

INTERROGATING STUDENT WORK RELATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT A SELECTED UNIVERSITY IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT: *The study sought to explore students' experiences and perceptions in order to unravel the challenges that students face as they go through their work related learning (WRL). The study employed a mixed research design approach with questionnaires and semi-structured interviews used as data collecting instruments. Two faculties which have an industrial attachment component as part of their curricula were involved in the study. The two faculties have a total of nine hundred and three (903) students, with seven hundred and three (703) already on attachment while the remainder have completed the attachment programme. Respondents' class lists were taken as strata while gender was also considered as a stratifying criterion. Stratified random sampling was used to come up with a representative sample of a hundred and fifty (150) students on whom the questionnaires were administered. Purposive sampling was used to locate interview respondents. The study established that students found it difficult to secure places for industrial attachment owing to the under performance of the economy and, consequently, some of them ended up settling for inappropriate attachment places in which they failed to get the requisite minimum functional exposure and were, more often than not, taken as sources of cheap labour. The major functional challenges faced by many of the students were the lack of information and computer technology (ICT) skills and business communication skills which resulted in the students having difficulty in adapting to the host companies' operating systems. The study also established that many of the students received little or no remuneration in terms of allowances from the host organisations during their period of attachment and had to grapple with travel and subsistence challenges. Amongst the numerous recommendations suggested, was the proposal to cover the WRL program under the Zimbabwe Manpower Development Fund.*

Key Words: *Work-related learning; pre-placement challenges; socio-economic challenges; functional challenges*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The increasingly dynamic economic climate has underscored the role and need for institutions of higher education to develop skills and capabilities that would be well geared for the obtaining world of work. Research output, of which the Dearing report (1997) in the UK made a significant contribution, has been calling for the development of more work-oriented curricular in tertiary institutions. The Nziramasanga Commission set in 1999 to evaluate Zimbabwe's education system concluded that the national curriculum was more inclined towards producing academics.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions president George Nkiwane is reported as saying that it was imperative for the inclusion of industrialists in crafting a relevant curriculum that would help students to acquire creative skills aligned to industry requirements (Newsday Zimbabwe, September 17, 2013). "As long as the industrialists are not involved in the curriculum, we will continue to churn out graduates that are not relevant to the industries. Industrialists and officials from the education sector should sit down and come up with a curriculum that is relevant to the current job market demands," (Nkiwane, *ibid*). In response to these calls, a number of universities and colleges have had to do major curricula overhauls.

Despite the obvious benefits to all the stakeholders the WRL programme is facing viability problems owing to the shrinking macro-economic space. The World Bank has said that the 2014 outlook for Zimbabwe's still ailing economy remains increasingly uncertain due to a host of internal and external factors (The Standard, 8 September 2013). In its September Economic Briefing, the bank said growth in Zimbabwe was rapidly fading, and after 4, 4% recorded in 2012, the growth projections for 2013 have been revised downwards to 3%, with little prospects for a recovery in 2014, *ibid*. The economy's growth projections have been stymied by low foreign direct investments, policy uncertainties after the July elections, non-extension of credit facilities from international lenders, amongst other ills. As a result, the industrial sector is characterised by massive company closures and retrenchments.

The critical aim of the WRL programme is to expose students to the practical world of work so that students would, on completion of their degree programmes, be suitably equipped for and adaptable to industrial practices. According to the university's general guidelines on WRL mentors at the respective places of attachment are responsible for the day to day guidance, supervision and evaluation of the students during the period of attachment while members of academic staff are required to undertake supervisory visits to assess the students' performance as well as the appropriateness of the attachment places. The students are required to secure their own attachment, maintain a log book detailing the work related activities during the period of attachment and to submit at least two performance related reports. The supervisors' evaluation, the students' reports and the academic staff's assessment constitute the key elements upon which overall performance of the students is rated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In almost every discipline, there are aspects that cannot be adequately covered through theoretical discourse hence work related learning interventions have increasingly been adopted by most institutions of higher learning. Connor and MacFarlane (2007) observe that questions of scope and definition often arise regarding work-related learning (WRL) because there is little consistency or consensus in language used or in what kinds of learning activities might be included. The English Quality and Curriculum Authority (2003), defines WRL as planned activities that use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices, and learning the skills for work. WRL is an intervention that uses the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the students to proficiently undertake work practices (Work Related Learning Guide, 2008) and encompasses all learning outcomes that are achieved through industrial attachment. The main objective is to expose students to

