

Education and Training for the Workplace: Workplace-readiness skills

Ms Susanne Taylor and Dr Cookie Govender (University of Johannesburg)

Abstract

50 million people in South Africa, of whom nearly 70% are under the age of 35, a 25.2% official unemployment rate (May 2012) and a national Vision 2030 (2011a) to reduce unemployment in SA to 6% by 2030 send a strong message that education, training and skills development are important.

Reflections on the piloted Human Resource Management work experience project initiated by the University of Johannesburg's Faculty of Management and the outcomes from the 18th World Association of Cooperative Education's World Conference round table session on workplace-readiness are the impetus for this paper contribution. A brief background to cooperative education and work integrated learning will set the scene, with legislative aspects providing a backdrop to the opportunity that the South African post-school education and training sector has to make a difference in the lives of students, to empower them to enter the world of work with confidence.

11 million jobs by 2030? Reduction of the current unemployment rate to 6 percent by 2030? Workplace-readiness skills are proposed as one solution.

Paper

Introduction

A key aspect of South Africa's National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (2011a) is sustainable development, with business, government and civil society playing inter-related roles in order to improve the lives of all South Africans. The Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training

(2012) is one of a range of recent skills development and human resource legislation that highlights the responsibility of the Higher and Further Education and Training institutions to ensure that the education and training they deliver meet the needs of the economy. Other applicable legislation includes the National Skills Development Strategy III (2011c) and the National Skills Accord (2011b).

As a so-called comprehensive university, the University of Johannesburg in South Africa offers both traditional formative education as well as vocational and professional programmes, which include a work integrated learning component. The University's Faculty of Management aims to create 'future fit leaders', thereby aligning itself to the University's 'learning to be' teaching, learning and assessment philosophy and strategy, in order that graduates are equipped with the requisite management and leadership skills, attitudes, values and knowledge for the workplace. Within this faculty, the department of Industrial Psychology and People Management (IPPM) offers a variety of qualifications in Human Resources Management (HRM), across a range from Diploma programmes to Doctorates. The Human Resources Management Diploma will be introducing a work integrated learning (WIL) component into the qualification in 2015. In order to build a base of participating WIL employer companies (future partners in skills development) the Department piloted a work integrated learning partnership model during the one-week September 2013 recess.

An overview of the HRM work experience project is provided, including the preparation for students for their workplaces and the interim feedback obtained. This, coupled with some of the outcomes from the 18th WACE World Conference round table sessions on workplace readiness, forms the basis of the paper, which includes a brief insight into cooperative education, with references to the relevant South African skills development legislation. An outline of a proposed workplace-readiness programme is proposed. The intention is that this becomes a point of departure for discussion, with the aim of such a programme becoming a compulsory module to be completed prior to students entering the workplace, be it for purposes of WIL or as graduate employees.

Cooperative Education – an education strategy centred on experiential learning

The literature abounds with various strategies and models of education. Adult education is said to have begun in the fourth century BC, from days where students sat at the feet of a master (Coetzee, 1999, p.63). Confucius (450 BC) is attributed to having said Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember, Involve me, and I will understand, thus a fore-runner of the notion of learning by doing. Cooperative education is one such strategy, combining classroom learning with on the job training.

South Africa's (SA) Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) defines cooperative education as: A philosophy of learning that promotes the concept of enhanced learning based on co-operation between education institutions and industry, commerce and the public sector (CHE: HEQC 2004). The workplace learning was referred to as in-service training initially in SA, with the terminology evolving through experiential training, experiential learning and most recently (since 2004) is widely known as work integrated learning. The term experiential learning has become an umbrella term, including concepts from service learning to work integrated learning. The promulgation of the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) in South Africa in 2007 for the first time introduced the term *work integrated learning* into a Department of Education document.

The cooperative education model is based on the concept of experiential learning, the process of making meaning from direct experience. David Kolb helped to promote the concept of experiential learning drawing heavily on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget. Kolb (1984, p.41) wrote that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it. His four-stage learning cycle model is central to the learning theory: a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, which in turn creates the new experience (Kolb, 1984). In order for an individual to gain a better understanding of new knowledge and to retain the information for a longer time, it is vital for the individual to directly involve him/herself in the experience.

