

Research Paper

Evaluating the impact of a retail management programme on graduates' industry readiness at a selected South African university

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Abstract

This study explored the effectiveness of a Retail Management Programme in preparing students for employment in the retail industry. In South Africa, there is growing concern about the disconnect between university education and the labour market's expectations. The primary aim of this study was to assess whether the programme provides students with the relevant skills and knowledge necessary for the workplace. A quantitative research method was employed, and data was collected through questionnaires completed by 40 retail management students. The responses were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings indicate that most students felt well-prepared for customer service, digital work tools, and retail operations. However, some students expressed uncertainty about their readiness, particularly in areas such as data analysis and decision-making. Students were primarily motivated to enroll in the programme to acquire transferable skills and enhance their employment prospects. They also valued training that mirrored real work environments. The study recommends incorporating more input from industry professionals, utilising greater practical learning methods, and placing a stronger emphasis on soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Additionally, curriculum updates and improvements to career support services are suggested to facilitate a smoother transition for students into the job market.

Keywords: graduate employability; graduate work-readiness; retail curriculum development; retail industry; South African universities

Introduction

The retail and wholesale sector is the fourth-largest contributor to South Africa's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (W&RSETA, 2018). This sector has recently undergone significant changes, similar to trends in many other countries. These transformations have been driven by various factors, including technological advancements, the expansion of global value chains, and shifting demographics. Nonetheless, the retail sector in South Africa struggles with a high prevalence of unskilled labour, while universities face challenges in producing adequately prepared graduates. There is a significant gap between the skills taught at universities and the competencies required in the labour market. This disparity makes it increasingly difficult for local businesses to compete with their global counterparts. Research indicates that South African graduates frequently lack essential work readiness skills, particularly "soft skills," which are crucial to employers. Consequently, there is a growing demand from governments worldwide for higher education institutions to prepare graduates more effectively for the realities of the workplace (Harry & Chinyamurindi, 2022; Winterton & Turner, 2019).

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While Experiential Learning (EL) is included in some university programmes, many focus primarily on pedagogical theory and knowledge. To address this gap, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) has developed modules that emphasise soft skills valued by the labour market, offered through their General Education (GE) curriculum (Ramraj & Marimuthu, 2021). At DUT, General Education is grounded in a humanistic worldview that aims to foster graduate qualities such as self-efficacy and a commitment to lifelong learning. The GE Module concentrates on the skills, knowledge, and mindset essential for a well-rounded education. Its objectives include broadening students' intellectual horizons, enhancing their ability to communicate effectively (both verbally and in writing), and promoting critical and creative thinking to support independent learning, which are essential skills that employers expect graduates to possess as they enter the workforce. Furthermore, the module emphasises scaffolded learning, which takes into account students' educational backgrounds and builds on inquiry-based learning (Naidoo & Govender, 2021; Neerpath, 2016).

Within the retail qualification offered at DUT, there is a GE module focused on work preparedness. This module aims to help students understand ethical behaviour and realistic workplace expectations while preparing them for seeking employment, engaging in interviews, and careers in the retail sector. To explore this issue and identify areas for improvement, this paper aims to assess the effectiveness of the work preparedness module and suggest ways to enhance the retail management curriculum. This will be achieved by examining students' perceptions of the relevance and applicability of the skills they have learned in this module.

Literature Review

The retail curricula and dynamics of the retail industry

The retail industry is experiencing a skills shortage due to inadequate training and educational opportunities, as well as a shortage of employable professionals with the required retail management competencies (W&RSETA, 2018). These elements have influenced the growth of retail management qualifications in South Africa, despite the fact that the university system only enrolls a tiny portion of the population (Van Der Berg & Hofmeyr, 2018). Presently, barely six of South Africa's 26 public universities offer retail-specific programmes, which is surprisingly low considering the sector's significance to the country's GDP. At universities, the primary objective of the retail management programme is to develop retail knowledge practitioners and increase student employability by providing them with the fundamental retail knowledge and skills necessary to secure entry-level jobs in the retail sector. In addition to having a solid understanding of the fundamentals of starting a retail business, such as classifying stakeholders and their needs, the graduates must also be knowledgeable about the general operations of a retail store, including housekeeping, staff management, customer service, risk management, and health and safety regulations.

