

CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGES BEDEVILING WORK RELATED LEARNING AT A SELECTED UNIVERSITY IN ZIMBABWE: MENTORS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *The study sought to interrogate the alignment of the university's curriculum to industrial practice and establish the factors that compromised effective implementation of the work-related learning (WRL) programme from a mentors' perspective. The study employed a qualitative research design and the study participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique. The data was solicited through unstructured interviews and the interviewees comprised nine academic mentors and twenty four company mentors. The study established that the key factor that caused the misalignment between the university's curriculum and industrial practice was the lack of collaboration between the academic mentors and company mentors during course design. It also established that the main factors that affect the effective implementation of the WRL programme were ineffective communication of the university curriculum to the company mentors and poor collaboration between the academic mentors and the company mentors during supervision and assessment of the students' performance.*

Key words: *work-related learning; academic mentor; company mentor; university curriculum; communication; collaboration*

Introduction

“Work-related learning (WRL) is a planned activity that uses 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” (Work-Related Learning Guide, 2008: 7). Its objective is to bridge the gap between classroom tuition and industrial practice by providing the students an opportunity to learn direct from actual work experience. Universities and industry have been collaborating for over a century and when companies and universities work in tandem to push the frontiers of knowledge, they become a powerful engine for innovation and economic growth (Science/Business Innovation Board, 2012).

The Northern Illinois University, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center module (undated), states that experiential learning could be understood as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration. Instruction is designed to engage students in direct experiences which are tied to real world

problems and situations in which the instructor facilitates rather than directs student progress, *ibid.* Inspired by earlier work by John Dewey and Kurt Lewin, David A. Kolb believes, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984).

As such, WRL programmes are designed to expose students to the practical world of work in order to enhance their employability when they complete their degree programmes. Company mentors are responsible for scheduling the company activities that the student should cover as well as the day to day guidance, supervision and assessment of the students during the WRL period. The academic mentors are responsible for designing the university curriculum and undertaking supervisory visits to assess the students’ performance and the appropriateness of the attachment places. The students are required to secure their own places of attachment, maintain a log book detailing the work related activities they cover during the period of attachment and to submit at least two performance related reports. The academic and company mentor, however, have a joint responsibility of ensuring the success of the WRL programme.

Literature Review

Effective WRL is dependent on a successful three-way relationship between student, academic tutor and in-company mentor stakeholders (Roodhouse and Mumford, 2010) and a clear understanding by the three parties of the WRL programme and the expected contribution by each stakeholder to a successful outcome [Benefer, (2007) in Cutler, (2012)]. The objectives and pedagogical activities of the WRL programme must therefore be clearly communicated to all the stakeholders. However, “whilst the classroom communication between students and tutors is excellent, students frequently bemoan lack of sufficient access to their mentor and limited understanding of the module objectives by the mentor as a result” Cutler (2012: 2). He further observes that attempts to invite company mentors into the university for briefings or discussion are often stymied by the company-mentors’ multiple work priorities resulting in a general reliance on the student to communicate academic information to the mentor. According to Cutler (2012) such interactions are usually faced with difficulties, such as follows:

- At the beginning of a work based learning module the student cannot be expected to understand the scope of the content and learning objectives well enough to give their mentor a clear picture of what will be required in terms of support over the remainder of the module
- The student is almost always hierarchically below the mentor and may have difficulty in “managing” the support relationship
- Mentors are often not necessarily “in-company champions” of foundation degree learning – they may simply be assigned to the task – and hence the student's needs may not be given sufficient credibility within the company environment

- Mentors are usually subject to many demands which prevent them from organising regular support sessions or meetings with academic tutors who, in turn, would have extreme difficulty in physically meeting with as many as 25 mentors several times during the course of a module.

