Graduate attributes for a global society: the RMIT International Industry Experience and Research Program (RIIERP)

SYLVESTER ABANTERIBA
ELIZABETH PARKINSON
JULIANNE REID
RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Work integrated learning (WIL) is a key part of the distinct educational philosophy of RMIT University; indeed WIL is embedded within RMIT policy, which mandates a minimum level of WIL activities as part of the experiences and assessments of all students in Higher Education and Vocational Education coursework awards. As a global university of technology and design, RMIT has established RIIERP to help fulfill its global and WIL aspirations, providing a global WIL experience of between 6 and 12 months for more than 2,500 students. RIIERP partners with over 200 organisations in 17 different countries in Asia, Europe and North America, that contribute approximately $2.7 million each year to the program. Long-term partnerships of more than 10 years duration have been established with successful global companies such as Audi, BMW, Siemens, Bosch, Volkswagen and Bayer. RIIERP allows early exposure and promotes awareness of students to different cultural settings, and gives students the opportunity to improve their global employability, thus instilling the desired generic attributes for graduates of the future in a global society. The authors draw on the evidence provided by RIIERP, developed more than two decades ago, to engender the development of graduate attributes of a global work-ready citizen.

Keywords: graduate attributes, global work integrated learning, global work-ready citizen, RMIT International Industry Experience and Research Program (RIIERP)

INTRODUCTION

RMIT is a global university of technology and design, committed to providing students with the skills and experiences that will enable them to succeed and engage with their professions in a global context. This vision informs the collaborations and partnerships RMIT has locally and across the world, including those related to the work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities made available to students each year.

WIL is a strategic learning and teaching priority for RMIT, and it was first etched into the university’s philosophy at its very beginning as the Working Men’s College that only awarded technical and expert certificates upon proof of students’ engagement in practical work with industry (Murray-Smith & Dare, 1987). In the years since, WIL has remained a distinguishing and positive feature of many RMIT programs and in 2008 the provision of WIL was embedded in university policy. Intended to make a significant contribution to the work readiness of RMIT students, in particular “their development of the core skills and capabilities of practice” (RMIT, 2014, Work integrated learning (WIL) at RMIT policy, para. 2), this policy mandates that WIL must form part of all Higher Education and Vocational Education (AQF Levels 5 to 9 inclusive) awards offered by the university. At RMIT, interaction with and feedback from the workplace is deemed integral to the WIL experience, and assessment of WIL contributes to academic credit.

The RMIT International Industry Experience and Research Program (RIIERP) is a unique WIL activity offered by RMIT. The program seeks to equip RMIT graduates with attributes that will enable them to live anywhere as global citizens and perform competently as professionals. RIIERP offers undergraduate, graduate and research collaboration opportunities in any discipline, and this paper focuses on how the international WIL experiences provided by RIIERP have contributed to the development of work-ready global graduates.

THE RMIT INTERNATIONAL INDUSTRY EXPERIENCE AND RESEARCH PROGRAM (RIIERP)

Gacel-Avila (2005) maintains that one of the basic functions of a university should be the fostering of global awareness and understanding amongst students, of their own and other cultures. Further, universities should also be a key educational resource for training citizens with critical perspective, and adequate preparation to work and live effectively and successfully in a global context (Gacel-Avila, 2005).

These qualities could be achieved if universities gave their graduates time overseas during their study (Abanteriba, 2006). It was on this basis that RIIERP was established in 1992, with the following goals:
RIIERP is a unique program in Australia that offers six different WIL placements designed to meet the learning needs of an individual student or graduate cohort (Figure 1).

The number of RIIERP WIL placements offered each year has grown substantially, particularly during the first decade (Figure 2).

Overall, RIIERP has partnered with more than 200 companies located in 17 countries to offer WIL placements to more than 2500 RMIT students. These companies also contribute up to AUS$2.7 million each year in student allowances. Table 1 presents a selection of the companies hosting RIIERP students in 2014.
### Table 1. Selected 2014 RIIERP international company partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>INTALES GmbH</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>ThyssenKrupp AG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert Bosch AG</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Kawasaki Heavy Industries, Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Rolls-Royce Canada Ltd.</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>AB Volvo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Airbus Headquarters</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>ABB Ltd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DEGREMONT SAS</td>
<td></td>
<td>Alstom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keolis/Yarra Trams</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wärtsilä Switzerland Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Airbus Defence and Space</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Airbus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audi AG</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bentley Motors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BMW AG</td>
<td></td>
<td>MAHLE Powertrain Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continental</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rolls-Royce International Ltd.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daimler AG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>German Aerospace Center (DLR)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IBM Deutschland</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>BETA CAE Systems USA Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Deere GmbH &amp; Co.KG</td>
<td></td>
<td>Boeing Capital Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lufthansa Aviation Center</td>
<td></td>
<td>GE Aviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nestlé Deutschland AG</td>
<td></td>
<td>McQuay International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Porsche AG</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pratt &amp; Whitney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert Bosch GmbH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rolls-Royce Deutschland Ltd &amp; Co KG</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rolls-Royce Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volkswagen AG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The RIIERP process

RIIERP placements, including project details, are advertised via the RIIERP website and applications open in June for placements in the following year. Applicants must have a grade point average of at least 2.0 out of 4.0 (credit average), and their application consists of a formal cover letter detailing their interest in participating in RIIERP, a full resume and their current transcript of results. Applicants also list three international host companies and the project they would like to complete in order of preference. The application process also includes a rigorous interview intended to provide each applicant with the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of RIIERP and its goals, as well as how their professional development needs match the opportunities offered by their preferred host companies. Each applicant is then ranked according to their academic performance (60%) and their interview (40%).