At DUT, the characteristics of retail students are aligned with the university's graduate attributes, which include (1) critical and creative thinkers who are capable of working both independently and collaboratively; (2) knowledgeable practitioners; (3) effective communicators; (4) individuals who are culturally, environmentally, and socially aware within both local and global contexts; and (5) active and reflective learners (Neerpath, 2016). Conversely, retailers tend to prioritize employability skills and unique personality traits over subject-specific knowledge or relevant qualifications (Malhotra, Iyer & Dave, 2022). Retailers are seeking smart, capable, and motivated individuals who can help drive market growth in response to increasing competition and innovation. Employers look for candidates with exceptional presentation skills, decision-making abilities, emotional intelligence, assertiveness, teamwork skills, diversity management, listening skills, time management, stress management, as well as innovation and creativity, alongside strong morals and ethics (Broadbridge, 2003; W&RSETA, 2018). This suggests that employability is primarily assessed based on skills, attitudes, and other observable and measurable factors, rather than solely on subject-relevant knowledge or qualifications. Al-Shehab et al. (2021) further support this notion by highlighting that while achieving high academic standing is valued, it does not necessarily guarantee employability. This illustrates the disconnect between job requirements, educational outcomes, and the skills that are valued in the workforce.

Graduate employability

The ability of students to develop and apply their skills and competencies to secure jobs that benefit them and society is commonly referred to as graduate employability. This concept encompasses a range of accomplishments, including specific skills and personality traits that can enhance graduates' chances of finding work and achieving success in their chosen careers (Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2021; Jonck, 2017). In South Africa,

graduate unemployment is one of the most significant challenges facing the country today, making graduate employability a critical issue for all stakeholders in the higher education sector (Mtawa, Fongwa & Wilson-Strydom, 2021; Ohei & Brink, 2019). As institutions seek to address the problem of graduate unemployment, the employability of their graduates is increasingly viewed as a reflection of their ability to produce qualifications that align with the needs of a globalized knowledge economy and labour market (Koloba, 2017).

Higher education institutions (HEIs) primarily aim to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in the modern labour market while also providing opportunities for historically underprivileged individuals to compete effectively (Durazzi, 2019). However, globalisation and technological advancements, such as robotics and artificial intelligence, continually reshape economic trends and business models. These changes impact on the skills and knowledge graduates need to thrive in their careers. As technology evolves rapidly, competition in the job market intensifies, leading to an increased global demand for qualified, job-ready workers (Reddy, 2020). In this context, HEIs are expected to enhance graduates' employability by understanding labour market expectations and equipping students with the essential competencies required (Okolie, Nwosu & Mlanga, 2019). Employers expect graduates to possess not only hard skills and knowledge specific to their fields of study but also soft skills that facilitate smooth transitions across various work domains (Pang, Wong & Leung, 2019). Therefore, universities must develop employability frameworks that foster the growth of a wide range of abilities, technical knowledge, and transferable skills relevant to industry needs. These include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and analytical skills (Choi-Lundberg et al., 2024).

Employers in South Africa expect recent graduates to possess a range of employability skills and be adaptable to secure and maintain a job (Ismail, 2017). As a result, South African universities are under considerable pressure to produce graduates who are market-ready (Brits, 2018). A major factor contributing to graduate unemployment in South Africa is the lack of work experience and exposure to real-world activities during undergraduate studies (Pitan & Muller, 2020). To tackle this issue, universities should encourage students to gain substantial job experience and consider redesigning their curricula to enhance graduate employability. This can be achieved by collaborating with companies during curriculum development to incorporate transferable skills (Harry, Chinyamurindi & Mjoli, 2018; Kadhila, Shalyefu & Shivoru, 2018).

Graduate work-readiness

The level of a graduate's work readiness, often referred to as graduate work readiness, is seen as a strong predictor of future job performance, success, promotions, and career advancement. This concept encompasses a variety of attitudes, behaviours, and skills that, when combined with technical knowledge specific to a particular field, facilitate a smooth transition into the workforce. Additionally, it takes into account the competencies that graduates aspire to possess, as well as the skills employers deem necessary. Graduate work readiness is likely more comprehensive than job readiness and extends beyond merely listing skills (Borg & Scott-Young, 2020; Prikshat, Kumar & Nankervis, 2019; Verma et al., 2018). It is primarily about learning how to learn in order to become competent and confident in performing a job. This process helps graduates build self-assurance in various work scenarios (Herbert et al., 2020).

Soft skills are general, acquirable personal qualities that can be applied to various life situations. They are considered crucial for 21st-century students to effectively address complex challenges and adapt to changing environmental conditions (Casali et al., 2024). However, there is a significant gap between the soft skills demanded by the labour market and those developed in higher education. Universities are increasingly recognised as vital environments for cultivating not only academic knowledge but also the soft skills essential for graduate employability. Across multiple studies, there is a consistent emphasis on the importance of skills such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability, attributes that employers highly value but often find underdeveloped in traditional academic settings. While students recognise the significance of these competencies, they frequently report that universities do not effectively foster them, primarily due to an ongoing reliance on theory-heavy, teacher-centred instruction. Practical experiences, such as internships, mentoring, and project-based learning, are highlighted as more impactful; however, these are inconsistently integrated into curricula. The studies collectively advocate for a pedagogical shift toward more experiential, student-centred learning models and a stronger alignment between higher education and labour market expectations to help bridge the existing skills gap (Pereira et al., 2019; Matuszewska-Kubicz & Warwas, 2023; Kocsis & Pusztai, 2024).

