Strengthening planning education development: A collaborative institutional mentorship model for professional skills development

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Abstract

The rapid urbanization and industrialization have intensified the multifaceted challenges faced by cities in addressing infrastructure and service delivery demands. These complexities necessitate a robust convergence of academic, research, and industry ecosystems to foster professional skills development across various levels of urban and regional planning. The purpose of this research paper is to introduce a Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model (CIMM) designed to strengthen the linkage between planning professional bodies, higher education institutions (HEIs), and industry stakeholders to produce industry-aligned academic and professional skills outcomes. Using a qualitative research approach, the study utilized cohort group discussions and logbook analysis to identify critical areas for professional skills development within the urban and regional planning discipline. The findings highlight gaps in current educational frameworks, emphasizing the need for enhanced collaboration to address evolving industry requirements. By fostering continuous dialogue and knowledge exchange, the proposed CIMM framework aims to bridge the academic-industry divide, enhancing the employability of graduates and the adaptability of professionals. The paper concludes by advocating the adoption of CIMM as a scalable and replicable strategy, with practical implications to strengthen planning education globally, addressing the dynamic challenges of urban development while cultivating a skilled workforce capable of navigating complex urban futures.

Contents

Contribution of this paper to the literature
The research identifies the key gaps in the current educational framework and contributes to the development of the Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model (CIMM) framework, which facilitates structured mentorship by integrating academic curricula with practical, industry-driven insights, ensuring that planning professionals are equipped with relevant competencies.

1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed an increase in infrastructure development globally in cities at various levels, such as megacities, metropolitan cities, as well as large, medium, and small cities. This infrastructure development, which followed rapid urbanization, contributed to an emphasis on the professional development within the planning sector. This, in turn, facilitated the need for specialized key areas to address the multidimensional cross-cutting issues of planning. Internationally, planning professional bodies have played a pivotal role in fostering the development of the planning profession at national, sub-national, and local levels. Planning professional bodies have, among other responsibilities, the duty to ensure appropriate bridging between professional skills development requirements and academic skills output at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. The planning profession is further considered one of the essential skills required in infrastructure delivery and services. It is therefore important that the skills needed to address infrastructure development requirements are instilled during education and training processes. Jones et al. (2009) highlighted that planning often occurs in a politicized and conflicted environment. The problems are multifaceted, complex, and unique. It is not merely a matter of implementing generalized, pre-constructed theories, instructions, or recommendations.

According to the Planning Profession Act, 2002 (Act 36 of 2002), the planning profession encompasses areas of expertise involved in initiating and managing change in the built and natural environment across various geographic scales, ranging from regions and sub-regions to cities, towns, villages, and neighborhoods. It aims to promote human development and environmental sustainability, particularly in land use delimitation, regulation, and management; organizing service infrastructure, utilities, facilities, and housing; and coordinating social, economic, and physical aspects through the synthesis and integration of information for preparing strategic, policy, statutory, and other development plans within the South African development context. Additionally, the Act states that the Council and the planning profession must promote the profession and pursue improvements in planners' competence through the development of skills, knowledge, and standards within the profession (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2002).

Considering the market demand in the planning profession, the role of planning professional bodies becomes very important in linking the academic, research, and consulting domains. Currently, there are 11 planning schools in South Africa offering diploma, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral qualifications in various domains of town, urban, and regional planning. Among these institutions, the three-year National Diploma in Town and Regional Planning was previously offered by three institutions: the University of Johannesburg (UJ), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Industry training was a compulsory part of the National Diploma program, requiring students to undergo 11 months of training during their second year through Work Integrated Learning (WIL) or experiential training. Through WIL, students engage in professional development as part of their education (Betts, Lewis, Dressler, & Svensson, 2009). The students get the opportunity to be mentored by a Professional Planner or Technical Planner during their experiential training.

The urban and regional planning field is one of the scarce skills fields in South Africa (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2022; Todes & Mngadi, 2008). Considering the ongoing thrust in infrastructure development and planning, market demand in the planning profession, and the limited mentorship opportunities for students from planning institutions in South Africa, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the role of institutional mentorship becomes central in strengthening the linkages between academic, research, and professional consulting domains.

Several students are unable to receive mentorship from registered Professional and/or Technical Planners during their training due to the unavailability of such professionals or their placement in other allied departments during the training period. Additionally, some students who did not have the opportunity to undergo experiential training are particularly vulnerable, as they did not receive mentorship from a Professional and/or Technical Planner. The lack of student placements for WIL affects various institutional aspects, including an increase in WIL backlog, impacts on graduate throughput, and the availability of professionally trained and skilled technical manpower (Lewis, Holtzhausen, & Taylor, 2010).

