

Exploring the Relationship Between Industry and Academia for Future-Fit Retail Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper emphasises the imperative for Higher education institutions to incorporate future-fit skills into their curricula, addressing rapid technological changes and industry demands, particularly in the wholesale and retail sector, are all vital to South Africa's gross domestic product. Despite its significance, the sector faces a persistent skills gap due to outdated curricula. This study investigates perceptions regarding the relationship between retailing academia and the industry. Employing a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews unveil varied perceptions, ranging from collaborative to disjointed. Facilitators include mutual interactions and shared perceptions, while hindrances encompass power dynamics and operational disparities. Recommendations include establishing collaborative platforms and advisory boards for transparency. Improving this relationship can enhance graduate employability, bolster the wholesale and retail sector's competitiveness, and contribute to South Africa's economic growth.

1. Introduction

The necessity of integrating future-fit skills into Higher education institution (HEI) curricula has been emphasised by scholars, such as Kruger and Barkhuizen (2022) and Loots and Oberholster (2024). These skills, crucial due to technological advancements, encompass digitalisation and technology-related competencies (Junge, 2023). Industry expectations affirm the need for graduates to possess

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these skills, underscoring the importance of embedding them in HEI curricula to enhance graduates' readiness for the workforce. However, sectors like wholesale and retail (W&R), vital to South Africa's economy, face persistent skills shortages, as HEI retailing curricula fail to align with industry demands (Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022). This discrepancy impacts graduates' employability and the nation's economic landscape (Teuteberg, 2021). Research by Ward and Pillay (2023) for the Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&R SETA) highlighted misalignment between academia and industry, influenced by varied perceptions. Nevertheless, understanding of the industry-academia relationship's impact on future-fit retail Higher education remains unexplored. This paper aims to investigate this relationship's dynamics, starting with an overview of the study's background.

1.1. Background

The retail sector is pivotal to the South African economy, accounting for nearly 20% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and showing a 2.7% year-on-year increase in retail trade sales from 2019 to 2023 (Stats SA, 2023). As the second-largest employer after the government, the retail sector's influence on the economy is substantial (Teuteberg, 2021). However, despite its significant role, the sector faces notable skills gaps that hinder employees' ability to be "future-fit", a term referring to a company's ability to adapt and possess robust internal capabilities to handle business complexities, particularly in digitalisation and technology (Junge, 2023; Yu, Shan, Boutalikakis, Tempel & Balian, 2022).

The W&R SETA (2020b) prioritises upskilling employees at all levels to address these gaps. Its mission is to develop a skilled, capable, and professional workforce to transform the W&R sector. The W&R SETA (2023) Sector Skills Plan (SSP) report identified key skills shortages, including digitalisation and technology skills, data analytics, data management, business intelligence, technology adoption, adaptability, and resilience. To combat these shortages, integrating skills development into HEI curricula is crucial (Otermans, Aditya & Pereira, 2023).

According to the W&R SETA (2020a) SSP 2020–2025, curricula must align with sector labour market demands. Meyer and Van Dyk (2022) emphasised developing up-to-date curricula and training programmes to equip employees with the necessary knowledge and skills for agility in the fast-changing W&R sector. W&R SETA (2024b) supported this recommendation, noting the importance of technology integration into curricula due to digitisation, automation, and globalisation in the retail industry. Empirical findings by Manubag, Kilag, Peñalosa, Timtim, Padilla and Abendan (2023) further supported this.

Many industry reports and empirical studies (e.g., Manubag et al., 2023; Otermans et al., 2023) underscore the need for alignment between curricula and sector skills. Despite numerous studies on skills shortages and curricula alignment, a disconnect between academia and industry persists (Ward

& Pillay, 2023). Meyer and Van Dyk (2022) argued that retailing curricula are not adequately adapted or frequently revised to meet evolving sector demands, resulting in ongoing skills shortages and inadequately prepared HEI graduates.

This study aims to explore the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry to understand how this relationship influences the alignment of retailing curricula with sectoral needs. Ahmed, Fattani, Ali and Enam (2022) posited that building a long-term relationship between these primary stakeholders is essential to embedding future-fit skills in retail curricula. By exploring the existing relationship, areas for collaboration may emerge, enabling HEIs to engage continuously with the retail sector. This engagement would help embed future-fit skills in curricula, preparing youth for careers in retailing and benefitting the sector, economy, and country at large (Stats SA, 2023).

1.2. Problem statement

The retail sector contributes significantly to the South African economy through GDP and employment (Stats SA, 2023; Teuteberg, 2021). Despite its pivotal role, the sector faces a critical challenge of skills shortages amongst retail graduates from HEIs, particularly those skills deemed as “future-fit”, including digitalisation and technology (Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022; W&R SETA, 2023, 2024b). Some initiatives by the W&R SETA have been implemented that aim to address these skills gaps, yet there remains a persistent disconnect between the skills imparted by HEIs curricula and the evolving demands of the retail sector.