A short list is made available to each host company, which then confirms the successful applicant and sends them a letter of offer and employment contract. All students and graduates undertaking RIIERP are required to enroll in an RMIT elective course and confirmation of this enrolment must be submitted with their work permit (required for all students) and visa applications (if required).

RIIERP placements are formally assessed, and students and graduates must submit all assessment tasks within two weeks of their return to Australia. As shown in Table 2, a range of tasks is used so that different perspectives are included in the assessment of a student or graduate’s skills (Ferns & Moore, 2012).
TABLE 2. RIIERP assessment tasks and weightings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Task</th>
<th>Contribution to Final Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project Report (8,000 words)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Report (8,000 words)</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation – Project (30 minutes)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentation – Cultural (30 minutes)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Journal (5,000 words)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Supervisor Feedback</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evaluating RIIERP

A series of surveys was conducted between 1992 and 2010 to capture the RIIERP experience as follows:
1. The Participating Student Survey collected feedback from students and graduates who completed a RIIERP placement between 1992 and 2000. The 14-question survey was given to students in hard copy or via email to complete on their return to Australia.
2. The Graduate Student Survey collected feedback from students and graduates who completed a RIIERP placement between 1992 and 2010, and had since graduated from RMIT. The 14-question survey was given to graduates in hard copy to complete on their return to Australia, or emailed to graduates for whom contact details could be obtained.
3. The Overseas Companies Survey collected feedback in 2000 and again in 2005 from international companies that had participated in RIIERP. The same 10-question survey was used each time and it was emailed to company contacts.
4. The Australian Companies Survey was distributed to a group of Australian organisations in 2000 purposely selected on the basis of their size and relevance to RIIERP placements. The six-question survey was mailed to company contacts.

SURVEY RESULTS

Participating Student Survey and Feedback

Overall 210 students and graduates were invited to participate in the survey and 196 surveys were completed and returned (96%). The majority of respondents (59%) had participated in RIIERP during 1999 and 2000 (Figure 3). Overall, 57% were in their 4th year of study, 7% were in their 5th year of study and 36% participated as a recent graduate.

FIGURE 3. When survey respondents participated in RIIERP

The benefits reported by students participating in RIIERP are shown in Figure 4. At the time of the survey, 67% of respondents had graduated from RMIT. Of these, 93% were employed and 7% indicated they were completing
graduate studies. Of those employed, 96% said it took them less than a year to find employment. Further, 13% of respondents said they had received an offer of employment from the company where they completed RIIERP.

![FIGURE 4. Self-reported benefits of participating in RIIERP](image)

Even though the majority of participants said they knew little (67%) or nothing at all (14%) about their international host company prior to RIIERP, they all rated RIIERP as good to excellent in their professional development and also said that they would recommend the program to others. This is also highlighted in the following comments from RIIERP participants:

- **Being in the work force makes you think, feel, problem solve, and analyse while working on real life projects. It forces you to step up to the next level which I found both challenging and very exciting.** (RMIT Aerospace Engineering / Business student at ACE GmbH, Friedrichshafen).

- **I found this to be a very rewarding experience, as not only did I get to work in the highly competitive Space Industry, I also got to see some of the most incredible human inventions that have been and are being created.** (RMIT Aerospace Engineering student at Astrium in Bremen).

- **The highlight of my time at BMW Group was the month I worked at the test track assisting with the collection of wheel force and displacement data. It was great to be involved with the testing and to experience all the sights, sounds and smells of the track environment.** (RMIT Aerospace Engineering / Business student at BMW Munich).

**Graduate Student Survey and Feedback**

The response rate for the Graduate Survey was 87% (384 respondents of 442 graduates invited to participate). Of the respondents, 74% participated in the Work Experience opportunity of RIIERP, 25% participated in the Graduate Traineeship and 1% participated in Research Placements. Most respondents (70%) were Australian citizens.

At the time of the survey, 96% of graduates were employed and 81% noted they had gained employment within six months of graduation. Of those employed, 63% were working in Australia, 18% in their home country and 19% in another country. Although only 7% of respondents said that they were offered a job overseas as a result of their RIIERP placement, one graduate did provide the following comment:

- **Going to the other side of the globe to work on the F136 program has been such a fantastic experience and has allowed me to gain invaluable skills and experience in one of the world's leading power systems companies. I'm very excited to gain a position on the Graduate Leadership Development Program and continue my career with Rolls-Royce.** (RMIT Engineering Graduate at Rolls-Royce Indianapolis).