The problem explored in this paper relates to the role of planning institutions in addressing skills development through an integrated approach of institutional mentorship. The WIL issues are multidisciplinary, as students were previously subjected to different environments during their internship year of the academic tenure. Subsequently, the new programmes of a three-year Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning and a Bachelor Honours in Urban and Regional Planning did not include WIL or experiential training. Table 1 provides a brief overview of some of the challenges and limitations experienced by students at different stages in their academic path.

Table 1. Challenges and limitations towards acquiring prospective institutional mentorships.

Student categories	Challenges and limitations
Students preparing for WIL (First-year students)	Limited academic exposure, limited exposure to WIL preparation, limited networking, or institutional linkages.
Students enrolled in the second year (not engaged in WIL)	Acceptance of students by private and public sector organizations and/or placement issues, no mentoring support, resource limitations.
Students enrolled in the second year (Engaged in WIL)	Limited work exposure in organizations and availability of professional mentors.
Students in the third year (not engaged in WIL)	Academic tenure, competition with graduates to obtain WIL training, managing, and placement with third-year studies.
Students who have completed the third year but have not secured an opportunity for WIL.	Competition with second-year students as well as graduates, internship placements, limited internship opportunities.

2. Literature Review

There are several issues related to addressing skills development through an integrated approach of institutional mentorship. However, insufficient empirical research has been conducted on how an integrated approach to

institutional mentorship benefits students and institutions, particularly within the planning profession, where (WIL) is an integral part of the academic curricula. An important aspect at the individual level of mentor and mentee interaction is interpersonal relationships, as one of the benefits derived from this relates to work attitudes and behavioral intentions (Eby, Durley, Evans, & Ragins, 2006). Mentorship is an important training and development tool for the professional development process in many occupations. Mentorship is also associated with psychological development that leads to career success (Hunt & Michael, 1983).

According to Wright and Wright (1987), mentoring enhances academic success and provides further opportunities for career relationships, as well as long-term professional development. The benefits to mentees include career advancement, networking, professional development, and personal identity. Through university-alumni program linkages, the students can also benefit from academic and professional advice. The students can benefit in their career and professional development, build a professional network, increase academic and professional skills competence, and connect to subject matter knowledge at various levels (Cherian, 2007; Ovens, 2007; Savage, Karp, & Logue, 2004). Dressler (2015) indicated that internship experience was linked to initial career success, where career success is defined as "gaining university-level employment appropriate to the degree undertaken within 12 weeks of completing a university degree." (Dressler, 2015). Groenewald (2012) indicates that universities are not purely preparing students for work, but to develop graduates who are well-rounded.

Mentorship further provides the opportunity to transmit professional acumen in the work environment and cultivate qualitative changes rather than an emphasis on immediate productivity. Mentorship transforms the arenas of professional and managerial fields by redefining several roles to achieve developmental transformation toward higher levels of functioning (Healy & Welchert, 1990; Montgomery, 2018). There is a critical gap in the approaches of professional skills development at the university level and workplace practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Institutions need to find innovative and alternative approaches, such as collaborative relations and structures, to address the critical gap. These collaborative structures can serve as a powerful force for professional development and foster a new culture of learning. Collaborative mentoring practices offer opportunities for professionals to provide feedback while developing competence in work practices, learning, writing, and research development (Mullen, 2000).

Transitional challenges are not only restricted to the progress from student to working professional. The students' transition from high school to university brings several challenges to mentors, which *inter alia* include: challenges related to cultural background, socioeconomic backgrounds, different learning aptitudes and styles, time management, and low entrance grades. These inherited issues result in several factors affecting students' success. These include academic standards, adapting to the social and academic environment, personal goals and aspirations, motivation and defined goals, and the priority of work commitments (Salinitri, 2005). A well-developed mentoring program based on a sound model can integrate the university, community, and workplace towards good practices (Savage et al., 2004). In South Africa, the importance of skills development is also highlighted by the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2006). The NSDS is considered to be the extension of the Human Resource Development Strategy and extends beyond the training-related aspects, such as enhancing the quality of life at the workplace through skills development and employment prospects (Dowd-Krause, 2009). It is here where WIL affects interpersonal skills, maturity level, self-confidence, and teamwork. The value-added and outcome contribution of WIL can be further enhanced through the support of employers (Lewis et al., 2010).

