RESEARCH REPORT

WHOLESALE & RETAIL SETA
LEADERSHIP CHAIR: GAUTENG

Project 2023/2 (B)

EXPLORING NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND TRENDS IN RETAIL EDUCATION

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November 2023

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Prepared by:

Dr Isolde Ward (nee Lubbe)
Ms Semona Pillay
University of Johannesburg

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Africa's retail sector has a significant influence on the nation's economy, contributing nearly 20% to GDP. Specifically, the wholesale and retail sectors are prominent as they are not only the fourth-largest contributors to the GDP but also employ a significant segment of the population, second only to the government. However, despite its potential to provide many employment opportunities, the sector faces challenges, especially in addressing the skills gap. This concern becomes even more pronounced as South Africa grapples with a worrying youth unemployment rate. The focus on skilled labour within the retail sector has, therefore, become increasingly crucial. Recognising this, initiatives, such as the introduction of the Skills Program Matrix by the W&R SETA, which aim to upskill individuals and thus, enhance the industry's expertise pool. This adaptation to the evolving retail trends is not just vital for the sector's growth and survival but also for its pivotal role in buttressing the nation's economy.

Against this backdrop, the primary research explored integrating contemporary skills, like 'green skills' and 4IR, into the curricula of higher education institutions (HEIs). To achieve this, the study harnessed semi-structured qualitative interviews. The initial intent was to include five representatives from each of academia and industry, however, the final number was three from each category. The emphasis was on depth, ensuring the inclusion of insights from those with considerable experience in the South African Wholesale and Retail sector.

The main thrust of the research centred on discerning ways to seamlessly integrate 'future skills' into academic frameworks. The challenge lay in harmonising the ever-adaptive demands of the industry with academic offerings, especially in the context of South Africa's evolving retail landscape. The findings were insightful, revealing a dynamic and constantly evolving relationship between academia and the industry. Several challenges, like fragmented interactions and weakened institutional ties, further highlighted the complexities of this relationship. Another discerning observation was the existing gap between the fast-paced changes in the retail industry and the more deliberate pace of academic institutions, leading to potential curriculum misalignments.

Based on these observations several recommendations emerged. It was deemed essential to have regular dialogues characterised by joint sessions, workshops, and

knowledge exchanges between academia and industry. Curricula must be frequently updated to remain aligned with current industry trends. A strong emphasis of bridging theory with practice, achieved through joint ventures, internships, and practical projects, was also highlighted. Importantly, the academic curriculum needs to be broadened to incorporate not just theoretical expertise but also essential soft skills to ensure comprehensive student development. Central to all these recommendations is the cultivation of mutual respect, open communication, and aligned goals between academia and industry.

In conclusion, the study highlights the need for alignment between academia and the demands of the evolving retail sector. The participants emphasised that in the South African context, prioritising job security and basic skills is crucial before introducing advanced skills, like 4IR or 'green skills'. For graduates to be truly prepared for future challenges, a cohesive approach between educational bodies and the retail industry is essential, ensuring they are 'job ready' and 'future ready'.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Retail sales play an important role in driving the South African economy, accounting for nearly 20% of the country's GDP (Botha, 2022; Kenton, 2022). Wholesale and Retail, specifically, are estimated to be the fourth-largest contributors to South Africa's GDP. This sector employs an estimated 30,000 tax-registered businesses, engaging nearly 20% of the economically active workforce. Consequently, it holds the position of the second-largest employer in South Africa, after the government (Teuteberg, 2021; Stats SA, 2021). It is an important sector where growth boosts consumer confidence and stimulates consumer spending (Abraham, 2022). An upward trajectory in retail sales directly translates to positive employment prospects, which is crucial in South Africa, given the alarming current unemployment rate of 61.4% among the youth aged 18 – 24 in South Africa (Abraham, 2022; Trading Economics, 2023). With retailing being the fourth largest contributor to the South African GDP, it has the potential to reduce unemployment by creating employment opportunities. However, it is important to acknowledge the shortage of skilled labour in this sector (Khatle et al., 2021). Skilled employees are individuals in the workforce who possess an extensive education, training or experience, enabling them to handle more complex physical or mental tasks in the workplace (Hayes, 2022).

The skills shortage contributes to the national unemployment rate. However, in the wholesale and retail sector, the W&R SETA has implemented various strategies to address this issue. One such strategy is the Skills Program Matrix, which offers a range of programmes aimed at upskilling individuals in the retail sector (W&R SETA, 2020). In addition, the W&R SETA has introduced programmes focused on 'green skills' (environmental friendliness) and 4IR skills (such as relating to the 4th Industrial Revolution). These are but some of the programmes introduced to ensure that the W&R SETA remains aligned with the latest industry developments. Despite the implementation of various employment-boosting initiatives in the retail sector, the W&R SETA report on '*The impact assessment of retail management developments*' highlights the necessity for retailers to adopt new developments and trends to survive, grow and support the South African economy (W&R SETA, 2020). These changes must be integrated into retail-related qualifications, as they prepare graduates to become valuable employees in retail businesses, thereby contributing to the sector's overall

success. In South Africa, higher education institutions (HEIs) are categorised into universities, colleges and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVETs).

This report aims to provide a summary and highlight the new developments and trends in South Africa, as presented in the existing literature, which served as the foundation for conducting the primary research. The primary research aimed to investigate the extent to which new developments, such as 'green skills' and 4IR should be incorporated into the HEIs' curricula.

2.   PROBLEM STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES

Following the given background, the following sections present the problem statement, which identified a gap in the alignment between the retail industry and HEI curriculum development. Thereafter, the research objectives that guided the study are outlined.

3.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

The motivation for this study originated from a proposal by the W&R SETA to investigate the alignment between existing curricula and industry needs. A preliminary examination of various W&R SETA reports, including the W&R SETA Sector Skills Plan (2020), highlighted the importance of partnering with HEIs to develop curricula that align with the demands of the labour market within the sector. In addition, the W&R SETA research report on learning programmes by Meyer and Van Dyk (2022) emphasises the necessity of creating up-to-date curricula and training programmes to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills required for agility in the rapidly evolving W&R sector. These findings confirmed the existence of an alignment issue between curricula and sector skills, particularly understanding the trends that relate to the much-needed skills.

As evidenced in the abovementioned reports, as well as the introduction and background to the study, the skills gap which was identified related to 'green skills', as well as 4IR-related skills; employees in the retail industry currently do not have these nor are knowledgeable enough to keep up with the trends. Therefore, the findings from this study aimed to contribute to both the retail sector, as well as the HEI curriculum development to align the two parties.

4.   RESEARCH AIM AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study was to determine to what extent should 'green skills' and 4IR skills be embedded in the curriculum.

To support the primary aim, several secondary objectives are proposed.

- *Secondary Objective 1: To assess the importance of the alignment of future skills and industry trends in curriculum development.*
- *Secondary Objective 2: To recommend how HEIs can adapt curricula to incorporate new skills required by the industry on an ongoing basis.*

The next section presents a literature review which formed the foundation of the study and gives context to the types of skills required in the retail industry.

