The influence of a work-integrated learning course in administrative management on employability

Abstract.

The supply of business and management (B&M) graduates to the labour market has grown significantly. One wanders if these graduates are employable. Employability is of high importance not only for unemployed or laid off individuals, but also for those who are currently employed in today’s turbulent work environment. It is a responsibility of high education institution to produce graduates with employability skills. There is a gap between skill requirements for entry-level graduate employment and those offered by high education institutions. Experiential learning has been suggested as a learning method to reduce the skills gap. However, not all experiential learning courses equip learners with employability skills. It is therefore important to evaluate the influence of a course on employability. The purpose of this research is to establish the influence of a work-integrated learning course in administrative management on employability.

Keywords: Employability; Employability skills; Administrative management; Experiential learning; Work integrated learning

INTRODUCTION

The major reasons most people register at a higher education institution is to graduate and get employment, get promotion or get a new employment (Gokuladas, 2011). It is therefore important that higher education institutions equip their graduates with employability skills (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). The supply of business and management (B&M) graduates to the labour market has grown significantly (Wilton, 2011). While high education institutions around the world are producing so many graduates; most of them find it hard to get a job. This is because there is a gap between the skills they acquired and the skills required by the employers (Baker & Henson, 2010). Experiential learning has been suggested as a learning method to reduce the skills gap (Procter, 2011).
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

True learning is the result of students’ experiences, and the evaluation and reflection of these experiences (Moore, Boyd & Dooley, 2010). Experiential learning unlocks capabilities because it about action rather than just learning theory (Jennings & Wargneir, 2010). Ghose (2010) states that experiential learning can be implemented by educators in varied disciplines to equip students with hand-on experience. Clark & White, (2010) conclude that quality university business education program must include an experiential learning component.

Although there are many definitions of experiential learning, Kolb (1984) is the most quoted. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. According to Kolb, experiential learning is a four stage process. These stages are: Concrete Experience: the learner must be willing and be actively involved in the experience; Reflective Observation: the learner must be able to reflect on the experience; Abstract Conceptualization: the learner must possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience; and Active Experimentation: the learner must possess decision making and problem solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

Experiential learning is categorized into two different types: one which is more personal and informal (e.g. learning from experience that one should always read through an e-mail before sending it) and another type that is a designed learning event with situations to which the learner is intentionally exposed (Vesper, Kartog, Bishara & Reeves, 2010). Experiential learning can take many forms including internships, volunteering to work in a firm and simulation (Clark & White, 2010).

Experiential learning provides many benefits to students, faculties and educational institutions, firms/owner/manager, researchers and government policy makers (Hynes & Richardson, 2007). According to Nevin (2001) experiential learning provide learners with fun, exciting and entertaining way of learning. Experiential learning gives students an opportunity to be real not pretenders (Vincett & Farlow, 2008). In addition, experiential learning create the right atmosphere for learning, put value on students’ knowledge, skills and experience, enforce sharing of ideas and increase synergistic learning of participants (Smith, Collins & Hannon, 2006).
Experiential learning course in administrative management

The course is entitled “Administrative Practice” because of the experiential learning component in it. This course is offered by the University of South Africa (UNISA) the largest Open Distance Learning (ODL) university in Africa. The purpose of the course is to provide the learners with experiential learning in the national diploma in administrative management. This course prepares students for the work environment.

Upon registration, students receive study materials which include all assignments to be completed. One of the assignments they must complete is the experiential learning project which should be completed in a work environment and submitted to the university for final assessment. Other assignments cover theory on experiential learning. With the help of the university, students are to find a work placement. They are required to spend two months at the work environment. During this period, students are to familiarise themselves with the organisation in which they are placed; learn the information systems in use; use both written and electronic communication; discover the area that require insurance; plan the office environment; learn how administrative function support other organisational functions; learn about quality assurance; ensure that the office observes green principles; expose themselves to facilities management; learn about automated processes in the organisation; learn about ergonomic office; discover how the organisation decorate its offices; learn about buying; and facilitate meetings. In a nutshell, students learn all about administrative management.

Students are provided with a log book which contains all the activities they should complete. After completing each activity, students must record evidence of completion in a portfolio of evidence. They are required to attach supporting documents to their portfolio. Also, students are to declare ownership of their portfolio of evidence by attaching a declaration form with a stamp of commissioner of auth. They are to make their portfolio presentable by biding or filing it and get it ready for submission to the university. The portfolio is submitted towards the end of the year for final assessment.