Beyond the increasing demand for planners driven by infrastructure-led growth and development, there remains a shortage of skilled planners at senior levels, as well as experienced planners (Andres et al., 2018; Todes, 2009). There is a further mismatch of planning competencies at various levels of governance. Employers employ planners with limited experience or even without planning qualifications, particularly in smaller municipalities. Upcoming planners or recent graduates are often assigned higher-level positions without considering issues such as limited relevant planning experience and exposure. The situation worsens where there is no capacity to support, train, coach, or mentor them to ensure long-term sustainability. There is a lack of ongoing mentoring and opportunities for continuous professional development (Denoon-Stevens et al., 2023; Todes & Mngadi, 2008).

The effectiveness and skills development of students depend significantly on institutional partnerships. These partnerships establish connections between academic institutions, workplaces, and knowledge resources. Successful collaborations offer opportunities for students to benefit from both internal and external partners. Internal partners include university staff members, WIL coordinators, students, and WIL support units. External partners encompass employers such as private companies, municipalities, provincial and national governments, and professional associations with statutory or voluntary status. According to the Council on Higher Education (2011), partnerships for the different WIL curricular modalities include work-directed theoretical learning, problem-based learning, project-based learning, and workplace learning. Of these partnerships, the workplace learning approach is what the students of the National Diploma in Town and Regional Planning experienced during their academic curricula as part of their WIL tenure. Due to the nature of the multi-institutional partnerships, such as academic, industry, and professional associations, the role of mentors and supervisors in an institutional context plays a critical role in developing the learning environment for the students. Without mentors from these institutions, students would not be exposed to challenging situations or be able to effectively integrate academic and workplace experiences (Council on Higher Education, 2011).

The roles that academic and workplace supervisors can play have many dimensions, including important functions and responsibilities. Table 2 provides some of the more prevalent dimensions, roles, and responsibilities of the Internal and External Partners.

The roles and responsibilities of internal and external partnerships identified in Table 2 largely focus on the integration of a number of themes in guiding the students effectively during the workplace internship period. The guidance may positively impact students beyond the training period. However, it appears that the guidance has only limited focus areas specific to the project or work involvement during the WIL tenure. Workplace internships provide several opportunities for students but are rarely exploited due to the lack of proper institutional collaboration. These opportunities could enhance students' professional development in areas such as organizational culture, leadership styles, gender, politics, health and safety, innovation, and diversity. The Australian Collaborative Education Network highlights the lack of academic and industry supervisors as one of the significant deficiencies in workplace learning in Australia (Council on Higher Education, 2011). This is also a reality within the planning profession in South Africa due to a lack of academic and industry supervisors.

Table 2. Internal and external partner dimensions, roles, and responsibilities.

Internal and external partners	Dimensions, roles, and responsibilities
Academic partner	Define learning outcomes in collaboration with professional partners.
	Facilitate effective communication between students and workplace supervisors for feedback.
	Support students in developing self-directed learning skills.
	Mediate and resolve conflicts.
	Evaluate student workplace performance, often with professional partner input.
	Monitor workplace dynamics, including supervisor performance.
	Guide students in setting and achieving personal development goals.
Institutional partner	Integrate students into the organization's culture and processes.
	Establish clear performance objectives for students.
	Collaborate on defining learning goals.
	Assess and monitor student workplace performance.
	Identify skill gaps and arrange targeted training or learning opportunities.

Source: Council on Higher Education (2011).

The integrated institutional mentorship framework (Table 3) may ideally look for relationships at multiple levels of engagement, e.g., pre-service, in-service, and mentee, and mentoring purpose with a suggested focus of the structured mentorship (Raven, 2011).

Table 3. Multiple level engagement relationships of mentor and mentee based on a study done by C.A.P.E. 2011.

	Mentee	Mentoring purpose	Suggested focus
Pre-Service	School learners	Generate interest in environmental and conservation careers by showcasing sector opportunities.	Overview of career paths and entry requirements in the sector.
	Undergraduates	Enhance experiential learning within academic curricula and introduce career opportunities.	Support for curriculum-based learning and exposure to specific career roles.
In-service	Young Professionals – interns (Graduates)	Orient young professionals to the sector and outline potential career trajectories.	Sector organizational induction, with a focus on diverse career pathways.
	Junior professionals	Support career advancement through targeted skill development.	Competencies required for progression in a chosen career path.
	Mid-career professionals	Build capacity for senior management, mid-management, specialised roles.	Skills for senior/mid-management or specialised positions.
	Senior management	Strengthen strategic leadership and organizational management capabilities.	Competencies for effective strategic and organizational leadership.

Source: C.A.P.E. (Conservation Professionals (2011).

