A South African Perspective of Work-Integrated Learning and HIV/AIDS Workplace Orientation

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ABSTRACT Work integrated learning (WIL) aims to enable students to shift easily into their chosen profession upon graduation. WIL lends value to the learning process and has resulted in it becoming far more strategic within Universities of Technology (UoT's) in South Africa. However, students entering the workplace are only afforded access to particular kinds of workplace experiences and possibly not those that are sufficient for the development of comprehensive workplace knowledge. The notion of employee orientation is of utmost importance to any student entering the workplace, more particularly employee orientation that provides information on policies and procedures regarding HIV/AIDS in the workplace. The overall objective of this study was to examine the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of WIL students' experiences regarding workplace orientation on HIV/AIDS. A quantitative approach was employed for this study. The study was conducted among final year public relations students completing their work-integrated learning. Findings reflected that majority of the students did not go through a formal orientation process and they were inadequately equipped to deal with HIV and AIDS in the workplace. Research implications for improving formalized workplace orientation on HIV and AIDS are reflected upon.

INTRODUCTION

In today's global society the HIV/AIDS pandemic is seen as one of the most significant challenges to health, development, and economic and social progress. South Africa in particular, has one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the world, with 5.6 million adults and children estimated to be living with HIV (Shisana et al. 2010). Statistics also indicate that the highest infections are occurring among young people between the ages of 15 to 49 (AVERT 2013). The high rate of infection in this age group indicates a significant reduction of the life expectancy of this group. This reduction exacerbates the situation further, as it results in a decrease in the productive workforce. The effects of HIV on the most prolific age groups inflicts huge expenses on organizations in the form of falling productivity, amplified labor costs and the loss of knowledgeable and experienced workers. The International Labor Organization (2010) reports that fundamental rights at work are often violated on the basis of a real or alleged HIV status, particularly through prejudice and stigmatization directed at workers living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. The development and implementation of workplace policies and programs on HIV and AIDS, facilitates the access to prevention, treatment, care and support services. Richard Holbrooke, President and CEO Global Business Council on HIV/AIDS, maintains that a business not only has a responsibility to act, but also an opportunity to play a crucial role in the global fight against the epidemic, particularly within their own workplace (Rau 2004).

Many organizations have found that comprehensive policies and prevention and care programs are effective ways of helping curb the spread of the disease. In many countries, workplace awareness and prevention programs will be the only source of accurate information employees will have about HIV/AIDS (Rau 2004). According to the South Africa Department of Labor (2012), most workplace programs therefore ought to include the following activities relating to the creation of a company policy on HIV/AIDS, its dissemination to all employees, its implementation and its occasional updating: information on HIV/AIDS, ways of preventing transmission, places to seek further information and services, and ongoing company and union

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support for responsible sexual behavior; condom distribution at readily accessible points around the workplace; STI diagnosis and treatment, whether within the company, in community clinics or in other centers where employees receive healthcare; treatment for HIV and associated diseases, such as tuberculosis; counseling and testing for HIV on a voluntary and private basis, with means to provide support for employees and/or family members who test HIV-positive; mitigation services designed to provide such follow-up activities as counseling, community support and home-based care.

The above literature clearly shows that the world of work plays a critical role in addressing HIV and AIDS as it offers a valuable entry point to reach the most significant age group affected by HIV/AIDS. Higher education institutions in particular represent a human resource pool for the workplace and are therefore in a prime position to meet this need due to their skills-based curriculum, which includes work integrated learning as a prime component. The purpose of this paper is to therefore examine the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of WIL students' experiences regarding workplace orientation and more specifically, HIV/AIDS workplace policy orientation.

