Towards a work integrated learning partnership model for higher education and industry - a Human Resource Management pilot project

Abstract

According to South Africa’s National Development Plan: Vision for 2030 (SA, 2011a), the aim is to reduce the current unemployment rate in South Africa from 27 percent in 2011 to 6 percent by 2030. Education, training and skills development initiatives, especially at higher education institutions (HEIs), are a key aspect to the success of this endeavour.

The Faculty of Management at the University of Johannesburg aims to create ‘future fit leaders’ so that graduates who enter the workplace are equipped with the required management and leadership skills, attitudes, values and knowledge. Leading from this aim, a work integrated learning (WIL) partnership model is being piloted to bridge the gap between theoretical lectures and practical industry experience for final year Human Resources Management (HRM) Diploma students, whose programme has not previously contained a WIL component.

The WIL partnership model seeks to fast-track industry partner identification, cement such partnerships and allocates individual or groups of students to these approved industry partners for mentoring, work shadowing and project-based workplace learning. The model is intended to
be a viable, cost-effective and practical solution for large numbers of students to gain workplace experience, thus aligning lectures to workplace policy, procedures and practices.

This paper presents an overview of WIL in South African higher education institutions (HEIs), the country’s skills development legislation and the changes in the educational landscape. The pilot model, its various phases, the implementation process and the anticipated impact are presented for discussion.

The aim of this paper is to stimulate discussion on the pilot WIL partnership model as a norm for other HRM qualifications offered by the faculty, as well as in other HEIs. This paper adds value on a strategic, theoretical and practical level. The proposed WIL partnership model promotes the objective of the country’s Vision for 2030 by creating employable graduates who may be absorbed into mainstream employment by some of the industry partners.

Introduction

International trends reveal that work integrated learning (WIL) with examples of industry partnership projects in higher education institutions (HEIs) are on the increase. It is an accepted fact that classroom-based instruction alone does not produce future-fit graduates. The role of WIL or learning for performance is essential in the development of the desired graduate profile. The competency profile of a graduate should include discipline specific knowledge, skills and attitudes, as well as generic cognitive, behavioural and technical skills and attributes (Coll & Zegwaard, 2006; Powell, Tindal & Millwood, 2008; Ishisaka, Farwell, Song, & Uehara, 2004).
In South Africa (SA), WIL or work-based learning is also being increasingly utilised within HEIs. While there are definite academic, personal, career and work ethic benefits, WIL promotes partnerships with business, industry and government to improve economic growth for the country (Matoti, Junqueira & Odora, 2011). Nearly 70% of SA’s population of 50 million people are under the age of 35. Many of these young people are either semi-skilled, unemployed or are in the process of entering the economic sector. Over 11 million employment opportunities are required to reduce South Africa’s unemployment rate from 27 percent in 2011 to 6 percent by 2030 (SA, 2011a). With the latest official unemployment rate of 25.2% (Stats SA, May 2012) education, training and skills development is high on the national agenda.

The higher education landscape in SA has changed radically since 2004, creating the University of Johannesburg (UJ) through a merger process in 2005. The University supports a ‘learning to be’ teaching and learning strategy, particularly embraced by the Faculty of Management that aims to produce ‘future fit leaders’ of all its graduates. Within this faculty, the department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) offers a variety of qualifications in the Human Resources Management (HRM) programme, from Diploma to postgraduate Doctorates. In order to bridge the gap between theoretical lectures and practical industry experience for all students, ideally, a WIL component is required for all qualifications, which is currently not in place. This discussion paper presents a proposed WIL partnership model for pilot implementation in the HRM Diploma qualification. The model aims to ensure that graduates who enter the workplace are equipped with the basic HRM skills, attitudes, values and knowledge and
are ready for easy transition into a formal workplace as HR Practitioners and Professionals (De Vos, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to introduce the WIL partnership model that may become the norm for other qualifications offered by the Faculty, as well as in other HEIs. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this WIL model will directly impact South Africa’s Vision for 2030 by reducing unemployment through increasing the graduate chances of employability, with the added benefit that some graduates may be absorbed into mainstream employment within some of the industry partners.

As background to the model design, an overview of work integrated learning, education in South African HEIs, the country’s skills development legislation and the changes in the education landscape are investigated and presented below. Thereafter, the proposed WIL partnership model, its various phases, the implementation process and its anticipated impact are presented for discussion.

**Work integrated learning (WIL): a theoretical framework based on experiential education**

The beginnings of experiential education may be attributed to Confucius (450 BC), who said “Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.” Since this time, various theories/theoretical frameworks have evolved, concepts have been formulated and various terms have been coined in the field of experiential education.
A snapshot of some of the main experiential education theoretical frameworks are: Dewey’s formula: Experience + Reflection = Learning (Dewey, 1938); David Kolb’s (with Roger Fry) experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984); the action research model developed by Kurt Lewin, who is seen as the ‘father’ of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) the model of reflective enquiry and observation as proposed by John Dewey, David Boud and Donald Schön (Schön, 1983); and more recently the CLARION model to highlight the role of implicit and explicit learning (Sun & Zhang, 2004; Sun, Zhang, Slusarz & Mathews, 2007).