Although numerous studies underscore the importance of curricula alignment with sectoral needs (e.g., Anyigba, Preko & Senayah, 2024; Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022; Pantano, Pizzi & Rogers, 2021), W&R retailing curricula and sectoral needs continue to experience misalignment. A long-term solution to maintaining a relationship that aligns stakeholders’ expectations and retailing academia to foster success and mutual benefit remains elusive, which implies that the retail sector continues to contend with skills shortages attributed partly to HEI graduates’ preparedness for the constantly evolving demands of the retailing industry (W&R SETA, 2024b). This lack of preparedness is a result of retailing curricula that do not sufficiently address sectoral needs. Thus, a critical need arises to explore the relationship between academia and the retail industry according to the W&R SETA (2020a) SSP 2020–2025 report, seeking avenues for collaboration to embed future-fit skills in curricula.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between academia and the retail industry, including perceptions, challenges, and alignment. By fostering a long-term relationship between these primary stakeholders, the study seeks to bridge the gap between retailing curricula and sectoral needs. Through this collaboration, HEIs can continually adapt their curricula to equip graduates with the required future-fit skills, ultimately benefitting both the retailing sector and the broader South African economy.

1.3. Research objectives and questions

In view of the background to the study and the above-stated problem, the main research aim for this study is to explore the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. To support the main aim of the study, the following research questions are presented:

- How is the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry perceived?
- What facilitates or hinders the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry?
- To what extent is there alignment between the retailing industry's future-fit needs and the retailing curricula offered at HEIs?

This paper commenced by providing an introduction and background to the study, inclusive of the problem statement, and the research objectives and research question. Next, the paper presents the literature review and theoretical framework underpinning the study. Thereafter, the research methodology is outlined followed by the findings of the study. The managerial implications are delineated which include the findings relating to previous literature and recommendations from the study. Subsequently, the limitations of the study and suggestions for future studies are presented, and lastly, a conclusion is provided.

2. Literature Review

This section presents an overview of the retail sector in South Africa, including a discussion on the skills gaps identified, the challenges in aligning curricula with sectoral needs, and the major drivers of skills change and building long-term relationships between academia and the retail industry. Thereafter, the theoretical framework and the theories that underpin the study are presented.

2.1. Overview of the retail sector in South Africa

The W&R sector is essential to the South African economy and is the second-largest employer after the government (Labour Research Service, 2022). According to Kenton (2022), the sector accounts for nearly 20% of the country's GDP (Botha, 2022; Kenton, 2022). W&R is estimated to be the fourth-largest contributor to South Africa's GDP and employs an estimated 30 000 tax-registered businesses, engaging nearly 20% of the economically active workforce. Consequently, W&R is an important sector, where growth boosts consumer confidence and stimulates consumer spending (Abraham, 2022). Despite its significance to the South African economy, one of the challenges the industry constantly contends with is the skills gap related to being future-fit.

2.2. Future-fit

According to Yu et al. (2022), "future-fit" refers to a company's ability to adapt to and have robust internal capabilities to deal with complexities in the business environment that enable growth. These

capabilities relate to digitalisation and technology (Junge, 2023). Kotsiou, Fajardo-Tovar, Cowhitt, Major and Wegerif (2022) stated that future skills intended to prepare learners to integrate into future organisations are knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, and competencies. Advances in technology require a combination of human, digital, and traditional skills, highlighting the need for Higher education to play a pivotal role in preparing retail graduates and employees to upskill and future-proof their careers (Ben-Gal, 2020; Woods, Doherty & Stephens, 2021).

This concept of future-fit is becoming increasingly important in different areas, such as education, industry, and professional development. Kotsiou et al. (2022) explained that the benefits of being future-ready are diverse and impact individuals, organisations, and societies. These benefits include improving adaptability, decision-making, and preparedness for future challenges. According to Ab Jalil, Ismail, Ma'rof, Lim, Hassan and Nawi (2022), being future-fit allows individuals to respond flexibly and make informed decisions in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. Furthermore, Ab Jalil et al. (2022) found that the university learning experience, ecosystem, and curriculum positively, directly, and significantly affect learning agility and future readiness. This implies that future-fit education nurtured by a vibrant learning ecosystem delivers lasting values and experiences for students and should be embedded in curricula. By fostering a future-fit-orientated mindset, both academia and the retailing industry can proactively adapt to the ever-changing retail environment and achieve sustainable success, yet the skills gaps in the W&R sector continuously contend with producing future-fit retail graduates, as discussed below.

2.2.1. Skills gaps in the retail sector

A skills gap refers to the discrepancy between the skills that the current workforce possesses and those demanded by employers (Swiss South African Cooperation Initiative [SSACI], 2024). In South Africa, this gap is a critical issue impacting various sectors, with significant implications for employment, economic growth, and social development (Kruger, 2016; Matoti, 2022). Factors contributing to this gap include rapid technological advancements, shifts in the job market, and insufficient investment in training and education (Kuznetsova, 2021). According to Sumberg, Fox, Flynn, Mader and Oosterom (2021), these gaps can result in a shortage of qualified workers, slower economic growth, and lower productivity, making it difficult for jobseekers to find roles matching their skills and experience.

The International Labour Organization (2020) reported that skills mismatches are a significant issue in South Africa, with the Boston Consulting Group (2019) noting that the country faces a skills mismatch rate exceeding 50% and the lowest labour force productivity among 30 surveyed countries. The Global Competitiveness Index (World Economic Forum, 2017) ranked South Africa 61 out of 137 nations in its ability to nurture, attract, and retain talented individuals. These findings highlight

the urgent need for targeted measures to address these gaps and enhance the global competitiveness of South Africa's workforce (Otermans et al., 2023).

