Connecting the dots: Building WIL capacity within and across university boundaries

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The best co-op placements are those where industry and universities are seen as equal partners involved in the planning of the overall experience and student's professional development (Martin in Howe and Patrick, 2007). A qualitative study, conducted across a small representative sample of stakeholders (within and across university boundaries) involved in a 12-month placement program, found that regardless of the diversity of work placement settings and the uniqueness and value differentiation of the individuals involved, there was evidence of a breadth of opportunities for learning, professional formation and individual development. The study concluded that through promoting knowledge sharing, collaborative relationships and active engagement within and across a number of levels of university and organisational contexts, capacity can be built at individual, leadership and institutional levels.

Keywords: Relationship development, placements, professional development, communities of learning

INTRODUCTION

Work placements offer unique learning opportunities for students. However some students return from work placement programs having changed little or not at all. The research literature points to any combination of factors that impact on the co-op experience and identifies tensions existing between the various stakeholders as to whose responsibility it is to maximise students’ chances of success in their work placement.

Martin in Howe and Patrick (2007) and others contend a successful work placement program is the shared responsibility of the student, the employer and the university and is most successful with the active involvement of all parties.

A recent qualitative study, conducted for the purpose of uncovering the views of individual stakeholders involved in one-year placement programs at an Australian university, revealed greater capacity building of individual stakeholders where responsibilities were shared.

METHODOLOGY

The setting for the study is an undergraduate information systems degree within the Business College at the RMIT University. The 4-year program includes a mandatory 12-month paid co-operative education program (co-op) in the 3rd year. Work placements are found in a diverse range of small, medium and large businesses across a wide range of industry sectors.

A single case study approach was used to gather insights from a sample of 26 stakeholder representatives involved directly and indirectly in the Co-op program. The sample included managers, academics, students, alumni and practitioners. The study adopted an inductive design and engaged qualitative techniques to guide the capture, interpretation and analysis of individual perspectives of the sample. The validity of findings was addressed through the triangulation of the multiple perspectives from the diverse sample. In-depth, one hour, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The semi-structured nature of the interviews offered opportunities for unexpected insights to be gained as well as encouraging participants to speak in their own voices and elaborate on responses.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed for further analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed through a number of readings and systematic processes of coding and categorising data to identify emerging patterns and themes. A wealth of perceptions and insights were collected and reported from which “fuzzy generalisations” (Bassey, 1998) or assertions (Stake, 1995) could potentially be made across the whole category of co-op work placements. This paper presents the findings relating to evidence of capacity building for WIL across individual, leadership and institutional levels.
FINDINGS

The findings from this study re-enforced a shared belief that the workplace can provide a rich and powerful environment for professional learning and skills development for students. However some students changed more than others. A great number of individual, social and contextual factors were found to influence the co-op experience; in particular the work readiness of the student; the quality of the workplace supervision; membership in a workgroup; and the extent and quality of both the organisational and university affordances.

The findings indicate that the extent of preparation of both the students and of the workplace, before the placement, has a great impact on the richness of the work place experiences and learnings. There was evidence to suggest that the value organisations place on co-op is reflected in the supervision and support the student is given and the subsequent development of the student. Jobs also needed to be meaningful to the student and beneficial to the organisation. Guidance, instruction, direction and support during the placements maximise learning opportunities.

The value the organisation places on the placement program was reflected in the affordances given to the workplace supervisor and the student, and was found to have a great impact on the students’ experience. Differences in organisational affordances were found across organisations such as in the planning arrangements for the new intern; the thoroughness of the induction; the assignation of the supervisors; the opportunities for career learning and development; the support and mentoring given to the student; and the time given by organisations to supervision.

In the next section these findings are discussed with reference to the literature review across the areas of workplace and organisational learning, professional formation, adult learning, higher education, co-operative education and work integrated learning.

DISCUSSION OF FINGINGS

Work readiness of students

Both the literature and the study uncovered differences of opinion as to how best to prepare young people for employment and life. Broadly speaking universities believe a solid foundation of formal knowledge and skills will provide their graduates with the necessary attributes to enter the workforce and society. Employers on the other hand find graduates lacking in the knowledge and skills necessary to work effectively (DEST, 2007). The importance of good oral and written communication, teamwork skills and an ability to learn and adapt quickly were common themes arising from the interview responses and supported research findings that good interpersonal skills were the catalyst for speeding up new employees’ survival, task performance (Te Waita, 2006) and identity development (Beckett, 2010) in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the notion of embedding the development of generic skills within university courses to generate better learning in the workplace (Hager, Holland et al., 2002), was generally not acknowledged by the academics interviewed. It was reasoned students could develop these skills through their class and assignment work and in activities outside the University. What became evident in the study was the lack of understanding (across the stakeholder groups) of the nature of skills such as oral communications and team working and that they are best developed through doing a variety of tasks in different situations (Billett, 2008).

