Perceptions of 3\(^{rd}\) year Library and Information Studies students regarding host institutions during their work integrated learning program

Research Paper

Abstract

The Library and Information Studies Program (LIS) within the Department of Corporate Management and Technology at the Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa has a compulsory work integrated learning component for students who are studying towards the National Diploma qualification. WIL in the LIS Program is spread over two years and provides the students with an opportunity of bridging the gap between theory and practice by engaging in real life situations within the library and information providing agencies. This paper will present third year students’ perceptions regarding their host institutions during their work integrated program and also highlight key findings of the study. Third year students have been chosen because the author is the third year WIL coordinator.

Keywords: work integrated learning, perceptions of library and information studies students, South Africa

Introduction

South African higher education institutions previously consisted of colleges, later renamed universities, and technical colleges, which were later upgraded to Colleges of Advanced Technical Education (CATEs). CATEs were eventually renamed technikons (Kraak, 2006). Technikons provided “skilled personnel to meet the intermediate skill needs of the national economy” (Kraak, 2006, p.135). This was possible because technikons offered curricula at National Certificate and National Diploma levels.

Following the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, dramatic changes were initiated in the country, and these included changes in the higher education sector. During this period South Africa needed “a single, nationally coordinated system” for higher education (Kraak, 2006, p.138). After many policies were formulated (e.g. National Plan for Higher Education),
discussions around technikons and universities arose, leading to mergers in higher education to reduce the number of higher education institutions. Thus technikons merged with each other (such as the former ML Sultan Technikon and Natal Technikon) or with universities to form comprehensive universities (for example the University of South Africa merging with Technikon South Africa), and a number of universities merged to become traditional universities (e.g. Natal University and the University of Durban-Westville).

Prior to 1993, technikons were not allowed to offer degrees and were restricted to diploma programs; degrees were only offered at universities. The Technikon Act of 1993 allowed technikons to award degrees, specifically Bachelors degrees, and Masters and Doctoral degrees Winberg (2005). Because technikons were increasing their degree offerings, the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP) requested a change in status to universities of technology (National Plan for Higher Education, 2001:53). The CTP argued that: “Technikons were seen as inferior to universities; membership to international associations was denied” (Kraak, 2006, p.145). Technikons were officially changed to UoT’s by the Ministry of Education in October 2003.

Originally, technikons provided students with an opportunity to “enter the job running”. This was possible because most technikon programmes had an element of cooperative education (co-op), in other words “an apprenticeship, usually in a company for a period of up to one year” (Winberg, 2005, p.192). Du Pre (2009) confirms that experiential learning (or work integrated learning) was regarded as one of the key strengths of technikons.

Du Pré et al (2001:3), as cited by (Winberg, 2005, p.197), state the strong position of technikons with regard to work integrated learning thus:
“Technikons have acknowledged and valued experiential learning; and have understood that students develop important knowledge and skills in workplaces. There are many good reasons to maintain experiential learning in the new universities of technology...”.

Interestingly, UoTs have carried with the strong position of work integrated learning within their academic programs.

**Context of the research**

The Department of Information and Corporate Management came to being through a merger of two Programs, namely the Office Management and Technology Program (OMT) and the Library and Information Studies Program (LIS). The context of this paper will be based on the LIS Program only because the author is a lecturer in the LIS Program and is also the third year WIL coordinator. The objective of the Library and Information Studies Program is to “prepare diplomats to become prospective members of the library and information industry (WIL Third Year Manual, 2010). The LIS program combines academic and work integrated learning program to provide relevant knowledge and experiences for students to develop the attitudes and skills needed for employment in a wide range of information supplying agencies. The program provides diplomats with a para-professional status and prepares students to occupy support positions in the library and information industry. The LIS program is a three-year full time program and the academic program consists of fifteen subject offerings and a strong work integrated learning program with placement in industry at the second and third year levels of study.

**The work integrated learning program in the library and information studies program**
Library and information studies students are required to complete six weeks of WIL in a public library of their chose. Students are required to send at least four host placements requirements and a second year WIL coordinator (who is a lecturer) is responsible for placing students into host institutions. In the third year of study, students are required to do WIL in special or academic libraries of their chose. At the beginning of each academic year, students submit to the third year WIL coordinator (the author of the paper) a list of three places that students would like to be placed for their WIL placements.