In South Africa, employers prioritise graduates who are prepared for the workforce and possess both technical skills and key personal qualities, such as initiative, empathy, adaptability, and persuasiveness.

Graduate work readiness is considered a reliable predictor of future employment performance and opportunities for professional advancement (Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2022; Masole & van Dyk, 2016). Therefore, universities must focus on developing skills beyond academic qualifications. This approach can better equip graduates to handle the demanding nature of the workplace and enhance their career preparedness through peer counseling programs (Magagula, Maziriri, & Saurombe, 2020). To further enhance students' preparation for the workforce and facilitate their transition into professional careers, universities can help graduates establish a sense of professional identity and bolster their self-efficacy. Educators and practitioners could implement programmes that foster resilience and clarify career paths, thereby enhancing work readiness. By acquiring these employability skills during their undergraduate studies, graduates can become more prepared for the workforce, leading to a stronger connection between the cognitive and emotional aspects of their work readiness (Chavan & Carter, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2018; Lau, Wilkins-Yel & Wong, 2020).

The reviewed literature highlights a significant and ongoing gap between higher education outcomes and labour market expectations, particularly in the South African retail sector. While universities aim to equip students with foundational knowledge, employers increasingly seek a combination of technical skills and soft skills, such as communication, adaptability, and problem-solving. Research consistently shows that academic excellence alone does not guarantee employability; instead, experiential learning and curricula aligned with industry needs are crucial for adequately preparing graduates for the workforce. The broader literature indicates that such initiatives are inconsistent across different institutions, and students often report limited exposure to real-world situations. Employers prioritize candidates who demonstrate emotional intelligence, teamwork, and digital fluency traits not always developed through traditional teaching methods. The studies advocate for a shift toward student-centered, experiential learning models that simulate workplace dynamics and foster a professional identity. Additionally, there is an emphasis on transferable skills and career adaptability, reflecting the evolving nature of the retail industry, which is influenced by technological advancements and global competition. This synthesis reveals a common understanding that aligning academic programmes with practical, industry-relevant experiences is essential for producing graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also confident, competent, and ready to make meaningful contributions to the workforce. This alignment is particularly urgent in South Africa, where high graduate unemployment underscores the need for innovative educational strategies to prepare students for sustainable careers in a competitive global economy.

Study Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of a Retail Management Programme in equipping students with the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary for successful integration into the retail workforce. As concerns grow regarding the disconnect between higher education and labour market expectations in South Africa, this study investigates whether the programme adequately prepares graduates for real-world retail environments. It aims to assess students' perceptions of their readiness for industry, identify strengths and gaps in the curriculum, particularly in relation to soft skills and practical exposure, and provide recommendations for enhancing the programme's alignment with industry needs. The findings aim to inform curriculum development and support strategies that enhance graduate employability and work readiness.

The key research question is:

To what extent does the Retail Management Programme at a selected South African university prepare graduates for employment in the retail industry, particularly regarding work readiness and the development of both technical and soft skills?

Methodology

Design and Participants

The study employed an exploratory quantitative research approach, which is effective for assessing the effectiveness of the Retail Management programme by collecting numerical data from a large sample of graduates. The research design is both descriptive and exploratory. Descriptive research helps understand the population's characteristics, while exploratory research provides insights into the underlying reasons and motivations behind students' perceptions of the Retail Management Programme. The current enrollment for the Retail Management programme at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), particularly in the Work Preparedness module, consists of 105 students. To gather data, a convenience sampling method was employed,

targeting 100 students from this group due to its practicality and accessibility. Most participants were aged between 21 and 30 years (95%), predominantly female (67.5%), and identified as African (92.5%).

Aims of the Research and Research Question

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the Retail Management Programme at DUT in preparing students for employment in the retail industry. The research sought to determine whether the programme equips students with the relevant technical and soft skills required by the labour market.

Research Question

To what extent does the Retail Management Programme at DUT prepare graduates for industry readiness in the retail sector?

Data Collection

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire distributed to 40 retail management students. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions focusing on students' perceptions of their readiness for the retail industry, motivations for course selection, and the effectiveness of the work-readiness module. Ethical considerations were ensured through voluntary participation, anonymity, and confidentiality of responses. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time.

