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WIL: Achieving intended and unintended learning outcomes of university study

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Abstract

Students in Hong Kong commonly have some form of part-time work, so the question is ‘do they need to gain more workplace experience?’ However, the purpose of work-integrated learning (WIL) is not to generate income, as is the case with a part-time job. Indeed, WIL can be of benefit in four main areas: academic, personal, skill development and career (Dressler and Keeling, 2004). University students, being novices, have the potential through WIL to identify the learning gap between requirements in university study and the workplace, personal interests and potential careers, and espoused theories and theories in use in the real world.

Despite the differing nature and varied WIL opportunities organized by universities in Hong Kong, students can plan the intended learning outcomes related to the programme they are studying when first assigned to WIL activities. Focus group interviews were conducted with five student groups from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University on their WIL experiences in 2006, and it was noted that some students did not know the scale and types of tasks involved, although they did know where to report for duty. Furthermore, they had supervisors with different levels of commitment to supervision. As they reflected on their experiences, the students reported both excitement and disappointment in their WIL activities. Some perceived that they had gained good experience during the placement period and wished they could have done more, but some were disappointed because they were given only limited duties. However, they believed that good lessons had been learned when enabled to reflect on the whole experience.

A lot of effort was made between the university and its industrial partners to prepare WIL placements (Abeysekera, 2006). It was found that the key to maximizing learning opportunities was to engage these students in setting realistic learning goals and preparing them for learning when interacting with stakeholders in the workplace, and the WIL opportunities provided did promote reflection on the gap between academic learning and learning in a work-related context..

Introduction

When students enrol in university, some may already have considered what careers they want to pursue. Now that there are more university graduates in society, such students want to have more practical experience in their undergraduate courses because this may improve their employment opportunities after graduation. Many studies confirm the value of learning in the workplace, including learning professional skills and knowledge, improving self-confidence, promoting reflective thinking, and building networks for their future careers (Crebert *et al.*, 2004a; Dressler and Keeling, 2004; Graham and Megarry, 2005; Morgan and Turner, 2000; Spowart, 2006; Wilson and Pirrie, 1999. More importantly, students can experience an easier transition from university to employment (Crebert *et al.*, 2004b).

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University places a high value on WIL in the curriculum. Starting from the triennium 2005–08, all UGC-funded full-time undergraduate programmes have had to include a work-integrated education (WIE) component. The university aims to provide its academic programmes in a professional context, giving opportunities for its students to develop all-round professional competence and increase their employability. The types of WIE activity provided range from a ten-month full-time placement in a ‘sandwich’ programme, two-month summer placements, community service and clinical placements to a three-credit, six-month exchange programme offered through the International Association for the Exchange of Students

for Technical Experience (IAESTE). In general, students are expected to participate in these activities in the summer following completion of their second year 2; however, some are also arranged mid-semester and some during the third year, or fourth year for those attending the sandwich programme, depending on the specific programme. Given this situation, it is important to explore students' experiences of these activities. As part of a pilot study, invitations were sent to students who had completed WIE activities in four departments in 2006. The interviewees were asked to participate voluntarily in focus group interviews, which aimed to explore whether they had achieved the intended learning outcomes, such as applying theoretical knowledge and developing professional competence, and also whether there were any unintended learning outcomes. This study aimed to identify areas for improvement in arranging WIE activities by individual departments in the university and by the employing organizations taking part.

Research methodology

Invitations for the focus group interviews were sent to Building and Real Estate (BRE), the Institute of Textile and Clothing (ITC), the School of Design (SD) and the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM). Two student groups from SHTM and one group from each of the other departments that had completed the WIE activities were interviewed, making a total of 21 students (See Table 1).

	BRE	ITC	SD	SHTM
Year 2	2	1	0	7
Year 3	2	2	3	0
Year 4	0	0	0	4

Table 1. Year group of interviewees from the four departments

Semi-structured interviews were considered a more appropriate method of exploring the research questions than sending out questionnaires because this was the first round of full implementation of WIE activities in all undergraduate programmes. This method would also give the researcher an opportunity to probe for more details (Cohen *et al.*, 2007; Fowler, 2009), notably about issues

raised when experiencing the activities. The discussions covered the perceived achievement of intended and unintended learning outcomes and related issues. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was recorded and subsequently transcribed. As this was a qualitative study, the data are presented as a selection of direct quotes and paraphrases of interviewees' comments.