Planning is a multidisciplinary field, and with rapid urbanization and development, the functions of town and urban planning have changed significantly in recent years. The field of planning involves interconnected issues such as design, long-term strategic planning, integrated development, regional development planning, and other core aspects of town, urban, and regional planning. Due to the shift towards developmental and participatory approaches, planners require a range of skills at various levels. Research commissioned by the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) highlighted key issues: there is a lack of understanding of what a planner is, what planners are expected to do, and what constitutes a fully functional planning unit in municipalities; several non-planners perform planning functions, especially at the municipal level; there are also qualified planners who are not in planning positions; and there appears to be a mismatch between the organizational structure of municipalities, the functions to be performed, and the number of planning posts allocated. The research emphasizes the need for quality planning skills and their effective utilization within government. Key recommendations related to skills development include aligning university curricula with industry demands, increasing university capacity, and strengthening government departments (Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA), 2008). In this regard, the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN) addressed the 'gaps' identified through JIPSA in its Competency and Standards generation project (South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN), 2014). The process used by SACPLAN to formulate the set of standards and competencies and the process and stakeholders are well documented by Sihlongonyane (2018), respectively, and thus are not repeated here.

3. Methodology

The research study aimed to determine students' preparedness for Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placement opportunities, identify major gaps requiring further attention, provide preliminary feedback to students in these areas, and sensitize students to the importance of preparation for professional development. It also sought to identify key issues faced by students before WIL engagement and during the training period, as well as the skill areas students are exposed to and the perceived learning and skill gaps. Additionally, the study explored perceptions of institutional mentorship in addressing issues related to WIL and enhancing skill orientation and professional development at various levels of student engagement during their academic tenure. The objective was further to develop a Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model (CIMM) to assist planning professional bodies and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in establishing and ensuring appropriate bridging between professional skills development requirements and academic skills output at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels.

A qualitative research approach was used to establish the opinions of first-year cohorts and third-year students (senior students) enrolled in the National Diploma in Town and Regional Planning at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Johannesburg. The participants included students who had completed or partially completed their (WIL) component. The third-year students who had never engaged in WIL were also part of the cohort. The study focused on first-year and third-year students to include those in the process of securing WIL, those who had completed WIL, and third-year students who had not had the opportunity to engage in WIL. Second-year students were excluded because they were still completing WIL and were off-campus during the survey period. Data collection involved survey questionnaires and document analysis

of students' WIL logbook portfolios. A structured questionnaire, comprising both closed and open-ended questions, was distributed to first-year and third-year students during their lecture contact sessions.

Purposive sampling was used, as first-year students had not completed their WIL and had initiated steps toward securing WIL opportunities, whereas third-year students would typically have completed their WIL. It is acknowledged that some third-year students never secured an opportunity to engage in WIL; these students formed part of the research sample to gain insight into the challenges of not obtaining a WIL placement. The data obtained from questionnaires were completed by 96 participants (64% of the sample size). A separate questionnaire was designed for first-year students and those studying in the third year to obtain their perceptions of the institutional arrangements for pre- and post-mentorship.

A logbook analysis was also conducted for the documents (logbook) submitted by students as part of the completion of their WIL at the end of the training period. The logbook analysis was carried out to ascertain the extent of student involvement in various areas of planning, to identify key challenges and recommendations as captured from their self-reflection reports, and comments received from mentors.

4. Research Results
4.1. Findings from the First-Year Students

The entire cohort of first-year students was invited to participate in the WIL survey through a structured process using uLink Blackboard. The first-year students completed an online questionnaire via uLink Blackboard, which is the university's online platform for access to teaching and learning tools. Of the 85 students, 74 students participated in the survey, as provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Key findings from first-year entrants towards WIL preparedness.

Key Indicators	Overall class percentage
Out of 85 students in the class, only 44 students had their CVs ready.	52%
Students interested in WIL related workshops: 67	79%
Students who know any professional planner: 21	25%
Students who have any relatives or family members in the planning profession: 2	2%
Students who were members of the South African Planning Institute (SAPI): None	0%
Students who had registered with the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN): 1	1%
Students who are members of the Town and Regional Planning (TRP) of UJ LinkedIn group: 6	7%
Students registered with the Forum of Planning Students (FOPS) of TRP, UJ: 34	40%
Concentration of students per province:	
• Gauteng Province: 19	22%;
• Limpopo: 29	34%;
• Mpumalanga: 10	12%;
• Other provinces: 16	19%
Students interested in completing their WIL with government bodies (Municipalities, metropolitan cities, provincial departments, national departments): 21	25%
Students interested in completing their WIL within the private sector: 7	8%
Students interested in completing their WIL with NGOs / CBOs: 1	1%
Students who showed interest in completing their WIL within both the government and private sectors: 45	53%

4.2. Findings from the Third Year (Final Year) Students

From a group of approximately 70 students, around 22 questionnaires were received. These included both students who had successfully completed their WIL and those who had not completed or had the opportunity to complete their WIL during the previous year (second year of enrollment in the National Diploma), as shown in Table 5

Table 5. Key findings from third-year students towards institutional mentorship.