Measurement and Tools

A closed-ended questionnaire served as the measurement tool for this study. The questionnaire underwent pre-testing to ensure clarity and relevance. It assessed various dimensions of work readiness, including communication, problem-solving, teamwork, and technical competencies. Responses were recorded using a Likert scale, and the reliability of the instrument was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha, confirming its internal consistency.

Data collection was conducted using questionnaires distributed to retail graduates, enabling the efficient gathering of information from a large number of respondents within a short period. The questionnaire featured closed-ended questions designed to collect quantitative data, focusing on the graduates' perceptions of their readiness for the retail industry, the effectiveness of the Work Readiness module, and their motivations for choosing the program. To ensure clarity and relevance, the questionnaire underwent pre-testing. The study implemented consistent data collection procedures and standardised instruments to guarantee reliability. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha to measure internal consistency.

Quantitative data analysis was performed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of demographic characteristics and the responses of retail graduates, while inferential statistics were used to identify significant patterns and relationships within the data. The analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarise demographic data and response distributions, while inferential statistics were used to identify patterns and relationships. The use of standardised instruments and consistent data collection procedures ensured the reliability and validity of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical research practices to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the research process, with no identifying information collected or disclosed. The data collected was used solely for academic purposes and stored securely to prevent unauthorised access. Ethical clearance was obtained in accordance with the institutional guidelines of the DUT, ensuring that the study met the ethical standards required for research involving human subjects.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 depicts the demographic characteristics of the surveyed students. Most participants were aged between 21 and 30 years (95%), with a majority being female (67.5%) and identifying as African (92.5%). Furthermore, a little over half of the respondents (52.5%) reported finding employment within 1 to 6 months after obtaining a retail qualification.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics

Variables	Frequency (n=40)	Percentage (%)
Age group		
21-30	38	95
31-40	2	5
Gender		
Female	27	67.5
Male	13	32.5
Race		
African	37	92.5
Indian	3	7.5
Employment after retail qualification		
1-6 months	21	52.5
1-2 years	9	22.5
More than 2 years	10	25

Table 2 shows the students' response to course selection motivation. A medium index score (54) was recorded for "I could not gain access to any other courses." This suggests that, while some respondents selected their courses due to limited options, this was not a dominant factor in decision-making. The desire for transferable skills received a high index score (79), showing that many students enrolled in their courses with the expectation of acquiring skills that could be applied across various industries. Similarly, the opportunity for further training scored even higher (83), highlighting that students value continuous learning and career progression. A significant proportion of respondents (85.5 index score) were drawn to their courses due to the industry's growth and sustainability, reflecting their awareness of long-term career prospects. Likewise, the goal of securing employment was a strong motivation, with a high index score of 81, emphasising the importance of job security in students' course selection. A medium index score (73.5) was observed for "Good starting salary," indicating that while remuneration was a factor, it was not the primary driver of the decision-making process. Similarly, the alignment of personal character with industry requirements had an index score of 73, suggesting that personality fit played a role, albeit not as prominently as other factors, such as career growth and employment opportunities.

Table 2. Students' motivation for choosing a career path in Retail.

Statement	Responses										Score	Index	Category
	SA		A		N		D		SD				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
I could not gain access to any other courses	6	15	7	17.5	2	5	19	47.5	6	15	108	54	Medium
I wanted to gain transferable skills	11	27.5	22	55	2	5	4	10	1	2.5	158	79	High
I wanted a course that would give me opportunities for further training	21	52.5	13	32.5	1	2.5	1	2.5	4	10	166	83	High
Growing industry and sustainable industry	19	47.5	13	32.5	2	5	3	7.5	3	7.5	171	85.5	High
To secure employment	18	45	14	35	3	7.5	2	5	3	7.5	162	81	High
Good starting salary	15	37.5	11	27.5	3	7.5	8	20	3	7.5	147	73.5	Medium
My character fits with the industry	17	42.5	10	25	1	2.5	6	15	6	15	146	73	Medium

Note: With SA=5 and SD=1 and N=40, Index score for Item 1 is $[6x5+7x4+2x3+19x2+6x1]x100/5x40$. Similarly for items 2 to 6.

The mean score of students' motivations for course selection is given in Table 3. The analysis of students' motivations for course selection reveals that external constraints played a more significant role than intrinsic aspirations or career-driven considerations. The highest mean score (3.30, SD = 1.34) was recorded for the statement "I could not gain access to any other courses," indicating that many students felt restricted by the limited alternatives available. The relatively high standard deviation suggests that while some students strongly agreed with this statement, others had differing perspectives. This finding suggests that course selection was often influenced by necessity rather than deliberate choice.