Work Integrated Learning and Workplace Learning

Although work integrated learning takes different formats across higher education institutions, the South African Council on Higher Education (2011), identifies four main curricular modalities of WIL which are, work-directed theoretical learning, problem-based or oriented learning, project-based learning and workplace learning. Workplace learning in particular, relates to training and development of the student at their workplace. Workplace learning develops knowledge through experience in the workplace. Forbes (2007) maintains that because work-based learning is learning by experience in the workplace, it is a concept with many definitions and is considered to cover many different activities. Marsick (1987) maintains that workplace learning is the way in which individuals or groups acquire, interpret, reorganize, change or assimilate a related cluster of information, skills and feelings. Mathews (1999) argues that the way individuals learn, and how they respond to

change are key issues within this definition. Brennan and Little (1996) purport that work-based learning has been defined as learning for, at, or through work. Learning is positioned very broadly by the above. Rylatt (1994) however, asserts that workplace learning is a sustained and high leverage development of employees in line with organizational business outcomes. The key idea in this definition is focused around an idea of sustained development. Mathews (1999) purports that that workplace learning involves the process of reasoned learning towards desirable outcomes for the individual and the organization. These outcomes should foster sustained development of both, the individual and the organization, within the present and future context of organizational goals and individual career development. Boud et al. (2000) explain that workplace learning involves the acquisition of work-related knowledge and skills, both in the university and in the workplace, with the formal or non-formal involvement of employers. This form of WIL involves what students do in the workplace and this forms the basis of the curriculum which is typically a mix of the kind of higher order cognitive skills, such as reflection and critical thinking, required in university courses and more content and context specific work outcomes (South African Council on Higher Education, 2011). Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) state that merely placing students in the workplace does not guarantee that learning will take place. Forbes (2007) therefore states that curriculum development should incorporate a work-based or work-integrated prescribed learning outcome and should be informed by and planned in partnership with commerce and industry. The decision to prescribe a block of experiential learning time in industry should be informed by the assessment criteria of the structured learning outcome components. It therefore follows that work integrated learning ought to be a learning and development experience that is underpinned by student needs.

Most of the definitions cited above position development as a central factor in workplace learning, which could help students easily shift into their chosen profession upon graduation. Based on the above, it is evident that workplace learning lends value to the learning process and this has resulted in it becoming far more strategic and important. Therefore, in addition to a work-preparedness skills program conducted by

academics for WIL students at universities, there is a need for WIL students to undergo a formal workplace orientation process, conducted at the workplace, which covers important workplace policies and procedures. Affording students access to formal orientation processes will therefore add value to the kind of workplace knowledge being given to the WIL student and will possibly assist in the development of a more comprehensive workplace experience for the student.

Orientation in the Workplace

New employee orientation, often spearheaded by a meeting with the human resources department, generally contains information about safety, the work environment, the new job description, benefits and eligibility, company culture, company history, the organization chart and anything else relevant to working in the new company. It includes an introduction to each department in the company and training on-the-job. New employee orientation frequently includes spending time doing jobs in each department to understand the flow of the product or service through the organization (Heathfield 2013). Another definition offered by the Business Dictionary (2013) defines workplace orientation as an introductory stage in the process of new employee assimilation, and a part of his or her continuous socialization process in an organization. The Business Dictionary (2013) further states that the major objectives of orientation are to gain employee commitment, reduce anxiety, to help the employee understand the organization's expectations, and to inform an employee about job expectations.

This definition supports Chao et al. (1994) view that workplace orientation is a process through which an employee learns and adapts to a new position in an organization as organizational socialization. Studies (Ashforth and Saks 1996; Saks and Ashforth 1997) show that the use of socialization training has been linked to job satisfaction and commitment. Together, these studies suggest socialization training can be used in a strategic manner to ease an employee's transition into an organization and influence subsequent attitudes and behavior. A central theory of socialization is the theory of uncertainty reduction (Falcione and Wilson 1988; Lester 1987).

The Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) proposes that when an employee joins an organization he/she experiences high levels of anxiety as a result of uncertainty. This uncertainty typically causes discomfort. To reduce this anxiety, the employee gathers information in various domains from various sources. Once sufficient information about the workplace has been collected the employee is able to better understand the workplace. This makes the workplace more predictable and controllable for the employee. It is through this process, as an employee gathers the necessary information to comprehend and function in his/her new environment, that successful socialization takes place (Foley 2010). This theoretical concept has served as the basis for much of what is known about socialization in terms of training, tactics, and information seeking (Saks and Ashforth 1997). In keeping with URT, many researchers have viewed socialization as a learning process. In this context, studies have shown that there are four distinct contextual domains that are relevant to the socialization process: *task, role, group,* and *organizational* domains (Fisher 1986). The *task* domain deals with all aspects related to the actual execution of the job: how to perform task assignments and use equipment. The *role* domain focuses on non-task specific expectations for the position. These would include appropriate behaviors as well as boundaries of authority and responsibility. *Group* processes are concerned with group structure, group norms and values, and how the group functions as a unit. The *organizational* domain is made of information regarding organizational structure, history, organizational policy/goals/values, politics, and language. Research has shown that employees who believed that they possessed more knowledge in these information domains were more satisfied, more committed, and better adjusted (Ostroff and Kozlowski 1993).

Studies (Wanous 1992; Wanous and Colella 1989) indicate that the absence of adequately socializing employees has been linked to outcomes such as counterproductive work behaviors, unmet expectations and lower levels of turnover. Other studies (Allen and Meyer 1990; Ashforth and Saks 1996) have indicated that positive socialization has led to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and decreased turnover intentions. According to Simms (2002), many organizations have orientation processes

that address the paperwork issues but do not include crucial information about the company's products, and services, culture, policies, customers, health and safety issues. Simms (2002) further argues that orientations must be customized to the company's culture, processes, values, procedures, and policies, so most companies develop their own orientation programs. Meeting new people and understanding the functioning of the different departments and how they interrelate with other departments, understanding a company's culture, processes, values, procedures, and policies within the organization can be an anxious and maybe even a daunting experience for WIL students. Ideally, the employer should therefore take responsibility to welcome the new employees (students) to explain what is expected of them. Sharpe (2000) affirms that an orientation is a process not an event. Therefore, WIL students will benefit greatly from undergoing workplace orientation. It will ensure a more authentic workplace experience for the student and will lend to the holistic development of the student. Sharpe (2000) further states that an orientation program should comprise of company history and context, employee programs and services, and policies and procedures as these guidelines form the basis of orientation programs. However, students entering the workplace are only afforded access to particular kinds of workplace experiences and possibly not those that are necessary for the development of comprehensive workplace knowledge. For example, one area that needs to be advanced is the issue of an HIV and AIDS workplace policy. Rau (2004) states that in many countries, workplace awareness and prevention programs will be the only source of accurate information employees will have about HIV/AIDS. Workplace policies and programs on HIV/AIDS facilitate access to prevention, treatment, care and support services, and in most cases the transmission of this information is often communicated during orientation programs. However, do students undergo formal workplace orientation and more specifically does the orientation program address the issue of HIV/AIDS policy in the workplace?

Objectives

The objective of this study was to examine the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of WIL student's experiences regarding work-

place orientation and more specifically HIV/AIDS workplace policy orientation. It suggests that exposing WIL students to a formal orientation program in the workplace will assist in the development of the student and will lend to a more comprehensive and valuable workplace experience. In addition, the paper suggests that to advance the students' knowledge of workplace policies, workplace orientation could be formally integrated into the curricula at universities.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach was used for this study. The study was conducted at a selected University of Technology in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to select a sample for this study as participants were selected according to a pre-selected criterion relevant to this paper (students who had completed formal workplace learning). Eighty-one final year students who were completing compulsory workplace learning participated in the study. The data collection instrument was a self-administered questionnaire, which consisted of mainly close-ended questions. An exploratory questionnaire was devised to seek information about workplace orientation and specifically, HIV/AIDS workplace policy orientation. The data gathered was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15.0 for Windows.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Attendance to a Formal Orientation Program