Key indicators	Key findings
Challenges faced by the students in securing suitable WIL opportunities	Challenges in finding companies willing to train students, including limited opportunities at municipalities. Challenges in securing experiential training opportunities, competition with other students, budget constraints, and lack of exposure to town and regional planning fields. Challenges in securing opportunities that are accessible, e.g., within one's hometown. Employer requirements, such as a driver's license and AutoCAD skills. Difficulties in constructing a CV.
Challenges faced by students while undergoing WIL training	Attending classes while participating in WIL is expensive due to the distance from the institution. Students find it difficult to grasp new concepts and have limited exposure to practical land use. They face challenges in presenting complex information, dealing with impatient clients, and managing limited resources. Many struggle with report writing. There is a lack of support, limited exposure, and few programs for improvement. Students do not have enough time to learn specific skills. Additionally, there is a lack of integration between lecturers and companies.
Skill areas exposed as part of the WIL training	The areas include spatial planning (e.g., Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs), Land Use Schemes, Urban Renewal Projects), land use applications (e.g., amendment schemes, subdivisions, township establishments, consent applications, planning hearings), administration, GIS work, site inspections, public participation, surveying, project management, urban design, research, traffic impact studies, fieldwork, and the preparation of memorandums and maps.

Key indicators	Key findings
Competencies/skillsets expressed by students as essential to be learned during the WIL training	In-depth understanding of spatial planning, AutoCAD, GIS, land use applications, entrepreneurship, report writing, project management, interpersonal skills, legal procedures, and township establishment.
Perceptions on the role of planning institutions and ineffective mentorship.	More WIL opportunities, skills development in spatial planning, AutoCAD, GIS, land use applications, entrepreneurship, report writing, project management, interpersonal skills, legal procedures, and township establishment. Provide opportunities for companies to take two to three students each year. Mentors must have the necessary skills and experience, and trainees should be exposed to various town planning matters, guiding students about the industry. Assist in the placement of students, help in finding placements, and provide pre-training to ensure a better WIL experience.
The benefit of skill/competency value add perceived due to the assigned mentors	Importance of planning responsibilities, practical assistance, professional guidance, skills development, career management, and promoting integrity and efficiency. The need for interpersonal skills, management skills, professional conduct, and academic and professional writing.
Student perception of institutional mentorship	Programme offers comprehensive knowledge of urban and regional planning, broad learning opportunities, strong motivation, experience, career guidance, remuneration, bursaries, WIL training preparation, exposure, and a clear future direction in planning.

Focusing on students' perceptions, it is evident that there are certain gaps in the process of preparing students for WIL placement, as well as during their WIL training or upon completing their third year (for students who have not completed their WIL training). There is a lack of integrated institutional partnerships that could promote institutional mentorship, especially for students undergoing WIL training. South Africa has more than 2,600 registered Professional Planners with SACPLAN, working in various capacities such as academic or research institutions, private companies, municipalities, provincial and national government departments, or other organizations related to planning and development. There is an opportunity for such planning institutions to foster interlinkages and develop structured mentorship programs. An integrated institutional mentorship framework could involve relationships at multiple levels of engagement, such as pre-service, in-service, and mentee, with a focus on structured mentorship approaches (Raven, 2011).

5. Discussions

There are various existing internship opportunities available at the local, provincial, and national levels. These opportunities are limited in scope and sector-specific, resulting in not all stakeholders being involved or participating in the mentorship process. Interaction is often seen as limited to one-way communication between the student/mentee and the participating institution. Some of the programs available at the local level include internship opportunities by metropolitan municipalities, medium or small municipalities, district municipalities, provincial governments, and national government departments. Many of these internships focus on exit-level qualified planners or those who have completed their basic planning qualifications. A limited number of opportunities are available for (WIL) training compared to internship opportunities. The current system does not account for students who do not get an opportunity to be linked with any institution or mentorship program. There are some success stories where institutional mentorships have become best practice models or are integrating different stakeholders, such as Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA) (Sexton, Abbot, Beets, & Naude, 2011) or the internship/mentorship program for municipal finance management by the National Treasury (2004). However, there are still limitations regarding institutional mentorships involving relevant stakeholders to provide the desired experience and benefits to students, mentees, and mentors. These issues can be observed in sectoral internships at the national, sub-national, and local levels, where the relevant skill sets of professional planners may be limited, for example, in departments like Treasury, Public Works, Tourism, and Environment. This mentorship program can be extended beyond the WIL requirement to include mentorship during the Candidacy phase of professional registration.

