students into responsible citizens. The belief is that such engagement and interaction can be driven through the curriculum using Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as an impetus to enable students to practice what they have learned while at the same time improving their academic performance [4]. Curriculum can thus be used as a

two-edged sword to establish a link between higher education and communities by creating a platform for students to plough back to society the knowledge, skills, and values they have acquired in higher education that improves society. [5] indicate that WIL is a curriculum design strategy that links students' classroom theory with what is found in different contexts of the real world. Besides, WIL comprises different benefits for students, that involve learning from professionals and what is happening in the real world by exposing students to the whole avenue of practice and experiences inclusive of political and socio-economic realities that face communities [6]. Students also benefit by promoting learning by doing which not only enhances insight and a deeper understanding of classroom theory but contributes towards producing versatile, responsible citizens who have a positive attitude and interest in community issues [7].

Responsible citizenry has a moral duty that is extended to different types of people and a sense of commitment to help others to promote social justice [8]. This implies that responsible citizenry incorporates ethical behavior, social responsibility, community engagement, and care for the environment. It is thus vital for higher education institutions, to foster these qualities in students to develop them into well-rounded, caring, and responsible citizens who contribute positively to society. The dominant type of engagement that higher education focuses on through WIL or service learning is mostly formal workplace settings that prepare students more for job readiness. Yet, the other angle of the university curriculum is to equip students with the knowledge, and skills

associated with civic competencies. Admittedly, responsible citizenry as another aim of education seems to be given less attention. As responsible citizenry forms part of the expediency needed in providing solutions to specific social problems, collaboration with communities through WIL can open mutual opportunities to tackle poverty and other challenges that higher education can contribute to, to improve the lives of communities. The Main Research Question explores how higher education through WIL as a curriculum design enables students to become responsible citizens who impact social change.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework refers to a connected set of concepts and assumptions that have been developed from theories to ground the study [9]. This paper adopts Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, which holds to the principle of a just society represented through the display of virtues of love and caring for humanity conveyed through WIL as a curriculum component that makes higher education institutions improve societies and bring liberation [10]. To Freire, humanity is one of the important virtues that reflect caring for others, identifying other's challenges, being real, and responsible, as well as helping others to solve problems as an act and commitment to principles of unconditional love, fairness, equity, and freedom [11]. The implication is that higher education must interact with communities to promote responsible citizenry for communities to reap the benefits of love, caring, and freedom. Although [12] indicates that Freire did not offer a logical explanation of how an act of love must be conveyed, the indication is that love and caring are part of existence and virtues that are transmitted through education to uphold humanity. This means that the development of responsible citizenry among students creates a leverage of sustaining humanity, freedom, and equality to create a just society, committed to moral virtues and Sustainable Development Goals. In this paper concepts of theories of Freire demonstrate the significance of sound values that are communicated through higher education curriculum design aiming to develop students' moral character to carry the responsibility of sharing knowledge and skills with communities. In the same vein, [13] Singer 1984 alludes to the idea that responsible citizens are sensitive to the suffering and needs of others and are conscious about the beauty of humanity to the extent of promoting moral acts of generosity, and sacrifices that bring confidence and fulfilment to others. On the other hand, acts of caring for others represent responsible citizenry which higher education conveys through curriculum content.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

University social responsibility engagement with communities

As contemporary society is increasingly faced with humanitarian crises, the social responsibility role of higher education curriculum in developing students in becoming responsible citizens becomes mandatory, [14]. Such interactions create social cohesion by fast-tracking solutions to some of the social problems, by conveying civic competencies including the sustainable use of limited resources [15]. This means that engagement with communities is significant because communities are faced with complex challenges that require collaborative efforts. The implication is that when students are allowed to apply knowledge, skills, and values in a social context they can commit to a moral consciousness of responsible citizenry. Besides, the prevailing challenges faced by the country such as poverty, use of resources, and unemployment need collaborative efforts [16]. This means that the government is not expected to do everything, people need to think of creative efforts to solve some of their challenges. Therefore, collaborations, recognition, and mutual sharing of knowledge communities possess, and scientific knowledge stimulated through WIL may assist in reducing some of the developmental and social challenges of communities. Such an engagement can also provide an opportunity for higher education to form partnerships that are mutually beneficial to all parties involved. In this context, students doing WIL following [17] collaborate with communities to extend another mission of the university of the application of teaching and learning to display a transformative angle that enables the university to actively participate with communities to respond to social issues. Similarly, a curriculum design that follows an agenda for a just society considers the interlink between the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing humanity [18]. On the other hand, [19] posits that global competitive trends and the measuring barometer for students who are developed holistically require individuals who can contribute knowledge and skills to meet the needs of both industries and communities. [20] indicates that Higher Education Institutions can promote the formation of diverse partnerships with various stakeholders to promote social innovation, which can contribute to community development in South Africa. Besides, there is a need to include emotional dimensions of learning in the curriculum to reflect humanity through collaboration to strengthen engagement with communities [21]. This means that students need to be prepared to internalise and perform certain roles by practicing those competencies in real-life situations outside the confines of the university.