As reflected in Figure 1, most (61%) respondents did not attend a formal orientation process at their place of work. The remaining (39%) indicated that they did not have a formal orientation process at work for varying reasons, of which the main reasons cited indicated that, *there was no formal orientation program*. Another popular reason cited was that *it's a small company and no formal orientation took place...they just explained what they do and what my place in the company was. Another respondent mentioned that there is no formal orientation program for students and I was only introduced to the people whom I was going to work with.* The data from these findings indicates that workplace orientation amongst WIL students is inconsistent amongst employers of students. Some
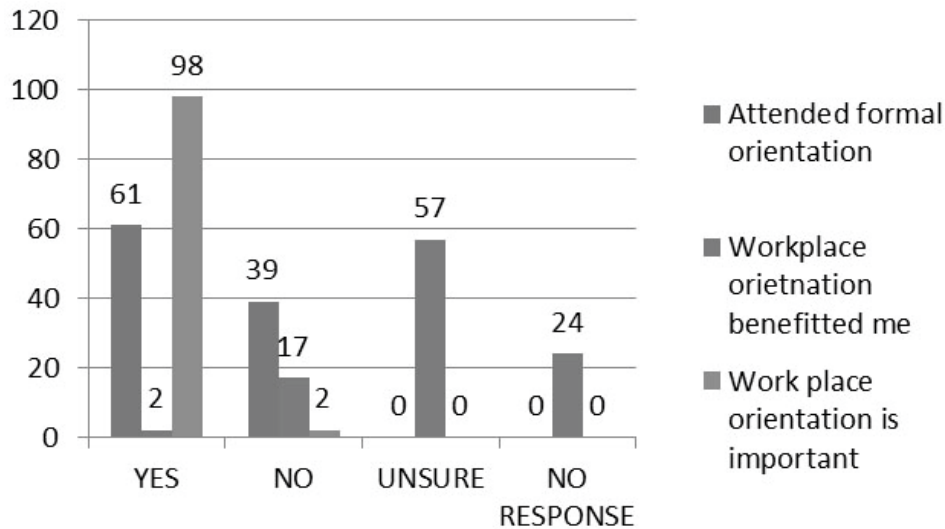
Fig. 1. Orientation in the workplace

students are afforded access to orientation whilst others are not. This could be attributed to the notion of the student being an intern and possibly because the student occupies a temporary position in the organization. However, the absence of a formal workplace orientation program does raise concerns relating to the kinds of workplace experiences afforded to the student. As affirmed by Muir (2014), implementing a formal orientation process assists staff settle into their new job so they can become a productive and contributing member of the team. Getting orientation right will undoubtedly add value to the organisation.

Student's Perceptions of the Importance of Workplace Orientation

Most (98%) of the respondents indicated that orientation was necessary. The remaining (2%) felt it was not necessary because the *work placement was not permanent and they were going to leave after six months of training*. The most popular reasons cited for why orientation was important was that *an orientation welcomes and helps the new employee understand the whole corporate culture and what is expected of him/her, it helps the employee know who is who and how she is expected to report*. Other students

mentioned *that it helps give you as a clear view of your entire organizations' objective and roles and the vision and values*. Whilst a few mentioned that it *helps make you feel valued*. A few cited orientation as being valuable because *you are formally addressed about the company as well as its rules and regulations*. The overall findings show that most students agreed that orientation is important and linked it to factors related to role related functions as proposed by seminal researcher (Fisher 1986). However, further analysis of data indicates that there is an absence of students linking workplace orientation to the various policy frameworks within which a company operates. These findings are inconsistent with Sharpe's (2000) affirmation, that is, part of the overall integration of new employees into the organization by which the organization assists the new recruits in adjusting to the work environment and the position they are hired for. Thus, although the majority of students in this study are aware of the importance of orientation, information linking workplace orientation to the various policy frameworks within which a company operates ought to be addressed. This could possibly be addressed by including a formal assessment which tests students' knowledge regarding linking workplace orientation to policy frameworks.