5.1. Key Scenarios

The following are some options that could be further discussed and debated to formalize integrated institutional mentorship opportunities in the planning profession, which connect to the three-tiered model of teaching, service, and research (Hallman, Massoud, & Tomiuk, 2020). Figure 1 provides a Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model (CIMM) detailing the three scenarios of the framework.

5.1.1. Scenario 1

The necessary stakeholders, such as academic or research-based institutions, the private sector, municipalities, provincial government, national government, and professional and voluntary bodies associated with the planning domain, should collaborate to establish a national mentorship program. Stakeholders should participate in designing the program to address various stages of skills and competency development, such as basic, intermediate, and advanced levels (Cutillas et al., 2023). The stakeholders will be responsible for preparing a comprehensive mentorship and institutional action plan in close coordination with inputs from all member institutions. The process can be anchored nationally by institutions such as SACPLAN or a national government department, for example, the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD), which is the custodian of the planning profession; or some of the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), such as the Local Government Sector Education and Training Authority (LGSETA) and the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA). The integrated institutional arrangement would involve all stakeholders participating in the mentorship process, with defined roles and responsibilities for skills and professional development outputs.

5.1.2. Scenario 2

Since planners are required to be registered with SACPLAN, SACPLAN, in collaboration with the South African Planning Institute (SAPI) and the South African Association of Consulting Professional Planners (SAACPP), can

structure mentorship partnerships with academic institutions. The integrated institutional arrangement would involve registered planners participating in the mentorship process with defined roles and responsibilities for skills and professional development outputs. This can be further linked with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to advance the mentors' professional careers.

5.1.3. Scenario 3

The registered Professional and Technical Planners from SACPLAN, working within the consulting sector, municipal sector, and the planning staff from academic institutions, are accessible and can be approached by students/mentees. The students/mentees have the option of selecting a mentor of their choice based on geographical location, areas of interest, or alignment with the purpose of their academic curricula. Each student has the option to select a mentor from the day they enroll in the planning program or during their training period.
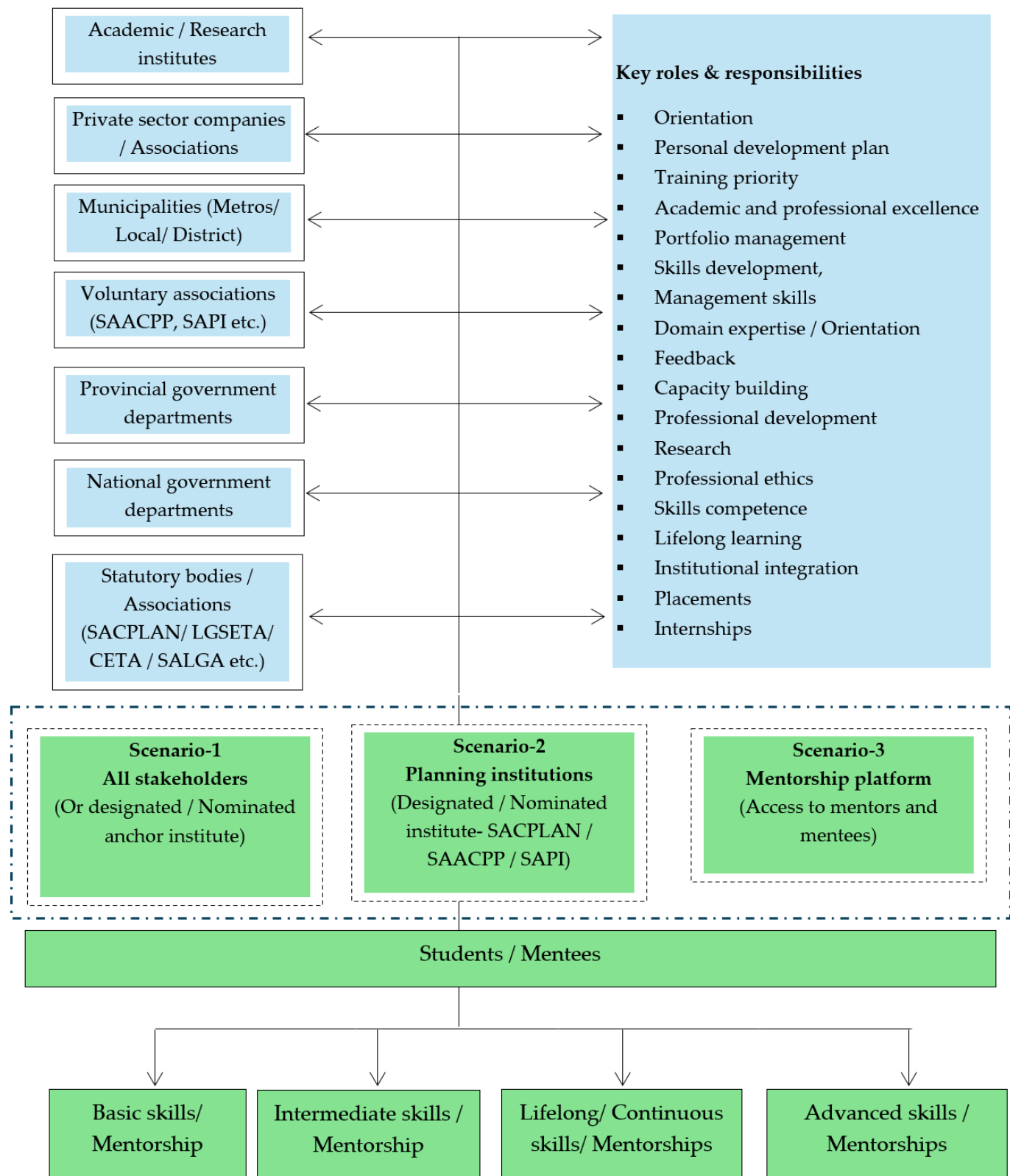