Within the third year curriculum, students are advantaged because there is subject solely for the purposes of preparing students for WIL. The Library and Information Professional Practice 3 (LIPP3), is a credit bearing subject and carries a weighting of 100%. During the course of the academic year, i.e. between February and June, students attend lectures within LIPP3 in order to make sure that they are adequately and effectively prepared for the world of work. LIPP3 has three lecture periods per week and these are used for WIL preparation. A variety of teaching methods are employed to assist students, for example, role plays, oral presentations, seminar discussions and where possible, practitioners within the library and information sector are invited to share their skills and knowledge with the students. Students go for WIL between June and August. On their return, students do oral presentations to lecturers and students of the program. The oral presentations provide students with the opportunity of sharing their work experience and the presentation are assessed carrying a weighting of 25% towards the final mark. After the presentations, students are required to submit a written report that is based on the reflections regarding their host institutions. The reports are assessed by lecturers and they carry a weighting of 25% which contributes to their final mark.
In all the years that the LIS program has been in existence, no study of this nature has been conducted and it is for this reason that the researcher wanted to solicit students’ perceptions regarding host institutions during their work integrated program. The findings of the study will allow the WIL coordinator (the author) to examine if the current program that is used to prepare students is of benefit and provide recommendations for improvement if any.

**Research Methodology**

*Aims of the study*

The study aimed to solicit third year library and information studies students’ perception regarding their host institutions during their work integrated learning program. The study also aimed to gather students’ views regarding the WIL preparation lectures that are provided to them prior to them going for WIL. It is believed that the results of the study will assist the LIS Program to identify challenges that students faced during WIL and to identify strategies to remedy the situation. The objectives of the study were:

- To find out how were students received, orientated and supervised at their host institutions?
- To investigate how were students’ interactions with staff members during work integrated learning at host institutions?
- How was the student’s overall experience at the host institution? Would the student recommend the host institution to other students?
- Is the preparation given to students prior to the work integrated program appropriate and adequate?

*Data Collection*
The research participants were third year library and information studies students who completed their National Diploma last year (2010). The students had completed their eight weeks WIL program between June and August 2010. Questionnaires were distributed to third year students during the last week in November, unfortunately students had already completed their end-of-year examinations therefore they did not participate in the study. Of the total of 40 third year registered students (Class Register, 2010), 19 students participated in the study. The reason of the low response was that most students had already completed their final examinations and had probably left the city of Durban. The researcher, who is also the third year WIL Coordinator, adopted the questionnaire as designed by Spowart (2006). Amendments were made to suit the researcher’s objectives and the questionnaire was used with permission from Spowart (2006). A variety of questions were included in the questionnaire. Questions were either open-ended or closed; open-ended questions afforded the students with an opportunity of giving their own perceptions on the questions. Students were requested to explain the kinds of problems they experienced, if any; and to provide recommendations on how WIL preparation lectures could be improved.

**Research findings**

In order to present the findings of the study, the questions were categorized according to the areas of the investigation.

*How were students received, orientated and supervised at their host institutions?*

Generally 47% of the students reported that their first day was good and the 16 % of the respondents that reported not to have been well received and not ready for the first day, stated...
some of the reasons as: they were not sure what was expected of them and whilst another student reported that she had to wait four hours before someone attended to her.

Although the WIL coordinators informs host supervisors in good time of the students’ arrival dates, some hosts will claim not to have know that a student was coming for WIL placement on that particular day. At least 74% of the WIL students had supervisors as this is communicated to the host institution. A detailed third year WIL Manual is given to the student (in a sealed DUT enveloped) and this is to be handed over to the supervisor on the first day. Included in the envelope for the hosts is all the relevant documentation that the host supervisor will be requested to sign on behalf of the student, for example, attendance register, record of daily tasks, etc. It is the belief of the LIS program that supervisors are a vital link between the student and the academic institution and their assistance in supervising the students is highly appreciated. Though it is not a specified in the student manual that students should receive orientation, 95% responded that they received orientation on their first day, though in some cases 5% did not receive orientation or induction. Students appreciated this gesture from WIL hosts and 79% affirmed the helpfulness of orientation:

- It introduced me to the services and departments within the organisation
- It offered me an opportunity to meet staff members and get to know the layout of the organisation.