EMPLOYABILITY

The supply of business and management (B&M) graduates to the labour market has grown significantly (Wilton, 2011). However, the labour market requires graduates with employability skills. As a result, higher education institutions responded by incorporating experiential learning in their course offering (Peach & Gamble, 2011). Employability is of high importance not only for unemployed or laid off individuals, but also for those who are currently employed in
today’s turbulent work environment (Wittekind, Raeder & Grote, 2010). Employability is the prime factor that influences the very thoughts of a graduating student (Gokuladas, 2011).

Although there are several definitions of employability, they focus on the personal attributes, understandings and attainments that make individuals more likely to gain and maintain employment, and to progress in workplaces and build careers (Watton & Truscott, 2006). Dearing (1997) defines employability as the ability of an individual to gain employment appropriate to his/her educational standard. Although this definition emphasise possibility of an individual in getting employment, it does not cover the value that the individual will add to the employer, community and the economy. Little (2004) defines employability as a set of achievements, understandings, and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations. This is a detailed definition and it reveals how one becomes employable. In addition, this definition emphasise the fact that the individual should also be successful in their chosen career. Yorke & Knight (2004) define employability as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. This is a very broad and inclusive definition of employability. It reveals that the individual must accumulate certain skills in order to be employable and succeed in the chosen career path. Moreover, Yorke & Knight’s (2004) definition indicate that the success of the individual with employability skills must benefit the workforce, community and economy.

There are three types of employability (Rothwell, Jewell & Hardie, 2009). These are: (1) Employability of workforce: related to government policy or national-level ‘skills’ agendas, or at an industry Level. This perspective is derived from concerns about the changing nature of work and employment at the end of the 20th century. (2) Employability as human resource strategy: this relates to the notion of employability based on skills and personal flexibility acquired through employment, often promoted by employers as an alternative to job security. (3) Employability of individuals: largely derived from employability being flagged as a concern. Related to this were concerns about the ability of the university sector to provide graduates with the skills employers need, with the consequences of mass expansion of the university sector and linked to perceptions of significant changes in the wider labour markets.

Employability contains different dimensions such as the actual competence of the individual, formal qualifications gained through educational activities, hard technical vocational employability skills, and soft skills, including transferable meta-competence, interpersonal skills (Nilsson, 2010). According to Cox and King (2006), there are two aspects of employability, namely subject skills and transferable skills. Transferable skills refer to certain personal
Employability skills are skills needed for life-long learning and a successful business career (Stoner & Milner, 2010). Employability skills are teachable skills and may be taught in both schools and employment settings. Therefore, the authority should set goals and objectives for teaching employability skills (Nayan, 2010). According to Nayan (2010), employability skills are categorized by the following competency areas: personal values, problem-solving and decision-making skills, relations with other people, communication skills, task-related skills, maturity, health and safety habits, and commitment to job. Wilton (2011) identified the following employability skills for business and management graduates: Written communication; ability to work in teams; research skills; basic computer literacy; spoken communication; problem-solving skills; numeracy skills; management skills; leadership skills; creativity; entrepreneurial skills; and advanced IT or software skills. These employability skills will be the basis for this research.

**METHODOLOGY**

A survey was undertaken to collect data from Administrative Practice students registered at UNISA for the academic year 2011. Throughout the years, UNISA was perhaps the only university in South Africa to have provided all people with access to education, irrespective of race, colour or creed. UNISA is the largest open distance learning institution in Africa and the longest standing dedicated distance education university in the world. UNISA enrolls nearly one third of all South African students. Moreover, UNISA enrolls over 350000 students every year (http://www.unisa.ac.za/Default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=17765). A questionnaire was used to collect data from the students. Open-ended and closed-ended questions were incorporated in the questionnaire. In addition, a Likert Scale was used to establish the extent to which students agree or disagree to different statements of interest. The questionnaire was sent to all students (330) registered for Administrative Practice via e-mail. Students were requested to attach the completed questionnaire to their project and submit them all together. Those who failed to attach the questionnaire to their project scanned and e-mail or faxed the questionnaire to the lecturer. Of the 330 students, only 270 were admitted to the examination allowing them an opportunity to submit their project. Only 97 usable questionnaires were received from the students. This led to a response rate of 35.93%. The internal data reliability was calculated to be 0.857 (Cronbach’ Alpha). This shows that this research is very reliable.
RESULTS

Of the 97 students, 19.6% were male and 80.4% were female. The racial groups were represented as follows: African (69.1%); Asian (3.1%); Coloured (9.3%); and White (18.6%). The students were in the following age groups: 20-29 years (36.1%), 30-39 years (44.3%) and 40 years or older (19.6%). Of the 97 students, 51.5% were single, 43.3% married and 5.2% divorced. Students who were employed before the start of the project were 77.3% and 22.7% had to find a placement.