5.   LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's swiftly evolving landscape, both academia and the retail industry are undergoing significant transformation. This literature review navigates key themes shaping these sectors. The symbiotic relationship between academia and retail in fostering 'future-ready' graduates is highlighted followed by a discussion of the profound effects of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) across industries. Concurrently, 'green marketing,' is explored and this report emphasises its role in sustainable and eco-friendly practices. Concluding the exploration, various emerging trends influencing retailers' strategic planning and sustainability are briefly highlighted, aiming to provide readers with a clear perspective on the current dynamics in the retail sector and academia.

5.1   Fostering future-ready graduates: The symbiosis between academia and the retail Industry

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have traditionally been the bedrock for preparing graduates for the workforce (Hay, 2020; Molebatsi, 2021). The 4IR interplay between academia and the retail industry is paramount to ensure these graduates are not only 'job ready' but also 'future ready' (Mackie, 2020). In the throes of the 4IR, the synergy between academia and the retail industry is more crucial than ever (Ramakrishna et al., 2020). Ensuring graduates are 'job ready' entails equipping them with the skills and knowledge currently in demand (Jackson, 2018). For instance, with the rise of e-commerce, students might undergo practical training in digital marketing tools, data analytics, and online customer engagement strategies (Penprase, 2018; Purnomo, 2023).

However, being 'future ready' extends beyond the immediate needs, preparing graduates for the unpredictable changes the 4IR might usher in. For example, as artificial intelligence and automation become integral to retail operations (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hassoun et al., 2022) graduates should be trained in not just using these technologies, but in critical thinking and adaptability to swiftly learn and integrate emerging tools (Whittemore, 2018). In addition, soft skills, like emotional intelligence, cross-cultural communication (Minocha, 2018) and ethical decision-making become vital as the line between technology and human interaction blurs (Banks, 2016). By embedding such foresight in curricula, academia ensures that the graduates they train are prepared for both the current retail landscape and its potential evolutions. While preparing graduates for future technological advancements is essential, understanding and addressing the underlying dynamics between academia and the retail industry becomes equally crucial.

The relationship between these two entities is intricate, continuously evolving, and marred by misalignment due to conflicts of interest and the contrasting pace at which they operate (Anderson, 2001; Hillerbrand & Werker, 2019; Nam et al., 2019). Such discrepancies have presented the importance of work-integrated learning (WIL) as a potential solution (Jackson et al., 2023).

WIL emphasises the mutual relationship between academia and industry, and acts as a catalyst to merge theoretical underpinnings from educational settings with the empirical realities of the industry (Patrick et al., 2008; Trede, 2012; Fleming & Hay, 2021). It is not just about absorbing academic content; it's about making that content resonate in real-world scenarios. The successful implementation of WIL demands a harmonious collaboration between academic institutions and host organisations, ensuring students get the best of both worlds (Hay, 2020; Fleming & Hay, 2021).

However, the world is rapidly changing, underpinned by digital transformation and a shift towards a more technologically-driven environment, academia is responsible for laying down the theoretical foundations, but the industry gives students practical shape (Clapp et al., 2016; Choo, 2022) With the acceleration of 4IR, graduates are expected to possess a blend of academic knowledge and soft skills, such as digital literacy, adaptability, and resilience (Chen, 2022; Nwosu et al., 2023). This changing landscape requires a dynamic curriculum that is attuned to real-world applications and industry

needs, as well as ensuring graduates are equipped to navigate the challenges posed by technological advancements and artificial intelligence (Winterton & Turner, 2019; Dong et al., 2020)

Against this backdrop, HEIs (or academia) must not only champion the adoption of the 4IR but also prioritise aspects, like academic programmes, training modules, and technological infrastructure to align with industry expectations (Al-Maskari et al., 2022). Leveraging WIL becomes even more pertinent, nurturing employability skills that prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the 4IR (Okeke-Uzodike & Anwana, 2020; Adegbite & Govender, 2022). It is clear: for graduates to thrive in this new era, a seamless, collaborative synergy between academia and the retail industry is more crucial than ever.

5.2   The 4th Industrial Revolution

The 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) refers to the ongoing technological transformation characterised by the fusion of the physical, digital and biological systems (Kasza, 2019). It includes advancements in technologies, such as big data analytics, the Internet of Things (IoT), robotics and customer self-service, the growing popularity of the metaverse, artificial intelligence (AI), and omnichannel retailing.

5.2.1. Big data and data analytics

Big data describes the vast amount of structured and unstructured data generated from various 'places' and sources in a retailer's organisation and other interaction touch points or platforms. These include sales transactions, customer interactions, social media, loyalty programmes, online browsing, and supply chain operations. Exploring big data in a retailing environment will involve leveraging advanced analytics techniques and technologies to extract actionable insights and drive informed decision-making. Data analytics refers to the process of studying raw data to draw recommendations about it (Frankenfield, 2022). Data analytics empowers a retailer to make data-driven decisions, enhance customer experiences, optimise operations, and drive business growth.

Retail data analytics enables businesses to make customer insights according to their buying behaviour, delivering more personalised shopping experiences and better customer service (Barasch, 2019); an example of this is demand forecasting. Nestlé

used demand forecasting by leveraging analytics for demand forecasts rather than human judgment to reduce inventory by millions of dollars. The algorithm extended beyond seasonal trends to simulate numerous demand indicators in 'what-if' scenarios (Flynn, 2021). These algorithms were dependable, allowing Nestlé to minimise its inventory safety stock by 20%. These massive datasets also aided in trend predictions and strategic decision-making based on market analysis.

Data analytics is, therefore, an imperative trend that retailers need to observe as it contributes to the study of consumer behaviour in retailing, particularly in relation to demand forecasting. Retailers can use big data analytics to produce customer recommendations based on their purchase history, resulting in more personalised shopping experiences and better customer service (Barasch, 2019). Data analytics will be more prevalent in the future of retailing, making it a relevant topic to include in HEI curricula, particularly in the field of consumer behaviour. As a result, strategic methods, such as these tools and technology that impact the future of retailing should be implemented in the pursuit of improving retailing, therefore, this trend is relevant for inclusion in future retailing courses.

5.2.2. The Internet of Things (IoT)

The Internet of Things, or IoT, relates to the billions of physical gadgets that are now linked to the Internet, by capturing, and exchanging data throughout the world (Perwej, 2019). Examples of the Internet of Things in retailing are payment methods that do not require a cashier, real-time monitoring of goods, in-store buyer behaviour tracking, wireless shipment tracking devices and personalised retail marketing and content delivery (Thomas, 2022). The application of IoT in the retail business is inextricably linked to GPS (Global Positioning System) and RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) technology, which assists firms in tracking products along the supply chain (Digiteum, 2022). RFID provides retailers with the visibility needed to monitor the movement of goods and conditions, track positions, and anticipate delivery time.

The IoT has a huge impact on the future of retailing in a digitally inclined environment and is a theme that should be included in future retailing courses. This is because IoT is a key driver in the way that retail is evolving, and as technologies advance and become more precise and effective, one can anticipate that the industry will increasingly rely on individualised, remote shopping experiences that bring shops and

their items into customers' households (Evans, 2022). This theme is bound to have an impact on future retailing systems making it noteworthy to be included in HEI curricula, particularly in logistics and supply chain management.