According to Matamande et al. (2008) there are a number of factors that affect the effectiveness of industrial attachment programmes and these encompass the assessment methods employed, and the perception of the host company towards industrial attachment.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Students on WRL programmes often take an inordinately long time to adapt to industrial practice and, consequently, many of them fail to perform to the companies' expectations from the outset. On the whole, students are not adequately prepared for industrial attachment owing to misalignment between the university curriculum and industrial practice. Media is also awash with calls to realign university curricula and the demands of industry. The study therefore sought to interrogate the alignment of the university's curricula to industrial practice and examine the factors that hamper effective implementation of the work-related learning (WRL) programme.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives that guided the study were to:

- Determine the key factors that cause misalignment between the university curriculum and industrial practice.
- Establish the key factors that downgrade the implementation of the WRL attachment programme.
- Provide appropriate recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the WRL programme.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study employed a qualitative research design. The qualitative research design facilitates understanding of behaviours and perceptions of members of an organisation and, according to Marvasti (2004), it provides a detailed description and analysis of the quality or the substance of the human experience. The design was therefore deemed most appropriate in capturing the experiences and perceptions of the academic mentors and the company mentors relative to the effectiveness of the WRL programme.

Data collection and analysis

The study participants were selected through the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a judgmental sampling technique (Punch, 2005) that involves handpicking supposedly typical or interesting subjects (Baxter et al, 2001) who are likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon the researcher is studying (Leedy, 1997). Thus, participants were purposively selected from academic and company mentors.

The data was solicited through unstructured interviews. The unstructured interview approach was adopted for the study because it does not impose any limitations in the manner that the study participants express themselves. According to Bryman& Bell (2003), in an unstructured interview the researcher only has an interview guide or aide memoire listing the topics or issues to be covered only, without any specific questions prepared in advance. The interview guide serves as a reminder to the researcher for the main issues and topics that need to be covered and the respondents may answer the questions in any way that seems sensible to them (Fisher et al, 2010). The unstructured nature of the interview provided the researcher the flexibility to explore exhaustively all the pertinent and related issues. A total of thirty three interviews were held and the interviewees comprised nine academic mentors and twenty four company mentors.

During analysis, the data was coded into two categories according to the first two objectives of the study namely, 'factors causing misalignment between university curriculum and industrial practice' and 'factors that downgrade the effectiveness of the WRL programme'.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Respondents' Sex profile

Four academic mentors that were interviewed were drawn from the Faculty of Commerce and five were from the Faculty of Social Sciences. Twenty four company mentors were drawn from host companies scattered all over the country. Below is the sex-profile of the respondents:

Table 1, showing the designation-sex profile of respondents

Designation	Male	Female	Total
Academic Mentors	6	3	9
Company Mentors	15	9	24
Total	21	12	33

SOURCE: SURVEY (2013)

Alignment of university curriculum to industrial practice

Almost all the academic mentors interviewed indicated that they used text books and journals as well as internet resources to design their respective courses. They admitted that they did not particularly take into account industrial practice during course design. This explains why a number of company mentors bemoaned inadequate student proficiency in computerised accounting and human resource payroll packages. They also observed lack of proficiency in business communication skills, particularly in students from the Faculty of Social Sciences. Many of the academic mentors indicated that they themselves had neither undertaken any WRL nor had they had any industrial experience. This suggests that the university's curriculum is based almost purely on theoretical knowledge with very little, if any, consideration of the obtaining industrial practices.

When asked why they had not fused in the elements of the industrial practice, most of the academic mentors insisted that university regulations did not explicitly provide for collaboration with external institutions during course design. They indicated that regulations are amended after at least three years, a period that lapses when lots of initiatives would have been roped in by industry in dynamic environments. And yet industry gives incessant calls that industrialists be included in the crafting of curricula in tertiary institutions. "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," insists the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Union president George Nkiwane, *Newsday Zimbabwe*, September 17, (2013). Academic mentors interviewed unanimously agreed that their WRL policy was silent on such matters. They however, advised that, in order to address this shortcoming, tuition was made as practical as possible by, for example, employing such techniques as case study and role play.

In response to a question on what measures the academic mentors would recommend in order to improve the effectiveness of the WRL programme, they suggested that WRL policy, in particular, should make explicit provisions for lecturers to confer with the respective industrial companies or relevant professional bodies, as may be necessary, when designing courses. They also did concur on the fact that the university should freely sponsor academics to attend even workshops run by such professional bodies as the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Zimbabwe (ICAZ), Institute of Personnel Management of Zimbabwe (IPMZ), among others, to allow them to keep informed and relevant as well. They also indicated that the university could go further through sponsoring academics to assume membership of such relevant professional bodies.

