Title
"Perspectives of employers on work readiness of WIL students. A case study of the Durban University of Technology."

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Abstract
There is a concern that students are inadequately prepared before being placed in industry to do Work Integrated Learning (WIL). Also, the Co-operative Education Practitioners as well as the external partners or employers are not sufficiently supported to drive this challenging work. This may, as a result, have an adverse impact on the students as they would drop out or perform badly on this programme. It must also be noted that these students are from different backgrounds. Some of them are from rural areas where there is a scarcity of industries. The opportunity of getting a placement in industry is a very unusual experience to them.

The Durban University of Technology is being used as a case study to probe this challenge. In general, during semester four, or just before the completion of their course work and even much earlier in some programmes, students are required to participate in WIL orientation that is aimed at improving their knowledge and attitude towards the world outside the classroom. They are required to attend work preparedness workshops in which a guest speaker from industry is invited to address these students on industry expectations. These workshops are compulsory,
but at this stage, there is no academic credit. This is done in order to prepare them for the world of work. After having completed this type of student preparation, one has to wonder whether justice has been done to improve the student's work readiness. If cognition is not taken, some students may feel neglected or lose interest and enthusiasm. This may also lead to the collapse of the Co-operative Education practice. This paper looks at the perspectives of employers who employ DUT students for WIL.

Key words: Employers; Work Integrated Learning; Work Readiness; Co-operative Education Practitioners.

In this investigation, Co-operative Education Practitioners refer to every person who takes part in the facilitation of WIL e.g. WIL Co-ordinators, Learner Support Practitioners, Co-operative Education lecturers, Placement Officers, University Mentors, Academic Staff.

Introduction and background

The general model that is utilized by Universities of Technology (UoTs) such as the Durban University of Technology is that students, before completing their course work, would first be required to take part in a Work Preparedness Skills Workshops which are followed by the processes of placements in industry or programmes where Work Integrated Learning can take place as stipulated in the Higher Education Qualifications Framework document (Government Gazette, 2007). Alderman and Milne (2005) stated that the main focus of these workshops is to assist students on the following:

- articulate the knowledge, skills and attributes that they will be taking to the placement
- articulate the knowledge, skills and attributes that they want to develop
- learn strategies for taking control of their own learning and
- gain a greater understanding of their professional responsibilities whilom the program
The recruitment for placements in industry is done by employers in such a way that it resembles real life situation. A curriculum vitae based selection would initiate the process, followed by interviews and the placement of the best candidate. This in itself is part of work readiness. Therefore, the holistic procedure of WIL takes place by following the learning cycle that was designed by Brian Forbes from the Southern African Society for Co-operative Education (SASCE) shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

A student would be subjected to work preparation in which an industry guest would be invited to explain the expectations of industry to students, CV writing and interview skills as well as work ethics to name a few. This would be followed by the actual placement as mentioned earlier on. It should be noted that according to the DUT practice which is also enforced by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a workplace approval must be conducted at a work site before a student is placed in order to ensure that training requirements are met as stipulated in the student training manual. The work learning programme is conducted in such a way that a student performs productive work. In some disciplines, especially in Science and Engineering, a student would be required to undertake an investigation that
would benefit the host organization. Co-operative Education Practitioners would support these students by continuous visitations to monitor the progress and make an input to their work. At the end of the training period or (in some cases in this is done throughout the training) the student’s work is assessed and evaluated by means of allocating an academic credit.

According to Du Pre’ (2009) WIL is and should always be an integral part of a UoT’s education programme to provide students with relevant work experience. This comes as a result of the partnerships and relationships with UoTs and external partners such as Industries, Commerce, Government, Communities as well as Nongovernmental Organizations. Du Pre’ (2009) further explains that institutions have realized both the potential and the need for co-operation, partnerships and joint ventures with industry and business, linked to an entrepreneurial approach. These partnerships and relationships between the university and industry are a driving force of the learning cycle that is shown in Figure 1. The key objective is to expose the students to actual working environment so that they can become value-added graduates preferred by employers.

Gamble, Thompson and Zdenkowski (2007) also support this when they explained that the reasons for the introduction of co-operative education are firstly to provide students with relevant work experience that would enhance their employability upon graduation, and secondly, to foster relationships between universities and external partners. After having said the all of the above, there is a concern that emanates from the industry sector to the effect of the under preparedness of WIL students that undertake placement in their organisations. Makhitha (2007) explained that well prepared students do not only save the employer money and time but also contribute to overall performance of the organization. ‘A co-op program (which in the South African context is termed an experiential learning programme) can provide the company with continuous supply of qualified individuals who, because of their experience are better prepared to assume management responsibilities in the future’, this was explained by Coll and Zegwaard (2011) as one of the benefits of co-operative and work integrated education for employers.
Bailey and Major (1998) state that apart from giving access to higher education, work-based learning enables employers to achieve project development which might not otherwise have been undertaken, it gives them access to students who may bring a fresh perspective to bear on problem solving, and presents them with opportunities for partnerships which may prove beneficial in the future. Some employers also see the potential for recruitment through work-based learning. It is not unusual for students to be offered paid vacation work and permanent positions on completion of their studies.

