Competition for IBL Placements

Shiu Ram

School of Computing and Information Technology, Unitec New Zealand

Abstract

Providers of tertiary education and training include work experience or real projects as compulsory requirements of a number of programs that they offer. Students have to meet either one of these requirements in order to graduate. This implies that the students must find employers who can provide opportunities for them to gain the necessary work experience or complete projects that are relevant to their respective programs of study. Are there such employers? If so, can they meet the demand for the industry based learning (IBL) placements? How should the placements be managed? Obviously there are employers who do offer opportunities for IBL placements because many students have successfully completed the requirements of their programs and have graduated. However, did all students find placements that they needed? Did they find them in good time? The reality is that the number of opportunities for placements is limited. Students from all tertiary institutions compete for the places that are available. The situation is probably aggravated by secondary school students who also take up holiday jobs. Apparently, there is a need for an efficient and effective management of the placements. An electronic database that stores employer information is an obvious solution, but who should create and maintain it? Should each institution have one of their own? Should there be one for each city, or the nation as whole or a global one? Answers to these questions may lead to well-managed IBL placements. The issues raised in the above paragraphs are based on my observation over the last three and a half years while supervising IBL students on Unitec's Bachelor of Business program of study with the information systems major. These may also be relevant to industries other than information technology (IT). The intention of this paper is to find some feasible solutions to these apparent problems by delving deeper into the issues that have been raised. This paper may also trigger the undertaking of new and more detailed studies that could lead to effective solutions.

Introduction

Lifelong learning skills are becoming increasingly important in today's information age. In this age the perception that graduation marks the end of one's education and training is entirely wrong. After graduating a person usually gets employed and begins earning a living. Each work environment places demands on the employees to acquire specific knowledge and skills. As such learning does not stop at graduation. Now learning is regarded as a lifelong process. According to McIntyre and Solomon (1999): "Flexible learning, lifelong learning and vocationalising of education are all signaling the opening up of boundaries between academic learning, working knowledge and learning through or at work" (p. 11). Further they state that: "As academic expertise is brought into the workplace, so industry expertise is brought into the academy. Here there is an important argument about the changes in contemporary knowledge production that ties together the academy and the corporate workplace in yet another way (p.11). It has become a necessity that employees continually up-skill and upgrade their qualifications in order to perform effectively and efficiently in their jobs.

What are lifelong learning skills? One of the answers to this question could be that these are skills in learning how to learn. Employees have many personal commitments and need to use their time as efficiently as possible. People who are good at learning would be able to acquire new knowledge and skills with ease and thus become more productive in the work environment. True learning takes place when a person puts his or her knowledge and skills into practice. It is with this objective that many providers of tertiary education and training include IBL as one of the courses in their programs of study. However, the effectiveness of IBL is questionable.

Questions like: Are there opportunities for placement for all the qualified students? Are those opportunities relevant to the students' specializations? Are they available when the students need them? Are the placements well managed? This paper is an attempt to initiate discussions with the view to finding answers to the above questions.

Program Requirements

For value and recognition IBL has to be a full-fledged course in whichever program it is a requirement. This means that it must have a prescription which delineates the learning outcomes and formal assessment that form the basis of achievement in terms of letter grades and credit points at a specified level. In an undergraduate program IBL is taken as a Level 7 course in the final semesters – that is, when the student would have passed in most of the courses required for a particular major. For a meaningful contribution to a student's learning, the course duration should be at least one semester with a minimum of 18 credit points. However, making it a compulsory course can have serious implications. For example, if a student does not qualify to go on a placement or a suitable placement cannot be found then the student cannot graduate! For a student who qualifies, the placement may not be available when required. This will delay the student's graduation. These considerations lead to the questions: How do students qualify to go on IBL placements? What is a suitable placement?