Conversely, factors related to career growth, skill acquisition, and industry prospects had lower mean scores, indicating stronger agreement among respondents that these were key motivators. For instance, the statement "I wanted a course that will give me opportunities for further training" had the lowest mean score (1.85, SD = 1.23), demonstrating that long-term educational development was a major consideration for most students. Similarly, "I wanted to gain transferable skills" had a mean score of 2.05 (SD = 0.99), showing that students generally valued skill acquisition in their decision-making process.

Economic and industry-related factors also had relatively low mean scores, reinforcing their importance in course selection. Statements such as "Growing industry and sustainable industry" (1.95, SD = 1.24) and "To secure employment" (1.95, SD = 1.20) suggest that students were particularly mindful of job market trends and career stability when choosing their courses. Likewise, the prospect of a "good starting salary" (2.33, SD = 1.37) and "personal fit with the industry" (2.35, SD = 1.53) were moderately influential, with responses showing considerable variability.

Overall, the average mean score of 2.25 (SD = 0.86) suggests that students' decisions were primarily driven by career-oriented motivations rather than limited alternatives. While some students faced constraints in course availability, the findings indicate that many were actively considering employment prospects, skill acquisition, and long-term career growth when making their selections. The high standard deviations across several statements further suggest diverse perspectives among respondents, with some students placing greater emphasis on certain factors while others were less influenced by them.

Table 3. Average score of students' motivations for programme selection

Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
I wanted a course that would give me opportunities for further training	1.85	1.23
Growing industry and sustainable industry	1.95	1.24
To secure employment	1.95	1.20
I wanted to gain transferable skills	2.05	.99
Average score	2.25	.86
Good starting salary	2.33	1.37
My character fits with the industry	2.35	1.53
I could not gain access to any other courses	3.30	1.34

The students' perceived preparedness for the industry through the Retail Management programme and their assessment of the programme's effectiveness in preparing them for the retail sector is given in Figure 1. Most respondents (65%) indicated that the module prepared them for the retail industry, while 27.5% were uncertain. A small percentage (7.5%) felt that the module did not adequately prepare them. Regarding the perceived effectiveness of the module, the majority (55%) felt that the module prepared them adequately, while 25% reported feeling the least prepared. Meanwhile, 20% of respondents indicated that the module prepared them exceedingly well.

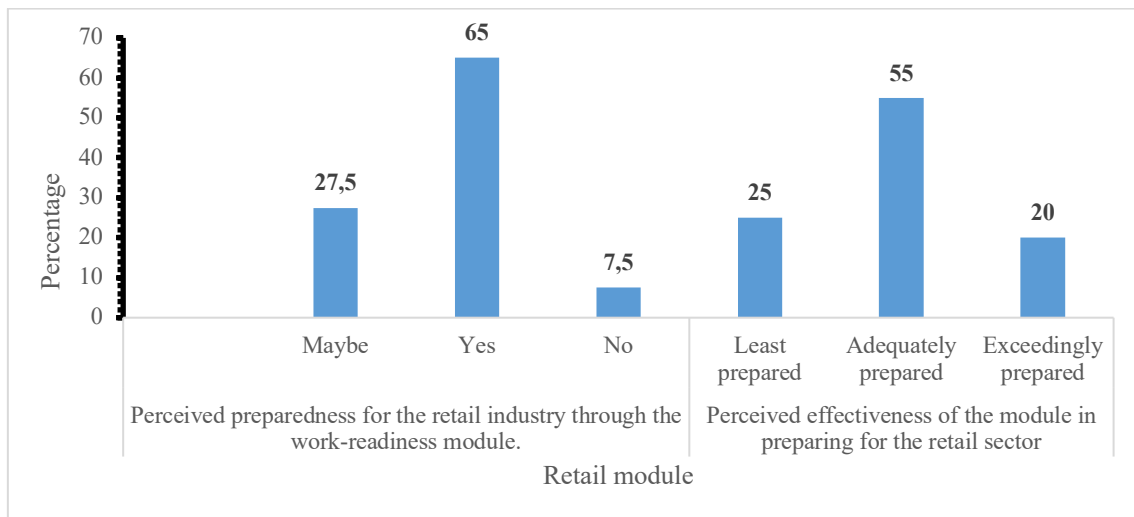
Figure 1. Students' perception of the Retail Management programme for work-readiness

Table 4 summarises the effectiveness of the programme in equipping participants with essential skills and knowledge for the retail industry. The highest-ranked aspect of the programme was its ability to provide retail internship opportunities, with a mean score of 4.33 and a mean rank of 8.59. This suggests that participants highly valued practical exposure in the retail industry, as it provided them with hands-on experience that could enhance their employability. Similarly, mentoring and preparing students for job interviews was rated highly, with a mean score of 4.30 and a mean rank of 8.34, indicating that participants found career guidance and interview preparation to be a crucial component of the programme.

