



The Future of Work-Integrated Learning: Everything Institutions Need to Know About Mandatory WIL Under QCTO



South Africa's skills development system is undergoing one of its most significant transformations in decades and entering a decisive new era. Driven by rapid technological advancement, shifting economic realities and evolving industry needs, the way we prepare learners for the world of work is changing fundamentally.

At the centre of this shift is the transition from the traditional Skills Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) framework to Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) qualifications. A clear message to education institutions that acknowledges that Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is no longer optional. It is mandatory, structured and integral to occupational competence.

For institutions, this moment requires more than compliance. It calls for rethinking partnerships, processes and the systems that support workplace learning at scale.

Why mandatory WIL changes the institutional role

Under the QCTO framework, occupational qualifications are designed around the realities of work. Theory, practical training and workplace exposure are intentionally integrated, assessed and quality assured. This fundamentally changes how institutions operate.

Institutions are no longer only providers of academic instruction. They become orchestrators of learning ecosystems, responsible for coordinating employers, mentors, assessors and learners often across sites and industries.

This expanded role brings new expectations:

- Verified and quality-assured workplace placements
- Ongoing monitoring of learner exposure and progress
- Structured mentorship and assessment
- Transparent reporting aligned to QCTO requirements

Meeting these expectations consistently is not simply a question of effort. It's also a question of capacity and capability.

The Hidden Complexity of WIL at Scale

Mandatory WIL introduces complexity that is often underestimated. As student numbers grow and occupational qualifications expand, institutions must manage:

- Hundreds or thousands of placements simultaneously
- Multiple employers with varying levels of readiness
- Diverse mentor capabilities and availability
- Detailed evidence requirements for audits and quality assurance

Without strong coordination, even well-intentioned WIL programmes can become fragmented, placing strain on institutional teams and employer partners alike.

The case for systems, not spreadsheets

As QCTO requirements become more defined and oversight increases, institutions face a practical reality: manual processes cannot sustain mandatory WIL at scale.

Spreadsheets, email chains and disconnected tools create risk. Not only for compliance, but for learner outcomes and partner trust. Systems are needed not to control learning, but to support it.

Effective digital systems enable:

- Real-time visibility into learner progress
- Consistent documentation and evidence collection
- Early identification of issues in placements or mentorship
- Reduced administrative burden for institutional teams and employers

Importantly, systems also provide a shared source of truth, strengthening relationships by replacing uncertainty with clarity.

Preparing institutions for what comes next

Mandatory WIL under QCTO is not a temporary adjustment and institutions that approach this transition proactively by strengthening partnerships, rethinking operating models, and investing in enabling systems will be better positioned to:

- Meet QCTO compliance requirements with confidence

- Deliver high-quality workplace learning experiences
- Support employers without overburdening them
- Produce graduates who are genuinely work-ready

At OLUMS, we believe this moment presents an opportunity to build stronger relationships, smarter systems and a more responsive skills ecosystem for South Africa. The future of Work-Integrated Learning will not be defined by policy alone. It will be shaped by how effectively institutions, employers and technology work together to turn intention into impact