Overall, 99% of the survey respondents said that their participation in RIIERP helped them secure a job, and had helped in their career development. In particular one graduate commented:

- **I have gained an understanding of Lean and Six Sigma methodologies which are a useful skill set that can be transferable to any given industry or workplace. Working for a multinational organisation has broadened my views of various cultural norms when dealing with colleagues across the globe.** (RMIT Marketing Graduate at Siemens in Mühlheim).
Overall 104 companies were invited to participate (20 companies in 2000 and 84 companies in 2005) and 98 surveys were completed and returned (94%). As shown in Figure 5, survey respondents demonstrated a spread of experience with supervising RIIERP participants.

![FIGURE 5. Overseas company data regarding supervision of RIIERP participants](image)

Eighty-eight percent of international companies rated RMIT students’ and graduates’ ability to carry out tasks as excellent, and 75% rated their ability to work in a team as excellent. Further, 95% of companies surveyed said that RMIT students integrated into the company social environment easily.

When asked to compare RIIERP students to those in their own country, one company stated that RMIT students were better, and the remainder responded that RMIT students were comparable with their international peers. Finally, when asked if they would employ RMIT graduates at the conclusion of RIIERP, all respondents said that if there were no visa restrictions and positions were available they would employ the RMIT graduate in their company. In addition all respondents agreed that they would recommend RIIERP to continue in their company. It is important to note that two company survey respondents noted that the students’ lack of knowledge of languages was a weakness in the program, and one other said that the time taken to arrange student visas was an issue.

**Australian Company Survey and Feedback**

Of the 25 companies invited to participate in this survey, 20 participated (80%). Eighty percent of respondents said that as an employer, they would favor an applicant who had undertaken overseas work experience at an international company, during his/her studies. When asked to qualify this response, the following reasons were provided:

- “Maturity…. ability to work in different environment”.
- “Appreciation of working globally … experience in dealing with different cultures and environments”.
- “More flexible approach to work”.
- “Improve mobility of the team … be able to cope when sent to work in other regions”.
- “We equate 6 months graduate trainee-ship in Germany with 2 years effective working experience in Australia. This is reflected in the starting salary”.

On the whole, 90% of Australian companies said they would recommend that undergraduate students should have training such as RIIERP, and 90% considered a student's exposure to different cultural environments a necessary component of their professional development. Most (75%) of the respondents also commented that an employee with such exposure would have better chances of advancement in the company for the following reasons:

- “Necessary in this information age”.
- “Important for a globalised industry”.
- “Breadth of experience gained”.
- “Gives students the opportunity to measure themselves against their peers from overseas”.


• “Excellent opportunity for students…. our company has offices in the UK, Asia, South Africa, etc.”

DISCUSSION

Feedback from student, graduate and company respondents in this study clearly indicates that RIIERP improves the vocational and cultural skills of participants, as well as employment opportunities locally and globally. Students also claimed that their participation in RIIERP influenced their career direction, and graduates believed that participation in RIIERP assisted in securing a job and developing their careers.

Although not active participants in RIIERP, Australian companies involved in the study also perceived there was value in students and graduates participating in RIIERP. These respondents expressed a preference for employing graduates with international experience over those without, and indicated that the experience could help graduates advance in their careers, as well be financially remunerated. These observations are consistent with recent findings that linked international work placements with enhanced professional networks, global expertise and career advancement (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Sison & Brennan, 2012).

The views of overseas companies that host RIIERP students and graduates were overwhelmingly supportive. Even though the participants’ lack of knowledge of other languages was noted, it is clear that RIIERP participants integrate into the company’s social environment well. In addition, these overseas companies value RIIERP, as reflected in their continued involvement over many years and their desire to recommend that the program continue within their organisation.

All international companies rated the skills demonstrated by RIIERP participants as comparable to those expected from students in the host country. This, the authors believe, is a clear indication that this group of RMIT graduates and students are indeed capable of working productively overseas. These findings also demonstrate that RIIERP is implementing what Van Rooijen (2011) argues that industry now demands: “practical, real world education that is relevant, current and translates from theory to practice into sustainable impacts” (p.6). In accordance with the study by Crossman & Clarke (2010), the findings show that programs like RIIERP do enhance learning, skill development and employability.

RIIERP has, through its international WIL placements, developed comprehensive and long-term partnerships with high profile companies at the international level. The success of the program has developed over time, and in its early days placement numbers were low as a result of the significant commitments in resources the program required, both from the university and from the companies concerned. However the growth of the program and the diversification of the WIL placements offered demonstrate that this alliance has turned out to be beneficial for all stakeholders. The feedback from the students, graduates and companies that participated in this study overwhelmingly indicates that they believe their participation has been beneficial for professional development and employability of the students and graduates.

REFERENCES


Copyright © 2014 Sylvester Abanteriba, Elizabeth Parkinson & Julianne Reid

The author(s) assign to the Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited, an educational non-profit institution, a non-exclusive licence to use this article for the purposes of the institution, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to the Australian Collaborative Education Network to publish this document on the ACEN website, and in other formats, for the Proceedings of the ACEN National Conference, Gold Coast 2014. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).