The relevance of Work Integrated Learning: A case at a University of Technology

ABSTRACT

Does Cooperative Education Department at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) succeed in placing students for work integrated learning (WIL)? This question is pertinent because of the WIL-placement challenges that VUT faces in the context of dwindling employment opportunities in South Africa. Research indicates that approximately 300 000 formal jobs have been lost rather than being created this year alone. It seems this trend is not going to improve in the near future. South Africa is still faced with the scourge economic exclusion which affects mostly previously disadvantaged masses (Bruggemans, 2009, Naong, 2011:181).

This is also confirmed by the country’s absorption rate of new recruits by the economy which has dwindle from to less than 4% from 64% in the last decade (Davies, 2001:32). In this context, the aim of this paper is to present current trends of WIL and critical issues with the purpose of highlighting the severity of the matter and to come up with recommendations towards a solution that .... policy and procedures of WIL.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the problem

Co-operative Education is an integrated approach to teaching and learning for the attainment of qualifications. It focuses specifically on encouraging and enhancing learning partnerships and relationships between the primary and secondary partners. The primary partnership is compulsory for Co-operative education, whilst the partnership between the primary and the secondary partners may vary according to the need of specific learning programmes. The primary partners are the University, the learner and the employer and the secondary partners are the community, department of labour, department of education, other relevant government structures and professional bodies.

Co-operative Education encourage and enhances Work Integrated Learning (WIL) because it is important to the three parties. The University through liaison with industry, business, government and communities, receives feedback on the quality and relevance of its educational programmes. The employer benefits from having access to a year round supply of highly motivated learners employees who want to work and learn. Learners/students develop confidence and skills in working with people and directly improve their employment opportunities upon graduation.

Many challenges facing co-operative education in UOTs particularly in South Africa. The level of unemployment graduates in South Africa displays a cause of urgent concern for South African Government. High school students coming from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds that have been grated the opportunity to study have been automatically placed in a dilemma where finding work is just as challenging as completing the degree itself.

High school students who dreamt of furthering their studies are now provided with the aid to fulfill those dreams. The future of these young stars will always be under threat by the ever increasingly high levels of poverty that persists in the country. This, linked closely to the unemployment problem facing undergraduates. Some government project failed to produce the
proposed sustained growth on higher plans, subsequently alleviated unemployment (Pauw, 2002). The economy has not been able to absorb the rapidly growing labour force into employment at a rate where there is enough job creation. Brilliant minds are leaving the country with skills and limitless potential that could improve the quality of human capital in South Africa. The South African government needs to buckle down on reframing policies that may combat this unbearable situation that many graduates face today particularly UOTs graduates who supposed to do both theory and practice.

According to Red Star Resume Publication (2010), there are 5 Challenges facing graduates and are outlined below:

- Competition (too few jobs and too many graduates)
- Downturn in the economy
- Lack of real world experience
- Too high expectations
- Debate between further higher education and job seeking

1.2 Problem statement

Close to 7 million South Africans are out of work including graduates. This illustrates the unending nature of unemployment in South Africa. With this high unemployment, South Africa’s labour absorption capacity stands at 40%. The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) reports that the unemployment rate in South Africa was 25.2% for the period of January to March 2012, having increased by 1.3% from 23.9% in October to December 2011.

Unemployed has huge costs to the economy, both in terms of lost economic activity, but most overwhelmingly in terms of loss of human capital and skills. Every year the number of people that are available for work, but give-up the search grows by 5%. This category is known as the discouraged work seekers. There are over 2 million discouraged workers. According to the QLFS working age is from 15 years, it makes sense that a significant proportion 41.5% of the economically inactive would be students.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Vaal University of Technology: Work Integrated Learning conception

The following methods of teaching and learning of an integrated Education curriculum verifies that Co-operative Education can and may take on many forms of practice in order that the specific and critical cross-field outcomes of programmes are achieved. The assessment of each of the learning methods must also be clearly spelt out for the Learner, Lecturer and the Employer (Vaal University of Technology Co-operative Education Policy, 2002:8).

Figure 2.1 Teaching and Learning Strategy
The Work Integrated Learning total is normally stipulated by a minimum time, but the success of completion is determined by the attainment of predetermined skills and competencies, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

### 2.2 Council on Higher Education: Work Integrated Learning conception

Work-integrated learning (WIL) refers to an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces. It involves curricular, pedagogical and assessment considerations that differ from those of genera education programmes. There are many curricular modalities that can be drawn on in developing a WIL programme. The following modalities as prescribed by Council on Higher Education 2011 are outlined below:

#### Work-directed Theoretical Learning

Work-directed theoretical learning (WDTL) involves an attempt to ensure that theoretical forms of knowledge are introduced and sequenced in ways that meet both academic criteria and are applicable and relevant to the career-specific components (Barnett, 2006). All WIL programmes will include theoretical subjects or components. All should be aligned with the practical or practice-based components through teaching and learning activities that bring theory and practice together in meaningful ways. For example, WIL curricula need to take into account the twofold nature of professional education. It aligns disciplinary demands with workplace relevance and enhances the academic quality of the program rather than compromising the quality. Another example is to invite guests lectures from the workplace or professional practice into the academic classroom.

#### Problem-based Learning

Problem-based learning (PBL) is a term used within higher education for a rage of pedagogic approaches that encourage students to learn through the structured exploration of a research or practice-based problem (Savin-Baden & Major, 2004). This modality can be used to bring
fundamental change so that problems are the organizing structure of the curriculum rather than academic subjects. The main objective of this modality is the attainment of an extensive integrated knowledge base that is readily recalled and applied to the analysis and solution of problems. Problem-based learning is more valuable when more than one subject or discipline field is involved and in principle, information should be integrated from the disciplines that are core to the educational programme and relevant to the problems.

