Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training

Abstract

Historically there has been a distinct divide between education and training at the tertiary level. However, the impact of globalization and the paradigm shift toward knowledge-based economies have resulted in many first world countries adopting national policies which have sought to link both education and training at the tertiary level. Consequently, the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) has adopted an institutional Co-operative Education (Co-op Ed) framework which solidifies UTech’s resolve to equip its graduates with higher employability skill-sets required by a dynamic labour market in order for them to function effectively and efficiently in a globally competitive environment. The purpose of the paper is to evaluate the quality of UTech’s Co-op Ed programme and the extent to which the Programme is effective in bridging the gap between education and training. The ACCI/BCA (2002) Employability Skills Framework was used as a point of reference. The paper utilizes student and employer questionnaires, case study, interviews and a review of related literature for data-gathering purposes. The findings support other research which posit that properly planned and implemented Co-op Ed programmes are generally effective. Additionally, the findings reveal several areas of extended partnerships and recruitment models evolving from the Co-op Ed engagements. The paper ultimately illustrates that UTech is an innovator in Jamaica and is answering the call for higher education to narrow the gap between education and training,

Key words: education and training, employability skills, Co-operative Education, industry partnerships, work- integrated learning
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**Introduction**

According to The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD], 1996), the historical divide between education and training at the tertiary level has shown signs of disintegration for the economic good of all stakeholders. The operational definition being employed to education in this paper is the formal curriculum which is theoretically based, with emphasis on acquiring declarative knowledge. Whereas, training is defined as students honing employability skills usually under the supervision of a professional at the workplace and which is directly related to their course of study.

The impact of globalization and the resultant paradigm shift toward knowledge-based economies were key factors behind the call to redefine the relationship between education and (vocational) training (OECD, 1996; Richardson, 2009). The result of this has been national policy changes in this regard (Felce, 2011). According to the OECD, in the globalised setting, economic prowess is determined by a country’s ability to combine four kinds of knowledge with technology, that is the know-what, -why, -how and -who. It further postulated that while the know-what and know-why can be obtained through traditional tertiary education, the know-how and know-who, are rooted primarily in practical experiences to be gained in workplace settings. It further encouraged increased collaborations between university and industry for advanced skills training. In other words, vocational/skills training must be infused in all curricula at the tertiary level.

The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech), founded in 1958 as the Jamaica Institute of Technology, is recognized as the first institution among universities and colleges in Jamaica to embrace in a holistic way, a work integrated learning approach (integrating education and training) to tertiary level education. In fact, Murthy and Oliver documented the various
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training forms of linkages existing among UTech, local and international agencies and industry, to promote training programmes as a part of the curricula (Murthy & Oliver, 1985). At the turn of the century, UTech sought to further embrace Co-op Ed by adopting an institutional framework supported by guidelines from the Accreditation Council for Co-operative Education (n.d).

To date, UTech has integrated a Co-op Ed component, which is normally a mandatory credit bearing module, in more than 50% of its formal curricula. Importantly, this number excludes a further 25% of other practical scheme types existing in the University that have been removed from the scope of Co-op Ed on the basis that work experience gained in the respective courses of study is in keeping with the requirements for professional certification in associated industries. Participation in the Co-op Ed programme generally occurs at the end of students’ second through to fourth years and may last between 4 and 30 weeks, depending on the course requirements. Students are generally evaluated by the on-site supervisor and a School Co-ordinator who conducts at least one site visit. There may also be joint evaluation of students and Co-op Ed facilities by the School’s Co-ordinator along with the University’s Co-op Ed Co-ordinator. Additionally, the University’s Co-ordinator conducts independent visits in order to carry out annual quality assurance audits of the Programme. It should be noted that while students are placed for the most part by the University, students do have the option of initiating their own placements.

This paper (1) evaluates the quality of UTech’s Co-op Ed programme and its effectiveness in bridging the gap between education and training within the Jamaican culture context and; (2) discusses the peculiarities of the Co-op Ed programme that create further synergies with industry. To this end, the following research questions were formulated to guide the paper:
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a. How efficient are the current Co-op Ed systems in fulfilling the objectives the programme?
b. To what extent do students develop/ hone higher employability skills?
c. What training opportunities have been derived from the programme?