5.2.3. Robotics and customer self-service

Robotics and customer self-service technologies (like self-help kiosks) provide consumers with self-service choices that allow them to get instant online responses without having to deal with human personnel. Most shoppers (86%) anticipate digital stores to offer self-service options, like a chatbot, which ensures organisations are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and reduces the number of incoming queries (emails or phone calls) by 30-40% (Haptik, 2021; Sidor, 2022). Automation and robotics streamline various retail operations, such as inventory management, supply chain logistics and order fulfilment. Robots can handle repetitive tasks, thus reducing errors and increasing efficiency. In addition, data analytics and AI algorithms optimise inventory control, pricing, and demand forecasting, leading to improved operational performance.

With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and sophisticated natural language processing (NLP) technology, companies are beginning to employ AI chatbots as part of their self-service strategy to deliver a higher Return on Investment (ROI) (Haptik, 2021). The increase in the use of self-service solutions is also attributed to consumers' increased need for instant gratification. Robots may aid retailers in becoming more efficient by streamlining non-customer-facing tasks, such as cleaning, inventory checking, and price changes, and most likely eliminating the need for employees to perform these tasks. In other cases, robots may directly perform customer-facing tasks, such as interacting with customers, providing promotional or product information, or assisting sales associates with their customer-facing tasks (Guha & Grewal, 2022). McDonald's has done well in using self-service tools which makes the process of purchasing food much more rapid and seamless.

Therefore, in an environment where technology precedes and adds value to the pursuit of efficiency, it has become increasingly important to note these themes which relate to technological advancements in retailing. This type of technology is assumed to be long-standing in the retail environment and should, therefore, be considered as a primary trend to include in HEI curricula, particularly in foundation retail modules, such

as Retailing 1 and 2, which discuss the retail marketing mix and include customer service.

5.2.4. The growing popularity of the metaverse

The metaverse refers to a retail environment that is enabled by *augmented* and *virtual reality technologies,* that extend the physical world by facilitating seamless interaction between real and simulated environments through avatars and holograms (Dwivedi et al., 2022). The metaverse impact on retailers includes enhanced virtual shopping experiences, personalised and customised interactions, social shopping and community engagement, virtual brand presence and partnerships, data-driven insights and analytics, virtual advertising and sponsorships, and the integration with physical stores.

The metaverse is a concept for the next generation of the Internet, it is a single, shared, immersive, lasting, 3D virtual realm where people may interact with one another and experience life in ways they are unable to in the real world. The metaverse plays a significant role in modern retailing and is a result of the increase in digitalisation. Digitalisation refers to the use of cutting-edge technologies and digital experiences to improve corporate processes, objectives, and strategies while digital transformation enhances workflow and customer experiences (Aktas, 2023). As we evolve towards a more digital environment, marketers and retailers must focus on providing emotionally engaging shopping experiences that engage all our senses. The metaverse provides this by combining both sound and sight to give a feeling of an experience as genuine as possible by using a digital reality that consumers can relate to; this is expected to overtake current social media platforms (Adcock, 2022). The metaverse gives consumers an immersive engaging virtual world that allows for a unique brand experience. According to research conducted by Singh (2021), brand experience is positively related to brand satisfaction and trust. In South Africa these constructs are strongly related to brand loyalty, a key to retaining consumers and ensuring sustainability in the retail environment. Through gaming-like experiences, competitions, virtual worlds, live video conversations, and product exploration, customers can engage with the business.

One of the most popular examples is the ability to purchase clothing and other items in virtual reality. As such, consumers can essentially 'showroom' products in this virtual reality before they purchase them.

The metaverse, therefore, serves as a theme that will be relevant in the future of retailing; it is suggested to include this in the new curriculum, perhaps embedded into consumer behaviour and foundation retail modules (including Retailing 1 or 2), where the retail marketing mix is explored and focuses on promotions and integrated marketing communication. The objectives of including these themes, as stated by the W&R SETA's (2020c) Report Skills Matrix, are to ensure that graduates are provided with skills in display expertise which deals with customers in a retail business and retail setting, as well as defining the core concepts of the Wholesale and Retail environment.

5.2.5. Artificial Intelligence (AI)

AI describes the development of computer systems that can perform tasks that require human intelligence. AI enables machines to process, interpret and learn from data, make informed decisions, and perform various cognitive functions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Natural language processing (NLP) allows or enables AI systems to understand, interpret and generate human language. NLP is the process that involves the interaction between computers and human language and is used in applications like chatbots, virtual assistants, and language translation (Yang et al., 2021).

5.2.6. Omnichannel shopping

Omnichannel retailing describes a retailing strategy that integrates various sales channels, both offline and online, to provide customers with a seamless and consistent shopping experience. Also known as combining traditional brick-and-mortar retail with e-commerce (Watts, 2022); its goal is to remove the barriers between different channels and create a unified approach to retail. Omnichannel retail combines the ease of Internet shopping with the dependability and security of a physical location. Customers can use omnichannel shopping to their advantage, by browsing for products online, making purchases in-store or through their mobile devices, and enjoying flexible delivery options (Tweten, 2022).

It is a unique concept aimed at providing clients with a completely rounded experience, that adds value and convenience to their specific demands (Watts, 2022). South African

buyers prefer omnichannel retailing because it provides many channels to get what they want with the least amount of effort since they can simply collect their online purchases from grocery retailers, for example (Price, 2023). Pick n Pay has successfully implemented this by creating an application which enables customers to purchase their groceries online and have them delivered to them. To successfully achieve this, a comprehensive and integrated strategy must be implemented for everything from content management and customer data to marketing and product information (Hjalm, 2022). In conclusion, the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) instigates new skills requirements in the retail industry. Retailers need employees with expertise in data analytics, AI, digital marketing, and technology integration.

5.3 Green marketing (green skills)

The concept of green marketing has become very prominent in South African retailing as a strategy to retain consumers by using sustainable and eco-friendly business practices (Van Niekerk & Conradie, 2020). Changes in consumer behaviour show an increase in consumers' interest in environmental sustainability which has given rise to the popularity of green marketing. Green marketing is more apparent among Millennials (Nandi, 2022) and Generation Z (Fernando, 2022), which, in the context of retailing, refers to the practice of promoting and selling products or services that are environmentally friendly and/ or sustainable. It involves incorporating environmental considerations into various aspects of retail operations, such as consumer demand for sustainable products and packaging, supply chain sustainability, waste management and recycling, green store designs and operations, and avoiding greenwashing and marketing communication.

Practical examples of green retailing consist of utilising environmentally friendly packaging made of recycled materials, lowering greenhouse gas pollutants from manufacturing processes, and adopting sustainable business practices (Shopify, 2022). Examples include Woolworths and other retailers using eco-friendly shopping bags and creating products with the 'cruelty-free' slogan, in addition to not testing products on animals. This contemporary marketing trend influences consumer behaviour the most as many consumers opt for retailers who align themselves with environmental sustainability (Martins, 2023). Thus, retailers can customise their marketing efforts to target specific groups (particularly Millennials and Generation Z),

boost brand loyalty, and predict future trends by researching customer behaviour (Radu, 2023). From market research, businesses can recognise and comprehend consumer requirements and preferences which can assist in identifying and understanding their customers' needs, preferences, and trends, as well as their purchasing behaviour and habits (Memon, 2022).