Eligible Students

A student who has done well in all the other courses, especially in the ones required for the major, would be expected to apply his or her knowledge and skills effectively in the real world work environment thereby meeting the employer's expectations and giving credibility to the provider of the program of study. (Ferkins, 2002) found out that: "The industry organization personnel felt that the success of the placement was in large part dependant on the suitability of the student" (p. 32). Usually a minimum of a B– grade – average pass is regarded as an acceptable level of achievement to qualify a student to go on IBL. In reality it is unlikely that each and every student enrolled in a particular program of study attains this level of achievement.

Suitable Employers

IBL would achieve its objectives only if the work or the project the student engages in is relevant to the major, is at the appropriate level (e.g. Level 7), has the appropriate duration (e.g., at least one semester), requires a minimum number hours to complete (e.g., 180 hours) and the work environment is conducive to learning. The work place supervisor should be qualified to provide the guidance the student would need and be available when needed. A commitment to the success of IBL is called for. It is doubtful as to whether all these conditions are satisfied in each and every placement. If the conditions are satisfied, then are there enough opportunities to meet the demand? According to Initiatives (1995):

> business or community partners who are willing to provide work-based learning experiences need a system which supports their efforts. These partners should have easy and reliable access to school-based coordinators, should clearly understand the goals of workplace learning, and should be assisted in helping individual students achieve success in their work environment" (p. 2).

In this context the use of educational technology would go a long way to assist the coordinators and workplace supervisors to perform effectively and efficiently their roles.

Globalization

For various reasons, including the current trends in migration, the composition of student populations in tertiary institutions in any country is international. Educational technology has advanced to a stage where providers are now able to offer online programs of study. The implications are that students could complete their IBL in any country in the world. Coll, Pinyonatthagarn and Pramoolsook (2003) have shown that international placements can be successful and of great value to the students. Foreign students usually return to their home countries after graduating. These considerations call for a global management of IBL. McIntyre and Solomon (1999) point out that "New Information technologies, by increasing inter-connectedness, provide a technological basis for global capitalism,

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'knowledge work' and the 'information society'" (p. 4). Inevitably, educational technology should play a major role in this kind of IBL management.

Placement Management

Full potential of educational technology should be exploited to facilitate effective and efficient management of IBL globally. Using electronic databases that are accessible through the internet seems to be the way to go. The database should store employer data and the job/project opportunities they can provide. Dobbelstein and Taylor (2004) call for the retention of the companies involved in IBL as "Without them, this education model is inoperable" (p. 1). Students should be able to apply for jobs/project on a custom-designed website. All applications for a particular program should be processed by the IBL course coordinator in liaison with the employer in order to get a good match up of the student's qualification and the relevant placement. This control will ensure that the employers are not inundated with applications and that qualification is not undermined by poorly matched placements. According to Mooney and Crane (2002) employers "are often inundated by requests for participation, causing confusion and ultimately hampering relationships between the two parties" (p. 1). Initiatives (1995) assert that: "Instructors serve as both coaches and gatekeepers, preparing students for the workplace but refusing to recommend students they judge to be ill-prepared" (p. 3). Coll and Eames (2000) state in their third model that "coordinators are subject specialists and have strong links with students, faculty, and deep knowledge of the business of the employer" (p. 10). Initiatives (1995) point out that "The work-based learning places intense logistical demands on its coordinators" (p. 1). Under these circumstances a team work becomes inevitable and good relationships between the industry and the providers of education and training must be fostered for their and the students' advantage.

Wider Implications

The use of the Internet and computer mediated/managed learning is a pertinent solution to an effective IBL. Treated in this way, IBL would foster relationships, collaboration and cooperation that will culminate in a global community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The mutually beneficial relationship between the stakeholders that IBL fosters suggests that it is an essential course in tertiary programs of study. To make it an effective course, students should attain a required minimum level of qualification to take up placements relevant to their major in the industry. Employers should be able to provide job/project opportunities, supervision and support to meet the requirements of IBL. The IBL course coordinator should be in charge for effective management and quality control. The Internet and employer database would be the tools that should be used for each stake holder's advantage.

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