Figure 1. Collaborative institutional mentorship model (CIMM).

5.2. Potential Benefits

Looking at the existing gap in the approach to mentorship, an integrated institutional approach is the most suitable mentorship strategy that will bring various benefits. The institutional framework would address larger issues related to mentorship opportunities, professional support, resource skills utilization, convergence of institutional linkages, and fostering awareness and learning. Some benefits of an integrated institutional mentorship approach include (1) continued mentorship opportunities for students during and beyond their academic programs as graduates; (2) support for mentees/students from various academic institutions towards professional skills development; (3) utilization of mentees/students for research and institutional activities in the planning field; (4) leveraging existing technical resources and skills from persons registered with SACPLAN and/or members of SAPI

or other professional/voluntary bodies for students' professional development; (5) convergence of linkages between academic, research, and consulting domains in multidisciplinary planning themes; (6) increased awareness, conduct of professional development programs, and research activities through an integrated approach; (7) linking and fostering lifelong learning in the planning field.

5.3. Key Roles and Responsibilities

The operationalization of institutional mentorship requires a dedicated role for an anchor institute that can implement various activities in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. These roles and responsibilities will primarily be carried out by those stakeholders involved in mentorship but will be driven and coordinated by an anchor institute or organization to ensure structured and coordinated efforts in implementation and execution tasks.

The anchor institute or organization is required to initiate various roles, such as preparing a national inventory and procuring relevant details of national planning schools and institutions offering planning-related programs, including the number of planners, student enrollments, WIL engagements, WIL backlogs, research interns, and placements. It should also prepare an inventory and procure relevant details of institutions, organizations, consulting firms, etc., associated with the planning field in South Africa. The database should be accessible to all stakeholders; however, this information is currently available on the SACPLAN website, which can be beneficial. Based on the procured information, the institute should develop a detailed strategy for engaging the student community with defined goals and objectives as part of a mentorship program. It should invite expressions of interest from prospective planning professionals and induct mentors from the planning field to be associated with the anchor institute or organization. An initial needs assessment and feedback should be conducted with existing planning members and stakeholders to inform the mentorship and institutional partnership programs. The institute should review and upgrade existing communication tools, such as websites, marketing, promotion, branding frameworks, and programs of relevant institutions, to reach target members. Launching various mentorship and institutional partnership programs with the assistance of planning stakeholders is essential. Finally, the institute should monitor and evaluate the benefits of these programs for students, prospective members, and other target groups.

5.4. Implementation Strategy / Key Tasks

For effective involvement and participation of students, prospective members, and existing members of the anchor institute/organization, they may initiate some activities while operationalizing the mentorship and institutional partnership process. The implementation of institutional mentorship programs would, however, depend on factors such as: availability of internal and external skilled human resources as mentors, incentives to attract mentors, needs identification of mentees, and a committed relationship between mentor and mentee (Nundulall & Reddy, 2011). As part of an implementation strategy, some key tasks could be identified to assist with the successful implementation of the suggested mentorship program. The lists provided hereunder should not be seen as an exhaustive list but rather as a basis from which key tasks could be identified by each participating institution.