Another key strength was the improvement of communication skills, which received a mean score of 4.25 and a mean rank of 8.54, reflecting its importance in the retail industry, where effective interaction with customers and colleagues is crucial. Likewise, increasing awareness of the needs of the retail industry (4.28, rank 8.39) and developing teamwork skills (4.25, rank 8.39) were highly regarded by participants, indicating that the programme successfully fostered industry-specific knowledge and collaborative work skills.

The development of leadership skills (4.25, rank 8.26) and problem-solving abilities (4.25, rank 8.24) were also positively perceived, suggesting that the programme helped participants build the confidence and critical thinking required for retail environments. Providing work-integrated learning experiences (4.25, rank 8.06) was another notable strength, emphasizing the importance of bridging the gap between theoretical learning and practical application.

Meanwhile, aspects such as helping participants pay attention to detail (4.18, rank 7.99), managing time in the workplace (4.15, rank 7.99), and providing knowledge of different career paths in retail (4.20, rank 7.59) were slightly lower in rank, though still well-rated. This suggests that while these elements were beneficial, they may require additional emphasis to maximize their full impact.

The lowest-ranked areas were preparing students to work under pressure (3.97, rank 7.19) and providing a proper career guide about the retail industry (4.15, rank 7.38). These lower scores suggest that participants may have felt that more support or resources were needed in these areas to better prepare them for the retail industry's fast-paced and demanding nature.

Table 4. The effectiveness of the programme in equipping participants with essential skills and knowledge for the retail industry

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean rank	Position
Prepare me to work under pressure.	40	3,97	1,368	7,19	11
Develop my professional ethical Behavior in communication exchanges	40	4,08	1,328	7,59	8
Develop my emotional intelligence and nonverbal communication skills.	40	4,10	1,236	7,49	9
Teach me how to manage time at the workplace.	40	4,15	1,350	7,99	7
A proper career guide about the retail industry	40	4,15	1,145	7,38	10
It should help me pay attention to detail in a work setting.	40	4,18	1,279	7,99	7
Provide knowledge of different career paths in retail	40	4,20	1,137	7,59	8
Improve my communication skills.	40	4,25	1,276	8,54	2
Develop my leadership skills.	40	4,25	1,235	8,26	4
Develop my problem-solving skills.	40	4,25	1,214	8,24	5
Develop my teamwork skills	40	4,25	1,214	8,39	3
Provide me with a Retail work-integrated learning experience	40	4,25	1,104	8,06	6
Keep me informed about the needs of the retail industry.	40	4,28	1,219	8,39	3
Mentor and prepare students for job interviews	40	4,30	1,159	8,34	
Provide me with Retail internship opportunities	40	4,33	1,163	8,59	1

Figure 2 further illustrates how well the Retail Management programme prepared participants for various aspects of the retail industry. Most respondents selected option 1 for each statement, indicating their agreement with the programme's effectiveness and the essential skills and knowledge required for the retail industry.

