

PERCEPTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY OF A SELECTED HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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This paper looks at the effectiveness of Work-Integrated Learning. The objective of this research was to determine the perceptions of B-Tech degree students regarding the effectiveness of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programme in contributing to the employability of Office Management and Technology graduates. The national debate on graduate employment has moved from the narrow focus on a set of essential core skills within the undergraduate curriculum. Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs are becoming popular with students, government, employers, and universities. A major benefit of a WIL program is the increased employability of students, and this matches well with the present trend whereby students expect a pay-off from their investment in education. Various initiatives have been introduced to prepare students for graduate jobs rather than for any job. This includes developing critical, reflective abilities, skills for self-career management and the maintenance of employability and career progression. For OMT students, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context within which they work. The most effective initiative which enhances employment of OMT graduates is the effective and efficient Work Integrated Learning (WIL) they undergo when they do their third year. The Department ensures the placement of all students which grants jobs to more than 70% of the students. The training these students receive so far equips them with the necessary abilities to function as intelligent citizens who can be self-employed and self-reliant. The skills they acquire enable them to contribute to the productivity and development of the organisations they work for. Many graduates are affected by an increasing rate of unemployment but this is not the case for OMT graduates. Most universities has recently strengthened their commitment to WIL through adding WIL to their strategic directions and re-shaping areas of the university to better manage and support WIL provision.

A questionnaire measuring the students' perceptions of their experiential training and mentorship was developed and administered to 70 students currently undertaking the B-Tech Degree study in Office Management and Technology. Convenience sampling method was used for this study.

The findings confirmed that importance of increasing the time allocated for the training as it will enable students to gain more administrative and office technology skills to enhance their employability. Finally, it was recommended that the departmental lecturer should conduct regular visits to industries where students are placed to ensure that the required training is provided to students and to monitor students' progress.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, experiential learning, work-based learning, Employability, curriculum.

Introduction

This study was based on student's efficiency during Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in the department of Information and Corporate Management at Durban University of Technology (DUT). The department offers National Diploma in Office Management and Technology and graduates get job opportunities in office supervisory position, Administrative Assistants, Secretaries, Administrators, Personal Assistants and other related positions.

OMT third year students spend three months of WIL in an appropriate office work environment so that they can get the necessary training and this is a compulsory component of qualification and they won't graduate until they have completed the three month WIL period.

WIL broad refers to educational programs that incorporate workplace based component but also connect classroom learning or individual's program of study (Kramer & Usher 2011:11). The concept of WIL has evolved significantly recently and it is now practiced in leading institutions around the world, aiming to provide learning opportunities coupled with real world experiences in one integrated package. Universities, for instance, currently tend not only to teach their students pure theoretical knowledge, but also to equip them with relevant skills that can help them achieve success in practical situations (Peach & Gamble, 2011).

It also defined as a bridge for the students between the academic present, and their professional future, the opportunity to apply and merge theoretical knowledge and gain in academic studies to "real world" work place practical experiences and to prepare the students for a career by providing an opportunity to develop relevant professional skills (Martin & Hughes, 2009:8). This program is intended to produce benefit for students such as job readiness skills and knowledge.

Motivation for the study

This study will add value to the partnership relationship between students, the workplace and Organisation and the Universities. Firstly, it will assume definite responsibilities, perform specific functions and achieve benefits as a result of the party's involvement. Secondly, it will motivate the academics so that they are able to develop employability skills amongst students. Finally, to give a clear understanding of each party.

Work-Integrated learning

Business and industry have increasingly called for Universities to generate better prepared, perhaps even work-ready graduate (Peach & Gamble 2011:110). Work-Integrated Learning program have become increasingly important in addressing employer and business demand for graduate employability development (Jackson, 2013:20).

Work-integrated learning can be thought of as learning by doing and by experience. The term describes the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kramer & Usher, 2011). Students are directly exposed to real life incidents and people, and become involved in activities that simulate real activities or people. Learning occurs when students participate in these activities and critically look back on the activity to reflect on learning and feeling, draw useful insight from analysis and apply it to new situation. Students become engaged in ways that are far superior to information delivered in lectures or read in textbooks. Work-integrated learning is an essential component for most careers. Students have to leave Office Management and Technology programmes with the knowledge and skills that are directly transferable to the organisation.