My Workplace has a HIV/AIDS Policy and Recognizes HIV/AIDS as a Workplace Issue

Figure 2, shows that most (61%) of the organizations where WIL students are employed do not have HIV/AIDS policies. The others (33%) mentioned that the organization that they were employed at had HIV/AIDS policies. Whilst a small (6%) were unsure of whether their organization had such a policy. In addition, most (54%) of the respondents revealed that the organization they worked for did not recognize HIV/AIDS as a workplace issue. Others (39%) indicated that although their workplace recognized HIV/AIDS as a workplace issue, they indicated that this issue was never discussed with them. The remaining (7%) mentioned that they were unsure if the organization they worked for did in fact have a HIV/AIDS policy. The implications of organizations not having HIV/AIDS policies point out that most students would not have learnt about HIV/AIDS and workplace policy. This has implications relating to the particular kinds of workplace experiences that students are being exposed to in the workplace. The accreditation of workplace stations at which students complete WIL could incorporate a criteria relating to a discussion on HIV/AIDS policy in the workplace. A criterion of this nature would intend to demonstrate to the WIL student how HIV/AIDS policy unfolds in practice and its implications for employees. Higher education intuitions could also ensure that HIV/AIDS in the workplace is one of the factors that is included as a prerequisite for accrediting the workplace sites for WIL students.

WIL Students' Knowledge of HIV/AIDS in the Workplace

Findings for this question relate student knowledge of HIV/AIDS policy in the workplace. The findings are reported in Figure 3 from the broad themes as identified by the International Labor Organization (2010).

My Workplace Helps the Fight HIV/AIDS

A fair number of respondents (48%) indicated that their workplace *helps fight against HIV/AIDS*. Other respondents (43%) affirmed that their organization *did nothing to fight HIV/AIDS*. A minimum number (2%) revealed that they were *not sure whether their organization helped the fight against HIV/AIDS*. The remaining respondents (7%) did not respond to the question.
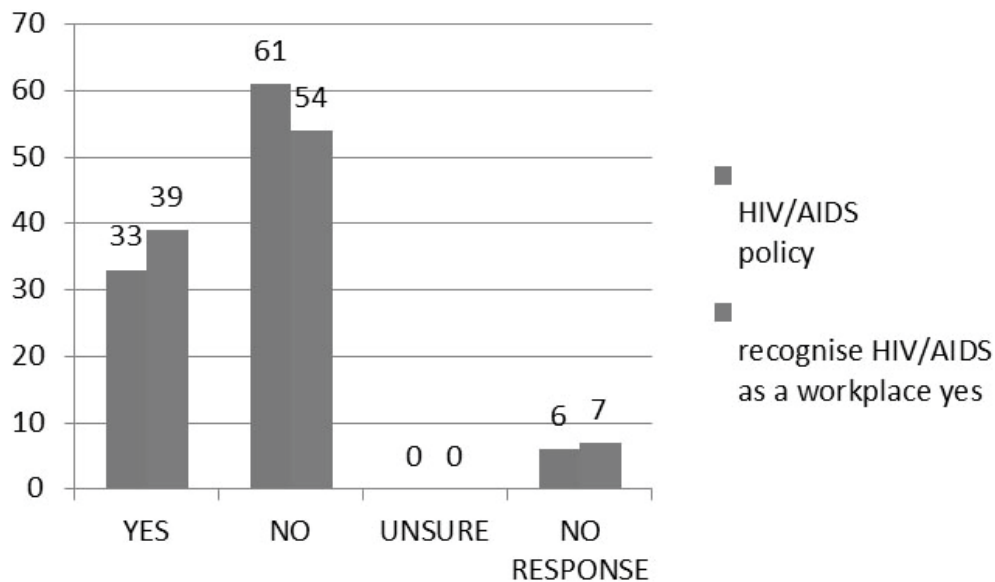

