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Are Students Acquiring the Skills, Competencies and Work Experience that Align with Industry Needs and Work-Integrated Learning Course Design?

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According to Coll et al. (2009) “A key purpose of work-integrated learning (WIL) is the notion of providing graduates with a comprehensive skill set desired by potential employers” (p. 15). The notion of providing a comprehensive set of skills and competencies that align with current employers’ desires can, however, be a constant challenge (Burchell, Hodges, & Rainsbury, 2000; Hodges & Burchell, 2003). WIL course designers need to not only remain up to date with key skills and attributes demanded by employers, but also need to monitor whether or not students are learning these skill sets to the satisfaction of the employers. It is hoped that by exploring students perceptions of their workplace experience through their end of placement reflections, this paper will contribute to the gap in the research in terms of what WIL students learn (Eames & Bell, 2005) and examine whether or not there is alignment between course design skill delivery and employer demands.

PROGRAM

The Bachelor of Business degree at Unitec involves a compulsory 30 credit Industry Based Learning (IBL) course at Level 7. In their final semester, students from five discipline areas namely; Accountancy, Finance, Human Resources, Marketing, and Operations complete a project and work tasks in industry for a period of 220 hours under the supervision of both an industry and academic supervisor. Currently, approximately 200 business students are enrolled in the IBL course annually.

Students are assessed across a number of areas via a self-assessed ePortfolio of learning that evidences their work achievements and reflections of their work experience. This discussion on work-readiness and course alignment considers students across all five discipline areas of business as mentioned above.

UNIQUE FEATURES

Whilst there is a considerable body of research examining the benefits of WIL experience for employers and students, this paper explores the alignment of students’ perceived acquired skills with industry employability needs and WIL course design.

DISCUSSION

Three intertwining threads on work-readiness, in terms of skills and competencies acquired by IBL business students; IBL course design, student perceptions, and employer demands. Each of these are discussed in turn.

1: Industry based learning course design

In line with many models of WIL within tertiary education, the IBL course has been designed with the aim of providing students with the opportunity to integrate their learning across their programme of study and apply theoretical and practical business skills to an approved project and work objectives in industry (Jackson, 2013). Equally important is the further aim for students to critically reflect upon the processes undertaken in completing their project and work objectives to inform their future personal and professional development.

Assessments, to encourage students’ reflection on their workplace experience, are commonly used in WIL course design (Sheridan, Kotevski, & Dean, 2014) and the IBL course design is in keeping with this practice. Students reflect both during and at the end of their workplace experience to foster integration of knowledge (Coll et al.,

2009) and help students develop a deeper self-awareness of their skills and competencies acquired and those requiring further development in the future (Coll, Lay, & Zegwaard, 2001).

The key assessments, within the IBL course, which focus on skills and competencies evident in the student at the end of the placement period are: 'a three party collaborative assessment', and an 'end of placement reflections' essay. The *three party collaborative assessment* requires that the host, academic supervisor, and student assess the student's performance in four broad competency areas: Professionalism, Interpersonal skills, Intellectual skills and Project/Time Management as well as the value of work contributed (project and work tasks). The *end of placement reflections* assessment encourages students to critically reflect on their workplace experience and discuss what they have learnt. Students are provided with a page of questions relating to general and personal learning experiences as well as the workplace culture, values and practice. The focus of this discussion centres on the 'end of placement reflections' assessment and examines the skills and competencies that students perceive to have developed during their IBL placement.

2: Students' perceptions of skills and competencies developed from their workplace experience

A qualitative content analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2003) was performed on students' end of placement reflections on their workplace experience. Two IBL cohorts (semester two, 2014 and semester one, 2015) were contacted and permission was requested to analyse their end of placement reflections. The resulting sample included 19 students from semester two 2014 and 12 students from semester one 2015. The fact that students contacted had already graduated or left Unitec is a contributing factor to the average response rate of 17%.

Emerging themes and patterns from the data were identified using an open coded method (Bryman & Bell, 2003) and then grouped into sub –themes guided by the four course competencies used in the IBL Collaborative Assessment. The two cohorts' responses were analysed separately, however, as no apparent differences in themes could be ascertained, the two groups were considered as one sample. The most pertinent competencies and skills that emerged from the analysis are discussed below in order of importance.

Emerging themes: Overall, the strongest themes that emerged from the analysis were those involving increased confidence levels and a deeper awareness of own abilities and future career choices; "I feel more confident in being able to reach my potential in the business world and have a successful career change" (KN), "the experience helps me build confidence in doing accounting jobs in the future", "my drive to get tasks completed may show through at times as overly controlling"(AG), "I am a very fast learner and can work independently on assigned tasks"(RG), "I am not a very good self-directed learner, which I need to work on in the future" (ZT), "I tend to underrate myself" and "I learn better by doing " (AT). "I sometimes place my high standards onto others, which I feel is a negative" (VQ), "I work best under pressure and can rise to a challenge without becoming stressed" (SN), and "I am not a person with enough patience " (WX). Further comments included; "My experience has helped me with future career choices and establishing the type of organisation I may wish to work for" (AG), "In the future, once I have gained more experience, I will look at this type of position again as I like the idea of a job that makes a real difference in society" (VM), and "like to be an accountant, using my knowledge and skills to help small businesses" (XZ).

