In Work For Work - Seamless Integration Of Academic Learning And Practical Application
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Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

- a holistic approach to inculcate lifelong competencies into the curriculum.

- workplace is a platform for practical application of acquired theoretical knowledge

- intangible soft skills outside the classroom situation.

- in-depth tripartite interaction between teacher, learner and the more knowledgeable other (MKO) from industry.

- the workplace becomes a learning space.
PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS ON WIL

American educational theorist Kolb first recognised the value of “experiential learning” in 1984. Developments on the theory of “experiential learning” gave rise to WIL.

Medhat (2007) qualifies work integrated learning (WIL) as paid or unpaid work undertaken either through work placements or in-house training or learning through work or professional development, in conjunction with formally accredited educational programs.

Work based learning supports the personal and professional development of students who are already in work and the focus of the learning and development tend to be on the student’s workplace activities (Brennan & Little, 2006).
Pedagogically WIL is categorised into three areas

- Learner centred
- Discipline centred
- Employer centred

“Work integrated learning experiences provide a bridge for the student between the academic present, and their professional future - an opportunity to apply and merge theoretical knowledge gained in academic studies to “real world” work place practical experiences, and to prepare the student for a career by providing an opportunity to develop relevant professional skills” (Martin and Hughes, 2009, p.8).
The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

The MKO, the industry supervisor
• creates the desired learning environment so the learner can successfully acquire the relevant skill sets to achieve the professional and personal learning outcomes of the internship.

• provides challenging situations to integrate theoretical academic knowledge with ‘real world’ workplace know how.

• allocates tasks to incorporate skills the learner already possesses, as well as new skills the task may demand from the pragmatic standpoint.

Brings opportunities for industry:
- to contribute to curriculum design,
- exposure to innovation,
- creativity and new approaches in the curriculum
Unitec’s commitment -The academic component

To provide the intern with the opportunity to experience “real world learning”.

During this co-operative learning experience the intern is able to:

- Gain an understanding of real workplace practice
- Enhance work competencies and skill sets
- Make tangible connections between theory and practice
- Acquire insight to assist career direction
- Obtain work experience and networks to enhance career prospects
- Grow in self-awareness, maturity and confidence
- Gain exposure to real world learning in an area related to their studies
Case Description & Sampling

**Sample**: 16 interns in the final year of the Bachelor of Communication at Unitec, New Zealand, that has 4 specialisations; Media, Public Relations, Event Management and International Communication.

**Course**: mandatory 30 credit, one semester course requires students to work a minimum of 200 hours in organisations within their selected specialisation.

**Placement Preparation**: academic requirement is attendance at 15 hours of workshops on topics such as professional practice, CV preparation, project and time management, workplace ethics, critical self-reflection and personal and professional goal setting.

**Assessment**: Individual e portfolio of learning with evidence of: project and work objectives plan, examples of work produced, collaborative assessment, learning journals, end of placement reflection, updated C.V, personal and professional goals achieved at the conclusion of the internship.
Aims & Objectives

• To evaluate the effectiveness of experiential learning.
• To ascertain student perspectives on the relevance of WIL undertaken in the final year of the Bachelor of Communication Degree.
• To confirm and further refine the WIL in the higher education

Objectives:
• To generate meaningful data on WIL
• To analyse the effectiveness of WIL
Methodology

Qualitative research used detailed surveys – using semi-structured questionnaires with both closed and open qualitative questions was the primary form of data collection.

This method of data collection generated numerical data for comparison purposes as well as an insightful spectrum of student opinions and perceptions on WIL.
Findings & Analysis

A combination of thematic and quantitative analysis was used to examine the data.

Qualitative data was analysed thematically from open ended questions in the survey.

Quantitative data was derived from the closed questions using Microsoft Excel.

The questionnaires were anonymous and administered by a third party.

100% response rate.

Placements were either in the private sector or not-for-profit organisations either in internal or external communication in media, public relations or event management.

WIL was a new experience for 61% of the participants.
Interns response was positive. 100% favoured WIL as an excellent or a very good learning tool.
Four Significant Themes

The 4 significant themes were:

- value of experiential learning
- practical application of theory
- development of skills
- acquired skill sets
1. Value Of Experiential Learning

WIL enables “students to recognise their future learning needs and develop their capabilities for lifelong learning” (Richardson et al., 2009).

Student comments reaffirm the value of experiential learning

“It has changed my learning experiences by providing me with opportunities to learn first-hand”

“It makes theory and academic learning relevant & real world skill acquisition”

“It has given me opportunities to apply my theory based learning into real world situations (work & life).”
2. Practical Application Of Theory

The best way to learn the practical skills required after graduation is to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world environments (University of Newcastle, 2014).

WIL is invaluable to the student experience to provide interns with a space to apply theory to practice.

One student commented:
“I believe it is an excellent opportunity to gain working experience & learning the aspects of the business communications environment before starting my career in the field”

Another student stated that internship is “an excellent tool to put what we have learned over the course of the degree into practice”.
3. Development of Skills

Lifelong learning is the answer to prepare for the unpredictable future and has progressively created this paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. (Barr & Tagg, 1995.)

The acquisition of lifelong skills is confirmed in the following comments:

“Personally this is how I learn best. I feel very effective as it is not just being taught but in a way students have to teach themselves”

“It is beyond valuable! I learnt so much that will be valuable to me going forward. It’s so important to apply the theory we learnt and reflect on it. An invaluable experience- loved it”.

Lifelong skills imply the inculcation of transferable skills.
4. Acquired Skill Sets

The research findings confirm individual capability building. (Richardson et al. 2009).

The process of critical thinking enables “students to recognise their future learning needs and develop their capabilities for lifelong learning” (Richardson et al. 2009).

Industry internship prepares the knowledge worker to think independently and to act effectively in a diverse dynamic workplace environments.

Workplace practice presents challenges and anomalies that require the versatility for quick, competent, and often innovative action.

More effective ways of applying knowledge means continuous opportunities for the intern to develop professional competencies.
4. Acquired Skill Sets

Table of skills and their rating

- Reflection on Practice
- Innovation & Creativity
- Presentation Skills
- Research Skills
- Critical Thinking
- Team Work & Collaboration
- Negotiating Skills
- Project Management
- Bicultural & intercultural awareness
- Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Problem Solving
- Self Direct Learning
Professional competencies

Professional competencies are the globally recognised essential intangible, generic transferable soft skills:
critical thinking,
personal initiative to reflect on action and consequently on the spot decision making.

Students rated communication skills and initiative as two of their weakest capabilities.

Weisz (2000) identifies the capabilities as communication skills, self-confidence, customer relationship management, enthusiastic participation, industry & business knowledge, self-sufficiency, personal organisation, professional networks and professional ethics.
Conclusion

The industry experience compels students to take greater responsibility of their learning with emphasis on self-directed learning.

Academic supervisors and MKO’s act as facilitators making learning holistic and relevant.

Employability of interns was enhanced to the extent that approximately 43% of the interns who participated in this research have now found permanent positions in their selected WIL organisations in the 4 communication specialisations; Media, Public Relations, Event Management and International Communication. This research endorses the value of WIL pedagogy in higher education.

The student perspectives substantiate its effectiveness and relevance in the real world and producing work ready graduates who meet expectations of industry and integrate seamlessly into the workplace.