Only students who were placed in the work environment and completed their portfolio were to return the questionnaire. 38.1% of the students found the placement themselves; 4.1% were assisted by the university to find placement; 3.1% were placed in a family business; 4.1% were employed at the university; and 50.5% got placed in other businesses. Of the 97 students, 56.7% indicated that two months was long enough for the completion of the project whereas 43.3% indicated that it was not.

When asked what the suitable time frame in months should be, 6.2% of the students chose three months; 19.6% chose four months; 1% chose five months; 10.3 chose six months; 2.1% chose seven months; and the remaining 60.8 happy with two months. Students were placed in the following industries: public service (11.3%); transport, storage and communication (8%); educational services (8.2%); agriculture, forestry and fishing (7.2%); financing, insurance, real estate and business services (7.2%); medical, dental, other health and veterinary and business services (7.2%); social and related community services (7.2%); mining and quarrying (5.2%); electricity, gas and water (4.1%); law (3.1%); agencies and other services (3.1%); Food, beverages and tobacco (2.1%); Paper, printing and publishing (2.1%); machinery and related items (2.1%); manufacturing (2.1%); construction (2.1%); retail trade (2.1%); safety and security (1%); office automation (1%); IT services (1%); government agency (1%); equipment programme sector (1%); laundry (1%); commercial and industrial; auditing (1%); wood, wood products and furniture (1%); chemicals, and chemical, rubber and plastic products (1%); catering and accommodation (1%); and long-term insurers (1%).

As it pertain to the project content; 81.4% agreed that the project covers everything about the current administrative practice; 89.6% agreed that the project deals with relevant administrative duties; 90.7% agreed that the project prepares students for the work environment; 82.4% indicated that the project was challenging; 85.6% indicated that the project makes them want to know about the organisation they were place in; 53.6% indicated that the project is relevant to the workplace; 68.1% indicated that the project covers things that are happening in the workplace; and 61.8% indicated that the project should not be changed.
The employability skills identified by Wilton (2011) were used to establish whether the course made the students employable. Students were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree that the course provides them with these skills. Table 1 reveals the agreement to the provision of the employability skills, mean and standard deviation. On average 85% of the students agreed that the course provide them with employability skills. It is worth noting that 96.9% of the students indicated that the course provided them with spoken communication skill. This is followed by basic computer literacy (94.9%) and written communication (90.6). It is also worth noting that Advanced IT or software skills had the lowest students’ agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability skills</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spoken communication</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic computer literacy</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written communication</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving skills</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>86.6</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to work in teams</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>0.978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management skills</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy skills</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.833</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership skills</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial skills</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>72.2</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>0.982</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced IT or software skills</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.083</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Frequency of Agreements to Gaining Employability skills, mean and standard deviation

Table 1 above shows the calculated mean and standard deviation per employability skill. The average mean and standard deviation were calculated to be 4.28 and 0.811 respectively. An average standard deviation of 0.811 indicates that there was less spread of responses to the employability skills. The average mean of 4.28 indicate that most of the students agreed that the course provide them with employability skills.