The W&R SETA (2023) SSP identified significant skills gaps related to technological advancements, data privacy, marketing, and cybersecurity. These gaps impact small, medium, and micro enterprises and their development. Moreover, there is a need for future skills, such as servant leadership, strategic thinking, collaboration, business intelligence, cultural intelligence, agility, innovation, creativity, critical thinking, merchandising skills, design thinking, and coaching and mentoring, which are currently lacking in South Africa (SSACI, 2024).

Research by Della Tamin, Du Plooy, Solms and Meyer (2019) underscored the mismatch between graduate competencies and employer expectations, advocating for new training approaches in educational institutions to meet contemporary workplace demands. Ward and Pillay (2023) revealed that current retailing HEI curricula do not include essential skills, suggesting a gap in the HEI system. This indicates a need for HEIs to provide skills consistent with those required in the W&R sector. Alexander and Mason (2017) found that many graduates lack specific e-retail skills needed in the South African W&R sector, further emphasising the gap in current HEI curricula. Ohei, Brink and Abiodun (2019) argued that HEIs should offer a holistic education encompassing both technical and interpersonal skills to meet industry expectations.

The mismatch between graduates' competencies and employers' expectations highlights the need for better alignment and a collaborative relationship between industry and academia. This collaboration is essential to empower the workforce and effectively address the skills gap. The skills gap poses a fundamental challenge to South Africa's economic growth and its potential as an innovation hub, necessitating a skilled, adaptable workforce (Coetzee, Neneh, Stemmet, Lamprecht, Motsitsi & Sereeco, 2021; Fear, 2024). Addressing these gaps is crucial for fostering economic resilience and competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global market. Several initiatives aimed at addressing the skills gap have been identified, though the ongoing nature of the issue calls for sustained and comprehensive efforts from all stakeholders involved.

2.2.2. Initiatives to address skills gaps

South Africa has implemented several policies, strategies, and initiatives over the years to address skills development challenges and bridge the existing skills gaps, including the Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998, SETAs (National Skills Authority, 2024), and the National Skills Development Plan (NSDP) 2030 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). These policy initiatives reflect South Africa's commitment to skills development as a critical driver for economic growth, job creation, and social inclusion. The government continues refining and executing these strategies to address skills gaps, improve access to quality education and training, and strengthen the country's human capital. Specific interventions to address the skills gap are shown and summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Strategies to combat skills gap in South Africa

Strategy	General description of the strategy	Application in retailing
Work-integrated learning (WIL)	WIL programmes and internships in partnership with industry are proposed to bridge the skills gap by aligning graduate competencies with employer expectations (Della Tamin et al., 2019).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leveraging WIL for nurturing employability skills that prepare students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution³ (4IR) challenges and opportunities WIL is a pivotal force for retail, bridging academia (head), industry (hands), and graduate aspirations (heart) (Ward & Pillay, 2023)
Upskilling	Upskilling programmes focusing on non-technical “soft skills” have been associated with Higher employment success – thus a need for these skills in the labour market (Guardia-Ortiz, Maina, Mancini & Clougher, 2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retail labour market faces an increasing demand for flexible and blended forms of lifelong learning. This is in preparation for the digital economy and providing more short-term online courses (Steynberg, Grundling, Liu & Li, 2020)
Information and communication technology (ICT) skills	Incorporating ICT ⁴ skills in educational systems is crucial for sustainable youth employability, addressing challenges including lack of access to information and high information technology skill demands (Alao & Brink, 2022).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICT skills are among some of the new and emerging skills in retail These ICT skills should be incorporated into curricula (W&R SETA, 2024)
Decolonising	Decolonising the educational system and restructuring academic qualifications can help align them with the country’s skill shortages and emerging labour market needs (Kappo-Abidemi & Ogunyemi, 2023).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current retail business management curricula need to be effectively decolonised The starting point for decolonisation process is the involvement of all stakeholders in the curriculum development process (Mugobo, 2021)
Continuous skills development and stakeholder relationships	Continuous skills development and stakeholder relationships. Stakeholder engagement in skills development programmes, such as the National Youth Service Programme, is critical for ensuring graduates are linked to employment opportunities (Samuel & Moagi, 2022).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is vital for retail to invest in stakeholder relationships Most successful retailers have very active stakeholder management strategies (Obeng, 2019)
Skills planning	Skills planning requires coordination between education, training, and labour market demands to support inclusive economic growth and address historical legacies of exclusion (Powell, Reddy & Juan, 2016).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is need to address skills gaps and workforce challenges through effective skills planning Skills planning aligns talent development with strategic business objectives Skills planning enables wholesalers and retailers to stay competitive and adapt to

³ The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) refers to the ongoing transformation of industries through the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), robotics, and big data analytics. This revolution is characterized by the fusion of physical, digital, and biological worlds, leading to unprecedented changes in the way we live, work, and interact with each other (Peckham, 2021).

⁴ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) encompasses all technologies used to handle telecommunications, broadcast media, intelligent building management systems, audio-visual processing and transmission systems, and network-based control and monitoring functions (Raihan, 2023).