**Methodology**

A qualitative research paradigm was chosen because it provides the researchers, through words and observations, with detailed descriptions of phenomena, addresses questions that may have received little attention, and suggests new insights and understanding (Zikmund, 2000). For this paper, the researchers sought to examine the perceptions of supervisors and interns and observe interpersonal relationships within organizational settings. The quantitative approach allowed for simple statistical analysis that served to provide a numerical perspective on the observations of materials and characteristics of the study.

The first two research questions employed the use of student and employer questionnaires and interviews for data gathering purposes, while a case study approach and interviews were used to gather data for research question number three. The questionnaires were administered by the University’s Co-ordinator over a six month period at the time of site visit, close to the completion of the placement period.

Questionnaires were administered to 65 students using the purposive sampling method. This technique was utilized in order to capture at least 10 students from each of the six Schools participating in the Co-op Ed programme. Students were selected irrespective of whether they were participating for 4 or 30 weeks or in the second, third or fourth years of their course of study. The student survey instrument consisted of 19 questions divided into two sections. The first section consisted of questions which served to rate student experiences using a five point Likert Scale, while the second section comprised open-ended questions and allowed students to
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training be more expressive regarding the nature of their experience. Questions in Section B provided the bases for the student interviews with the University’s Co-ordinator. The employer questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section consisted of 23 questions which rated the employability skill-sets of students; the second section comprised seven closed-ended questions, rating the overall quality of the Co-op Ed programme and two open-ended questions which formed the bases of the supervisor interviews with the University’s Co-ordinator.

The number of students visited/surveyed by the University’s Co-ordinator represented 10% of the population participating in the Co-op Ed programme during the academic year 2009/10. At each site visit, supervisors (who were normally middle managers) were first interviewed usually in their offices or at the boardroom. At these sessions supervisors were asked to elaborate on major duties that were assigned to each intern, their progress and performance, quality of experience, the extent to which the organization’s needs were being met and general concern/recommendations. Concurrently, students were asked to complete their questionnaires. Subsequently, the Co-ordinator met with the students to discuss their experiences and at this time clarification was sought on questions with unfavourable comments or noted areas of concern. These discussions occurred mainly in the students’ work areas or in the boardrooms.

These individual encounters with supervisors and interns allowed the researcher to explore meanings and motives, and led to a better understanding of circumstances and situations that may be unique to particular areas of specialization or industry, as well as, address the research topic of quality of the Co-op Ed programme and its effectiveness in bridging the gap between education and training. To support the validity of the findings, the researchers used multiple data sources in order to establish common themes. According to Leedy and Ormrod
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training (2005), validity in qualitative research may be established using triangulation, detailed descriptions of the process, use of secondary sources of information, as well as, respondent validation. The researchers sought to establish validity of the study at the onset of the research process by using real life settings, a representative sample, providing details of situations to facilitate replication in a different context, as well as, respondent validation.

**Paper Results and Discussion**

The research questions were used to guide the presentation of findings.

*How efficient are the current Co-op Ed systems in fulfilling the objectives of the programme?*

This question addressed the quality of UTech’s Co-op Ed programme. The operational definition employed to *quality* is the degree of efficiency achieved by the systems designed to fulfill the objectives of the Programme.

The objectives of UTech’s Co-op Ed programme is articulated in its mission statement which is to (a) provide students with opportunities to acquire higher employability skill-sets through professional exposure in real work settings and (b) provide industry with graduates who demonstrate the skill-sets required to function effectively and efficiently in a globally competitive environment.

This research, while acknowledging that there are several systems that drive the University’s Co-op Ed programme, will focus on the efficiency of the communication and documentation systems, as perceived by both employers and students.

*Student Perception*

According to Eakins (as cited in McDermott, 2008), “The partnership and communication between the educational institution, students and employers must be strongly established, so that the context of the workplace and the opportunities that it provides for the
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training student learning are clearly understood by all parties” (p.103). Other studies have endorsed this viewpoint and so it is commonly accepted that students measure the quality of the Co-op Ed experience against the support received from both School and workplace. Table 1 identifies students’ responses to the quality indicators on their survey instrument.