Work-Integrated Learning Programs

WIL program have a considerable history in providing students with meaningful work base learning opportunities over a broad range of scientific discipline. A report on graduate recruitment in the business industry in Australia highlighted that a strong knowledge based alone does not guarantee a new graduate employment and that personal attributes and capabilities of graduate are considered to have a greater influence on success in the workplace (Bell, Crebert, Patrick, Bate & Cragnolini, 2003:211). Effective WIL programs have been shown to enhance the preparedness of participants for post-degree work (Patrick, Peach, Pockness, Webb, Fleth, Pretoo, 2008:45).

Coll et. al., (2008:66) observed that, while WIL has been deemed as beneficial in the development of non-technical competencies, little is known about how it might better be facilitated or supported. Peach and Gamble (2011) argue that WIL should be developed as part of the whole course of study, rather than a stand-alone components. This is because students need a certain level of behavioural competencies prior to starting their cooperative experience and that it cannot be assumed that the development of such competencies can be left entirely for the WIL component of a degree. Consequently, many universities have begun to identify the generic skills and attribute their graduate possesses on graduation (Bell et al., 2003:90).

During WIL experience, students need appropriate supervision and support to understand the purpose of WIL and are able to develop the capabilities necessary to be a reflective practitioner (Patrick and Crebert, 2004). Rather than leaving the student unclear about what to learn during a work placement, institutions need to specify learning outcomes that focus the student's learning an encourage reflection about what they have learned (Patrick and Crebert, 2004).

Work-Integrated Learning Benefits

Work-integrated learning programmes in university course are not new. Traditionally, practicals have been expected in vocationally oriented degree that lead to professional accreditation and generally are regarded as a 'good thin'. Work-integrated learning is any co-operative venture between an organisation, a student and an academic n

Many benefits are gained by all the above-mentioned partners with the implementation of work-integrated learning programme, with includes, employer/industry; student and higher education benefit.

Employer/Industry benefits

The work-integrated learning programme contributes to the human resource strategy of the company as it identifies and develops future employees. It also provides additional assistance to peak times of the year by the improvement of staff efficiency. The relationship between organisations and Universities of Technology (UoTs) are strengthened and lead to improved career-oriented education as organisations contribute to curriculum design (Dressler & Keeling, 2004).

Student benefits

Real life experiences are gained by students. Their studies become more meaningful as they comprehend the relationship between theory and practice. Students gain practical experience during their studies for a qualification and therefore are provided with opportunities to sample career options. Growth in maturity, self-awareness and confidence are experienced by students. Better human relations are developed by students when they are working with people of different backgrounds and disciplines (Dressler & Keeling, 2004:226). Students' interpersonal communication, as well as problem-solving skills are developed. The cooperation of students enhances listening, and critical thinking skills are promoted as students share ideas and listen to the ideas of others.

Higher education benefits

Academic staff has access to contemporary work practices and new developments in the industry by maintaining close links with the industry. The curricula are constantly updated and serves the requirements of the employment sector. Lecturers are professionally developed through the coaching and mentoring of students in the industry (Dressler & Keeling 2004). Work-integrated learning does not only produce an able workforce, but reinforces the link between the higher education institutions, and employers and provides access to on-the-job earning. It is an effective means of developing a nation's human resources and reducing training costs/the lag time between hiring and productivity and supervisory time. With these benefits in mind, it is clear that it may be imperative for students to undergo work-integrated to ensure that they become employable and productive citizens of this country. It also contributes to the attainment of a human resources development strategy and economic growth objective of South Africa (Du Pre, 2009).

Students Issues during Work-Integrated Learning

Students are important in WIL as there are the focus point around which the projects run. The issues of concern to students include:

- WIL must have reasonable balance between theory and practice and be student focused rather than to serve the need of a specific company or organisation. Getting broad skills is preferable to gaining company-specific qualifications (Reinhard, 2006:20).
- Students can be concerned that their ability to work on the workplace may not be properly valued within assessment structures, which could affect students' focus and attention (Smith, Meijer & Kielly-Colema, 2010). Students often indicated the final assessment report (Smith et. al., 2010:67).
- Many students emphasize the value of creating shared learning spaces to support reflection and dialogue, so they can consider their experiences in the light of their peers' experiences (Smith & Smith, 2010:).
- The scope and team allocation of WIL projects need to be appropriately to the student's ability and needs. If projects are large, or if the team is not cohesive, then success is difficult to achieve.
- Suitable work placement is often difficult to achieve, for example, in a case study of Harvey (2010:63) less than 24% of students managed to find their own placement.

It is important to realise that in order to achieve success in WIL projects, all parties must work collaboratively. They must share ideas, resources and expectations throughout the lifecycle of the project (Smith et al., 2010:416).