Experiential learning or WIL involves the placement of students into workplace settings to move individuals from being just students to becoming novice professionals. Work placements are accepted as part of academic curricula in the rapidly changing practice-orientated HEI landscape that is different to traditional courses. Significant theoretical questions arise from WIL curricula such as: how do students make sense of work experiences; how to turn work procedural learning into assessment forms; is self-regulation and self-authorship promoted by portfolio assessment? (Bates, 2003; Meeus, Looy & Libotton, 2004).

SA’s Higher Education Quality Council defines WIL as:

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is the component of a learning programme that focuses on the application of learning in an authentic learning workplace context under the supervision and/or mentorship of a person/s representing the workplace. It addresses specific competencies identified for the acquisition of a qualification that make the learner employable and assists in the development of related personal attributes. Workplace/service employees and professional bodies are involved in the assessment of
the learning experience, together with University academic employees (Higher Education Quality Committee, 2004).

The Council for Higher Education publication Work-Integrated Learning: Good Practice Guide (2011: 16-21) outlines four main curricular modalities for programmes, especially new models in SA that align workplace experience (practical) and academic interests (theory) as follows: work-directed theoretical learning (WDTL); problem-based learning (PBL); project-based learning (PjBL); and workplace learning (WPL). The latter, WPL, is commonly referred to as WIL in the South African context (SATN, 2008).

The higher education landscape and legislation in SA

The higher education landscape in SA has undergone many changes, specifically since 2004, with the merger of several of the public HEIs. In 2009, the 25 HEIs, the 50 public Further Education and Training colleges (in addition to numerous private training providers) and the 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were placed under a newly formed Ministry of Higher Education and Training (SA, 2009), consolidating the post school education and training sector under one government ministry.

The SETAs that had been established with the introduction of the skills development legislation in 1998 to disburse skills levy funds to organisations and promote workplace training within specific economic sectors of SA, were previously located with the Department of Labour. In a significant shifting of the SA education, training and skills development landscape, higher
education and skills development were merged into a single ministry, further signalling the country’s commitment to economic, human resources and national development.

In 2007, SA’s eight-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF) structure was modified to become a ten-level Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF). This revised qualifications framework necessitates re-evaluation and redesign of programmes to align with the new framework (SA, 2007). One of the recurriculation objectives is to ensure that revised qualifications allow graduates to meet the world of work expectations, thus improving employability. The changing SA landscape, especially that of higher education, provides a conducive climate to introduce and pilot a workplace learning innovation with the HRM Diploma, third year students.

**Labour and skills development in SA**

A key aspect of the National Development Plan (SA, 2011a) is sustainable development for SA, with government, business and civil society initiatives to improve the lives of all South Africans. This, together with other recent skills development and human resource legislation promulgated, such as the National Skills Development Strategy III (2011c), the National Skills Accord (2011b), the Skills Development Amendment Bill (2011d) and the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2012) gave impetus to this proposed model. A recurring theme across the legislation is the concept of academic and industry partnerships, specifically the triple helix partnerships: education, government and industry.
SA is known for its stringent labour laws. The stipulations of the Labour Relations Act (SA, 1995) makes a dismissal process costly as well as lengthy, making it imperative that organisations hire the right staff. The model proposed takes cognisance of this important aspect and will afford organisations an opportunity to evaluate a student in the actual workplace for a time period, rather than simply making a hiring decision based on an interview process.

**Proposed WIL Partnership Model**

This conceptual paper proposes a theoretical WIL partnership model designed to develop a partner company base (one which currently does not exist for the HRD programme) and to allocate students to approved partner organisations for mentoring, work shadowing and project-based workplace learning. The model entails a viable, cost-effective and practical solution for large numbers of students to gain workplace experience, thus bridging the gap between the lecture hall and workplace practices. A key feature of the WIL partnership model is the establishment of an extensive industry partner base for innovative student placement in the marketplace so that there is maximum benefit for student, industry and training provider. To streamline the placement of the many students in the programme (150+) the ultimate aim of the model is to allocate groups of students (7-10) to a pool of approved companies with whom a memorandum of agreement in this regard will be concluded. These partner companies would then also be invited to make presentations on HR relevant topics to the total group of students, thus further promoting their company as an employer of choice to the student cohort.
The WIL partnership model is a framework consisting of five phases implemented over a period of 10-12 months as follows: design, develop and approval; preparation; implementation; evaluation; and review phases. Each phase has 4-5 processes that require essential resources.