Advantages of the cooperative model are many. Some such advantages for the three role players in the model – industry, the education provider and the student - include:

- For industry, an additional productive entry-level employee with fresh ideas; skills development funding (tax rebates being one), the opportunity to gain experience in mentorship, influence curricula of higher education institutions and the opportunity to evaluate students as prospective employees
- For higher education institutions, industry input into academic programmes, the chance for staff to remain up to date, research topics and related opportunities
- For students, their qualification with a period of relevant work experience, remuneration (usually) to assist them to support themselves and to pay their study fees, a probability of WIL resulting in a permanent placement, the opportunity to integrate classroom theory with real-life practice under supervision, enhanced employability skills, bursaries and more.

The Post-School Education and Training Sector in South Africa

Since 1994, the public higher education landscape in SA has undergone many changes, resulting in 25 public Universities and 50 public Further Education and Training colleges (with almost 300 campuses). These, together with the 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were placed under a newly formed Ministry of Higher Education and Training (HESA, 2009); consolidating the post-school education and training sector under one government ministry. The role of SETAs, which had prior to 2009 resided in the Department of Labour, is to disburse skills levy funds to organisations and to promote workplace training within specific economic sectors of SA. Linking these with the post-school education sector has many advantages for skills development.

The Human Resource Management (HRM) model and initial experiences

The HRM Work Experience model initiated by the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Faculty of Management seeks to fast-track industry partner identification. In doing so, partnerships would be forged with individual or groups of students then being allocated to approved industry partners to be mentored and to experience a work place environment by job shadowing a Human Resource

Practitioner, allowing students to gain additional insights into aspects of their curriculum. The model is intended to be a viable, cost-effective and practical solution for large numbers of students to gain workplace experience, thus aligning classroom learning to workplace policy, procedures and practices. (Taylor & Govender, 2013).

The model was conceptualised as occurring in five phases:

- Phase 1: Design, development and approval
- Phase 2: Preparation for implementation
- Phase 3: Implementation
- Phase 4: Evaluation of the model
- Phase 5: Review.

Phase 2 included the workplace-readiness preparation. This was completed over a two-month period and consisted of:

- Awareness and information sessions: preparation of stakeholders for the HRM project
- Distribution of WIL information packs
- Preparation of students for entry into the workplace
- Finalisation of the industry partner base.

The activities required for Phase 2 with reference to the preparation of students for entry into the workplace were:

- focus group sessions with selected students
- focus group sessions with the lecturer
- decisions and documents of WIL project team
- workshops from academic support services for students (workplace readiness skills offered by the Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development (PsyCaD))
- communication with selected industry partners
- the preparation of information packs consisting of memos, letters, brochures, portfolio of evidence (POE) criteria and relevant forms.

Of specific relevance are the basic series of PsyCaD workplace readiness workshops, aimed at empowering students with job search skills (given that they ideally should have secured their own workplace opportunity), CV writing skills (which included the importance of the cover letter and the emailing) and interview skills (including matters related to punctuality and appropriate dress code). The series of workshops was arranged by the class representative from each of the two participating groups and occurred two months prior to the work placement, planned for the recess period of 2-6 September 2013.

It became apparent as the recess approached, that most students had not been able to secure their own opportunity, only four of the 60 students securing own placements. Of the remaining 56, 54 were placed by the UJ WIL Coordinator, with ongoing attempt to place the remaining two students.

Difficulties experienced by students are illustrated below, taken verbatim from their email messages:

miss taylor im sill waitin or you to get back to me about the company < im only attending my classes on monday s if you can stil refer me anywhere for he WIL programme i can still make it please.. iv also been trying to secue a workplace with no luck on my side
and

I did try few companies before and they rejected me,most of them said they are focusing on taking interns now. It's not easy when you are not connected to the right people and it also cost lots of money to go around and look for companies. Hence the reason why I and most of my fellow classmates turned to you for your help, is because we couldn't find companies. My only hope is your help,there's nothing more I can do at this point.