**Project-based Learning**

Project-based learning (PBL) combines PBL and WPL in that it brings together intellectual inquiry, real-world problems and student engagement in relevant and meaningful work. This modality involves learning through projects located in the real world of work. Generally, such projects involves the element of research and the supervision of both the university teacher and the mentor in industry. Project based learning is a strategy that recognizes both students’ inherent drive to learn and capacity to do useful work. Projects do not always lend themselves to coverage of all outcomes in a curriculum. It is selecting of those topics that reflect the most important ideas and concepts in the curriculum and incorporating those topics into projects.

**Work place Learning**

Work place learning (WPL) is considered to be a valid learning experience for students in many higher education programmes (Wessels, 2005). It take place when students are placed in work environment for the purpose of learning. Usually learning in the work place involves students in planning and implementing an activity in reflection on an evaluating the activity and making adjustment for future action. The learning cycle proposes an interactive series of processes which underlies learning. Four stages are outlined below:

a) **Concrete experience:** one cannot learn something simply by watching or reading about, therefore active involvement is crucial.

b) **Reflective observation:** student attention should be focused on particular elements of the experience.
c) **Abstract conceptualization:** through a process of inductive reasoning, the students analyze observations, explain them, and integrate them into logically sound theories.

d) **Active experimentation:** the students consider how they are going to put what they have learned into practice.

Learning becomes less efficient where one or more of the learning cycle stages are missing, where a student lacks the skills or opportunity to deal with one of them.

### 2.3 South African Technology Network: Work Integrated Learning conception

It is significant emphasizing that the alignment between work and education implied in WIL is not restricted to WPL. There are a extensive series of WIL practices along a continuum from more theoretical to more practical forms. WIL includes, learning from experience. The intention of WIL including experiential learning is to encourage students to reflect on their experiences and develop and refine their own conceptual model. WIL include four main curricular types with possibilities for many hybrid combination (South African Technology Network, 2007) and are outlined as follows: explained the same as that of CHE.

- Work-directed theoretical learning
- Problem-based learning
- Project-based learning
- Workplace learning

Changes in the South African Higher Education landscape have been compound in that changes to the education system in response to globalization occurred at the same time as the beginning of a new democratic government, with strong equity and redress imperatives. The White paper 1997 on education, directed change towards both meeting global economic and internal political ends, with knowledge debates being influential (Kraak, 2000).

The perceived need to create a more skilled workforce in response to recent globalizing influences has led to the convergence of higher education and new economic needs being treated with greater urgency in the last ten years (Dearing Report, 1997). The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in Council on (Higher Education (CHE), 2003) has accentuated the need for
programmes to be responsive to potential employers and the community, to offer opportunities for the contextualization of work through project work and to have an impact on job opportunities.

According to Brennan (2005, cited in Nixon et al., 2006), WIL should be considered by HE institutions if they are to continue to contribute to the knowledge economy. WIL refers to the central role that work experience plays in the learning process. This pedagogy falls under an umbrella of comprehensively known terms such as apprenticeship, Field based learning, placements, practice oriented education and work-based learning (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2000). There are numerous benefits of WIL. Students in an experiential education programme have the opportunity to learn about different jobs, different industries, specific occupations and to apply what they learn in the classroom to an actual real-world work experience.

According to Cassidy (2004) and Lee (2007), WIL improve a student’s self-confidence and self-concept, improve social skills, increase practical knowledge and skills and enhance employment opportunities. The application of WIL is not without challenges. A fine balance is needed between meeting the demands of industry and community and meeting the universities’ requirements for high quality learning. McLennan and Keating (2008) outline the following difficulties: Skills and experience of academic and general learning in WIL, and resource-intensiveness. WIL educators also struggle with the concept of how best to design and implement worthwhile WIL programmes to increase the employability of graduates.

3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Employability status in South Africa indicate high employment rate. Close to 7 million South African are without work. 4 out of 10 young South African are unemployed. There seem to be a complete lack of highly developed and planed policies to improve the proportion of graduates to be placed into jobs within their field after graduating. No mechanisms, policies or frameworks have been provided to place recent graduates into internship programmes.
The following recommendations may be of help regarding this high unemployment rate in South Africa:

One solution to the challenges facing unemployment graduate is to mainstream entrepreneurship so as to reduce the demand for job placements. However, this does not mean the end of WIL. WIL is still important and it plays a very important role in the country especially as it is informed by Kolb experiential learning theory that advances the significance of practical and experiential learning.

UOTs should re-invent, revamp and revitalize WIL curriculum. For example modularize WIL within the faculties by having a portion of practice plus mini-project that will be equal to complete WIL component, or projects equivalent to WIL.

UOTs should learn from traditional university and contextualize experiences from traditional learning.

Staff development programmes that focus on WIL two pronged strategies:

a) Focus on Academic WIL Practitioner – Better equipped to place students appropriately

b) Focus on Academic subject expects – so that they would be informed with the pedagogical aspects of WIL in order to inform teaching and learning with appropriate debates of WIL. Likely to make use of academic networks and linkages for the advantage of WIL students. They should focus local opportunities and international ones.

The two should re-enforce internal partnerships and linkages for the purpose of WIL to international especially in African.

Making WIL socially responsive to the broader national principles such as those of “Batho Pele / people first”.

In conclusion, this paper advances the re-invention of WIL in order to meet the challenges of the current era such as high unemployment. In essence, WIL importance cannot be marginalized or overlooked, it remain an important component of learning at H.E.

REFERENCES


Red Star Resume Publication – [www.redstarresume.com](http://www.redstarresume.com)