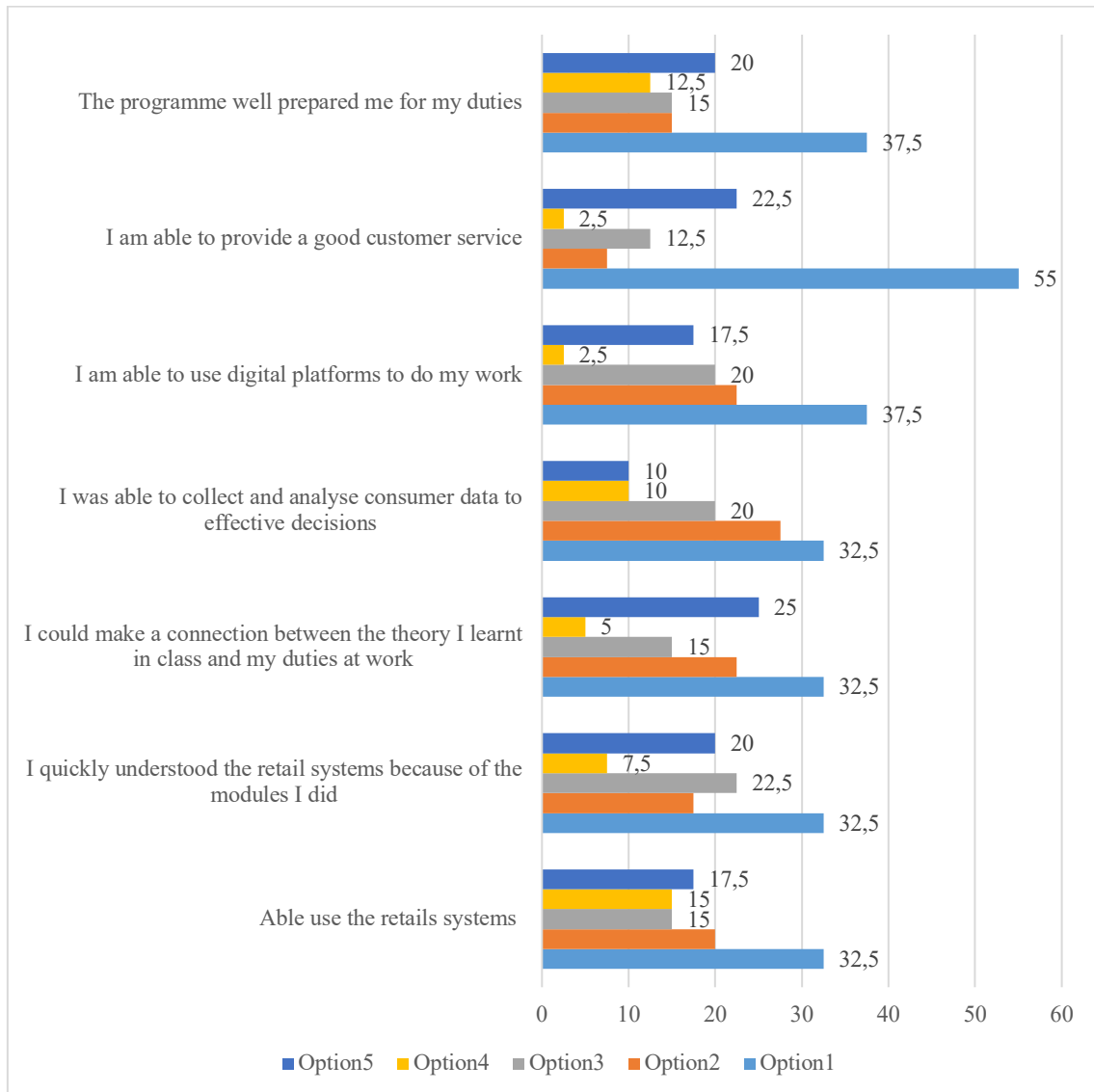
Figure 2. Students' Perception of the Retail Management Programme for Various Industry Requirements

Table 5 shows the students' suggestions for improving the retail program to better meet industry needs. The analysis reveals overwhelmingly high support for key curriculum enhancements. A significant majority (95%) believe that teaching modules in collaboration with industry experts would greatly enhance the learning experience, as indicated by the high index score of 90. Similarly, respondents strongly support the idea that module content should simulate real industry practices, as reflected by an index score of 88. Over 92% of respondents agree or strongly agree, indicating that students and stakeholders see value in experiential learning methods that provide hands-on exposure to industry-specific scenarios.

There is also a strong emphasis on the need for developing literacy, numeracy, and logical thinking skills, with an index score of 86.5. Nearly 90% of respondents recognise these foundational skills as essential for navigating the complexities of the retail environment, particularly in decision-making and analytical reasoning. Equally important is developing interpersonal, collaborative, and problem-solving skills, which received another high index score of 90. Respondents recognise that success in the retail industry depends not solely on technical knowledge but also on strong communication, teamwork, and critical thinking abilities.

Table 5. Students' suggestions for improvement for the retail programme to meet industry needs

Statement	Responses										Score	Index	Category
	SA		A		N		D		SD				
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%			
Allow the module to be taught in conjunction with industry experts	25	62.5	13	32.5	0	0	1	2.5	1	2.5	180	90	High
Module content should be a simulation of what happens in the industry	22	55	15	37.5	0	0	3	7.5	0	0	176	88	High
The curriculum should put more emphasis on literacy, numeracy, and logical and organised thinking	21	52.5	15	37.5	1	2.5	2	5	1	2.5	173	86.5	High
The module should develop interpersonal, collaborative, and problem-solving skills	26	65	12	30	0	0	0	0	2	5	180	90	High

Note: With SA=5 and SD=1 and N=40, Index score for Item 1 is $[25 \times 5 + 13 \times 4 + 0 \times 3 + 1 \times 2 + 1 \times 1] \times 100 / 5 \times 40$. Similarly for items 2 to 5.

Results

This study assessed the effectiveness of the Retail Management Programme at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in preparing students for employment in the retail sector. A quantitative approach was employed, gathering data from 100 students through the use of structured questionnaires. The findings reveal that 65% of students felt adequately prepared for the retail industry, particularly in areas such as customer service, digital tools, and retail operations. However, 27.5% were uncertain about their preparedness, and 7.5% felt unprepared, particularly in areas such as data analysis and decision-making skills. Students were mainly motivated to enroll in the program to acquire transferable skills (index score: 79), secure employment (81), and pursue further training (83). Practical experience was highly valued, with internship opportunities receiving the highest mean score of 4.33. Other well-rated components included mentoring, communication skills, teamwork, and problem-solving. Furthermore, students recommended several improvements to the curriculum, such as integrating industry experts into teaching (index score: 90), simulating real-world retail scenarios (index score: 88), and enhancing foundational competencies, including literacy and logical thinking (index score: 86.5).