practical work situations while giving them the opportunity to transfer their theoretical knowledge into practice (Edziwa and Chivheya, 2013). The ultimate objective is to embed work-related learning into the curricula of universities in order to enhance the employability of their graduates (Connor and MacFarlane, 2007).

However, many employers who take students on attachment do not provide adequate on the job training relative to the requirements of the respective disciplines and some actually treat the students as a source of cheap labour and end up using them to do menial jobs that have little to do with students' specific needs, (Matande et al, 2008). In such circumstances the students then do not enjoy the intended benefits of WRL. According to the WRL guide (2008) the WRL benefits to students include:

- enriching their education and giving them a greater understanding of the 'world of work' which lies ahead of them;
- helping them to develop the 'employability skills' that make them attractive to their future employers;
- helping them to think through their learning options and career choices; and
- raising the possibility that they might be recruited in future by employers they come into contact with.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

WRL is meant to provide an effective platform to bridge the gap between theoretical classroom discourses and the actual work practices. However, the economy of Zimbabwe has continued to shrink with the industrial sector being reported as operating at approximately 35% of its capacity. Furthermore, competition for attachment places has been growing. There are over thirteen universities and twelve vocational training centres and polytechnic colleges who vie for attachment places within the ever shrinking industrial sector. Consequently, students are compelled to take up whatever placements industry avail, often with adverse working conditions. Thus, the study sought to interrogate the challenges encountered in the WRL programme from a student's perspective.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives that guided the study were to:

- determine the major challenges faced by students during WRL programme.
- explore the possible ramifications of a shrinking economy on students chances of getting appropriate placement.
- provide appropriate recommendations to address the challenges.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In this study, the researcher used a mixed method research design. Creswell (2009) asserts that mixed method research design involves philosophical assumptions and the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches. It also involves the use of both approaches in tandem, so that the overall strength of a study is greater than either qualitative or quantitative research (Creswell 2009). Questionnaire surveys and structured interviews were thus administered concurrently.

Location of participants

The two faculties have a total of nine hundred and three (903) students with seven hundred and three (703) students on industrial attachment and two hundred (200) have completed the WRL programme and are in their final year at college. Stratified random sampling was used to come up with participants on whom questionnaires were administered. Two strata were identified; being those students that had already completed the WRL programme and those that were undergoing the programme. Purposive sampling was used to locate interview participants. Purposive sampling is a judgmental sampling that involves the conscious selection of participants to the study in a deliberate way, with some focus in mind (Punch, 2005).

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires were administered to one hundred and fifty (150) participants. The questionnaires were administered during the respective supervisory visits and this ensured that there was a 100% response rate to the questionnaires. Thirty interviews were held, with each researcher interviewing ten purposively selected participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were coded into three categories namely, pre-placement challenges; socio-economic challenges; and functional challenges. The research findings are presented and discussed below starting off with the participants' profile and then proceeding to the three categories.

Participants' profile

The research drew respondents from both sexes and table 1 below summarizes the profile of questionnaire respondents:

Table 1 showing the designation-sex profile of respondents

Designation	Male	Female	Total
Final Year Students	28	22	50
Students On Attachment	47	53	100
Total	75	75	150

A total of 150 subjects participated in the questionnaire survey with an equal number of male and female respondents. This ensured that the study adequately and objectively captured perceptions and views from both sexes.