Higher education futuristic approach

[22] opines that the role of education is no longer simply to transmit knowledge to students. However, it is to bring a paradigm shift regarding how students' conduct contributes to the upliftment of society to sustain the planet and humanity. In the same breadth, effective learning is about making a difference in the lives of others by igniting hope. This means that universities' interaction with communities through WIL should be to motivate communities and contribute to stimulating positive ideas that enable them to take action that improves their situation. Additionally, the promotion of democratic citizenship is to acquaint students with the dynamic, interdependent, and diverse environment in which they live that develops them into responsible, engaged youth with civic thinking who can take action that benefits others [23]. To that effect, a futuristic orientation's focus is on environmental sustainability, involvement in civic issues, and citizenship responsibility to add value to the lives of the people as a form of social justice [24].

Responsible Citizenship as Compendium for Ethical Principles

The quest to promote responsible citizenry in higher education curricula thus revolves around acknowledging the value of humanity, respect for human rights, equality, and social fairness and seeing citizenship as a concept that could bring society together, particularly communities facing societal crises [25]. This means that the commitment to responsible citizenry increases the call for higher education to expose students to ethical behaviour, that can be promoted through civic involvement and collaboration. The assertion is that higher education curriculum intervention around responsible citizenry must be a continuous process involving all citizens, including children and adults, requiring students to build both a skill set and a change in outlook toward life [26]. This demonstrates compliance and moral sensitivity to help communities by establishing relationships and the mutual sharing of scientific and Indigenous knowledge around ethical behaviour and responsible citizenry. [27] indicates that ethics and morality are perceived as principles that move from a lower hierarchy level of families and transcend to a higher hierarchy level of state governance where respective principles form the central nucleus base to govern the nation. Responsible Citizenry curriculum and virtues thus encompass principles of democracy, a participatory approach that has changed universities into more collaborative democratic institutions, especially in the global South [28]. Similarly, the embodiment of democratic and ethical principles drives higher education to pursue a socially just approach that benefits the public at large [29].

IV. METHODOLOGY**Research design**

A mixed methods approach referred to by [30] as a hybrid design was used to collect data. Qualitative, non-experimental designs explored the extent to which WIL impacts social change amongst local communities including the quantitative design that explored how higher education curriculum design through WIL enables students to become responsible citizens who plough back the knowledge, skills, and values they have acquired to become social actors who contribute towards the development of society whilst at the same time getting the opportunity to understand their world better [31]. A self-administered questionnaire used to collect quantitative data was analysed statistically whilst qualitative data collected using a semi-structured interview schedule were recorded, transcribed manually, and coded into themes [32].

Sample and sampling

Out of a population of 70 students, only a sample of 60 male and female students aged between 20-23 was used. A questionnaire was distributed to all 60 respondents and only 50 responses were obtained. To gather qualitative data, 20 purposively selected community members who interacted with the university students to take part in the project of planting household food gardens were interviewed.

Methods

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed to complement each other in the sense of adding qualities of objectivity, reliability, trustworthiness, and richness of data. The researcher used a self-administered 4-point Likert scale questionnaire to gather data from students who were involved in the WIL project and collaborated with informal settlement communities in the undertaking of the household food gardening project. The focused group co two groups consisting of ten members was conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule to collect data. The focus group discussion interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded into themes.

Data analysis

Data obtained through a self-administered questionnaire were analysed statistically. Data obtained from the interviews and FGDs was recorded and transcribed by the author and analysed systematically from content to codes, patterns, and emerging themes using content analysis [33].

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were considered and complied with in seeking permission to undertake the study by considering anonymity and confidentiality and data was put in a safe place.

Results and Interpretation of the findings emanating from a 4-Point Likert Scale

A 4 Likert scale with the following criteria: Strongly Agree(SA) /Agree (A) /Disagree (DS)/ Strongly Disagree (DA). Respondents' results were converted into percentages and analysed:

- + Statement 1: 100 % of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that the application of theory in real context displays a form of responsibility by enabling students to establish a link between theory and practice to have a holistic view of reality. This indicates a strong consensus on the importance of the practical application of theory in real-life situations to deepen students' knowledge and skills.
- + Statement 2: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that responsible citizenry is linked to respect for the rights of others. This shows the rights of others are a universal virtue that is linked to ethical behaviour and considered one of the qualities of a responsible citizen.
- + Statement 3: 90% of respondents agreed with the statement that Higher Education interaction with communities attempts to create a better life for all while 10% disagreed with the statement. This indicates that not all respondents are of the view that one single structure can be able to change their social lives.
- + Statement 4: 90% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that students' interaction with communities through WIL as a responsive curriculum design exposes them to communities' social challenges. 10% disagreed with the statement. This suggests a strong majority view but also indicates some dissent.
- + Statement 5: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that Higher education through WIL enables students to become change agents. This indicates a strong belief in the engagement and transformative impact of WIL. This aligns with [6]'s idea of promoting learning by doing which produces responsible students who can uplift communities
- + Statement 6: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that students' engagement with communities shapes their moral values of love, and care for humanity and other species. This highlights the perceived value of community engagement in changing the perspective of students and contributing towards moral development.
- + Statement 7: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that Higher education's engagement with communities promotes ethical behaviour. This indicates a strong consensus on the ethical benefits that promote a change in attitude.
- + Statement 8: 96% of respondents agreed with the statement that Higher education in its interaction with communities through WIL prepares students to solve

complex problems whilst 4% disagreed. Many of the respondents agree with the idea that higher education prepares students to tackle complex problems through community interactions, though a small percentage disagrees. This suggests broad support but also some varying opinions.

- + Statement 9: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that the sharing of knowledge and skills students acquire in higher education with communities turns them into responsible citizens. All respondents believe that sharing knowledge and skills with communities promotes responsible citizenship. This reflects a strong belief in the role played by higher education in developing responsible citizens.
- + Statement 10: 100% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement that responsible citizenry also reflects on knowing facts and being responsible for one's actions. All respondents agree that responsible citizenry involves knowing facts and being accountable for one's actions. This shows unanimous agreement on the elements of responsible citizenship.

Further analysis of the results from a 4-point Likert scale

Overall, these results reveal a strong and widespread belief in the positive role of higher education and community engagement in developing responsible, ethical, and knowledgeable citizens, although there is some variation in opinions on the extent of this impact. The belief is that Higher education has some impetus in promoting responsible citizenry as a social change approach when students share knowledge and skills they have acquired to improve the livelihoods of local communities, see [1]. Unlike cognitive elements, the emotional dimensions of learning in the curriculum on humanity are deepened through collaboration and engagement with communities, see [21]

Findings emanating from Focus Group Discussions (FDGs):

The following themes emerged from a focused group discussion of two groups of ten (10) community members located in one of the informal settlements in the Free State province in South Africa. These themes highlight the profound impact of collaboration between universities and communities, particularly in addressing poverty, food security, and environmental sustainability. Themes are highlighted and discussed below including their implications. The themes highlight the profound impact of collaboration between universities and communities, particularly in addressing poverty, food security, and environmental sustainability issues. Here's a discussion of each theme and its implications:

1. Collaboration instills self-belief and hope

Participants indicated that working with universities and students helped them realize that they could change their

situation by changing their perspective of thinking that it is the responsibility of the government to improve society without thinking with the available resources at their disposal they can initiate change and improve their situation of lack. A quote extracted from the FDGs indicating a level of appreciation for the community interaction with the university:

“Change starts with me is what made me accept the contribution made by the university”

[Participant 1]

This theme highlights the importance of education and partnership in empowering communities. When people believe in their ability to improve their circumstances, they are more likely to take initiative and become active participants in their development. This suggests that universities have a crucial role in fostering self-efficacy among community members, which can lead to sustainable change. The revelation links with Freire’s theory of caring for humanity which is regarded as one of the important virtues needed for human survival, see [11].

2. Student Engagement Reflects Care and Responsibility

Participants recognized the involvement of students in community projects, like household vegetable gardens, as an expression of care and responsibility toward addressing food insecurity. This means that the involvement of students in such initiatives can strengthen the bond between higher education institutions and the communities they serve. It shows that students are not only acquiring knowledge but are also applying it in ways that directly benefit society. This practical application of learning can lead to more compassionate and socially responsible graduates. This ties in with the sensitivity and consciousness of dealing with the suffering of others and helping them to pull through, see [13].

3. Transformative Outlook of the University

Also flagged is an extract from one of the participants in the FDGs indicating the following:

*“Universities are no longer working in silos;
I appreciate this transformation”*

[Participant 5]

Community members appreciate the university’s transformative approach to collaborating with communities toward producing graduates who are keen to share their knowledge and skills to impact positively on the community. This suggests that universities are evolving from being mere knowledge providers toward becoming active agents of change that promote holistic and ethical development. A transformed university has an impetus to develop graduates who are not only skilled but also socially conscious, to be able to demonstrate responsible citizenry in addressing and contributing to help in finding solutions to the socio-economic challenges faced by communities.