Strategy	General description of the strategy	Application in retailing
		market changes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This planning supports innovation and improves customer experience through a skilled workforce (W&R SETA, 2020b)
Experiential learning	Experiential learning and career guidance are required to prepare students for the disruptive workplace (Pitan & Muller, 2023).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiential learning guides the transformation of students' learning into meaningful knowledge • Experiential learning fosters the development of essential soft skills like communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and customer service (Southworth, 2015)
Training	Training is imperative to upskilling and reskilling employees in the sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cloud-based Software-as-a-Service solution training, on-the-job training, and outsourced external training courses • Regular skills audits should be conducted to provide targeted training programmes to bridge skills gaps • Partnerships with industry and training providers should be cemented, and internal company resources must be leveraged to ensure employees are equipped with skills for the future retail landscape (W&R SETA, 2024a)

Source: Authors' compilation

Table 1 outlines several strategic interventions that can help address the skills gap, including WIL programmes, developing soft skills, integrating ICT skills in education, decolonising educational content, and adapting qualifications to align with labour market needs. These interventions align with the findings of Ab Jalil et al. (2022), who emphasised that future-fit companies should contribute to institutional change through sustainable practices and that conventional companies need education on these practices. Effective collaboration between academia and industry is imperative, especially in the W&R field, to ensure these interventions are successful and relevant. Further details on existing collaborations are discussed next.

2.2.3. Current collaboration between academia and the retail industry

The primary aim of this study is to explore the evolving relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. This relationship often involves conflicts of interest and differing operating speeds, as noted by Hillerbrand and Werker (2019) and Nam, Kim and Choi (2019). WIL has emerged as a potential solution to bridge this gap, underscoring the practical application of theoretical knowledge (Fleming & Hay, 2021; Jackson, Riebe, Meek, Ogilvie, Kuilboer, Murphy, Collins, Lynch & Brock, 2023). Successful WIL implementation requires collaboration between academic

institutions and industry, ensuring that students receive a balanced mix of academic and practical experiences (Hay, 2020).

In a rapidly changing, technology-driven environment, academia provides theoretical foundations, while the industry hones students' practical skills (Choo, 2023). Graduates are now expected to possess a combination of academic knowledge and soft skills, such as digital literacy, adaptability, and resilience, to navigate the challenges of the 4IR (Nwosu, Bereng, Segotso & Enebe, 2023). This necessitates a dynamic curriculum that aligns with real-world applications and industry needs (Winterton & Turner, 2019). HEIs must develop future-fit academic programmes, training modules, and technological infrastructure to meet these expectations (Al-Maskari, Al Riyami & Ghnimi, 2024).

Leveraging WIL and developing future-fit skills are crucial for nurturing employability skills that prepare students for the demands of the 4IR (Moalosi, Letsholo, Matake, & Olyyn, 2021; Okeke-Uzodike & Anwana, 2020). However, a seamless, collaborative relationship between retailing academia and the retail industry is essential for graduates to thrive in this new era, which is currently lacking (Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022). This study identifies the critical need to explore and enhance this relationship, as it affects the ability to successfully implement and deliver initiatives that embed future-fit skills in retailing curricula (W&R SETA, 2020b). Establishing an open, mutual, and collaborative relationship between academia and the retail industry is more necessary than ever to prepare graduates for future challenges (W&R SETA, 2024b).

2.3. Theoretical foundation

The study is anchored in three theories: the triple helix model, stakeholder theory, and human capital theory. A discussion of each theory and its application to the study is presented below.

2.3.1. Triple helix model

The triple helix model was first theorised by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (1995). The theory proposed that the dynamic interactions between three helices (academia, industry, and government) are key for entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic growth in a knowledge-based economy (Nel-Sanders & Thomas, 2022). This model describes a set of interactions among academia, industry, and government to foster economic and social development, as discussed in concepts like the knowledge economy and knowledge society (Galvao, Mascarenhas, Marques, Ferreira & Ratten, 2019).

The triple helix model emerged from a confluence between Etzkowitz's longer-term interest in the study of university-industry relations and Leydesdorff's interest in an evolutionary model that sought to generate a next-order hyper-cycle (Leydesdorff, 2020). According to Ranga and Etzkowitz (2013), this model emphasises the creation and dissemination of knowledge within academia, highlighting the role of the interaction among these three institutional spheres in generating new and innovative organisational designs and social interactions. The triple helix model signified a paradigm shift from

the traditional dominance of the industry-government partnership observed in the industrial society to the evolving triadic relationship involving academia, industry, and government in the knowledge society. As shown in Figure 1, the university and industry interact around new product ideas and innovations; industry and government interact around jobs, taxes, and infrastructure; and academia and government interact around funding and strategic demands.

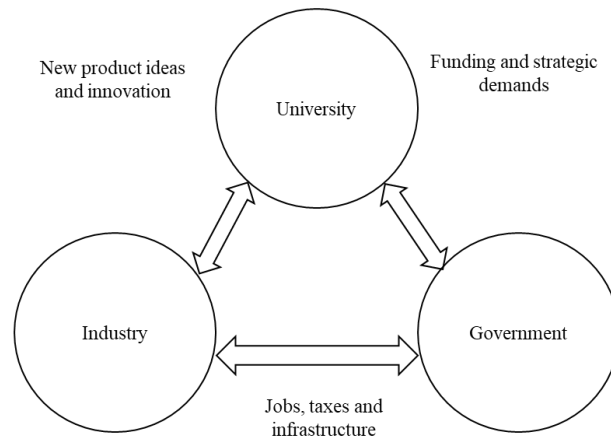


Figure 1: The triple helix model in an emerging economy

Source: Adapted from Nel-Sanders and Thomas (2022)

This model explains the interactions between academia and industry in this study. By exploring the skills gaps and advancing industry recommendations to academia, the study contributes to the discourse around the “future-fit” skills contributing to the retail sector’s knowledge economy and the current relationship between academia and industry. The model provides a theoretical lens to analyse and interpret the study’s findings, particularly regarding the current state and effectiveness of the academia-industry relationship and the potential to enhance this relationship to address the identified skills gaps.