Methodology

This study has adopted quantitative (in the form of a questionnaire) research design to gather information that was interpreted by means of bar charts. The results are based on responses from targeted population that included different industries that employ DUT students for WIL. The questionnaire was filled by respondents during or after workshops, advisory boards as well as all other events that were hosted by the Co-operative Education Unit at DUT. Analysis of data by statistical tools is also performed and shown on presented results. This investigation relies on the experiences and opinions of the respondents.

The Durban University of Technology hosted a Homecoming event via its Convocation office in July 2011. This is an event that has shown success in drawing interest from thousands graduates of the university that are situated across the country and abroad to make input towards the betterment of the processes of running the institution. A research questionnaire was designed to extract information that is relevant to the graduates of DUT. This questionnaire had 104 respondents.

Results and discussion

The work preparedness programme at DUT is currently not bearing a credit towards the student’s success. However, it is compulsory for a student to attend these workshops. There is no penalty in a case where a student chooses not to take part. It was realized that there was a need to attach a credit to the work preparedness programme. This is aimed at improving the student’s enthusiasm to take part and as a result to improve work readiness. As part of the questionnaire, respondents were
asked to comment on the importance of formalizing the work preparedness programme to bear an academic credit. The results below depict the opinion of 99 respondents. 58.97% indicated that it was extremely important for DUT to engage on this exercise as shown in Figure 2. This was also supported by 38.46 % of respondents who felt that this was important. Only 2.6 % thought that this idea is not important.

![Formalize work preparedness to be credit bearing](image)

**Figure 2**

On the question of readiness of WIL students to perform adequately at work, it was agreed by 66.67 % that these students were found to be readily prepared as shown in **Figure 3**. Only 2.56 % disagreed. This may be attributed to the fact that some employers recruit students that are misplaced or chosen a wrong career. A small percentage of 17.95 was not sure whether WIL students are work ready. In some cases you find that an employer would allocate a student to a supervisor who is still new in its employ. This could also result on this uncertainty.
Large employers have a tendency of placing more than one WIL student. It does happen in some cases that there is a noticeable difference in the abilities and performance of students, even if they are from the same class. This study also investigated how the employer would handle such differences. Figure 4 shows that 81.08% indicated that they would pay more attention to the underperforming student. This coincides with the larger percentage of graduates who indicated that employers made a positively impact towards their learning during WIL in Figure 7. 18.92% said they would assign more duties to weak students in order to help them find their feet and gain confidence. It is interesting to find that no employer said they would ignore or expel such students as shown in Figure 4.
Also, this study revealed that a large percentage of employers suggested that lack of learner support can contribute to student’s failure as shown in Figure 5.

![Lack of learner support vs student’s failure](image)

**Figure 5**

DUT believes that its adoption of the WIL model implementation of the processes thereof, contributes positively towards the employability and hence the marketability of its students when they graduate. 64.10 of employers agreed to this as shown in Figure 6. 2.56 % disagreed and 5.26 % is not sure about this. It should be noted that some of the employers graduated from traditional universities where WIL is not compulsory hence they may be immune to this practice.

![Does WIL contribute positively towards the student’s employability?](image)

**Figure 6**
On the graduate questionnaire, graduates were asked to identify a person that impacted positively on their learning during their WIL period. The respondent was required to select one person out of a choice of the WIL Co-ordinator, Industrial Supervisor, University Mentor, Fellow WIL students and Co-worker (other employees). The highest percentage of 31.31 was attributed to the Industrial Supervisors or employers as shown in Figure 7 above. This is due to the fact WIL students spend the whole training period (which is six months or a one year depending on the requirements of their academic programme) in the care of the employers. Therefore, the perspective of employers on work readiness of WIL students is quite significant. It is also interesting to realize that 14.14 % of the graduates indicated that there is no one who made a positive impact to them during WIL. This as mentioned earlier on, could be attributed to the inexperienced supervisors from the employer’s side, misplaced students as well as lack of or poor visitations by University Mentors during WIL placements.

Figure 7

Conclusions

It would be extremely important for DUT and other UoTs to formalize the work preparedness Programme and render it as a credit bearing module. This would encourage students to take it seriously and attend it regularly.
According to the opinion of the employers, WIL students are adequately prepared to enter the world of work after having gone through the work preparedness programme. A small percentage disagreed to this. This suggests that the programme should be improved and as suggested above, it must be enforced to students.

An investigated must be undertaken to measure the improvement of weak students after more attention has been paid to them by employers. Learner support mechanisms such as the visits by university mentors, coaching and monitoring should be improved. This must be done carefully to ensure that it does not lead to spoon feeding the student as this may have a negative effect on them after the training.

Based on the response of the employers, WIL does improve the employability and the marketability of students who have undertaken it. Therefore, attempts to minimize it or removing it from the curriculum must be discouraged. Also, industrial supervisors where singled out by graduates to have had a positive impact on their learning during WIL. This suggests that they must be properly supported in terms of capacity building in order to boost their confidence in the good work that they do.

References