Students who had been unsuccessful in securing placements were requested to submit their CVs to the UJ WIL Coordinator, the person centrally having responsibility for overseeing WIL at UJ. From the emails containing the CVs received, the need for more in-depth workplace preparedness sessions was obvious: poor spelling and business writing skill, lack of formality in the email (no form of greeting), inadequately constructed CVs with cell number and email addresses having been omitted).

Examples illustrate the point best:

hi i'vent received any call yet about hrm project and it seems lyk all my classmate have received

and

Miss A Name Changed cover latter and a CV for the Humna Resourse Management Job Shodowing Project

A company requested that I replace this student with one that can write proper English not slang after receiving the email below:

Tank u a rily apreiciate da oppoturnity u hv granted me, I'm also looking forward 2 gain more eprience concerning HR in your organisation

The importance of appropriate email and telephone skills is underlined by an email such as the one received from a company:

I would love to shadow and empower anybody who is willing to learn. What I do not appreciate is a young man who has neither telephone etiquette nor understanding that there is a business language that one uses for business matters.

When I spoke with this young man this morning he kept on saying "Ja", "Ja", on the phone, now see the email below.

We are a very busy team and we would appreciate it if you could refer to us students who mean business as we will all spend our valuable time contributing to these young adults as a team.

Thank you

To their credit, once students had been reminded of the importance of changing their voice mail messages and way of answering their calls and checking their spelling and general ways of sending emails, this improved greatly as evidence by the following two emails:

Good afternoon

I have had no luck in finding a company. To be honest this week was pressure on me and I made no meaningful attempt to get myself a job opportunity. If anything should come up please count me in.

Thank you

and

Dear Ms Taylor

I have been unsuccessful in terms of getting a company to job shadow for the coming september holidays the company i was waiting for a response from declined my request yesterday.

Kind Regards

Name Surname (Cell Number).

The students who participated in the HRM Work Experience Project are in the process of writing up their Portfolios of Evidence for submission for evaluation. Immediate lessons learned from the pilot project are: the importance of sufficient student preparation that they are aware of time lines, checking their email messages and voice mails daily during this time, that all communication should be made in a professional manner and that initial support from the central WIL office is important. A post-experience survey will be conducted (with employers and students) to gather input on how to improve on the placement project.

World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE) World Conference – Round Table 7: Work-readiness

The 18th WACE World Conference was held in Durban, South Africa in June 2013. Part of the conference programme was a series of round table discussions on matters of importance to WIL, providing opportunity for input from a range of stakeholders in a more informal setting. Of specific relevance to this paper are the discussions on the topic of work-readiness.

Some of the main questions that were posed and responded to regarding workplace-readiness were:

1. What are the skills required by students as they enter the workplace?
2. What does industry/the employer expect from students?
3. Whose responsibility is it to make students work ready/to offer work-readiness programmes?
4. What do companies do to support students to adapt to the workplace?
5. When should work-readiness programmes be presented?

The skills required by students entering the workplace identified are:

- Self-discipline
- Time management
- Grooming
- The ability to work well with others across age, culture, experience and seniority
- Coping with diversity
- Adaptability to an unfamiliar environment
- Critical thinking
- Problem solving
- The right attitude (WACE, 2013).

This list excludes some of the basic skills required to actually obtain the workplace opportunity: the job search, CV writing and interview skills, although in the discussion on who should prepare students for the workplace, key components mentioned were email and telephone etiquette and skills, presentation and communication skills, work ethics of life etiquette (basic good manners and behaviour). The foregoing were all to ensure that students had the best chance of not only securing a WIL workplace, but of retaining the position as an entry level graduate by not making avoidable mistakes.

The three suggestions made as an outcome of the WACE Roundtable 7 discussion are indicated below

Suggestion 1:

WACE (and other National Associations) to consider making self-training resources available via the website on these important topics. Education Institutions to direct their students to these valuable resources.

Suggestion 2:

SA's Higher Education and Training Ministry to be lobbied to ensure that work-readiness programmes become a formal part of every qualification – whether a WIL component is present or not.