5.3.1 Consumer demand for sustainable products and packaging

Despite the significant price increases brought on by global inflation, customers are increasingly prepared to pay extra for goods that come in environmentally friendly packaging (Kararia, 2023). These environmentally conscious consumers are inclined to pay a premium for green products when they recognise the ecological benefits, superior value, quality, functionality, and performance. Thus, raising awareness about green products is essential to encourage green purchase intentions (GPI) and promote sustainable consumption (Ansu-Mensah, 2021). Over 70% of consumers expressed a readiness to spend more on products produced sustainably, either to a moderate or significant degree. This shift is promising. While consumers can merge their ethical beliefs with their buying habits, businesses might gain an advantage in setting prices higher (PwC, 2023).

5.3.2 Supply chain sustainability

Sustainable supply chain management includes the objectives of sustaining social and environmental values, in addition to the speed, cost, and reliability of operations that are the emphasis of traditional supply chain management (Wolf, 2011). This entails solving global problems including corruption, fair labour practices, deforestation, water security, and climate change. According to research, the supply chain accounts for most of a company's environmental effects (David, 2020). As items are manufactured and transported throughout the world, supply chains frequently include energy-intensive manufacturing and transportation. Therefore, rather than altering other company procedures, firms may have the most impact by changing their supply chain.

5.3.3 Green store design and operations

In a retailer's physical store, there are opportunities to incorporate sustainable initiatives, such as energy-efficient lighting, water conservation, and the use of eco-friendly materials for fixtures and displays (Jeong et al., 2014). Sustainable or green

design refers to the approach of producing goods with minimal environmental impact (Llanquileo-Melgarejo & Molinos-Senante, 2023). By applying green design principles, businesses can reduce waste, reuse resources, and recycle products and materials (Veleva & Bodkin, 2018). Not only does an eco-friendly store design minimise environmental repercussions, but it also serves as a competitive edge, attracting and retaining customers who prioritise sustainability (Jeong et al., 2014).

5.3.4 Greenwashing concerns

This is the practice of misleading consumers with inaccurate, false, or exaggerated environmental claims. It poses a reputational risk for retailers. It is possible to mislead customers to thinking that their items are ethically sourced or biodegradable. They might even spend extra money on a product that will not end up in a landfill. Greenwashing diminishes customer confidence in brands. Consumers should not be forced to invest their money in a product that does not live up to its promises (Ottman, 2011; Kahraman, & Kazançoğlu, 2019).

5.3.5 Green marketing communication

Green marketing communications involve retailers using 'green messages' to showcase their dedication to sustainability. This includes highlighting eco-friendly initiatives, sustainable product options, and the environmental consequences of consumer decisions (Correia et al., 2023). Green marketing emphasises engaging with stakeholders, particularly consumers, to validate a company's environmental stance and product value. This interaction seeks to inform and educate customers (Stoica, 2021). Ultimately, the objective is to establish a green corporate identity and inform customers about a product's ecological footprint.

5.4 OTHER TRENDS THAT IMPACT A RETAILER'S BUSINESS STRATEGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

Other trends will impact a retailer's business strategy and sustainability which cannot necessarily fit the headings of the 4th Industrial Revolution or green marketing skills. The retail industry is undergoing significant changes driven by various trends that can have a profound impact on a retailer's business and its sustainability. Therefore. it is important to consider these trends, such as the emergence of mobile-commerce (m-

commerce) and digital adaption in retail, innovation in customer experience and payment evolution, and data privacy in the age of digital retail.

5.4.1 Emergence of m-commerce and digital adaption in retail

In the digital age, mobile commerce (m-commerce) has become a key pillar of retail, with smartphones being central to this transformation. Retailers are continuously optimising their mobile commerce interfaces for mobile accessibility, especially as m-commerce is anticipated to dominate nearly half of all e-commerce transactions by 2024 (West, 2022). South Africa, specifically, is set to experience a surge in online shopping, catalysed by factors, like high connectivity across communities and initiatives by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies to provide affordable broadband access to households (Illidge, 2023). Major platforms, like Takealot.com, lead the South African e-commerce market, illustrating the prominence and potential of this sector.

5.4.2 Innovation in customer experience and payment evolution

Today's consumers demand personalisation in their shopping experiences. Through data analytics and AI, retailers can offer tailored recommendations and improve customer service, fostering loyalty and differentiation (Lindecrantz et al., 2020). Concurrently, the payment landscape is evolving. Traditional payment systems are giving way to more advanced, digital forms of transactions, like contactless payments and digital currencies. Contactless payments, for instance, have seen a 150% increase in usage in the US since 2019 (Drenik, 2022). As the retail environment adapts to the 4th Industrial Revolution, understanding these transformations becomes crucial for retailers seeking to stay ahead.

5.4.3 Data privacy in the age of digital retail

In the digital domain, customer data is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it offers retailers deep insights to enhance customer experiences; on the other, it brings about pressing concerns about privacy and security. South African regulations, such as the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA), emphasise the importance of data protection, with stringent penalties for non-compliance (Staunton et al., 2020). Retailers not only have the obligation to safeguard customer data but also leverage robust data protection as a competitive advantage (Castaldo et al., 2009).

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology invariably adheres to underlying philosophical tenets that define what is deemed as 'legitimate' research and the most suitable method(s) for accruing knowledge in a particular investigation (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). The choice of a research methodology is influenced by the guiding paradigm of the study. Rather than being theories themselves, paradigms serve as overarching orientations that shape these theories; they function as the foundational belief systems or perspectives through which scholarly research unfolds (Möller & Halinen, 2022).

This segment delves into the philosophical underpinnings guiding this study and the consequent choices in the research methodology. These foundational beliefs, which Krauss (2005) characterises as a theoretical framework about the essence of existence, are instrumental in understanding the lens through which this research was approached and executed. The genesis of a study's methodology is rooted in addressing certain pivotal questions. It is recognised by researchers that the realm of research is often muddled by a plethora of terms, leading to ambiguities in the interpretation and application at the conceptual levels. As clarification, Table 1 elucidates the philosophical foundations and their direct implications for this investigation.

Table 1: Philosophical choices for this study

Philosophical foundation	Implementation in this research study
Research philosophy	Interpretivism research philosophy
Research paradigm	Constructivist research paradigm
The essence of understanding and how it is perceived	Subjectivist understanding
Methodological approach	Naturalist methodology

Source: Authors' own

This study is grounded in the interpretivism research philosophy, emphasising the intricate and subjective nature of social phenomena. Furthermore, the research methodology was grounded in a subjectivist understanding, focusing on the essence of comprehension and how it is perceived. It delves deep into participants' perspectives, as described by Bryman (2017). The primary aim was to shed light on the views and experiences of academic professionals and individuals from the wholesale and retail sector in South Africa, concerning equipping future job aspirants —specifically graduates. A significant point of enquiry was the future skills needed, such as the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) skills, to harmonise the educational

strategies and industry demands to reflect the skills that the wholesale and retail sector necessitates. As expressed by Denzin and Lincoln (2017), qualitative research seeks to uncover the socially constructed essence of reality. A report by W&R SETA (2023, p.34) highlighted the need for training the younger generation for future readiness in the sector (Khan et al., 2022).