4. Higher Education’s Commitment to Making a Difference

Interaction with students gave participants the impression that higher education institutions are genuinely committed to reducing poverty and promoting sustainable living. This suggests that commitment from universities can help bridge the gap between academia and the real world, making education more relevant and impactful. The benefit of collaboration with communities also enhances the credibility of higher education institutions as key players in social development.

5. Empathy and Social Responsibility

Participants generally agreed that the engagement of higher education with communities demonstrates high levels of empathy and social responsibility. This theme highlights the role of universities in fostering social responsibility among students, which can lead to a more empathetic society. It also emphasizes the potential for higher education to contribute to social cohesion and community well-being.

6. Long-Term Community Partnerships

Some participants believe that long-term partnerships between universities and communities can enhance the social impact and encourage independent thinking.

This suggests that sustained engagement is key to achieving meaningful and lasting change. Long-term partnerships can lead to deeper trust, more effective knowledge transfer, and greater community resilience, reducing dependency on external aid.

7. Mutual Exchange of Knowledge and Skills

The exchange of knowledge and skills with students inspired confidence and self-belief among community members, showing that they too can solve problems. This indicates that mutual exchange empowers communities by validating their experiences and knowledge while also enriching students’ learning. It suggests that universities should continue to promote reciprocal learning, where both students and community members benefit from the collaboration.

8. Contribution to Human Development

Community engagement was seen as contributing to the broader goal of human development.

This reinforces the idea that universities play a vital role in holistic development, not just through academic education but also by fostering personal growth, social responsibility, and community well-being.

9. Environmental Sensitivity and Responsibility

Participants learned the importance of being sensitive and caring for the environment through their engagement with students and universities. This theme underscores the need for environmental education as part of community engagement efforts. Universities can play a significant role in promoting sustainable practices, which is crucial in the

context of global environmental challenges.

Overall Implications

The themes from these FGDs suggest that university-community collaboration is a transformative approach that benefits both communities, particularly students who develop into responsible citizens who care for the well-being of others. Such partnerships can lead to empowered, resilient communities, socially responsible

graduates, and a stronger alignment between academic goals and societal needs. The emphasis on mutual learning, long-term engagement, and social responsibility points to a model of higher education that is deeply integrated with community development, which can have far-reaching implications in resolving both local and global challenges.

The following figure shows the outcome of collaboration between universities and society



Figure 1: Engagement as interactions: university, economy, and society by Ronaldo Munck

Limitations of the study

The constraint in this study showed the need to collaborate with a broader spectrum of stakeholders to form a multi-collaboration including the identification of various needs of communities.

V. CONCLUSION

The quantitative results revealed the positive role of higher education curriculum engagement through WIL in developing students who are responsible, ethical, and knowledgeable citizens, who demonstrate a caring attitude toward humanity and other living organisms. It can be concluded that responsible citizenry is not about developing skilled professionals but about developing ethical and engaged members of society. Higher education curricula thus promote virtues of love and caring through their interaction with communities to find answers to some of the challenges. It can thus be concluded that WIL leverage values of social responsibility, ethical behaviour, and community involvement that demonstrate respect for humanity and the harnessing development opportunities. Therefore, the role of Higher education institutions in shaping students' character and developing morally conscious citizens who are not only responsible but who can tackle complex challenges is realised. The revelation is that consciousness about the plight of significant others including the country's development that reflects Freire's theory of caring for humanity is fulfilled. The opportunity created by Higher Education for students through WIL thus creates a space for students to model and relive professional behaviour, and ethical practices including

managing change. Engaging and collaborating with community members also suggests mutual benefits for both communities and students in the sharing of knowledge and skills as well as working together to find solutions to some of the social challenges demonstrates an indirect contribution to the country's development. To that effect exposing students to collaborative ways of addressing some of the social challenges, higher education institutions demonstrate a pivotal role in shaping the next generation of responsible citizens who are prepared to tackle the complex challenges of today's world. Undoubtedly, it can thus be confirmed that the promotion of responsible citizenry has the potential to bring positive consequences for the entire society. This suggests that community problems also bind universities as producers of the public good. As a result, the goals of education for responsible citizenry citizenship are associated with students' cognitive and ethical development including the improvement of communities.

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The assumption is that WIL as a curriculum component in higher education provides the opportunity for collaboration, comprehensive learning experience, and holistic development including the promotion of responsible citizenry among students as well as improving the livelihood of communities. This suggests that the promotion of citizen responsibility has the potential to strengthen ethical behaviour and increase diversity, multiculturalism, citizenship solidarity, and national identity including the futuristic plan of securing food sustainably. Higher education

collaboration with communities, therefore, has the benefit of developing futuristic graduates who can mutually share knowledge and skills with communities and contribute to enhancing change communities through the modelling of civic virtues and ethical behaviour that shape the kind of life that society desires to live in.

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