Discussion

The results indicate that while the Retail Management Programme is effective in providing students with essential skills, there are significant gaps in areas such as analytical thinking and career guidance. The emphasis on practical learning and soft skills aligns with broader trends in employability literature, which highlight the importance of experiential education and alignment with industry needs.

These findings have important implications for curriculum developers, educators, and policymakers. Strengthening partnerships with industry, incorporating experiential learning, and updating course content to reflect current retail trends can enhance graduate employability. Additionally, improving career support services and integrating student feedback are crucial steps to bridging the gap between academic preparation and workplace expectations. Supporting literature emphasizes the significance of digital competencies, socio-emotional skills, and career certainty in predicting employability. Together, these studies advocate for curricula that integrate practical learning, digital literacy, and the development of soft skills. In a country facing high graduate unemployment, aligning higher education with labour market needs is crucial for producing work-ready graduates and promoting economic development (Mkhize & Reddy, 2025; Ferreira et al., 2024; Potgieter et al., 2023).

Recommendations and Conclusions

The study found that 65% of students feel well-prepared for the retail industry through the Retail Management program, while 27.5% are unsure, and 7.5% feel unprepared. Practical exposure is highly valued, with a mean score of 4.33 for retail internship opportunities. Students are primarily motivated by the desire for transferable

skills, job placements, and good starting salaries. Additionally, 95% believe that collaboration with industry experts would enhance their learning experience. Therefore, there is a need for deeper curriculum integration, enhanced support services, and better alignment with actual job market dynamics. This can be achieved by integrating teaching modules with industry experts to provide students with valuable insights and practical knowledge from the real world. This collaboration can effectively bridge the gap between academic learning and industry expectations. It is essential to develop module content that simulates real industry scenarios. This hands-on approach will better prepare students to face the challenges they will encounter in the retail sector. Additionally, incorporating training that fosters interpersonal, collaborative, and problem-solving skills is crucial. These soft skills are vital for effective communication, teamwork, and critical thinking in the workplace. Furthermore, emphasising the development of literacy, numeracy, and logical thinking skills is important, as these foundational abilities are key for decision-making and analytical reasoning in the retail industry. Finally, increasing opportunities for internships and work-integrated learning experiences can provide students with practical exposure that is highly valued and can significantly enhance their employability.

It is recommended that the programme foster partnerships with industry to ensure that the curriculum aligns with market demands and that students acquire relevant skills. There should also be strong support for experiential learning, internships, and industry simulations to enhance students' readiness for the workforce. Additionally, initiatives should be introduced to address the skills gap between graduates and labour market needs. This may include funding for curriculum development and projects encouraging industry collaboration. The program should conduct regular curriculum reviews to align with the latest industry trends and technological advancements. This will help students acquire current and relevant skills. Additionally, the program should invest more in career support services, including mentoring, job interview preparation, and career counselling, to assist students in transitioning smoothly into the workplace. It is also important for the program to continuously seek and incorporate student feedback to enhance work-readiness modules, as understanding students' perspectives can highlight areas for improvement. By implementing these recommendations, the program will better prepare retail management students for successful careers in the industry, address the skills gap, and improve graduate employability.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that may impact the depth of and the ability to generalize its findings. Firstly, the research was conducted at a single institution, the Durban University of Technology, using a convenience sample of 100 students. This limitation reduces the applicability of the results to other universities or broader populations. Furthermore, the exclusive use of quantitative methods, specifically closed-ended questionnaires, restricts the ability to capture nuanced insights into students' experiences and perceptions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, such as social desirability or overestimation of preparedness. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study provides only a snapshot in time, failing to account for changes in perceptions or employment outcomes over the longer term.

Future research should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach that includes qualitative interviews or focus groups to explore students' lived experiences, providing richer contextual insights. Conducting longitudinal studies that track students from enrollment through to post-graduation employment would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the program's long-term impact on work readiness and career progression. Additionally, comparative studies across multiple institutions in South Africa could help identify regional or institutional differences in curriculum effectiveness. Expanding the research scope to include international universities might further highlight best practices and innovative models of work-readiness education globally. These methodological enhancements would not only strengthen the evidence base but also inform more targeted curriculum reforms and policy interventions aimed at improving graduate employability in the retail sector.

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