2.3.2. Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory can be traced back to Edward Freeman’s 1984 book, *Strategic management: A stakeholder approach* (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022). The theory suggests that businesses should consider all stakeholders’ interests (Leydesdorff, 2020). Using stakeholder theory, a business can be conceptualised as a network of relationships among various groups that have a vested interest in the operations that constitute it (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar & De Colle, 2010). This theory considers the dynamic interactions between customers, suppliers, employees, financiers (stockholders, bondholders, and banks), communities, and managers, as they collaboratively generate and exchange value (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997).

Applied in this study’s context, stakeholder theory acknowledges the economic and moral nature of relationships in and around W&R organisations. Although this theory recognises the diverse groups impacted by retail business entities, the theory was applied to describe the relationship between two specific key stakeholders – retailing industry and retailing academia – to explore interactions and identify potential areas of alignment or conflict. Examining academia expectations and interests provides valuable insights for devising strategies to foster a long-term, collaborative relationship between academia and industry.

2.3.3. Human capital theory

Human capital theory states that employees' knowledge, experience, and skills are developed through advanced education, training, development, and job changes (Tharenou, 1997). According to Marginson (2019), the theory proposes that education enhances the marginal productivity of labour, thereby influencing earnings. This is because human capital acquisition through learning and job satisfaction increases a workforce's ability to perform effectively (Funke & Strulik, 2000; Shaw, Duffy, Johnson & Lockhart, 2005; Tomer, 1998). Thus, nurturing human capital is fundamental to successfully placing workers in private-sector jobs and ensuring that retail graduates are future-fit and equipped with the necessary skills required in the retailing sector.

This study applied human capital theory to propose strategies that align with future-fit retailing education at HEIs to address the skills gap in South African retail (W&R SETA, 2024a). As presented in Table 1, interventions to address the skills gap in literature – for instance, that employees' knowledge, experience, and skills are developed through processes of advanced education, training, and development – are consistent with human capital theory (Alao & Brink, 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023; Rena & Diale, 2021; Samuel & Moagi, 2022). Despite these interventions aiming to alleviate the skills gap, Meyer and Van Dyk (2022) affirmed that a long-term solution to ensuring these future-fit skills are embedded in retailing curricula, grounded in the relationship between retailing academia and industry, remains ambiguous.

3. Research Methodology

This study used an interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological, qualitative methodology to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. The goal was to inform practice and policy by capturing the richness and complexity of these experiences (Gill, 2020). Non-probability, purposive sampling was employed to select participants, including academics from institutions offering retail-related qualifications and industry representatives working in talent management or recruitment for retailers. Guided by the recommendation of Creswell (2013), the sample size included 10 prospective participants deemed adequate to achieve data saturation, however saturation was reached after six interviews including three academic participants and three industry representatives.

Data collection involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. The interview guide focused on three key questions concerning: (1) the perceived relationship between retailing academia and the industry; (2) the factors facilitating or hindering this relationship; and (3) the alignment between the industry's future needs and the retailing curricula offered by HEIs. The Culture Foundry Co. research agency was engaged to identify and contact participants, and handle data collection and analysis to maintain confidentiality and mitigate

bias, especially among academic participants who might be uncomfortable discussing institution-specific challenges.

Participants provided informed consent through an online form via Google Forms, which included an explanatory statement about the study's purpose, their role, duration, privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, benefits and the right to withdraw at any time without any implications. This study was ethically approved by the School of Consumer Intelligence and Information Systems Research and Ethics Committee (ethical clearance certificate number: 2023SCiS030). To maintain confidentiality and anonymity when transcribing the interviews and writing up the findings, pseudonyms were provided to each participant as follows:

- P1: academic
- P2: academic
- P3: industry
- P4: academic
- P5: industry
- P6: industry

The research agency employed thematic analysis, deemed most suitable for this phenomenological study, to understand and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences. Thematic analysis provides a flexible and systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data, aligning well with phenomenology's objectives (Finlay, 2021). This method's flexibility and in-depth coding process ensure that participants' subjective experiences are accurately reflected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six steps of thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied as follows:

- Data familiarisation: Data was read and re-read to identify meanings, patterns, and potential codes;
- Generating initial codes: Meaningful data segments relevant to the phenomenon were highlighted, with codes including terms like "skills", "alignment", and "relationship";
- Searching for themes: Different codes were sorted into potential themes and relevant data extracts were collated within these themes, such as "mutual interactions" and "facilitating collaboration";
- Reviewing themes: Each theme was analysed in relation to others to identify overlaps and data support, ensuring only well-supported themes were included;
- Defining and naming themes: The identified themes were named and defined in relation to the data, with seven main themes being defined and presented in section 4; and
- Producing the report: The findings were presented in a research report by Ward and Pillay (2023) and the current paper.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies, namely: conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews via Microsoft Teams for detailed data collection; involving the Culture Foundry Co. research agency to maintain confidentiality and reduce bias; providing thick descriptions of the sampling technique, participant criteria, and data collection process for transferability; using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis for systematic and rigorous data analysis, enhancing dependability; and employing pseudonyms for participants with ethical approval to ensure confirmability. These measures helped to ensure the findings were based on collected data and not influenced by researcher bias (Rose & Johnson, 2020; Singh, Benmamoun, Meyr & Arikan, 2021).