Achieving intended learning outcomes through WIE activities

The intended learning outcomes were broadly defined as practising professional knowledge and skills in the respective disciplines. Although they learned concepts and theories in the classroom, the students interviewed reported that they had opportunities to learn beyond bookish knowledge when they reflected on their hands-on experience. These are some sample comments:

We may not know exactly what a merchandiser does, but after this three months experience, we get to know it much better.

We may have studied those things, but when it comes to real working, there are many details that we don't know yet. We have to follow the details step by step, and we have to make sure they are all correct. Having the chance to ask questions whenever I have a doubt, the staff gave me practical answers and not just theories from books.

Students from ITC

My placement was located in Macau. As we have only studied things about construction and building in the university for two years, there is a lot that we don't know. When we were working, we always have to ask or check back the previous data. We simply don't have enough knowledge to cope with the work. Also, what we have learned so far is just theories in the books. It is very different from what we are doing in the placement.

I am studying building in the university, but when I was in the placement at a school, it would be impossible for it to construct a building. It was just building smaller things, like a roof. This is different from what we are studying at university. In the placement, I can work on a construction site, getting to know every detail of it and getting involved in many different things.

Students from BRE

I experienced the whole procedure of the production, from the design to the product. It is real, but not just like the notes and PowerPoint we read in the lesson.

In the internship, I learned how to communicate with colleagues as a production team. I learned how they do research on the product design. And I had the chance to take part in a real project, cooperating with colleagues, and knew about the division of labour at different stages.

Students from SD

We learn a lot of practical skills in the placement. We mainly focus on the theories in the classroom, and in the placement we can try working in the hotels. For example, we would work at the front desk. We learned the system of the computer in school, but in the placement we can learn the procedures of facing or checking-in a guest. We then know clearly how things work.

We gained a lot of experience during the placement. We have to work in the front line, and we can learn a lot of skills. We get to know the terms and procedures in dealing with customers. We had the experience to communicate with them. All these can't be learned in books.

Students from SHTM

Meeting the challenges in WIE activities

The excitement of being able to test theories and put theories into practice does not rule out unplanned challenges. Having communicated with the placement organizations, the university tries to arrange activities that best match students' disciplines. Some students said that they were assigned duties they could manage, but others encountered situations that they were not prepared for, including the need to communicate professional terms to colleagues and clients that they did not know before the placement (SD and ITC); being assigned to work in a different area to the student's specialty (SHTM); having to manage different standards and codes of practice when working outside Hong Kong (SHTM); needing to communicate with non-Chinese speakers in overseas placements (BRE); having to use software that was unfamiliar but required in the industry (BRE); having to

make management decisions with no academic advice (BRE); having to manage gender differences in the workplace (BRE); and needing to communicate technical terms in Chinese to customers despite having learned only English technical terms in class (ITC). In some cases, students received little information on what to do and were given tasks that provided little challenge (BRE, ITC, SHTM). The SHTM students had to rely on themselves to learn on the spot and had to apply prior knowledge at work. The BRE students learned to use unfamiliar software in order to complete tasks at work, while a female BRE student learned how to remain confident when working in a male-dominated environment. The ITC students reported that they needed to translate English documents for customers and that they had to spend a month learning the technical terms in Chinese. Others reported that they became more aware of the problems caused by not being able to understand communications between overseas colleagues, their inexperience in managing situations and their failure to meet requirements, and they often became frustrated when they experienced a big discrepancy between what they had learned and common practice.

Achieving unintended learning outcomes through WIE activities

Although the students were novices in the professional field, the working environment could become a catalyst to encourage them to take responsibility and use their initiative. Working in Shanghai, SHTM students worked on the front desk and in the food and beverage department to practise aspects of operating a hotel despite this not being their specialty in university. They were also given the additional responsibility of being trainers for new staff, but when they were given such challenging tasks and learned to tackle them by themselves, they felt that they had become more independent. These students also had opportunities to talk to workers on the front line and to learn about the problems of working with management. In this way, they became more aware

of office politics and of the communication gap between front-line workers and management. They also observed differences in standards and processes in hotel operations between Hong Kong and Shanghai, and, having worked outside Hong Kong, they realized that the fundamental concept of service was also different.

Students in classroom may be perceived as passive learners. However, when they encounter new challenges, some students took them proactively. It is not uncommon to find that students in internship are given basic and low responsibility. A student from SD took the initiative to approach the senior staff to discuss about his/her strengths such that s/he could be given more challenging tasks. Another SD student stated that s/he usually asked questions not until the staff members were free because they were often busy at work. Students from ITC reported that they would ask questions when they were not clear or certain of a task. As they took the work of merchandisers, it was different from the espoused theory studied in university. Through the placement, they learned about theories in actions.

