Combining Work and Study – a solution?

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ABSTRACT

Anyone dealing regularly with advising students is aware of the conflict between academic and non-academic pursuits, in particular paid employment, that can lead to under-performance and absence frequently followed by withdrawal from the course. Work has been perceived as conflicting with study rather than enhancing the learning experience, unless it is part of a sandwich course.

Current progression rates indicate that some of those withdrawing at first and second year are working part-time and not combining work and study effectively. In order to address this issue it was necessary to devise a structured approach that gave credit to students whilst at work that also enhanced the learning experience.   To that end, the Advisor of Studies devised a module to help students structure their personal development for work and study.

The purposes of introducing the module were to:
- Improve students' performance in examinations and coursework.
- Minimise "drop-out" rates.

The design of the programme integrates the skills required for academic study with those developed as a result of employment, voluntary work or vocational training that is not otherwise recognised as a part of the course undertaken.

The module aims to counteract this cause of poor progression by acknowledging and directing the skills and knowledge attained in a non-academic environment. Students who leave with the Diploma in Higher Education and utilised this option are expected to be more likely to return to their studies at a later date.

In conjunction with the assessment strategy adopted it is envisaged that the module will, to a certain extent, address one cause of poor progression.

1   WORK AND STUDY?

Anyone dealing regularly with advising students is aware of the conflict between academic and non-academic pursuits, in particular paid employment, that too often leads to under-performance and absence frequently followed by withdrawal from the course. Work has been viewed as conflicting with study rather than enhancing the learning experience, unless it is part of a sandwich course.

Current progression rates indicate that part of the reason for some of those withdrawing at first and second year is working part-time and not combining work and study effectively. In order to address this issue it was necessary to devise a structured approach that gave credit to students whilst at work that also enhanced the learning experience. To that end, the Advisor of Studies devised a module to help students structure their personal development for work and study.

2 PURPOSE

The purposes of introducing the module were to:
- Improve students' performance in examinations and coursework.
- Minimise "drop-out" rates.

This is achieved by designing a programme to integrate the skills required for academic study with those developed as a result of paid employment or vocational training.

The module was discussed from concept with staff from Students. The various meetings and discussions resulted in a positive and proactive approach to developing better prepared students based on the typical skills of those entering our courses.

This module is aimed at Level 2. The reasoning is based upon experiences and discussion with other members of academic staff and Student Support Services. The module has been designed to make it relevant and practical to students, whether or not they are experiencing progression problems.

2.1 Operation of proposed module
Three interviews are required with each student with the following objectives:
- Appraisal of students' needs;
- Unstructured Personal Development Plan designed and discussed; and
- Structured Personal Development Plan agreed.

The use of more one-to-one enables better support to guide students in undertaking their workload rather than hoping that they can automatically achieve a successful approach.

2.2 Advantages:
To UAD
- Addresses the major cause of withdrawal and under-performance by students.
- Enhances the benefits of vocational work and employment without conflict to study.
- Clear expression of development of life-long learning skills for students within the curriculum.

To students
- Can be developed for students at UAD.
- Develops the all-round educational experience of students.
- Makes students more employable.

2.3 Limitations:

- Staff resources and training
- Ownership – any resources required still have to come from a particular budget.
- May be perceived as conflicting with courses where Supervised Work Experience or sandwich placement are provided.
- Results can only be processed at the August/September Board with no possibility of reassessment.

3 IMPROVING THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Whilst studying at University students should get an "all-round educational experience". Within this context the University strives to develop the transferable skills to assist students preparation for life-long learning. Work experience gained from employment and vocational training can form a part of their life-long learning in addition to academic experience.

However, work experience in itself is not what this module intends to deal with. The module aims to get the student to ***demonstrate the learning taken from academic studies and work experience***. The learning experience is essential in developing transferable skills and improving on performance for the future.

The benefits of recording and reflecting on personal development for students are to:
- Learn new skills and develop existing skills to a higher level.
- Improve future employment prospects and enhance career development.
- Develop confidence in their abilities in dealing with people and work.
- Provide skills to enable students to adapt to a dynamic and changing work environment.

4 ASSESSMENT STRATEGY

Some of this section was designed taking into account a report based on the experience and work of Brenda Little and Nigel Dixon whilst at the (then) Employment Department in 1995 (1), entitled, "Assessment strategies for work-based learning" and is referenced accordingly. It is evident that to achieve fair assessment of such learning is a complex process.