4. Results and Findings

As alluded to, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data by familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing and defining themes (Lochmiller, 2021). The findings presented in this section relate to each of the research questions.

4.1. Research question 1: How is the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry perceived?

Findings from the in-depth interviews were mixed, purporting that, in general, the relationship between retailing academia and industry is on a "spectrum" that "fluctuates and varies". Furthermore, it was noted that there is no single formula being implemented to ensure a successful relationship, which impacts the ability for retailing curricula to adapt to suit the retailing industry's demands (Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022).

One of the academic participants countered the above-mentioned statement, perceiving the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry as an:

Ever-evolving web with a good multi-directional flow of information, resources, and strategy. There are "excellent interactions" that make the relationship resilient to change. It is almost like a spiderweb that grows and adapts to its environment; grabbing onto opportunities that head its way. (P1: academic)

Another academic participant felt that "the relationship is based on a strong foundation – with academia setting the theoretical ground and industry providing practical experience – from which a rich and evolving relationship grows" (P4: academic). In contrast to the more positive perceptions above, one of the other academics felt that the relationship "is almost like a failing marriage where communication has broken down and both sides simply do their own thing without consideration for the other" (P2: academic). This was supported by an industry expert claiming: "There 'isn't quite a relationship' between industry and academia – instead there are 'pockets' where somewhat of a relationship exists between individuals rather than at an organisational and institutional level ... there

is a distinct disconnect” (P5: industry). From the above-mentioned discussion and findings, the main theme presented in this section that aims to address research question one is:

- *THEME 1: The relationship between retailing academia and industry varies from positive collaboration to disconnected pockets, emphasising its complexity and need for further exploration.*

The findings underscore the significance of aligning sectoral skills with HEIs’ offerings. Varied perceptions regarding the retailing academia-industry relationship are apparent. According to stakeholder theory (Leydesdorff, 2020), understanding stakeholders’ expectations and interests is crucial. Section 4.2 addresses factors facilitating and hindering the relationship between retailing academia and the industry, which is vital for collaboration.

4.2. Research question 2: What facilitates or hinders the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry?

The findings related to what *facilitates* the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry are summarised as a “cross-pollination” between the two stakeholders, where (1) each has a role to play that is based on mutual respect and acknowledgement; and (2) the understanding that both stakeholders are equally valuable to the support and development of future-fit retailing graduates. Three main themes surfaced during the in-depth interviews, highlighting what facilitates the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry, as discussed below.

4.2.1. What facilitates the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry?

- *THEME 2: Mutual interactions between industry leaders and academic experts*

This main finding was alluded to by one of the academic participants, who stated that one way to support mutual interactions is when: “industry experts offer guest lectures where they share their knowledge, expertise, and observations, and lecturers perform site visits or stay up to date with industry trends and demands” (P1: academic). Hynes, Costin and Richardson (2023) supported this notion, positing that good and relevant guest lecturers might serve as role models who students can engage for further learning. According to Mastrogiacomì (2021), this aligns with experiential and future-fit teaching and learning practice.

The insights shared by participants above aligns to stakeholder theory, which argues that a network of relationships (industry experts offer guest lectures) among various groups (retailing academia and the retailing industry) with a vested interest in a common goal (to ensure future-fit curricula presented by HEI curricula) can collaboratively generate and exchange value (Mitchell et al., 1997). The value in relation to the findings presented support the knowledge and expertise required to keep up to date with industry trends and demands, hence adopting a future-fit approach (Loots & Oberholster, 2024).

- *THEME 3: Open conversations within and outside of institutions and industry*

Participants shared that “regular, ongoing meetings break down barriers between institutions, strengthen bonds, and allow for best practices and a unified vision to emerge. A relationship needs to be nurtured” (P1: academic). Another academic participant felt strongly that “industry must tell us what they are looking for so that we can keep up to date because the world is changing, but curricula haven’t changed” (P2: academic). This was further supported by another academic participant postulating that: “communication is encouraged beyond conversations in advisory board meetings industry that give academia feedback on their needs. Through more personal engagement, representatives from either side (industry or academia) can be present for these discussions” (P4: academic). Juxtaposed with the demands from academia presented above, one of the industry participants argued that “retailers do go to the W&R SETA every year and announce what they require and would like to do” (P5: industry), but this might not always be communicated to academic institutions.

The stakeholders’ responses indicated a willingness to engage in open, perhaps less formal, conversations, fostering their relationship. This aligns with the triple helix model, emphasising knowledge exchange among academia, industry, and government, which is imperative for economic and social development (Galvao et al., 2019). In this context, the relationship among stakeholders drives economic and social growth by aligning HEI retailing curricula with future-fit sectoral needs. Yet, to achieve broader development goals, stakeholders must prioritise open communication for a more collaborative relationship (Gachie, 2020), which is essential for the advancement of the retailing sector’s economic and social aspects.