6.1 Research Instrument

Qualitative interviews, especially semi-structured, were chosen as a potent tool, enabling flexibility essential for understanding complex social constructs (Rabionet, 2011; Bryman, 2017). Building a harmonious relationship between the interviewer and interviewee enhances collaborative knowledge creation (Comi et al., 2014). After obtaining ethical clearance (#2023SCiiS030) from the associated Higher Education Institution, the semi-structured interview blueprint was shared with a qualitative research agency that collected the data. Ethical considerations were emphasised, ensuring participants' consent, recording permissions, and ensuring confidentiality. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw without repercussions.

6.2 Recruitment of participants

To address the research enquiries the plan was to onboard five academic professionals and five industry representatives from the Wholesale and Retail domain. The final tally consisted of three participants from each category. Given the complexities of handling vast qualitative data, smaller sample sizes are often recommended (Eisenhardt, 1989; Marshall, 1996; Jervis & Drake, 2014). The sampling approach leaned towards participants possessing rich data, particularly those with extensive expertise in the South African Wholesale and Retail sector (Baker & Edwards, 2012, p.9).

Educators actively involved in retail management and marketing in South Africa were approached. Using her networks and contacts, the researcher reached out to known academics. If unavailable, referrals were sought and approached. This methodology mirrored the recruitment of industry representatives. The designated interview schedules and necessary documentation, such as consent forms, were communicated via email. An external qualitative research firm handled the actual interview process to minimise potential biases (Selvam et al., 2022).

6.3   Data analysis

For data scrutiny thematic analysis was found fitting, enabling the identification and review of recurrent patterns in the qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The study employed the inductive analysis method which ensured the derived themes genuinely reflected the data (Bowen, 2005). This study aimed to unearth key patterns concerning the harmonisation of educational frameworks with industry demands. Employing multiple data collection methods provided a rounded perspective, bolstering the research's credibility and dependability (Striepe, 2021). Despite the sample size, extensive probing during the interviews yielded valuable insights, ensuring the study's outcomes remained valid (Weller et al., 2018).

6.4   Analysis and findings

The primary objective stated earlier in the report was to ascertain the degree to which 'future skills', such as 'green skills' and 4IR skills should be integrated into the curriculum. To support this objective, secondary objectives were developed, and the findings were addressed under each secondary objective.

In an endeavour to bridge the gap between industry expectations and academic curriculum, The Culture Foundry, the designated qualitative research agency, engaged in insightful dialogues with industry stalwarts and eminent academics. The central premise of these discussions revolved around creating a synergy between the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and the industry, to pinpoint the precise skills required to equip graduates to be both 'future fit' and 'future ready' in the Wholesale and Retail sector. The overarching aspiration was to discern ways in which HEIs can curate programmes that adeptly arm the future workforce with the acumen and competencies necessary to remain nimble and resilient in an ever-evolving professional landscape. Following the discourse with the six esteemed participants, a quartet of salient themes surfaced: ***relationships, context, future and strategy.*** To elucidate the implications of each theme, the findings and insights pertinent to each research objective are meticulously laid out in the subsequent sections. To ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the analysis, participants have been ascribed pseudonyms, as detailed in the following segment.

    P1: academic;

    P2: academic;

P3: industry;

P4: academic;

P5: industry; and

P6: industry.

6.4.1. *Secondary Objective 1: To assess the importance of the alignment of future skills and industry trends in curriculum development*

Without engaging with industry professionals, academics might struggle to fully understand the evolving skills gap. Both parties, industry experts and educators alike, must forge **relationships** and facilitate open dialogue about present and future requirements. Building these mutual relationships is paramount to ensuring that graduates are not only employable but also equipped to navigate the rapid changes in the global landscape. The bond between the retail industry and academic institutions is not static; it is dynamic and diverse. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to guaranteeing a thriving partnership.

The interplay between industry and academia is multifaceted. Described by some as a perpetually adapting 'web' (P1), it thrives on seizing novel opportunities and benefits from an intensive interchange of information and resources. Conversely, others view this relationship as a methodical pipeline (P3), where academia provides the theoretical framework and industry introduces the practical dimension, fostering a constantly rejuvenating bond (P4). Such synergies frequently culminate in shared resources, job placements, and vibrant youth initiatives. However, this is not the universal narrative. Some stakeholders perceive a distinct disconnect (P5). Instead of a seamless collaboration, interactions seem sporadic and disjointed, weakening the overarching institutional link. An apt analogy used is a strained marriage (P2), characterised by a dearth of effective communication and mutual understanding.

Against the backdrop of this intricate relationship, or our research objective to align future skills with industry trends in curriculum development, it becomes pivotal to delve into the nuances and foresight of the retail sector. The retail environment, both within the industry and academia's precincts, necessitates an infusion of resilience and an innovative thrust to maintain its relevance amidst the whirlwind of global changes. As iterated by industry savants, the emphasis is on the urgency to 'change with the times and know what's happening on the ground' (P2), albeit without compromising the essence of the South African vision.

Transitioning to the digital spectrum, retail metamorphosis is palpable. A surge of tech-savvy consumers is compelling the industry to recalibrate its operations. Despite the global drift towards digitisation, there's an evident lag in the tempo at which South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are embracing this wave. Pioneers of change, such as e-commerce, AI, and automation underscore this revolution (P3). However, South Africa's unique challenges – be it the high crime rates, recurrent power disruptions, or the pivotal emphasis on employment – complicate the direct emulation of global digital models, such as self-checkouts. Remarks like '4IR is not the nature of the country we live in' (P2) elucidate this tension between tech assimilation and job preservation. The conundrum HEIs face is intricate while global insights offer a beacon, moulding these learnings to fit the local tapestry is the real challenge. It becomes imperative for academic curricula to harmoniously blend global tech strides with ingrained local nuances, promoting skills that amplify South Africa's distinct identity and spur entrepreneurial ventures (P5).

In the realm of retail, there is an unmistakable and unanimous shift towards environmental consciousness. While academia has started to recognise the significance of environmental skills, the depth of their integration remains superficial. This cursory approach contrasts with the increasing consumer inclination towards sustainability (P1). Bridging the gap between this rising interest and its tangible implementation in retail proves challenging. However, the industry is witnessing proactive efforts by retailers to make a positive environmental impact, signalling a definitive move towards sustainable practices. The need of the hour is a robust emphasis on environmental education, green consumption patterns, and actionable sustainable retail strategies.

To encapsulate, as HEIs sculpt the curriculum of the future, an intimate alignment with industry requisites – spanning digital innovations, local contextual challenges, and environmental imperatives – becomes essential. This alignment seeks to empower graduates with the aptitudes they require, priming them for a thriving stint in a dynamically evolving retail ecosystem.