Industries expectations from students during Work-Integrated Learning

Industry needs from OMT students during WIL includes both the need for persons with advanced skills in specialised areas and people who are very well prepared and with a broad understanding of the software packages. These packages include accounts, office productivity, e-mails and communication, but nowadays, most industries activities can be improved through desktop or web-based applications (Mohamed, 2010:57).

Work-Integrated Learning as an Effective and Efficient Learning Strategy

Effective programmes require access to quality learning environments, preparation and support for supervisory staff and establishment of appropriate risk management and minimisation processes (Peach & Gamble, 2011). Effective work experience must involve meaningful work as a means to an end, not an end in itself; the experience of work is not enough to produce transformed learning (Jackson, 2013). Learning in work placements need to be deliberate and intentional, supported by induction of students and supervisors and the imaginative development of appropriate assessment to ensure the maintenance of high standards and adequate duty of care (Peach & Gamble). Reflection and debriefing on the work by all parties is required to achieve these standards, as well as systematic evaluation for monitoring the quality of learning outcomes.

A distinguishing feature of effective work-placement programmes is that they involve partnerships among diverse groups; employers, students, lecturers, higher education managers, professional bodies and broker agencies (career offices, external placement groups). If continuing success is to be achieved, there needs to be recognition of all the parties involved, with clear agreements between them.

Furthermore, attainment of explicit mutual benefit is essential. If the benefit fails for any party, the placement programmes occur where the host organisation is involved in the planning from the beginning and where the organisation is committed to student learning.

Work-Integrated Learning Focus

The programme focused on soft and technical skills training for the graduate interns. Several researchers has identified both the importance of soft and technical skills as contributing to students' efficiency (Dressler & Keeling, 2004).

Findings

The research showed that WIL provides benefits to students. These benefits include reinforcing concepts and skills learned in the classroom, obtaining workplace skills, learning different software programs industries use which cannot be learned in the classroom and improves student's efficiency. Office Management and Technology curriculum and WIL is one of the best in the country as the programme was among the first qualifications to perfectly integrate WIL in its curriculum.

WIL has attracted considerable attention as an instrument for enhancing professional practice and developing work-readiness in new graduates. It is widely considered as a point of difference in developing graduate employability by enhancing skills outcomes, such as team-work, communication, self-management and problem solving, employment prospects and student understanding of the world-of work (WOW).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve and increase access to WIL; encourage businesses to provide structured learnerships, and explicitly report on employability skills demonstrated through WIL (BIHECC, 2007:2).
- WIL should be a strategy for enhancing South African productivity and addressing growing skills shortages as well as providing student with income support with their study.
- There are a number of challenges in the public post-school education system. This is especially so in the colleges, where many lecturers lack industry experience. There is a lack of capacity to develop the curriculum and materials required to meet industry needs across diverse sectors.

- Students and graduates need to be willing to develop their personal and professional skills relevant for the world of work to improve their chances of employment success. In addition they need to take advantage of opportunities to develop relevant skills, for example, during work experience and part-time employment.
- In conclusion it seems that the general consensus from HEIs is that the current and future employment market requires graduates to be equipped with a range of skills. Applicants need to be able to demonstrate their core transferrable skills in addition to their academic success.
- Lecturers who educate future employees should work in collaboration with industry in order to bridge the gap between industry and higher education, through the development of a curriculum that is industry relevant so that students are fully equipped with skills that will better prepare them for future employment.
- In addition, universities should seek to build strong partnerships with employers in order to promote the expansion of workplace training opportunities, especially in those areas where qualifications or professional registration depends on practical workplace experience. These partnerships can benefit from the inclusion of SETAs (White Paper, 2013:15).
- The post-school system should prepare graduate for the labour market, or enable individuals to earn sustainable livelihoods through self-employment or establishing a company or cooperative. Graduates should be able to make a living for themselves and contribute skills to a developing economy.
- Introduction to the importance of time management, goal and task management and efficient working practices during the WIL period
- More regular feedback from management of student progress.
- Conduct technical and soft skill training earlier in the programme.
- Consider extending the programme to fully year by restructuring curriculum and changing the national diploma in Office Management and Technology to four years.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has outlined the concept of students' efficiency during work-integrated learning. WIL approach is being increasingly used in many fields today,

ranging from different departments and career across the world. This study affirms the contribution of WIL to graduates efficiency outcomes and urges further examination of a greater range of influencing variables in a cross-institution and cross-disciplinary study.

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