- *THEME 4: Common perceptions regarding theory and practice*

There was a consensus amongst the participants about the role each stakeholder plays regarding skills development for retail graduates. The consensus implied that “academia provides strategy and theory, while retail industry brings theory to life in skills training and giving experience” (P3: industry), which was further supported by an academic’s perspective: “Academia can provide students with a theoretical understanding of why things are done a particular way, or how to think for themselves. Industry comes in with practical application of the skills attached to that understanding” (P1: academic).

The consensus between stakeholders suggests the potential for fostering a positive relationship, as per stakeholder theory’s argument that shared goals and expectations facilitate long-term collaboration (Freeman et al., 2010). This theory applies to the relationship between retailing academia and the industry. However, obstacles exist, including government’s involvement as a stakeholder. Despite supportive themes, these hindrances impact the long-term collaboration between retailing academia

and the industry, indicating the need to address challenges involving additional stakeholders to ensure sustained cooperation and alignment with common goals.

4.2.2. What hinders the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry?

In general, the findings related to what *hinders* the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry included consistency and transparency in communication and collaboration. These hindrances are discussed under the two themes that follow.

- *THEME 5: Power dynamics pose problems for both industry and academia*

An industry participant claimed that: “The relationship between industry and academia extends into the political realm where larger power structures can, at times, impose challenges and gate-keep opportunities within these spaces – particularly when funding and financial incentives are involved” (P6: industry). From this finding, it is evident that transparency in communication is key. The above statement was supported by P2 (academic), who alluded to the fact that “there needs to be a more open communication and a self-organised relationship that allows opportunities to occur organically and without political agenda”.

The obstacles affecting the relationship between retailing academia and the industry extend beyond their interaction, encompassing the influence of government stakeholders. Government structures, such as the W&R SETA, significantly impact the nexus between academia and industry, as evident in skills gap reports like the W&R SETA (2023) SSP and the NSDP 2030. These reports indicate alignment with government initiatives aimed at addressing skills gaps and enhancing human capital. Such findings resonate with the triple helix model and stakeholder theory, emphasising knowledge sharing and transparent communication to mitigate power dynamics among academia, industry, and government. By fostering long-term collaboration through transparent communication, stakeholders can overcome obstacles and strengthen their relationships, contributing to sustained collaboration and mutual success.

- *THEME 6: Industry and academia are operating at opposing speeds*

As opposed to the previous hinderance, the findings presented in line with theme 6 purport a more direct challenge to the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. One of the participants opined that: “the risk that retailers face when engaging with traditional universities is that they are slow to respond to how quickly the world moves. Retail is quickly changing, but curricula don’t seem to keep up” (P5: industry). This finding was argued by one of the academic participants justifying that “the university is a ‘big animal’ that is bureaucratic. Movement and change are not swift and funding is not easy – things don’t always move as swiftly as the retailers would like them to” (P1: academic).

The findings reveal a significant misalignment in expectations between retailing academia and the industry, impacting the delivery of future-fit retailing curricula at HEIs. According to stakeholder theory, aligning concerns and expectations is necessary for long-term sustainability (Adib, Zhang, Zaid and Sahyouni, 2021). This misalignment affects the relationship between stakeholders, with broader implications for meeting future-fit sectoral needs. Further exploration into this relationship's impact on sectoral needs is addressed in the findings for research question three.

4.3. To what extent does the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry influence the ability to provide future-fit education at Higher education institutions?

From all the findings presented above, it is evident that a number of factors lead to a lack of alignment between retailing academia and the retailing industry - a lack of alignment influences the ability to provide and deliver future-fit education at HEIs. The findings presented in section 4.2 demonstrate poor collaboration and quality of the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. When participants were probed further about the alignment, the following surfaced: “The current focus of industry needs is operational, while strategy and research remain overlooked. This results in retailers employing individuals who lack qualifications and theoretical knowledge in retail.... The value of a[n] education is overlooked by industry” (P2: academic). Another academic participant indicated that “it’s hard to know what to prepare graduates for when the industry expectations and needs are varied” (P1: academic). P1 (academic) added: “We can’t train students in practical skills or some of the future skills required, we don’t have the facilities to do so and P4 (academic) questioned ‘what is academia’s responsibility and what is up to industry?’” (P4: academic). In response to what academics alluded to, one of the industry participants stated that: “Lecturers are not in touch with the evolving industry; they are defiant and old school” (P5: industry). Based on the findings above, theme 7 is presented:

- *THEME 7: The relationship between academia and industry in the retail sector appears strained due to misalignment of HEIs’ educational offerings with industry needs, lack of communication and collaboration, and perceptions of inadequacy from both stakeholders that negatively influence the ability to create, develop, and deliver a future-fit curriculum.*

Stakeholder and triple helix theories advocate for collaborative, long-term relationships, underscoring the need for prioritising communication and aligning expectations between retailing academia and the industry (Freeman et al., 2010). This collaborative approach aligns with human capital theory, suggesting that education enhances labour productivity and contributes to economic growth (Marginson, 2019). Achieving broader benefits for the South African economy and society necessitates continuous communication and collaboration between retailing academia and the industry

to ensure future-fit retailing curricula at HEIs, thereby enhancing workforce effectiveness and overall GDP.