Reasons for assessing learning experiences from employment, in this context, are:
- Recognition of the application of practical skills in a work environment.
- Recognition that any employment forms part of a broad-based, all-round educational experience – regardless of the nature of the employment.
- Helps students to integrate theory and practice of transferable skills.
- Helps students to evaluate and act upon their strengths and weaknesses.
  (adapted from: Little, B. & Dixon, N. 1995)

In designing the assessments, there was a deliberate decision not to use employer's input due to the following specific problems:
- Varying standards employers will have in relation to the nature of employment undertaken.

- Stereotyping and/or personality conflicts that may distort an employer's/supervisor's view of performance (either making student too good to be true, the "halo" effect, or implying they can do nothing right – either extreme being unacceptable).
- Employer/supervisor may not have been directly involved in all the situations/tasks in the range of work based situations student experiences.

(adapted from: Little, B. & Dixon, N. 1995)

The module assessment strategy is **criterion-referenced** i.e. the submissions will be judged against pre-defined criteria. This means that **all students who meet the criteria would be assessed as achieving the related grade, regardless of how other students performed**.

4.1 Outline of assessments

In order to ensure the assessment is fair to everyone undertaking the module, regardless of employment, outline details of the assessments (taken from the student handbook for the module) are:

4.1.1 Personal Development Plan

Purpose of the assessment.

Enable you to develop your ability to undertake self-appraisal as objectively as possible.

Outline of assessment criteria

Complete the "Appraisal" of the PDP, covering the minimum sections provided that detail:
- Skills/knowledge profile.
- Current role.
- Short-term development needs.
- Long-term personal/career development.
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Complete the "Planning" section of the PDP, with no less than four development objectives, stating the following for each:
- Your current level of competence.
- Your required level of competence.
- Practical considerations in your employment context.
- The time-scale set for each objective within your employment context.
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Complete the "Development" section of the PDP, for each of the development objectives identified at the planning stage, stating the following for each:
- The subject area covering the development objective.
- The method(s) of development, i.e. how you intend achieving the objective. It is possible to use a combination of methods to achieve development.
- Dates that related activities took place, taken from your diary.
- The time (in whole hours) spent on these activities.

Complete the "Reflection" section of the PDP, for each of the development objectives identified:
- Stating the new level of competence.
- Brief statement on how you benefited from the experience.

- Further action, if any, should be stated (If satisfied you are skilled or better then state so here – do not leave any section blank).

The assessor
As this is based on your own appraisal this module allows you to grade your work with an equal weighting to that of the assessor. If the difference is more than 2 grade points then discussion between the student and Module Tutor to arrive at an acceptable grade will take place. Failing such agreement being achieved, for whatever reason, the Division Leader or his/her nominee can make the final award.

4.1.2 Diary/portfolio
Purpose of the assessment.
Enable you to record effectively and clearly your work for future reflection.

Outline of assessment criteria
Satisfactory completion and submission of a **daily** diary record (**if part-time employment, each day employed**), or a copy thereof, detailing the nature of experience in relation to the development objectives. For the purposes of this assessment satisfactory completion is taken to mean clear and legible method of recording data such that a third party can confirm the data without ambiguity. In addition, any **evidence** to support the objectives should be included in a **neatly presented portfolio**, with any evaluation/self reflection commentaries/narratives with the evidence.

4.1.3 Report
Purpose of the assessment
To demonstrate what you have learned from the work experience in a clear, structured manner.

Outline of assessment criteria
Presentation of a structured report that contains clearly defined aims that are satisfactorily concluded within the submission.
Imaginative and innovative presentation of your learning experience to produce a clear, interesting and professionally presented report.
The report details each of the development objectives and the learning experience for each is clear.

4.2 Weighting
The weighting of the assessments, to give an indication of importance and effort, are:

PDP	20%
Diary/portfolio	30%
Report	50%

5 CONCLUSIONS

Increasing importance to final outcomes from a course for students requires an integrated approach to include learning from sources outside the normal educational environment. With increasing emphasise on life-long learning professionals are required to undertake a combination of work and study. There is no reason why combined work and study cannot

begin successfully at undergraduate level – with appropriate recognition of the transferable skills and other learning gained from the experience.

REFERENCES

(1)   Little, B. & Dixon, N. 1995 Assessment strategies for work-based learning. Employment Department. (ISBN 0 7492 73143)