The following strong positive linear correlations were established: Pearson’s r for written communication and marital status was 0.746. Thus, there was a strong positive linear association between these two variables. Almost all married
and divorced students gained communication skills from the course. There was a strong positive linear association between ability to work in teams and marital status. Pearson’s r for these variables was 0.750. Almost all single and married students gained the ability to work in teams from the course. The Pearson’s r for research skills and marital status was 0.719. Almost all married and divorced students acquired research skills regardless from the course. There was a very strong positive linear relationship between problem solving skills and marital status. The Pearson’s r for these variables was 0.825. The majority of married and divorced students gained problem-solving skills from the course. The Pearson’s r for variables racial group and numeracy skills was 0.936. The majority of coloured and white students acquired numeracy skills from the course. There was a very strong positive linear association between numeracy skills and marital status. The Pearson’s r for these two variables was 0.928. Most married students acquired numeracy skills from the course. The Pearson’s r for the variables management skills and gender was 0.798. A greater percentage of female students gained management skills from the course. There was a strong positive linear association between management skills and age group. The Pearson’s r for these variables was 0.769. A greater percentage of students who were 40 years and older acquired management skills from the course. The Pearson’s r for variables management skills and marital status was 0.791. Most married and divorced students acquired management skills from the course. There was a very strong positive linear relationship between age group and advance IT or software skills. The Pearson’s r for these variables was 0.910. A greater percentage of students in age group 30-39 years acquired management skills from the course.

DISCUSSION

It is the responsibility of educational institutions to implement courses that equip students with employability skills. Educational institutions have concluded that experiential learning courses are the best in equipping students with employability skills. As a result, educational institutions around the world are implementing courses with experiential learning. However, they must ensure that the courses attain that which they are intended to do. This can be done by implementing experiential learning courses and continuous evaluation of these courses. The evaluation of the administrative practice course offered at UNISA reveals that the course covers all the current practices in administrative management. Moreover, the findings reveal that the course exposes students to all administrative management duties. The findings also show that this experiential learning course prepares students for the work environment.

The findings indicate that the majority of the students were female; African; between the age of 30 and 39 years; single; and employed. This confirms the continual trend of fewer men in administrative positions. Most administrative positions in organisations are occupied by women. The findings of this research indicate that the trend is not going to
change anytime soon. Also, there are more Africans interested in administrative management than other races. This also confirms the current trend in the labour market of most administrators being African. Moreover, most students were middle age, single and employed.

The majority of the students indicated that two months in the work environment was enough to complete the project. The majority of the students who indicated that two months was not enough indicated that there is too much to be learned. Some students indicated that workplace mentors are not always available making it difficult for them to complete the project in two months. It is worth noting that most of the students were placed in the public service industry. Therefore educational institution must establish a good relationship with the public services for future students work placement.

When asked if the course offered them employability skills, majority of the students indicated that experiential learning provided them with employability skills. Verbal or spoken communication, basic computer literacy and written communication were on top of the list of employability skills. These three skills are basic requirements for most administrative positions. The findings indicate that experiential learning has a great influence on employability. On average 85% of the students agreed that the course provided them with employability skills. The findings reveal that some students got employed because of the course. This signifies that indeed administrative practice makes students employable.

The findings of the research also reveal that marital status has a significant positive influence on employability skills, namely written communication, ability to work in teams, problem-solving skills, numeracy skills and management skills. The findings indicate that married students tend to acquire more of these skills than students of other marital statuses. The findings also show that age group has a significant positive influence on management skills and advanced IT or software skills. The findings show that students who are 30-39 years acquired advanced IT or software skills whiles students who were 40 years or older acquired management skills. The findings also reveal that coloureds and white students acquired numeracy skills from the course. Moreover, the findings reveal that most female students gained management skills than male students.

**CONCLUSION**

Administrative practice is relevant to the current administrative practice in the work environment. It prepares students for the work environment and exposes them to administrative duties and responsibilities. Although some students
complained about a shorter period at the work place, majority of the students found two months enough to complete their project. Some students got employed because of participating in the course. Moreover, majority of the students indicated that the course provided them with employability skills identified by Wilton (2011).

Marital status has a significant influence in employability skills. Married and divorced students acquired most employability skills than students of other statuses. Therefore, single students must be assisted for them to be able to acquire most employability skills. Also, age has a significant influence on management skills and advanced IT or software skills. Therefore, younger students must be assisted in order for them to gain these skills. Moreover, gender has a significant influence on management skills. Most female students acquired management skills than males.

It is therefore clear from the findings that administrative practice have a positive influence on employability. The findings concur with the current literature that experiential learning provides students with employability skills. Therefore educational institutions must try to incorporate experiential learning in all fields of studies.

This research was only limited to those students who managed to find placement. The response rate was low. A follow up study should be conducted to establish whether those students who were not employed have fund employment. Moreover, a further study should be conducted to establish whether the students who were employed have sustained their employment. A further study should be conducted to establish reasons why students failed to find placement.

REFERENCES