Pre-placement challenges

Eighty percent (80%) of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they had difficulty in securing attachment places. Almost all the interviewees also indicated that they had difficulty in securing places for attachment. This difficulty could be due to the decline in economic activity which has seen unprecedented company closures, with those still operating having scaled down on their employment levels. Sixty six percent (66%) of the questionnaire respondents indicated that they got placement due to the influence of certain people that were connected to the various organizations. Sunday and Bunmi, in *The Business Day* (2011), of Nigeria agree that securing industrial attachment placements in the North West African country is largely believed to be dependent on personal or indirect relationships between the students and one or more of the members of staff or management at the companies. Most of the interviewees also indicated that many of the organizations, especially town and rural councils preferred students whose parents or close relatives were either current or former employees in the respective organisations. The study found out that the issue of connections to influential people had a strong bearing on securing placements notwithstanding the tests and/or interviews that were administered to screen applicants for attachment in some organisations. A research by Edziwa and Chivheya (2013) on the problems faced by students in agricultural colleges while on attachment in Zimbabwe post the land reform programme gives corroborative evidence to this study's findings. They established that overall, students disagreed that securing attachment was easy and further analysis by sex, showed that female students expressed that finding attachment was a problem whilst most male students found it easy. However, this study did not agree with them when it comes to the issue of considering students for WRL placements along gender lines. Commenting on this issue, Sunday and Bunmi in *The Business Day* (2011) of Nigeria, observe that, "the connection syndrome, which helps, in most cases, to establish the enthronement of mediocrity should be discouraged so that placements can be firmly founded upon meritocracy only."

Socio-economic challenges

The study found that the major socio-economic challenges faced by students resulted mainly from failure of most companies to remunerate the students during the attachment period. As a result; the students felt that they were being used as a source of cheap labour. They also felt vulnerable to abuse and negative attitudes from their mentors and other members of staff.

- **Remuneration**

Seventy four percent of the questionnaire respondents indicated that remuneration was a prime consideration in taking up attachment places while sixty percent indicated that they changed attachment places in preference to companies that offered some remuneration during the attachment period. These findings were corroborated by the interviewees. Most of the interviewees stated that their major concern when seeking attachment was the amount of allowances they would get during their attachment. They explained that most of the host companies were situated far away from their home areas and so they had to secure rented accommodation for the duration of the WRL period. In addition, the students indicated that the issue of remuneration was important because they also had to cater for their own travel and subsistence expenses. They indicated that these expenses were in addition to the amount

they would have expended in registering for the two semesters they will be on WRL. The interviews revealed that only a few private organizations do remunerate students during attachment while a majority of government institutions and agencies only awarded allowances when the students attend workshops or other related exercises. The Zimbabwe Manpower Development Fund only caters for students on apprenticeship and those in polytechnics. With no statutory instrument compelling industry to pay students on attachment, 80 % of student respondents intimated that their attachment experience was nightmarish. Some of the final year interviewees (those that had completed the WRL) admitted having aborted the whole exercise before the lapse of the mandatory ten months, once the last assessments have been done, owing to financial hardships.

- **Source of Cheap Labour**

Fifty eight percent (58%) of the questionnaire respondents affirmed that they felt that they were taken as source of cheap labour. This was corroborated by many of the interviewees who stated that in most instances they were made to work independently on positions that would otherwise be occupied by fully paid employees. They further indicated that they were often used to cover personnel that would be away on leave of absence. These findings corroborate very well with those by Edziwa and Chivheya (2013) who established that students in agricultural colleges agreed with the statement that they were treated as cheap labour. Further analysis by them revealed that students who were attached to large-scale farms and agro-industries disagreed with the statement save for those attached to A2 farms.

- **Abuse**

Thirty two percent (32%) of the questionnaire respondents indicated that the students were at times exposed to some forms of abuse. The forms of abuse specified range from direct to subtle abuse. Some of the interviewees concurred, with some female students indicating that some of their mentors sought sexual relationships in exchange for favourable assessment reports.