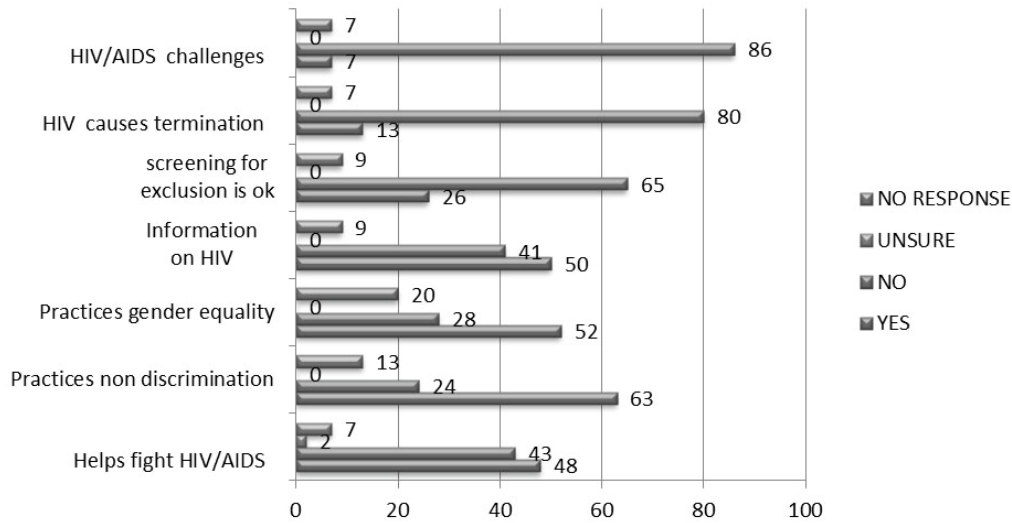**Fig. 2.HIV/AIDS policy in the workplace**

Fig. 3. Knowledge of HIV/AIDS in the workplace

These findings are indicative that in certain organizations the development and implementation of workplace policies and programs on HIV and AIDS are still non-existent. These findings raise concerns around issues as to whether students are exposed to HIV/AIDS policies and procedures in the workplace.

My Workplace Practices Non-discrimination

An above average number of respondents (63%) indicated that HIV/AIDS non-discrimination is practiced in their workplace. Another small number (24%) of respondents said that there were instances wherein cases of HIV/AIDS discrimination took place in the workplace. The remaining (13%) did not respond to this question. The twenty-four percent of respondents who indicated that HIV/AIDS discrimination still exists in their workplace (although minimal) clearly confirms that HIV/AIDS is still a pandemic surrounded by obliviousness, prejudice, stigma and discrimination as reported in the Employment Equity Act (South Africa 2012). It is therefore crucial that students are guarded against this discrimination and when UoTs accredit workstations, this factor is considered.

My Workplace Practices Gender Equality

More than half (52%) of the respondents indicated that their workplace practices gender

equality. Another small (28%) number of respondents said that their organization did not practice gender equality. The remaining (9%) did not respond to this question. Although a majority of the respondents indicated that their workplace practices gender equality there is still a minority that have indicated that in their place of employment gender equality is not practiced. This finding alludes to the Commission for Gender Equality study conducted in 2008 (cited in Hicks 2010), that most organizations were ignorant of national and regional acts and commitments to gender equality. It is therefore crucial that students are informed and made aware of gender discrimination and yet again, UoTs should consider this factor when accrediting workstations.

My Workplace Provides Information Relating to HIV/AIDS

Half (50%) of the respondents indicated that their workplace provided them with information relating to HIV/AIDS. Less than half (41%) of the respondents said that their organization did not provide them with information relating to HIV/AIDS. The remaining (9%) did not respond to this question. Findings clearly indicate that the workplace plays a vital role in addressing HIV/AIDS as it offers a valuable entry point to reaching the most significant age group affect-

ed by the pandemic. The UoTs, businesses and labor can collaboratively make efforts to be a source for credible and accurate information that can prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS (The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 1998).

Screening for the Purposes of Exclusion

Only a small number (26%) of respondents affirmed that it was correct for an organization to screen for HIV/AIDS for the purposes of exclusion. However, majority (65%) of the respondents affirmed that it was not correct for an organization to screen for the purposes of exclusion. The remaining respondents (9%) did not respond to the question. Findings indicate that most of the respondents are aware an organization may not screen for HIV/AIDS for the purposes of exclusion (International Labor Organisation 2010). However, the twenty-six percent of respondents were not familiar that this is an area of concern. UoT's should therefore ensure that students are aware of their rights before being placed for WIL. Furthermore, UoT's should consider this factor when accrediting workstations.