Phase 1: Design, development and approval of the WIL model, involves the following five processes: adopt or design the WIL model; identify students and industry partners; consult with stakeholders for approval, support and review; develop the supporting documentation and communicate the details of the WIL project plan. The essential resources required for Phase 1 include a WIL project team; students and industry partners; faculty committees, departmental teams, members and lecturer; and communication information such as learning guides with specific outcomes (SOs), assessment criteria (ACs), time span of WIL component and weighting of marks, as well as letters of introduction to the company, pro forma Memorandums of Understanding and a PowerPoint presentations.

Phase 2: Preparation to implement the WIL model, considers the following four processes: conduct awareness and information sessions to prepare the stakeholders for the WIL project; distribute WIL information packs; prepare students for entry into the workplace and finalise the industry partnership base. The essential resources required for Phase 2 are: selected students; relevant lecturer; WIL project team; academic support services for students; selected industry partners; information packs of memos, letters, brochures, portfolio of evidence (PoE) criteria and relevant forms.; pre-planned workplace readiness workshops to empower students on job search, CV writing, interview skills, dress code, business etiquette and the necessity of acquiring tax numbers and bank accounts.
Phase 3 of the WIL partnership model is the implementation phase. It incorporates the aspects indicated below: confirmation of placement list; indemnity and risk management; support base for students and partners communicated; tracking and feedback from students and supervisors. The resources required for Phase 3 are: signed letters from industry partners (supervisor/ mentor) per student; established data base of industry partners; indemnity forms and safety insurance for HEI and industry partners; structured PoE with progress reports, attendance and performance tasks, challenges experienced, competencies displayed and employability growth reflections in PoE/ reflective reports.

Phase 4: Evaluation of the WIL model requires the processes of gaining feedback from the lecturer; student; industry partners; and evaluation, recognition and appreciation of the industry partners and stakeholders. The essential resources required during this phase are lecturer assessment ratings of student POEs as per the assessment criteria; quantitative and qualitative research data from students and industry partners; the hosting of award ceremonies to acknowledge the participating industry partners and other stakeholders.

Phase 5 of the proposed WIL partnership model, the review phase, concludes the framework with processes that focus on questions and solutions for improving the model design as follows: what worked; what did not work; what should change; and how best to revise and improve the model. The essential resources for this phase are: WIL project team report on the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats of the WIL partnership model; risk management strategies; stakeholder consultation; and an improved WIL partnership model.
Implications for WIL Partnership Model

This paper reports on exploratory, theoretical research towards the development of a WIL partnership model involving approved industry partners who will mentor students they have selected to gain experiential, practical workplace learning to complement classroom lectures. The model proposes that all students undergo work preparedness lectures to empower them with winning CV and interview skills. Learning guides, letters, memoranda, forms and documents form the basis of the communication strategy to stakeholders. Surveys prior to and after the implementation phase will be introduced to measure the impact of the WIL model. The aim of the model is to promote HEI and industry partnerships to make a difference in the employability of graduates that exit HEI qualifications.

In the pilot phase, students will spend 40 hours (one week) in the workplace during a university recess to experience the practical implications of their theoretical knowledge, thereby enhancing and broadening it. The WIL partnership model anticipates that students will develop in their field of study with the potential for absorption into the workplace after graduation. Simultaneously, industry partners are able to evaluate potential employees when students interact with them during the WIL placement opportunity. Furthermore, the HEI, faculty, department and WIL project team members gain the benefits of meeting national and international obligations for integrating theory and practice in learning programmes. Inviting industry into the classroom and creating an opportunity for lecturers to interact with current workplace practices can only improve learning programmes. The development of a sustainable approved set of industry
partners is a crucial aspect of this model, given that once it has been integrated into the HRM programme, it will be a compulsory component with attached credit values. Companies will be approved according to the university’s guidelines, the WIL will be integrated into the curriculum thus making it unnecessary to utilise the recess period and companies may well provide stipends to the students, which is not an expectation in the pilot phase. A costing for the WIL model will be prepared to assist in the budgeting process, to ensure that all the partnership building, documentation and feedback mechanisms are enabled.

**Conclusion**

Partnership development and utilizing work integrated learning as a means not only to entrench concepts taught in the classroom but also for gaining both work experience and entrance into a permanent workplace is a key imperative for the WIL partnership model proposed. This paper invites discussion of the proposed WIL partnership model that will be piloted with the HRM Diploma third year students in the IPPM department of the Faculty of Management within the University of Johannesburg. It is recommended that rigorous research be undertaken to measure the impact of the proposed WIL partnership model in the pilot project. It is hoped that this model (together with the developed support material) may be replicated, thus opening doors for other programmes to introduce WIL components. Thus, education and industry working in partnership to close the skills gap and to effect drop in the unemployment rate.

**References**


* Cognitive systems research 5, 63-89.*