The key findings from investigating this relationship are as follows:

- The relationship between industry and academia is described as:

- o Complex and multifaceted.
  - o 'Ever-evolving web' (P1), that captures opportunities and thrives on exchanging information, resources, and strategic insights.
  - o Challenges exist, akin to a 'strained marriage' (P2).
- Academia and industry roles, each has a valuable role to play:
  - o Academia offers theoretical foundations.
  - o Industry provides practical experience (P4).
- Effective partnerships between the two are marked by:
  - o Resource sharing.
  - o Job placements for qualified candidates.
  - o Proactive youth programmes throughout education.
- Challenges and disconnects:
  - o Noted lack of active participation and engagement (P5).
  - o Presence of isolated interactions instead of a cohesive relationship.
  - o Weak broader institutional ties likened to a failing marriage (P2) due to poor communication.
  - o Need to fortify institutional connections for better cohesion (P6).
  - o Perceived disengagement due to isolated interactions (P2)
- Curriculum reform in HEIs:
  - o Digital integration: HEIs in South Africa lag in global digitisation adaptation, demanding curricula adjustments (P2, P5).
  - o Environmental focus: Increased call for environmental skills with current academic integration seen as shallow (P6).

Thus, the following key insights on the topic of relationships can be deduced below and the resultant recommendations are discussed in the recommendations section of this report.

6.4.1.1 Key insights relating to the secondary Objective 1

- o The relationships between industry and academia are dynamic, characterised as an 'ever-evolving web' that effectively leverages information, resources, and opportunities.
- o Both academia, with its theoretical foundations, and industry, through its practical experience, have integral roles to play in fostering successful partnerships marked by resource-sharing, job placements, and proactive youth programmes.
- o Despite the potential for collaboration, there exist significant challenges, including a lack of active engagement, fragmented interactions, and weakened broader institutional connections, drawing comparisons to a deteriorating relationship.
- o In HEIs, there is an urgent need to prioritise digital integration due to a lag in global digitisation adaptation and to intensify the emphasis on environmental skills, which are currently viewed as superficial.

6.4.2. *Secondary Objective 2: To recommend how HEIs can adapt the curricula to incorporate new skills required by the industry on an ongoing basis*

In the intricate relationship between academia and the retail industry, a distinct disparity emerges, particularly in adaptability and approach. With the retail landscape undergoing rapid transformation, academia, especially traditional institutions, appears stagnant, attracting critiques for their perceived inertia, as highlighted by terms, such as 'big animal' (P1) and concerns over their 'slow response to the rapidly changing world' (P5). This gap emphasises the urgency for academic curricula to be in sync with evolving retail demands, especially since the latter emphasises operational aspects, often sidelining critical areas like strategy and research. As a consequence, the retail sector sometimes recruits individuals lacking comprehensive theoretical expertise (P2).

Given the diverse nature of the retail sector, with every retailer boasting unique operational methodologies (P1), academia is faced with the monumental task of crafting a universally relevant curriculum. Compounding this challenge some lecturers are deemed as 'old school' (P5), who might be out of touch with contemporary retail dynamics. Even as the academic world receives extensive feedback on curriculum

development, the final decision-making power rests with them. This dynamic potentially leaves gaps in meeting specific retail needs, a situation somewhat understood by the industry (P1). The blurred boundaries between academia's obligations and the industry's expectations further underscore the necessity for clarity, especially when academic facilities are limited in offering certain practical skills (P1). This juxtaposition of challenges highlights an underlying need for academia and the retail industry to foster a more collaborative bond.

In the ever-evolving nexus between academia and industry, graduates stand at the forefront, embodying the fusion of both worlds. From the industry's perspective, they are expected to be versatile, mirroring organisational values like innovation, effective communication, and resilience (P2, P3). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on nurturing essential life skills in graduates, ranging from emotional intelligence to corporate communication etiquette (P5). While the industry's demands evolve, academia battles its own set of challenges, notably a foundational skills deficit in areas like numeracy and literacy (P1, P5). This is accentuated by the transitional hurdles students face moving from the safety net of school to the rigorous environments of higher education and subsequently, the professional realm. Against this backdrop, graduates yearn for a diverse skill set, tailor-made learning experiences, and updated evaluative metrics that align with the dynamic nature of the retail sector.

Context plays a pivotal role in understanding which skills should be prioritised. The Four E's—Education, Expectation, Exposure, and Experience—serve as a beacon in talent development within retail. As graduates lay their academic foundations, they often confront workplace realities that diverge from their initial anticipation. The industry, recognising this, plays a guiding role, ensuring that graduates discern the expansive opportunities in retail careers. Ensuring early exposure can illuminate the myriad of pathways available, while over time, real-world experience solidifies their commitment to the retail world (P6). For Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to continuously align their curricula with the industry's requirements, a persistent evaluation of these contextual nuances, in tandem with feedback from both academia and the retail sector, becomes indispensable.

Participants exhibited a distinct passion for retail, recognising its potential to address national challenges when guided by a fitting strategy. This strategy, open to

interpretation, fundamentally aims to blend the hands (actions), head (thoughts), and heart (emotions) within the retail domain.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) emerges as a pivotal force for retail, bridging academia (head), industry (hands), and graduate aspirations (heart). Yet, this approach presents challenges. For instance, 'placing students in a practical work environment to get experience, but it's a struggle to get placement. There are site visits, internships, and government-compensated programmes instead' (P2). This struggle for placement means students often grapple with juggling academics and work, as 'students can't balance work and study effectively otherwise' (P2). Moreover, extended internships can delay graduation, as voiced by 'internships are longer and based on a stricter programme' (P4) and 'spend X amount of time working to graduate' (P5).

The transition from internships to permanent positions remains uncertain. Practical experience aids job readiness — 'experience makes them more attractive to industry' (P2)—but does not guarantee long-term employment. This ambiguity is mirrored in comments like 'ideally, there would be a permanent job at the end of WIL where the individual gets absorbed into the organisation' (P2) and 'companies prefer structured WIL... You need to gain valuable and relevant experience' (P3).

Further, institutional differences in WIL offerings and the dual priorities of businesses—profit versus societal benefit—create challenges, especially as 'businesses have two hats: social consciousness and money' (P5).

In light of Implication #9, ensuring students' work-life balance becomes crucial. This is intertwined with understanding global and cultural shifts, as indicated by 'it's a national and global phenomenon. How do we plug into that as a starting point in WIL?' (P6). There is also an urgency to protect WIL from political dynamics and possibly involve the government to enhance its appeal, as noted by 'it needs to be incentivised to make it attractive to industry' (P5) and 'government needs to intervene' (P5).

When conventional WIL is not feasible, alternatives such as youth programmes, learnerships, and apprenticeships become essential, keeping alignment with retail's dynamic nature.