HIV Infection is a Cause for Termination

A small number (13%) of respondents believed that HIV infection is a cause for termination. Most of the respondents (80%) said that HIV infection is not a cause for termination. The remaining respondents (7%) did not respond to the question. Majority of the respondents agree with the International Labor Organisation (2010), which affirms that HIV infection is not a cause for termination of employment. As with other viruses, individuals infected with HIV should be able to work for as long as they are medically fit. The Labor Protect (2010) adds that in the case where employees can no longer carry out their work responsibilities, an employer should first investigate what the extent of the employee's capability to do their job is and the alternatives that may be available apart from dismissal.

Any Experiences Relating to Social and Cultural Challenges Related to HIV/AIDS

A small number (7%) did experience social and cultural challenges relating to HIV/AIDS in the workplace. Respondents revealed that some of these challenges related to discrimination. One

responded revealed *"when a staff member passed away in the workplace there was discussion by employees about his status"*. The issue of being *"stigmatized and being outcast in the workplace"* was also identified as a challenge in the workplace. Most of the other respondents (86%) did not experience social and cultural challenges relating to this. The remaining respondents (7%) did not respond to the question. Although a minimum number of respondents indicated that they have had experiences with cultural challenges relating to HIV/AIDS, it appears that discrimination and stigmatization still exists in the workplace. This confirms with AVERT (2013) in that the consequences of HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination are extensive, for example, being shunned by family, peers and the wider community, poor treatment in healthcare and education settings, an erosion of rights, psychological damage, and a negative effect on the success of HIV testing and treatment. Hence, it is important for organizations to educate employees about the pandemic and provide support structures for individuals affected by HIV/AIDS. Educating and supporting both infected and affected employees about the pandemic will aid in a non-discrimination and non-stigmatized working environment.

More is Needed to Prepare Me to Deal with HIV/AIDS in the Workplace

Majority (81%) of the respondents indicated that more is needed to prepare them to deal with HIV/AIDS in the workplace. A small number (17%) of the respondents said that they did not need any preparation to help them deal with HIV/AIDS in the workplace. The remaining (2%) did not respond to this question. These findings are a clear indication that there are significant differences between the expectations from students, academic staff and the industry. Orientation and specifically, issues on HIV/AIDS in the workplace were highlighted to be critical components by students (Forbes 2003). Including curricula on HIV/AIDS in the workplace should therefore be a vital factor to consider.

CONCLUSION

Findings regarding orientation reveal that there is a need for students to undergo a formal

and structured orientation program during their WIL work placement. Most students perceived workplace orientation as a beneficial process, however they were not afforded the opportunity to experience this process. Majority of the students indicated that orientation is important. Based on this, it can be concluded that workplace orientation will add value to the WIL students' work experience and will assist in the comprehensive development of the student. Students should therefore be given the opportunity to experience an orientation process in the workplace. An above average number of students were not exposed to a workplace HIV/AIDS policy. Furthermore, an above average number of workplaces did not recognize HIV/AIDS as a workplace issue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Contribution of Workplace Orientation to Comprehensive Workplace Experiences

Based on these findings it can be concluded that students are not sufficiently exposed to HIV/AIDS policy related workplace practices. It is therefore recommended that if students are not exposed to HIV/AIDS policy related issues then the university creates a platform for students to be part of a learning experience around issues of HIV/AIDS in the workplace. These experiences should focus on critical issues such as:

- Workplace interventions to help fight against HIV/AIDS
- How to deal with issues of discrimination in the workplace
- Policy and practices around the issue of gender equality
- Legal rights in the workplace relating to HIV/AIDS screening and termination
- How to deal with social and cultural challenges related to HIV/AIDS
- Orientation and HIV/AIDS workplace policy could be included as a prerequisite for site accreditation for WIL
- Workplace orientation and issues relating to HIV/AIDS in the workplace should form a part of the curricula at institutions of higher learning and should therefore be formally assessed after the work placement experience.

Overall, it is recommended that although WIL affords students an opportunity to learn in the workplace, it is also important for them to have access to comprehensive workplace experiences that will allow them to develop comprehensive workplace knowledge.

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