Issues emerging from WIE activities

The gap in expectations created by a lack of information could cause frustration. Some SHTM students felt that the management concept learned in university could be applied in the placement because they were assigned to operational duties. Similarly, BRE students reported doing skilled tasks in the workplace, having learned mostly theory in university. Another common concern was being given little responsibility, such as doing photocopying, posting samples, ordering materials or merely observing how other staff work. By contrast, some employers assumed that the students had all-round knowledge in the field and expected them to perform cross-sectional duties when the students had been streamed into specialties in their university programmes.

However, the critical factors depended on the nature of the tasks they were assigned and how supervisors interacted with them (Spowart, 2006; Billett, 1998). On-site supervisors were perceived as the most influential figures, assessing the students on their workplace performance. Some supervisors provided a lot of just-in-time advice, whereas others were less supportive. This could be because supervisors had different levels of commitment: although some were ready to provide guidance, others expected to assess rather than guide the trainees. In addition, different organizations offered different cultural support for the students, ranging from delegating a few staff members to be solely responsible for providing advice and guidance to having events to welcome students and engaging them in various responsibilities. Subsequently, staff members across departments in the placement organizations were involved to varying degrees to support the students.

Reinforcing placement learning

The key stakeholders in achieving the maximum learning potential in placements are students, and the staff of the university and the placement organization. It is possible to arrange for students to attend pre-placement orientation, which may include how to write a CV and how to prepare for and perform in an interview. However, students should also have discussions with alumni and senior students, who can share practical experiences, particularly about expecting the unexpected, and provide tips about learning opportunities in the workplace, such as taking the initiative whenever possible. Furthermore, students can plan for what they aim to learn as a learning contract with the university. Keeping a learning journal is also a useful tool to help students to reflect on their actions at work. However, they tend to take this as a listing of tasks rather than what lessons have been learned. Therefore, it would be useful if they can be shown or briefed on what a learning journal is. Students can be encouraged to reflect on what intended

learning outcomes and unintended learning outcomes they have experienced: book theories that can be applied and theories generated at work; what initiatives they have taken; what lessons were learned when mistakes were made; how they managed uninformed expectations; and what feedback they received from their supervisor, clients, peers and mentors. To capture professional experiences, large and small, students can build electronic portfolios that reflect their strengths and provide evidence of professional competence (Hodgson, 2007; Field, 2002)

Post-placement debriefing is equally important in consolidating placement learning. Although students may be assessed by their supervisors, they may not be informed about the details of their performance at work. However, students going through this apprenticeship valued comments from both professionals in the field and mentors from the university. Indeed, they mentioned that they wanted to identify their strengths and areas for improvement so that they knew how to continue to improve in preparing for their future careers. Students in the groups interviewed echoed the importance of students from the current cohorts about sharing their work experiences locally and overseas in order to broaden their awareness of international practice. This could result in a better understanding of professional practice when they apply for work in the future.

Limitations of the study

Although by interviewing students researchers can probe their WIL experiences in more detail, this pilot study may be biased towards the more vocal participants. Furthermore, it is only able to reflect the experiences of a small sample of students who were prepared to share their stories after the first year of implementation of the new policy. It does not report why and how students could not achieve the intended learning outcomes, i.e. gaining useful practical experience in the

workplace, in some WIL activities. It would be of greater value if a systematic survey of their experiences using a larger sample could be conducted in the future.

Conclusion

Apprenticing in the workplace is always challenging when students venture from bookish knowledge to practical experience. Because they were guided or exposed to assigned tasks, large and small, they could gain both practical and cultural experience of their disciplines as set out in the intended learning outcomes for the WIE activities they undertook.. To maximize the learning opportunities for students in the workplace, it is crucial that students be ready to take on responsibility. Therefore, student orientation should focus not only on how to write a CV and on developing interviewing skills but also on helping students to appraise their strengths and areas for improvement in both professional and personal development. By raising their self-awareness, students themselves can learn to take the initiative to push the boundaries and learn to become more proficient by accepting the steep learning curve intrinsic to any new challenges in the workplace. However, making this a success requires concerted efforts in onsite staff supervision to achieve planned, intended learning outcomes and incidental, unintended learning outcomes. As the majority of commercial employers have running a business as their primary focus, matching mutual expectations is necessary. Besides, to reinforce placement learning, debriefing with peers on what has been learned, both intended and unintended, would allow students to rethink further what they need to excel in when they continue their academic journey in preparation for their future careers.

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