The key findings from this investigation are:

- **Academic challenges in retail evolution**
  - A pronounced pace disparity exists between academia and the fast-evolving retail industry, with institutions sometimes dubbed as 'big animal' (P1).
  - Operational focus in retail often neglects strategy and research, leading to hiring staff possibly lacking a deep theoretical understanding (P2).
- **Curriculum and perception issues**
  - Retailers' diverse systems (P1) challenge academia's universal curriculum development, despite feedback.
  - Some lecturers, termed 'old school' (P5), might be out of sync with current retail trends.
  - The division of responsibilities between academia and retail is ambiguous, with academia highlighting its practical training constraints (P1).
- **Collaboration imperative**
  - A pressing need exists for an enhanced academia-retail collaboration (P6).
- **Industry's expectations and needs**
  - Graduates should embody resilience, adaptability, and key organisational values, notably innovation and communication (P2, P3).
  - Life skills, such as interview etiquette, emotional intelligence, and corporate communication, are emphasised (P5).
  - A desire for academia to adopt evolving curricula that match the fast-paced industry changes.
  - The Four E's—Education, Expectation, Exposure, and Experience—are integral to talent development in retail.
  - Graduates face discrepancies between their academic learning and the practical realities of the workplace.
  - The retail industry guides graduates, highlighting the vast career opportunities available within the sector.
  - Early exposure reveals various career paths, and over time, hands-on experience cements graduates' dedication to retail (P6).

- **Academic challenges and graduate preparedness**
  - Academia faces issues with students' foundational skills, particularly numeracy and literacy (P1, P5).
  - There is a need for a smoother transition for students from school to higher education and eventually the professional realm.
  - Graduates should have a wide skill set and personalised learning experiences to enhance their employability.
  - Modern evaluation metrics are required to prevent issues like over-promotion due to niche expertise (P5).
  - Contextual understanding is essential to determine which skills should be emphasised.
  - HEIs must constantly refine their curricula based on evolving industry needs, emphasising the importance of feedback from both the academic and retail communities (P5, P2).
  - Although future skills are important, get back to basics and get the basics right first (P6, P1).
- **Work-integrated learning (WIL)** in the retail sector offers potential benefits but grapples with challenges in placement, consistency, and employment outcomes.
  - Challenges include difficulty in student placements and balancing academics with work.
  - Variability in WIL offerings and business priorities between profit and societal good.

Offered solutions could be:
  - Enhancing work-life balance for students.
  - Addressing WIL's cultural and political challenges.
  - Exploring alternative programmes when traditional WIL is not feasible.

Consequently, the subsequent observations regarding the topic of relationships are outlined below. The corresponding suggestions will be elaborated upon in the recommendations segment of this document.

6.4.2.2 Key insights relating to the secondary Objective 2

- o There is a noticeable mismatch between the dynamic nature of the retail industry and the pace of academia, leading to challenges in curriculum relevance and graduate preparedness. The term 'big animal' signifies the sluggish adaptability of educational institutions. There is a noted gap between operational priorities in retail and strategic, research-based academic endeavours.

- o The retail sector and academia have differing expectations and perceptions, with challenges arising from varying retailer systems and outdated teaching methodologies. There is an acknowledged divide in responsibilities between these two entities, where academia stresses its limitations in providing practical training and mentions instructors who might be 'old school'.

- o Collaboration between academia and the retail industry is vital, emphasised by the strong call for increased joint efforts. Moreover, the industry expects graduates to not only have academic prowess but also embody resilience, adaptability, and other key soft skills, like communication and emotional intelligence.

- o In HEIs, there is an urgent need to prioritise digital integration due to a lag in global digitisation adaptation and to intensify the emphasis on environmental skills, which are currently viewed as superficial.

To align the recommendations with the emerging insights, Objective 1 seeks to gauge the alignment of future skills with industry trends in curriculum development, bringing to the forefront the intricate dynamics between academia and the industry. Described as an 'ever-evolving web' this relationship is pivotal in harnessing mutual benefits yet is not devoid of challenges. Issues ranging from the varying pace of academia and the industry to differing perceptions and expectations, underscore the complexities at play.

Objective 2 pivots towards actionable strategies that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can adopt to embed industry-required skills into their curricula. Noteworthy is the emphasis on the essential role of collaboration in bridging the theoretical

foundations of academia with the practical demands of the industry. However, the challenges, such as the notable mismatch in adaptability and the differing expectations between the sectors, underscore the urgency to adapt and innovate.

In light of these insights, the following sections will delineate specific recommendations tailored to each key finding for both objectives. The aim is to ensure that HEIs are well-equipped to prepare students for the evolving demands of the retail industry while fostering productive collaborations.

7.   RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 presents the insights derived from the secondary Objective 1 and the resultant recommendations.

TABLE 2: Recommendations relating to secondary Objective 1

INSIGHT	RECOMMENDATION
The relationships between industry and academia are dynamic, characterised as an 'ever-evolving web' that effectively leverages information, resources, and opportunities.	o Both industry and academia to host frequent forums to discuss skills needs, fostering mutual understanding. o Collaborate with industry experts to keep curricula current and relevant. o Internships can enhance students' gain of real-world experiences and offer industries fresh insights. o Joint research and development aligning academic skills with practical industry needs. o Set up mechanisms for industries to provide feedback on graduate performance, refining academic approaches. o Emphasise long-term collaboration between academia and industry for mutual benefit.
Both academia, with its theoretical foundations, and industry, through its practical experience, have integral roles to play in fostering successful partnerships marked by resource sharing, job placements, and proactive youth programmes.	o Joint committees and workshops to co-develop modules to align academic content with industry needs. o Academics to offer guest lectures, industry visits, and emphasise project collaborations for hands-on experience.
Despite the potential for collaboration, there exist significant challenges, including a lack of active engagement, fragmented interactions, and weakened broader institutional connections, drawing comparisons to a deteriorating relationship.	o For successful academia-industry collaboration, prioritise mutual respect, open communication, and address challenges, using shared goals to drive innovation. o Both industry and academia should strive to adopt flexible agreements and maintain regular engagement. o Both industry and academia should incentivise partnerships, ensure clear communication, and seize mutual benefits. o Increased active engagement can be achieved by regular joint forums and workshops to facilitate direct dialogue and knowledge exchange.
In HEIs, there is an urgent need to prioritise digital integration due to a lag in global	o Academia should enhance digital literacy by introducing comprehensive digital modules to

digitisation adaptation and to intensify the emphasis on environmental skills, which are currently viewed as superficial.	impart skills like coding, data analysis, and cybersecurity across disciplines, supplemented by case studies of successful digital integration in real-world businesses. ○ Academia should prioritise the inclusion of environmental studies in all major modules and promote interdisciplinary projects between environmental science and other fields to foster a holistic understanding of sustainability challenges and solutions. ○ Industry to implement digital learning platforms for continuous upskilling and cultivate a mentorship environment where seasoned professionals guide newcomers in digital practices. ○ Furthermore, the industry to undertake environmental impact assessments for every new initiative and partner with environmental specialists to achieve both sustainability and profitability in operations and share these initiatives with academics and students alike.

To pinpoint the skills that academics should focus on for the benefit of the industry, it is crucial to foster relationships with mutual incentives. By establishing partnerships between academia and industry that extend beyond mere financial incentives but to encompass mentorship, exposure, and joint research, for a better understanding of the industry's evolving needs. This knowledge allows academia to anticipate high-demand skills for the future. Equally vital is the emphasis on both theoretical and practical learning. While theory provides a foundational understanding, practical application reflects current and foreseeable industry demands. An agile curriculum that toggles between theory and application ensures its relevance, preparing students effectively for their prospective industry roles.