All the company mentors advised that they had not been requested to contribute towards university curriculum. They all indicated that they were willing to contribute towards the design of an appropriate curriculum. They also advised that they had not seen the university's

curriculum. Some of them said they had expected that the academic mentors would appraise them during the supervisory visits but this was not done. When asked whether they had raised the issue with the academic mentors, some of the company mentors advised that they had not done so and indicated that the academic mentors were always in a hurry with their main interest being to talk to the student. Some of the mentors indicated that they had raised the issue with the academic mentors but all they got was a 'scanty' verbal response.

Factors that downgrade implementation of WRL programme

The study found that there was no collaboration between academic mentors and company mentors before the students were attached to the respective companies. The academic mentors advised that they were not involved in securing attachment places for students and that it was the students' own responsibility to secure their own attachment places. They also advised that their initial meeting with the company mentors was during the first supervisory visit long after the students had assumed the WRL attachment. All this suggests that students did not receive any form of guidance in securing appropriate places for attachment relative to their respective disciplines and areas of specialisation.

Interviews with the company mentors confirmed that the students were responsible for securing their own attachment places. They also confirmed that the first time that they (company mentors) met with the academic mentors was after the students had already begun the WRL attachment, which in many instances was two to three months after the student had begun the attachment. The company mentors advised that they relied on the information provided by students to ascertain what the university's curriculum covered. They indicated that in most instances the information provided by the students was scanty and this made it difficult to design an attachment programme that would appropriately meet the needs of both the student and the university. These findings are corroborated by Cutler's (2012) observation that in WRL programmes, there was a general reliance on the student to communicate academic information to the company mentor and that such communication was not effective as it often lacked the required detail.

The company mentors bemoaned the fact that when the academic mentors made their supervisory visit they did not take time to discuss the overall WRL programme. They advised that the academic mentors were simply concerned with the operational activities of the host company that the students needed to cover and the students' actual performance. They also advised that in many instances the academic mentors did not make advance appointments when conducting the supervisory visits and this often resulted in the academic mentors failing to meet the respective company mentors who would be engaged in other previously scheduled company activities. As a result, the academic mentors would simply leave assessment forms for the company mentors to complete and forward to the university. In such circumstances the academic mentors also had to rely on the students to furnish the necessary information about the host

company. Cutler's (2012) observations on communication through students, *mutatis mutandis*, are also pertinent in this regard.

When asked about what needed to be done in order to enhance the effectiveness of the WRL programme, most of the company mentors suggested that instead of relying on the ad-hoc relationships that were established through students, the university should forge partnerships with companies who provide attachment places. According to the company mentors such relationships would facilitate issues such as effective communication of the university curriculum, appropriate placement of students, mutually beneficial supervisory visits by academic mentors, and productive meetings between academic mentors and company mentors.

Conclusion

The study concluded that:

- The key factor that causes the misalignment between the university's curriculum and industrial practice was the lack of collaboration between the academic mentors and company mentors during course design. The university does not have an explicit policy that facilitates collaboration with external institutions hence the academic mentors tend to confine themselves to literary works when designing courses. Furthermore, the university does not have a policy that could facilitate sponsorship of lecturers to become active participants in industrial professional bodies through whom they would be consistently kept abreast with obtaining industrial practices. Consequently there is hardly any infusion of industrial practices into curriculum design.
- The key factors that downgrade the effectiveness of the implementation of the WRL programme are nature of the communication and lack of collaboration. Communication is ineffective, since, the company mentors are reliant on students to be informed about the university's curriculum while on the other hand the academic mentors are also reliant on the students to be informed about the activities of the respective host companies. There is also lack of collaboration regarding the placement of students as the students are required to secure attachment places on their own, arrange their own terms of attachment and then advise the academic mentors. Similarly, there is no meaningful collaboration between the academic mentors and the company mentors with regards to the supervision of the students' performance

Recommendations

The study recommended that:

- The academic mentors should engage the company mentors when designing courses so that pertinent industrial practices could be infused into the university curriculum. This

would ensure that the university's curriculum was appropriately aligned with the obtaining industrial practices.

- The university should sponsor lecturers to join and participate in the activities of relevant professional bodies. This would ensure that the lecturers were kept up to date of industrial practices in their respective disciplines.
- Communication and collaboration during the implementation of the WRL programme should be enhanced so as to ensure direct exchange of information between the academic mentors and the company mentors on key issues such as the university curriculum, company activities, WRL objectives and students' performance.

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