5. Managerial Implications

The main aim of this study was to explore the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry. The findings are mixed, ranging from positive collaboration to significant disconnects, highlighting the relationship's complexity. Positive aspects include mutual interactions, open conversations, and shared perceptions, aligning with the triple helix model's emphasis on knowledge sharing for economic and social development (Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2013). However, issues like power dynamics and differing operational speeds hinder collaboration, as explained by stakeholder theory (Freeman et al., 2010). Transparency in communication is crucial to mitigate power dynamics, with government initiatives influencing the relationship between academia and industry. Emeka-Okoli, Nwankwo, Otonnah and Nwankwo (2024) stressed the importance of consistent communication to build trust.

The misalignment in expectations affects the ability to deliver future-fit education, with challenges in meeting industry needs and perceptions of inadequacy from both sides. Loots and Oberholster (2024) argued that prioritising communication and collaboration is essential for aligning expectations and improving HEI curricula to meet future needs, in line with stakeholder and triple helix theories (Galvao et al., 2019; Leydesdorff, 2020). Improving this relationship could enhance labour productivity and GDP, emphasising the need for ongoing collaboration for the broader benefit of South Africa's economy and society (Kruger & Barkhuizen, 2022).

6. Recommendations

Based on these managerial implications provided above, several recommendations are proposed:

1. Establish a collaborative platform: A platform should be created for continuous communication, where academia, industry, and government representatives can engage regularly. This platform should facilitate discussions on industry trends, skills requirements, and HEI needs, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration (Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024).
2. Implement cross-pollination initiatives: Mutual interactions and knowledge exchange between industry leaders and academic experts should be encouraged. Industry experts should participate in guest lectures, workshops, and industry visits within academic institutions, while academia should engage with industry through internships, research collaborations, or advisory roles. These initiatives may help align HEI offerings with industry needs (Hynes et al., 2023; Mastrogiacomì, 2021).

3. Establish joint advisory boards: Advisory boards should be created for curricula development, comprising representatives from academia, industry, and government. These boards should collaborate to identify emerging trends, skill requirements, and areas for curricula enhancement, ensuring that HEI curricula meet industry demands (Taylor & Calitz, 2020).
4. Promote transparency and consistency in communication: Power dynamics can be addressed by fostering transparent communication channels between academia, industry, and government. By establishing clear feedback channels and ensuring ongoing communication, trust may be promoted among stakeholders (Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024).

By implementing these recommendations, the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry can be improved. This will enhance the delivery of future-fit education, alleviate skills gaps, and contribute to the broader benefit of South Africa's economy and society.

7. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

The study explores the relationship between retailing academia and the retailing industry, revealing mixed perceptions ranging from positive collaboration to significant disconnects. The sample size of six participants is a limitation, as it does not capture a broad range of perspectives. Additionally, the study's focus on an emerging market limits its applicability to other regions, while reliance on qualitative data introduces potential subjective bias. The scope was confined to South African HEIs, without considering other forms of education or training impacting the retail industry-academia relationship.

Future research should increase the sample size and broaden stakeholder theory to include a more diverse array of participants, enhancing the generalisability of the findings. Moreover, embracing the triple helix model by examining government involvement as a key stakeholder could yield comprehensive recommendations. Complementing qualitative insights with quantitative studies could provide a more thorough exploration of the retail industry relationship. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of technical and vocational education and training colleges in addressing the skills gap within the South African retail sector.

The study underscores the critical need for HEIs to integrate future-fit skills into their curricula, as emphasised by various scholars (Kruger & Barkhuizen, 2022; Loots & Oberholster, 2024). As technology evolves rapidly, aligning educational programmes with industry requirements becomes paramount, particularly in sectors like W&R, which significantly contributes to South Africa's GDP (Stats SA, 2023). Despite its importance, the W&R sector suffers from a skills gap due to inadequate retailing curricula that fail to meet fast-changing industry demands (Meyer & Van Dyk, 2022).

Findings indicate a persistent misalignment between retailing academia and industry needs, negatively affecting graduates' employability and the broader economic landscape (Teuteberg, 2021). This

discordance is rooted in diverse perceptions regarding the relationship, ranging from positive collaboration to disconnected pockets. Facilitators of the relationship include mutual interactions, open conversations, and shared perceptions, while hindrances involve power dynamics and differing operational speeds.

To build a more collaborative relationship, HEIs and the retailing industry must regularly update their curricula in consultation with industry stakeholders, ensuring graduates are equipped with relevant, future-fit skills. Specific recommendations include establishing a collaborative platform for continuous communication, implementing cross-pollination initiatives for mutual knowledge exchange, creating joint advisory boards for curriculum development, and promoting transparency and consistency in communication (Emeka-Okoli et al., 2024; Mastrogiacomini, 2021; Taylor & Calitz, 2020). This collaboration will enhance graduates' employability and contribute to the competitiveness and growth of the W&R sector and the South African economy (Botha, 2022; Kenton, 2022; SSACI, 2024). Updating existing curricula does however come with its own challenges including the bureaucratic and administrative infrastructures at HEIs that are time-consuming which might be an area of exploration for future studies. Perhaps more practice-driven or short learning courses could be implemented based on industry developments and changing needs to expedite academic programmes aligned with industry needs. More investigation into the matter is however proposed.

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