Table 1

Students’ responses to quality indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicators</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The objectives set by UTech for placements are met</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My supervisor discussed rules of company with me</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My supervisor provides regular feedback</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am given the opportunity to use my initiative</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am comfortable speaking with my supervisor</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I am comfortable with my work colleagues I am seen as a team player</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I am given the tools to carry out my duties</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. The experience has been enriching</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I believe the programme is preparing me for fulltime employment</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. I have acquired at least two new skills during my time at the company</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. My tasks provide adequate challenge</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I would definitely be intrigued to gain permanent employment</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Employees in the company value my contribution</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N= 65

The researchers’ findings indicate that students were very satisfied with the quality of the programme. Ninety-four percent concurred that the experience was quite enriching and prepared
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training them for fulltime employment; while 92% of the respondents believed that the objectives of the programme as articulated by the University were being met. All other quality indicators excepting number 12 scored in excess of 80% in favour of the programme.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported that they would welcome the opportunity to gain permanent employment in the organisation to which they were assigned. This response was mainly influenced by the fact that they had not received any form of stipend. In addition, the students also reported that their own investigations revealed that these companies did not offer competitive salaries to their employees.

The students who were decisively negative were those who felt that the respective companies were not prepared to accommodate interns based on factors such as poor supervision by site supervisors, lack of integration into companies, unavailability of work tools and poorly planned work schedules. In fact, 20% of the students postulated that it was the University’s responsibility, not only to send the pertinent documentation regarding the programme, but to visit much closer to the start of the placement (and more regularly) to ensure that objectives of the programme were clear and that students were assigned to supervisors and areas that would provide most relevant experiences.

Common recommendations made by students, which were detailed in the interviews, were increasing the placement duration in some Co-op Ed modules and increasing communication while students are on placements. These recommendations whilst being specific to some modules are relevant to the overall programme since they would contribute to optimizing the Co-op Ed experience for all parties.

Employer Perception

Coll and Chapman (2000) posited that retention of employers in a Co-op Ed programme is associated with their perceived satisfaction of the quality of service provided by the education
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training institution with respect to student selection, communication between School and student and School and employer, as well as employer benefits. Empirical evidence provided by McDermott (2008) and Alderman and Milne (2005) also support the view that proper systems of communication and documentation were essential to the quality of a Co-op Ed programme.

Researchers’ findings revealed that UTech’s Co-op Ed employers were generally positive in their impressions regarding the quality of the programme. See Tables 2a and 2b.

Table 2a
Employers’ response to quality indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicator</th>
<th>Above Expectation</th>
<th>Meets Expectation</th>
<th>Below Expectation</th>
<th>Far below expectation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The value students add to the organisation</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N= 39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2b
Employers’ response to quality indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Indicators</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The duration of the placement period is adequate for mutually beneficial outcomes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation regarding my role as supervisor was adequate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The students were aware of the specific learning outcomes to be achieved through placement</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am fully aware of the specific learning outcomes to be achieved by the students I supervise</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Seventy-seven percent of the site supervisors stated that the value students added to the organization met their expectations, while 15% indicated that the students’ contribution had surpassed their expectations. Eight percent stated that students’ performance/value fell below their expectations. The fact that expectations were met and surpassed was an indication by employers that students are being properly orientated regarding performance expectations at the workplace and therefore come to the organization with a seriousness of purpose and zeal. It was also an indication that students generally value the experience gained from the Programme, and this is substantiated by their own responses to the statements “The experience has been enriching” and “Employees in the company value my contribution”. (Table 1)

Employers were also generally satisfied with respect to UTech’s documentation of expectations. Over 75% of site supervisors expressed some level of agreement that documentation regarding their role and the learning outcomes to be achieved by students were adequate. Furthermore, they recognised that students were cognisant of their own learning outcomes, concluding that these were communicated by the University to students.

Forty-six percent of the site supervisors had varying levels of concern regarding the duration of the placement. It was felt that the University needed to review the Co-op Ed modules lasting 4-6 weeks, to determine whether the learning outcomes are being sufficiently met. Students also expressed the concern that the 4-6 weeks placement duration was inadequate for achieving some learning outcomes. Despite these inadequacies in the Co-op Ed systems, both employers and students believe that the objectives of the programme are being reasonably met. Furthermore, employers have expressed commitment to its continuity.
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To what extent do students develop/hone higher employability skills?