5.5. Key Tasks for Successful Implementation of the Mentorship Programme

A process can be initiated under which each registered student from a planning institution in South Africa becomes a member of the institutional mentorship program. Planning institutions may be approached for a list of students registered in planning programs. Students are to register with SACPLAN to ensure appropriate portability from candidacy to professional/technical registration. Students should map their interests in various thematic areas of planning and their professional development goals in terms of academic, research, and consulting areas. The formation of the student body of planning, such as the South African Council of Planning Students (SACPS), should be supported by the anchor institute/stakeholders and other entities like SACPLAN, SAACPP, SAPI, etc.

5.6. Strategy / Key Tasks for Institutional Partners

Some of the strategic key tasks for institutional partners include: submitting an Expression of Interest (EOI) from the designated or nominated anchor institute for the mentorship programme and institutional partnership; inviting interested planning professionals from South Africa to mentor prospective students or members, as well as existing interested members in the multidisciplinary areas of planning for knowledge sharing under the guidelines for institutional mentorship; developing and preparing guidelines for mentoring and institutional partnerships with a broad agenda of possible collaboration in terms of academic, research, and activity-based partnerships, with defined milestones and outputs; increasing institutional partnerships with academic institutions, key planning or allied departments from universities, centers of excellence, private consulting firms, municipalities, associations, and other parastatal agencies or entities; preparing a directory of planning resource professionals and institutions involved in planning and available for mentoring and institutional partnerships in areas of academic, research, and project involvement, in collaboration with all key stakeholders; preparing guidelines for rating mentoring systems and linking them with an incentivized system for mentorship and institutional partnership involvement with all key stakeholders; developing training guidelines to assist institutional partnerships in developing and implementing focused training programmes to ensure registration compliance.

5.7. Key Potential Benefits

Some of the key potential benefits that could be achieved include: students enrolled in planning institutions would benefit from a large technical and professional resource pool in the planning field through stakeholders, anchor institutes, and organizations' websites; student and planning network members across South Africa would increase and serve as a key resource in operationalizing programs at the national, provincial, and local levels. Eventually, this network could become one of the largest institutional planning mentor networks in the world. The process could then be extended to the rest of the African continent and beyond. Student and institutional members would contribute to research activities conducted by planning associations. A large member resource pool would act as a one-stop platform for prospective planning students, experts, and institutional members for mentorship and partnership programs. Mentors, resource persons, and institutional partners would be able to document various case studies and best practices in the planning field, making these available to other stakeholders. Students would be able to network with industry professionals, aiding them in securing the best placements in the planning field. Mentorship would provide opportunities for skill development, assistance, professional advice, institutional partnerships, and networking, along with updated, academic-industry-focused, and relevant curricula.

6. Conclusions

The study emphasizes the need for strong institutional linkages within the broader areas of planning experience during and beyond the WIL tenure. These linkages require the involvement of all stakeholders at various levels. At the higher education institution (university) level, students need greater cohesion and integration of their academic studies with practical involvement during their WIL training. At the professional and voluntary institutional levels, mentoring support is critical, and the existing professional manpower resource base could be operationalized for better, meaningful, and structured participation between mentors and mentees, using participative options involving all stakeholders. Although some initiatives are being adopted at local, provincial, and national levels, these tend to lack coordination. A study on the impact of structured institutional initiatives related to skills and professional development, as well as mentorship relationships between mentors and mentees, could contribute to the body of knowledge within the planning profession. The study should broadly cover stakeholders (internal and external), map their expectations and perceptions, and aim to formalize institutional programs or arrangements between the university and professional bodies such as the South African Council for Planners (SACPLAN), voluntary associations like the South African Planning Institute (SAPI), and other stakeholders, including private sector companies, municipalities, provincial governments, and national government bodies.

The research presents the perceptions of planning students from one of the higher education institutions in South Africa. The target group is limited to first-year and third-year senior students within the same academic year of the former Town and Regional Planning program, which included 11 months of experiential training as part of the requirements for successful completion. The study excludes the perceptions of second-year students due to their (WIL) engagement outside the university, as well as external stakeholders and institutions involved in addressing the issues, based on internal student feedback and experiences. Under the new program structure, the Urban and Regional Planning program (new name) no longer includes the 11 months of compulsory internship or experiential learning. The Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model offers a strategic, innovative approach within the institutional framework to collaborate and address various skill development areas, serving as a bridge to industry-specific skill development through a mentorship approach.

Through this paper, the "Collaborative Institutional Mentorship Model" described by the authors is proposed to assist planning professional bodies as well as higher educational institutions in establishing and ensuring appropriate bridging between professional skills development requirements and academic skills output at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. Although developed from the field of urban and regional planning, this model can be implemented across disciplines.

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