Functional challenges

The functional challenges were concerned with the match between the university curriculum and the industrial practice; the students' proficiency in their early days of attachment relative to the expectations of the host organisations; and the appropriateness of the functional areas that they were placed during the attachment.

- **University curriculum versus industrial practice**

Fifty six percent (56%) of the questionnaire responses admitted to have faced some measure of difficulty in translating theory into practice while forty percent felt that there were 'information gaps' that could be bridged through appropriate review of the curriculum. These findings were supported by many of the interviewees. For example some of the respondents from the Faculty of Social Sciences advised that they experienced serious challenges when it came to writing reports or memos as these aspects were not comprehensively covered in the

university's curriculum and they suggested that a Business Communication course should be introduced to supplement the general Communication Skills course. Students majoring in Economics, Marketing and Banking also advised that a module in Business Law was necessary before students go on WRL, as it would go a long way in enhancing their proficiency in business systems. This gives a lot of credit to calls by industrialists that educationists should sit down with them as they craft their curricula if it is to be relevant to the job market.

- **Student Proficiency**

All the questionnaire respondents indicated that they received induction on taking up the attachment positions. However, 60% of the respondents hinted that the proficiency expectation of the mentors soon after the induction was not realistic. These findings were supported by the interview responses. All the interviewees advised that they had received some form of induction at the beginning of their attachment period. The comprehensiveness of the induction, however, seemed to differ from one organisation to the next. Some of the students felt that the performance expectation of their mentors was not realistic. They advised that from their perspective, their initial performance was hampered by the paucity of their computer skills which made them take more time than was expected by their mentors to adapt to the operations of the respective companies. The interviews revealed that some of the students had not received any formal ICT tuition before leaving for attachment and those who had a chance to do the ICT course had had little hands-on experience due to large student/computer ratios. It was also revealed that the ICT courses were general courses and not 'discipline specific' and as such students took inordinately longer time to adapt to the 'discipline specific' programmes. For instance, students majoring in accounting bemoaned their lack of proficiency in basic computerized accounting packages such as Pastel among others.

- **Appropriateness of attachment places**

Forty eight percent of the questionnaire respondents indicated that the scope of their WRL activities fell short of the requirements of their respective disciplines. This was corroborated by some of the interviewees who advised that their WRL activities did not encompass all the requisite departments and/or tasks. Some of the respondents highlighted that they were often requested to perform tasks which were not related to their programmes of study and even had to perform menial tasks which were supposed to be done by lower ranked personnel such as janitors. They also indicated that some of the host organisations were relatively small and bemoaned the little experiential growth that would result from such attachments. These findings resonate with findings by Matamande et al (2008) which established that 36, 6% respondents from the Faculty of Commerce at the University of Zimbabwe felt that their WRL host organisations were small and thus could not afford them room for growth.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that:

- Owing to the shrinkage of the economy, students especially those with weak or no 'connections', found it very hard to secure placements.
- The lack of a statutory instrument to enforce payment of allowances by organisations to university students on industrial attachment leave many of them exposed to the vagaries of poverty and various forms of exploitation and abuse.
- The university's curriculum was not fully aligned with the needs of industry. This led to the students failing to perform to the expectations of their mentors on the outset.
- Some of the attachment places were inappropriate as they did not provide the required minimum subject specific work experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above findings the study recommended that:

- In addition to preparing students thoroughly for placement, the university should develop closer links with industry so as to assist the students to secure attachment places. Building strong synergies with industry would go a long way in assisting students secure relevant WRL placements.
- The WRL programme should be covered by the Zimbabwe Manpower Development Fund so that the awarding of meaningful allowances by organisations to students on WRL attachments could be made a statutory obligation.
- The university ought to consistently review and amend its curricula relative to the obtaining industrial practice, processes and technology so that students are equipped with relevant knowledge.
- The university should provide students with comprehensive guidelines on the selection of appropriate attachment places. It should also assess each attachment place as soon as a student advises of having secured placement.

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