This research question sought to measure the effectiveness of the Co-op Ed programme by assessing the extent to which students were able to develop or hone their employability skills. The operational definition being applied to effectiveness is the extent to which the expectations of the programme are being met. In order to elucidate this question seven of the eight critical employability skills as set out using the ACCI/BCA Employability Framework (Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson, 2006) were considered. These were Communication, Teamwork, Problem-solving, Initiative and Enterprise, Planning and Organizing, Self-management and Learning. Table 3 summarizes the findings related to the seven critical employability skills considered.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability Skill</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative and Enterprise</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organizing</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self management</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Cleary et. al (2006) communication refers to speaking, listening, reading and or writing; it is considered central to all work practices and ‘takes many forms to contribute to successful work outcomes.’ For the organization communication may include creating documents, reading and interpreting documentation, oral communication, information communication technology, language and numeracy (Cleary et. al, 2006). While the survey instrument did not detail what constituted communication, feedback from students as to the
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major duties performed captured areas such as: update policies and procedures manual, make presentations, develop databases, write reports and use of appropriate software to capture data, etc. The outcomes reported by site supervisors indicate that 28% of interns demonstrated excellent communication skills. Good communication skills were demonstrated by 56% of interns and for 15%, their communication skills were considered to be fair. While it is recognized that communication has ‘many layers and levels of complexity’ (Cleary et. al, 2006), nonetheless, the findings suggest an acceptable level of competency of interns.

Teamwork was operationalized as recognizing the importance of relationships with others in the workplace. This study identified: supporting team members, contributing to positive team dynamics, understanding one’s relationship and accountability to other team members and working autonomously in the interest of shared team goals and objectives as critical teamwork skills that employees need to develop. The results of the data analysis underlie the importance of teamwork. Supervisors reported that 33% of students displayed excellent teamwork, while 51% displayed good teamwork skills. The contributing factors included: understand goals of the institution, functions as a team player, dependability/reliability and interpersonal skills. Thus, these findings indicate that students are indeed honing this employability skill that according to the framework ‘contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes’ (Cleary et. al, 2006). However, it should be noted that 16% were considered fair and therefore additional work is required to develop this skill.

A simple approach to operationalizing problem-solving was, the ability to see that something is wrong and fixing it. According to the Framework, problem-solving may be identified/used in organizations in contingency situations, by the use of trouble shooting equipment, providing customer service, for planning strategy and resource allocation, for
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training continuous improvement processes and for research. Higher levels of problem-solving would be expected of persons operating at the higher levels within the organizations. Only 20% of the students displayed excellent problem-solving skills while 46% received were rated as good. Thirty-three percent received a fair rating. The researchers’ findings revealed that while students performed creditably overall, there was room for improvement in this area.

The Framework defines initiative and enterprise as employees’ ability to achieve work-related outcomes without close and detailed supervision (Cleary et. al, 2006). It related to: change management, identifying opportunities, reflecting on one’s practice for improvement, engaging colleagues and adapting to new situations. The findings revealed performance levels of 32% excellent, 50% good and 18% fair in this skill set. Given that employees who demonstrate initiative are more likely to be considered for promotion and offered opportunities for career advancement, these findings suggest that generally, UTech interns are very advanced in the development and honing of this employability skill.

Planning and Organization is defined by the Framework as ‘an individual’s ability to manage the tasks and timelines which define their work roles.’ Several factors serve to influence the extent to which one plans and organizes on the job. These include time management, the degree of scrutiny, and scheduling. Considering these and other factors, 52% of the respondents rated the students as being good. Additionally, 23% thought their performance was excellent; and at the same time 23% of respondents felt that students’ performance were fair. It must be noted that this employability skill area ‘benefits the most from on-the-job experience’ (Cleary et. al, 2006). Hence, the overall performance under this category gives a good impression of the extent to which skills are developed on the job and effectiveness of the work integrated learning approaches.
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Self management is defined as ‘an individual’s ability to manage themselves in relation to the outcomes expected of their work role.’ Unlike conventional approaches to management, which viewed employees as inherently lazy and requiring a coercive relationship between managers and subordinates, modern management styles take a transformational approach to leadership, which places a significant amount of responsibilities on subordinates (Sarros, 2001). Self management is therefore critical to the effective performance of one’s duties on the job.

Most of the respondents (49%) saw students as possessing a ‘good’ level of self management skill while 33% felt that students’ self management skill was excellent. This clearly represents a major strength in the interns and by extension the Co-op Ed programme and its success in bridging the gap between education and training.