Suggestion 3:

WACE and its member organisations and Higher Education to make concerted efforts to bring industry partners to Co-op and WIL-related conferences/workshops: industry participation is key to the success of WIL (WACE, 2013).

Taking action in South Africa: Suggestion 2 to be acted on at the National Skills Conference, October 2013

South Africa's National Skills Authority in conjunction with Dr Blade Nzimande, the country's Minister of Higher Education and Training, will be convening a skills conference that will be attended by stakeholders in the post-school education and training sector. As the proclaimed 'voice' of cooperative education in SA, the Southern African Society for Cooperative Education (SASCE) has been invited to address the national skills commission theme *Turning every workplace into a training space* on the topic *Implementation of Work Integrated Learning in institutions*. SASCE will be taking Suggestion 2 from the WACE Conference Roundtable 7 to this conference, formally proposing there that workplace-readiness become a formal and compulsory model for all post-school education students. This module should be part of the academic programme for all students, whether they require workplace experience as part of their qualifications or not, and which should be presented in the six months prior to entering the workplace. Consideration may be given for electronic delivery, or self-study. Ideally, such a module would be registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This would follow examples as set by Australia, offering a Certificate in Work Education, a course of study which

prepares students for a first experience in the workplace and assisting young people to gain generic employability skills required by industry of an entry-level employee. (Australia, 2013).

Various workplace-readiness programmes are available internationally, with many of the resources mentioned available as open source, attesting to the importance of such programmes. An example is the list of *Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth*, generated from research provided through the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center based on employer input and 21st Century Skills (Virginia, 2013).

A draft proposal to be presented for consideration at the National Skills Conference in South Africa is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Workplace readiness – transitioning into the world of work

Group 1	Entry into the workplace
1.	Job search and the recruitment process * Students bring five job advertisements from various sources of jobs in their discipline and will apply for a Tax number and bank account
2.	CV writing and the cover letter * Students bring draft CV and copies of all relevant documents for their portfolio
3.	Interview skills, including mock interviews. *Students attend dressed as if for an interview
4.	Personal branding , including business dress, telephone skills and voice mail, social media profile and netiquette * Students send an email cover letter with their CV attached
Group 2	Rules of engagement in the workplace – workplace practice
5.	Legislation, policies and procedures * Students are introduced to the Labour Relations and Basic Conditions of Employment Acts, appreciate contracts, confidentiality and health and safety in the workplace

6.	Basic workplace etiquette: dress, eating, hygiene, visitors, communication, telephone/cell phone usage
7.	Meeting protocols and time management, including time keeping * Students attend a mock meeting and prepare the meeting documentation
8.	Communication in the workplace: written (electronic , memos and reports), verbal and non-verbal
Group 3	Interacting in the workplace
9.	Teamwork and Conflict Management
10.	Diversity and cultural awareness and sensitivity

Conclusions

11 million jobs in South Africa by 2030 with the reduction of the current unemployment rate to 6 percent by 2030? How? The University of Johannesburg's work experience project is but one initiative aimed at supporting this national project, taking a positive step by developing partnerships with industry and further marketing cooperative education/WIL as a viable education model, by creating employable graduates who may be absorbed into mainstream employment. Workplace and work-readiness skills are considered important to ensure that this process occurs seamlessly: workplace-readiness skills are key to successful entry into the workplace, and to continued employment.

Besides the requirement for policies and guideline documents for implementation of WIL with the necessary industry support, the student should be well prepared prior to applying for a WIL workplace and/or a graduate employment opportunity. This was confirmed by roundtable discussions at the recent WACE World Conference and the proposal of a workplace-readiness module to become compulsory will be made at the October 2013 National Skills Conference in South Africa.

Work-readiness happens through WIL. Students need to be prepared for the workplace so that they do not unwittingly disadvantage themselves by making avoidable mistakes. Education institutions have the initial responsibility, one they share with the student and the industry to enable entrants to transition into the world of work.

Education and Training for the Workplace? Workplace readiness skills are deemed to be a key component to transition students into the world of work.

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