Interpersonal competencies (196 mentions): In line with previous WIL research on placement reflections (Paku & Lay, 2008) students most frequently reflected on acquiring interpersonal competencies. Teamwork and building relationships in the workplace emerged as the strongest interpersonal skill; "I have never seen employees work in a team the way they did" and "I was able to work hard and build long-lasting relationships at work" (NN). Comments also included; "It was rewarding to be involved in a team" (AM), "there was a real sense of working together for a common cause" (NS), and "I hope that I am fortunate enough to work with such a team in my future endeavours" (VQ). Improved verbal communication proved to be the next most frequently acquired competency; "was able to present this information to managers and be able to answer any related questions" (JD), "I am most proud of my development with client communication. I was quite nervous at the start and didn't know exactly what questions I should be asking" (TD), and "now I have enough confidence to have good communications with customers" (JU).

Intellectual competencies (69 mentions): Most students commented on gaining new technical skills or subject matter knowledge whilst in their placement; “I learnt how to work in software for email marketing” (MM), “particular insights were gained for myself in regards to social media and digital marketing” (CU), “improvement in using X software” (SN), “more insight into the internal control area” (AT), and “experience in analysing the company’s financial reports” (JD).

Project/time management competencies (59 mentions): Unsurprisingly, students found that the placement experience improved their project management and/or time management abilities; “I’ve learned that I must learn to prioritise my task better” (JL), “Time management and planning ahead proved to be an important competencies learnt during this experience” (LN), “I found that meeting deadlines was an integral part” (IT), and “having the balance right was important as I had to juggle so many things while completing the work placement” (RG).

Professional competencies (59 mentions): Specific professional competencies focussed on work ethic and the culture of the organisation; “People work hard and still have a laugh and a joke with each other” (RG), “I will be able to work hard and build long lasting relationships at work” (NN), “Even though it is very busy, the staff were very fulfilled and happy in their jobs” (DM), “Not much talking was really done as everyone just seemed to work all day long, even during their lunch break” (ZT), and “I learned a lot about how to behave in the situations that were part of the work culture of the company which should help me to adapt faster in my future career” (AT). These emerging skills and competencies appear to align with course aims and outcomes but are they aligned with industry’s employability demands? The last discussion thread briefly examines current research on the topic of employers’ perceptions of skills and competencies required of graduate students.

3: Industry’s employability needs

According to a recent survey conducted by Victoria University the top ten skills and attributes which employers seek in new graduates are; 1) work ethic, 2) Verbal communication skills, 3) Energy and enthusiasm, 4) Analytical and critical thinking, 5) Problem solving, 6) Teamwork, 7) Interpersonal skills, 8) Written communication skills, 9) Self-management, and 10) Initiative (Victoria Careers and Employment, 2015). Interestingly, work ethic, which was so highly ranked in this survey, was not highly ranked in their 2006 survey.

The results differ slightly from Career NZ’s article on the “top 10 skills employers are looking for” which places communication skills, customer service skills and teamwork in the top three places (Careers NZ, 2015). The picture in Australia is not dissimilar with over 80% of employers rating teamwork, oral communication, interpersonal skills and problem solving skills as very important competencies in their selection of candidates (Australian Association of Graduate Employers, 2011). The research both locally and internationally indicates that overall types of skills expected of graduates by employers are similar with only the ranking of skills differing. It would appear that the types of skills demanded of graduates by employers are in line with students’ perceptions of skills developed during their IBL course.

Of concern, however, are employers’ satisfaction levels with graduate employability skills. In New Zealand only 34.6% of employers surveyed felt that Universities and Polytechnics graduates were well prepared to be effective in the workplace (Deloitte-BusinessNZ, 2014). British employers share these low satisfaction levels, particularly with graduate employability skills such as; positive attitude to work, basic literacy/use of English, problem solving, teamwork, self-management, and business/customer awareness (Confederation of British Industry, 2011).

The employers’ low satisfaction levels with these skills raise a number of questions. Are students’ perceptions of skill development at odds with employers’ expectations? Can improvements in course design reduce the gap between industry’s expectations of graduates’ skills and the skills they actually bring? Are employers demands unrealistic and could they play a greater part in shaping students’ development of skills required?

IMPLICATIONS/ISSUES

Students perceive to be learning the key skills demanded by employers. However, research indicates that there is a low level of satisfaction among employers regarding these skills developed by the graduates. Possible explanations for this significant gap in perception between students and employers include:

- Students' tendency to over-estimate their capabilities,
- The course failing to deliver the skill set at the required level, and
- Employers having unrealistic expectations of graduate students.

Further research into this perception gap between students and employers would help to ascertain the reason for its existence and provide options for reducing or eliminating it. Irrespective of the reasons for the differences in view between students and employers, it is clear that there is opportunity for improvement of WIL course design to align more closely with key employability skills desired by employers and thus achieve higher levels of satisfaction amongst employers of our graduates.

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