Furthermore, in an era marked by rapid technological change and globalisation, there is a pressing need to strike a balance between global perspectives and local intelligence, understanding what makes regions, like SA, unique and leveraging those distinct capabilities. Encouraging the development of entrepreneurs and small businesses becomes paramount, not just for economic growth but for preserving the unique attributes that give South Africa its character. It is important to address the looming concern of employment opportunities potentially being overshadowed by technological advancements. As rightly pointed out, sectors like retailing are major employment generators, and the implications of misaligned education leading to job scarcity must be carefully considered. In addition, in a world where job loyalty is waning, cultivating dedication and commitment becomes more vital than ever. Lastly, in the

evolving retail landscape, there is a noticeable gap in understanding online market trends and interpreting data. The current state of retail education must be revamped to emphasise the multifaceted nature of online retail and the critical importance of data analysis. It is clear that the future hinges on creativity, tech-savvy, and an acute understanding of market data and trends.

In summary, curricula should integrate green skills, emphasising their practical application in retail while adopting a holistic approach that considers culture, climate, and cash. This dynamic adaptation in retail education underscores a genuine commitment to sustainability.

TABLE 3: recommendations relating to the secondary Objective 2

INSIGHT	RECOMMENDATION
There is a noticeable mismatch between the dynamic nature of the retail industry and the pace of academia, leading to challenges in curriculum relevance and graduate preparedness. The term 'big animal' signifies the sluggish adaptability of educational institutions. There is a noted gap between operational priorities in retail and strategic, research-based academic endeavours.	o Academics should prioritise developing a flexible curriculum that can be swiftly updated based on emerging retail trends and technologies. This involves keeping a pulse on industry advancements and incorporating them into academic content regularly. o Educational institutions should establish regular collaboration sessions with industry leaders to understand current market needs. By inviting practitioners to deliver guest lectures, workshops, or seminars, academia can bridge the knowledge gap and ensure students are exposed to the realities of the retail world. o Retail industry players should form partnerships with academic institutions, offering internships, workshops, and real-world projects. This hands-on experience will allow students to understand the practical aspects of their theoretical learning, preparing them better for the industry. o The industry should actively provide feedback on graduate performance and areas of curriculum misalignment. This two-way communication channel will guide academics in reshaping their curricula to better suit the evolving needs of the retail sector.
The retail sector and academia have differing expectations and perceptions with challenges arising from varying retailer systems and outdated teaching methodologies. There is an acknowledged divide in responsibilities between these two entities, where academia stresses its limitations in providing practical training and mentions instructors who might be 'old school'.	o Academia should invest in regular training for instructors to keep them updated with the latest retail trends and technologies. By integrating contemporary case studies, digital tools, and practical scenarios into the curriculum, they can ensure that students are prepared for the current retail environment and not just theoretical models. o The industry should collaborate with academic institutions to design and implement practical training programmes or workshops. By contributing first hand industry insights and offering on-site experiences, the retail sector

	can ensure students are better equipped with practical skills and a clearer understanding of industry expectations.
Collaboration between academia and the retail industry is vital, emphasised by the strong call for increased joint efforts. Moreover, the industry expects graduates to not only have academic prowess but also embody resilience, adaptability, and other key soft skills like communication and emotional intelligence.	o Apart from traditional academic subjects, academic institutions should incorporate soft skills training into their curriculum. This would encompass workshops, seminars, and practical exercises focusing on resilience, adaptability, communication, and emotional intelligence, ensuring that students are holistically prepared for the demands of the retail industry. o Retail businesses should establish mentorship and internship programmes in collaboration with academic institutions. This will provide students with real-world experience, allowing them to apply their academic knowledge while simultaneously honing their soft skills in a practical setting. Such programmes can also serve as a feedback loop, informing academia about the evolving needs of the industry.
Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a potential solution to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. However, its implementation faces challenges related to student placements, curriculum consistency, and the alignment of business priorities. The need for alternative programmes, cultural and political considerations, and a stronger work-life balance for students are some proposed ways to enhance the effectiveness of WIL.	o Academics should design a flexible curriculum that can quickly adapt to the ever-changing needs of the retail industry. This includes periodic reviews and updates based on feedback from industry partners and WIL experiences, ensuring that students are exposed to the most relevant and up-to-date practices. o Retail businesses should proactively collaborate with educational institutions to establish structured partnership programmes. These programmes would not only facilitate easier student placements but also provide businesses with an active role in shaping the WIL experience. This collaboration ensures alignment with industry priorities and offers students a more balanced and practical learning experience.

It can be concluded that academics should regularly update curricula to reflect emerging retail trends. Educational institutions need to collaborate closely with industry leaders to ensure curricula are relevant and comprehensive. This collaboration should involve workshops, internships, and real-world projects, providing students with hands-on experience and practical knowledge. To produce graduates ready for the modern retail environment, institutions should incorporate both soft skills training and feedback from retail businesses into their educational approach. Furthermore, it is important to go back to basics and be clear about goals and to get basics right before trying to teach or incorporate future skills, such as 4IR or 'green skills'. Using familiar ideas as a guide, we could ask: What are the basic needs for the retail business, similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and start there?

8. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

One of the limitations of this study pertains to the insufficient exploration regarding the *specific* 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) skills that are most pertinent for graduates to be both 'future fit' and 'job ready'. It would be advisable, in subsequent research, to engage with retail professionals—especially those involved in the recruitment and mentorship of graduates—to obtain a deeper understanding. Such interactions could elucidate the distinction between foundational survival skills and the precise 4IR and 'green skills' that are increasingly becoming imperative in the contemporary job market.

9. CONCLUSION

In the nexus between academia and the South African retail industry, a series of significant disparities emerge, hinting at a landscape rife with untapped potential and challenges. The dynamic tempo of the retail industry often runs counter to the more deliberate pace of academia, symbolised by the 'big animal' analogy, which underscores the sluggish adaptability of educational institutions. This divergence is further exacerbated by a clear disconnect in expectations and methodologies, where the modern demands of the retail sector often find themselves juxtaposed against academic approaches that may be perceived as 'old school'.

However, it is not all a tale of division. The relationship between the two is undeniably dynamic, described as an 'ever-evolving web'. Both academia, with its rich theoretical underpinning, and the industry, bolstered by its hands-on experience, are crucial players in shaping the future workforce. This collaborative spirit is seen as indispensable, with shared ventures promising mutual benefits, ranging from resource-sharing to job placements. Yet, despite the recognised importance of such partnerships, there remains a palpable lack of active, cohesive engagement. Fragmented interactions and weakened connections often overshadow the potential for synergy.

In a rapidly digitising global landscape, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa face an imperative to integrate digital skills more profoundly into their curriculum. This urgency is further accentuated by the need to emphasise environmental skills, a reflection of the growing global focus on sustainability. However, in the unique socio-economic backdrop of South Africa, there is an overarching sentiment that prioritising foundational skills, critical thinking, adaptability, and entrepreneurship is crucial. These

attributes not only promise immediate employment but also arm individuals with the tenacity and versatility to navigate a volatile job market. Only after laying down this robust foundation should the lens shift to specialised skills, like those of the 4th Industrial Revolution. In summary, for South Africa's youth to truly thrive in a modern retail landscape, the harmonisation of industry demands with academic offerings is not just desirable – it is essential!

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