It was also found that most of the students coming into the placement year had no idea what to expect and what they wanted from the year. Wyn (2009) and others propose universities can do more to facilitate student career preparation and transition into the workplace. This was confirmed by supervisors in this study:

They [the students] need to come to work with a better understanding of the expectations an employer has of employees in the work setting [and] to understand what commitment they are making to the employer.

Engagement of workplace supervisors

Research literature in the areas of workplace learning and professional practice highlights the need for supporting structures. Although participation in everyday activities has the potential to develop competencies, without structure, organisation and refinement, Billett (2006) purports such learning may promote bad habits, be
limiting, lack guidance and support, lack understanding or inhibit future development. In general, the study found supervisors were more than ready to guide (and be guided) in providing students useful advice and support.

But there were instances where the supervisor was not well-versed by either the company or the University as to his duties and responsibilities for his student. Often decisions made regarding co-op programs such as where the student was located and who would be the supervisor, was made at upper management levels and not relayed to the individuals involved. Consequently the workplace supervisor (and members of the workgroup) did not necessarily have the best interests of the students at heart, the experience or inclination to supervise the student and may/may not have been welcoming or supportive (Pepper, 1997).

Organisational Affordances

The workplace learning literature (Down, 2006) found organisational affordances can promote or restrict learning. This was evident in the study that highlighted good and bad placement experiences. Some organisations have strong learning cultures with well-developed recruitment, induction and graduate programs and require little direction by the university; while other organisations are productivity-driven and rely on individual agency and autonomy and leaving students to their own devices. Some students accept the challenges and shine, while others become anxious, withdrawn and unhappy. Preparing students with the knowledge and skills in the first instance to recognise organisational cultures through organisation profiles and job interviews will enable students to make more informed decisions regarding the nature of the working environment.

University Affordances

Many academics interviewed saw university management support for WIL and placement programs as rhetoric and with management “not putting their money where their mouth is”. Weisz and Smith (2005) and others observed that universities do not support the staff involved with co-op, by training, professional development, support structures and pathways to promotion and rewards. Insufficient budget allocations see most placement programs employing administrators rather than academics to deliver placement programs. Consequently academics with legitimate promotional aspirations do not want to be directly involved in co-op programs.

JOINING THE DOTS

The study found the social and contextual dimensions of learning, engagement and influence contribute to building capacity for WIL across university and organisation contexts. It is proposed the university can facilitate building capacity for WIL through bringing together various cohorts of stakeholders, at different levels, for various purposes.

Planned program of engagement

The diversity of organisations and the uniqueness of individuals involved within each placement call for approaches that promote relationship development across university and organisational contexts. At the local level, key stakeholders involved in the work placement (student, supervisor and university advisor) negotiate the rules of engagement, and together, monitor and review students’ progress, professional development and well-being; while at the undergraduate program level, relationship opportunities are created between students, alumni, co-op partners and the profession through for example mentorships, site-visits and career development workshops. Long-term industry collaborations and research partnerships with major organisations are developed at higher management levels.

Planned program of learning

Program teams can design and deliver programs and courses that intentionally inform and prepare their students for placements. Curriculum design could be such that students are encouraged to take ownership of their own learning and development. Active learning environments have been found to be conducive to the development of proactive, agentive students. However, the design and delivery of such courses and conditions requires informed, capable and engaged teaching academics that have the relevant training and experience for designing curricula that incorporate work-related knowledge and delivery techniques that promote active
learning environments. Planned, regular interactions between various cohorts during the placement can ensure that continuing learning and development stay at the forefront of placement agendas.

Planned program of influence

Work placement programs have the potential to provide useful feedback to the undergraduate program team for course renewal and program accreditation and identify emerging industry trends requiring further research. Students located within organisations connect universities with organisations. Planned opportunities for connecting students with students, alumni and industry personnel could give way to more informed co-op preparation, knowledge sharing and constructing new practice knowledge. However, the management and operations of these programs relies heavily on the co-ordinated and close workings of teaching academics, practitioners, professional staff and management that together can provide the necessary educational and working knowledge, teaching and working experience and opportunities for networking.

CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

Diversity of organisational contexts, complexity of work placement relationships and individual value differentiation within and across stakeholder groups suggest no two placements are alike. It is proposed both the University and industry should take responsibility, not only providing resources, support and opportunities to enable students to become contributing members of their professional and society, but for affording their own staff with resources, support and opportunities with the skills, knowledge and experiences to be involved in university-industry engagements such as work placements.

A new leadership approach within the university is called for that crosses functional areas and management levels and moves across university boundaries, to engage, enable, enact and encourage cognition distribution. A distributive leadership approach (Jones, 2012) invites individuals with the willingness, capacities and freedom to be actively engaged in developing relationships through mutual respect and trust, to grow professionally and effect change. However such a model requires participating organisations and the university to develop and advocate strategies, structures, processes and policies that encourage, recognise and support distributed leadership capabilities in each individual. It is through such an approach universities can use WIL programs as the means to progress organisational and university sustainability and growth.

REFERENCES