The research sought to gauge the extent to which students learn on the job. Learning, in this context, emphasizes the ‘importance of using work experiences to extend and develop new skills’ (Cleary et. al, 2006). 49% of the respondents thought that this skill had been developed in the students to a ‘good’ extent, 26% to an ‘excellent’ extent and 25% to a ‘fair’ extent. The feedback seems to suggest that students had either developed new skills on the job and were able to apply those skills in the execution of their tasks or were able to use the skills already learnt to perform effectively in the workplace.

It is instructive that the UTech Co-Ed programme, as an academic framework, has demonstrated how employability skills can be and are integrated into the workplace framework as indicated by the satisfaction of employers with the UTech interns. The results suggest that UTech has been able to contextualize teaching and learning thereby making significant progress in bridging the gap between education and training.
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*What training opportunities have been derived from the programme?*

The Co-op Ed programme has certain peculiarities that make it advantageous for specialized recruitment selection. Consequently, several international employers in recent times have been able to use UTech’s Co-op Ed programme to satisfy specialized recruitment needs. Three (3) scenarios are cited and discussed. The companies involved will be referred to as ‘X’, ‘Y’ and ‘Z’.

The first, Company ‘X’, is an international manufacturing firm with a strong Caribbean presence. The organization possesses several unique production capabilities locally and to some extent regionally (within the Caribbean). The company is working towards employing local/regional persons to fill principal management positions; the Director of Operations was one such post that is still being held by expatriates. This position required skill-sets unique to the nature of the firm’s production operations. Further, it was felt that certain key performance criteria could only be observed while on the job and therefore, two students in the UTech Co-op Ed programme were selected to underfill the position. The company cited the structure of the programme with its work integrated learning approach as the basis for this successful partnership.

The second, Company ‘Y’, is an international electronics manufacturing firm with a Caribbean branch outside of Jamaica. Company ‘Y’ sought to partner with UTech, given its track record in the provision of qualified engineers to the Caribbean market via its Co-op Ed programme. While initial screening was conducted based on current academic standings or performance, other soft skills were desired and these would require closer engagement with candidates before a final selection. A short list was generated from which the prime students were selected. The students spent the summer prior to final year as interns at Company ‘Y’ and
Using a Co-operative Education Programme to bridge the gap between education and training then successful students who were considered ‘best fit’ were selected and placed in a specialized set of studies developed collaboratively between Company ‘Y’ and UTech. This tailored programme served to prepare a pool of candidates from which the company selects engineers for permanent employment.

The third Company ‘Z’, an international company with a strong regional presence, operates principally in the Information and Communications Technology sector. The company engages the University’s Co-op Ed students in a unique modality. Students are employed from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. daily and report for classes from 3:00 to 9:00 p.m. This is for the duration of one academic year. Pending satisfactory performance on the job, the students are considered for fulltime employment.

These three cases highlight the fact that corporate world has adopted new approaches to the recruitment of candidates with specialized leadership qualities and that Co-op Ed provides an appropriate context to facilitate such approaches. Conventional theories of leadership assumed leadership qualities were natural tendencies or could be determined from ones behavior. Modern theories suggest that the quality of leadership is contingent on one’s environment. In other words, it depends on the situation (Mullins, 2010 and Van Seters & Field, 1990). Co-op Ed provides an environment that afford employers the opportunity to evaluate the performance of potential candidates while performing related duties. Key competencies or areas of weakness can be determined and addressed. Within this context there is therefore a greater degree of accuracy in predicting the performance of the most suitable candidate for the given situation.

Paper conclusion
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The Co-op Ed Programme at the University of Technology, Jamaica has proven effective in narrowing the age old gap between education and training at the tertiary level, while presenting specialized recruitment opportunities. Further, the results indicate the importance of communication among all stakeholders and the on-going evaluation of students’ employability skills as critical success factors for any Co-op Ed programme. The results also speak to the impact of placement duration on the success of the programme in transferring relevant employability skills.

Amongst the recommendations arising from the study is the University’s need to adopt measures that will ensure that the level of supervision given by site supervisors is standardized. Outside of the documentation accompanying students, the University should consider organizing training workshops and expanding the Co-op Ed support base. Furthermore, as postulated by Mulcahy (1999) much thought must be given to the availability of sufficient work placements, assessing their suitability, allocating students, monitoring their progress and providing follow-up to ensure the sustainability of the programme.

Future research could include longitudinal studies with a wider student and employer population to (a) capture the career progression of students who participated in a Co-op Ed programme and; (b) as a means of further validating this work and for long-term strategic planning.
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