*How were students’ interactions with staff members during work integrated learning at host institutions?*

Most students 95% were generally accepted by staff members in their respective WIL placements. Prior to students going to host institutions for WIL, a series of lectures are
conducted to prepare students for the world of work. Different methods of teaching and learning are used, for example, lectures, class presentations, group discussion or individual and role plays. The format of each is lecture period is dependent on the theme to be discussed on that day, issues like, and sexual harassment in the workplace, interview skills, résumé writing and workplace relations are conducted. During placement, lecturers try a visit all students, and if it not possible telephone interviews with host supervisors and then the student are conducted. The visits allow for problems or challenges to be investigated, and attended to if any. 32% of the WIL students did encounter problems during their WIL placements. Some of the problems experienced by students are:

- Student being unfamiliar with the library system used in the host library
- Being given too many asks by different staff members either than the supervisor

89 % of students were not reimbursed during their WIL host placements and only 11% enjoyed the benefits of reimbursed. Host institutions are not obliged to reimburse students during host institutions. If host institutions are able to pay student, that is a luxury. Some institutions only afford to give students a stipend that covers their travelling costs. Normally, students are urged to undertake WIL at host institutions nearer to their homes, unfortunately this is not always possible and students end up going to faraway places and that increases costs. Professionalism at the host institution was 95% as this is an important criterion that the LIS program considers before placing students. If in a particular host institution it I discovered that students are not receiving LIS related training, they are removed and the particular institution is removed from the list as prospective WIL hosts institutions. Seemingly, this is a good initiative as no students had been made to do tasks that were not learning orientated.
How was the student’s overall experience at the host institution? Would you recommend the host institution to other students?

Of all the respondents, 95% received a rewarding experience and the learning provided was relevant to the profession, some comments given were:

- Training was relevant and balanced theory with practice
- WIL offered them an opportunity to relate academic studies to what happens in industry
- WIL made them to work independently and behave professional in the execution of duties

A large number of students 95% stated that they would work for the same host institution if it offered them a position. At least 11% were offered a position after they had completed their WIL placement program. 89% stated that they would recommend the host institution to other students. On their return from WIL present their work experiences to staff and fellow students (second year LIS students). Lecturers attend to assess the oral presentations against a rubric designed by the WIL coordinator, these presentations assist second year students to listen and learn about the different host institutions and maybe make selections to those that they would like to go and do their WIL at. If students get employment contracts after they have completed their WIL programme, it gives them an advantage in that they are already employed (either permanently or contracts) even before they graduate.

Is the preparation given to students prior to the work integrated programme appropriate and adequate?

95% agreed that the preparation provided before they embark on the WIL program prepared them adequately and was relevant to what they experienced in the workplace. Third year students
are advantaged because they have three lectures a week solely for the purpose of making sure that they receive as much preparation as possible and the preparation is to be relevant to what students will encounter in the workplace. Whenever possible, guest lectures are planned; practitioners from libraries come and address students in LIS related issues. Most of the comments made by students are relevant and some will be incorporated into curriculum, for example, students have requested an introduction of MARC21 to be done in the Programme and some have indicated that the duration of WIL (currently at third year it is eight weeks) needs to be increased.

**Concluding remarks**

Students’ recommendations regarding some areas of the curriculum that should be improved were discussed with lecturers and the Head of Department. Some recommendations will benefit the delivery of the program and the program has initiated initiatives to implement the recommendations:

- Third year WIL coordinator had discussions with the library at the university to assist the program in introducing students to online cataloguing
- The first year curriculum will be re-evaluated to include MARC21 concepts
- Regular visits by first, second and third year students will be arranged with the library in order to provide students with an opportunity to see the practical aspects of computerized catalogue
- Through the Cooperative Education, the program will investigate increasing the length of WIL in second and third year and a possibility of introducing WIL in first year.

**Recommendations**
The LIS program has WIL in two levels of study, i.e. second and third year. This study concentrated on perceptions of third year student regarding their host institutions and it is recommended that a similar study be conducted to solicit second year students’ views of their host institutions. The program should investigate the possibility of evaluating the WIL program on a regular basis and to always in order to ascertain if the delivery of the WIL program is still of benefit to students and host institutions.

References


