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The Role of Universities in South Africa and their Educational
Quality and the Efficacy of their Work-Integrated Learning
Programmes

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and the various theoretical paradigms which influence the way higher education institutions (HEIs) expound their role in South African society and to elucidate on how these paradigms are in a sense paradoxical with one another, and yet relevant. The relevance of higher education should be assessed in terms of how it meets the needs of society and the world of work in a global economy. Education that can be made more career-specific is a vital component in the promotion of sustainable growth that ultimately leads to an enhanced quality of life for all. If universities wish to be successful in the highly competitive international education environment, it is incumbent upon them to ensure that their students are adequately equipped with the necessary tools. WIL should be an essential component of the education of a student. Students are not the only beneficiaries of WIL, employers and staff in higher education also benefit. The knowledge, skills and WIL experiences of students as well as the generic skills they learn should also be transferable to other disciplines, if and when deemed necessary by the graduates. Work experience that is course-embedded provides an opportunity for the forging of closer links between higher education institutions and employers. Students are more likely to be work-ready when they graduate and more able to make a meaningful contribution to society. Employers have come to see the benefits of taking on students who have WIL experience. Such students thus have an edge when applying for posts. It is argued that although WIL has barriers in its implementation, it is highly conducive to a quality education, provided that efficient student mentorship is undertaken and industry is serious about it.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs), have traditionally played a major role in nation building initiatives in most countries. They have created national identities by engendering an *intelligensia*, able to conduct effective leadership in especially developing nations, such as South Africa. A number of national systems of higher education were thus configured according to the specific ways dominating elites in each nation-state defined mechanisms they considered to be appropriate to enable them to maintain social and political control (Musselin 2003).

The very dynamic global business environment and the growing knowledge based service economy have created an unsurpassed demand for management graduates to effectively manage businesses. Greater emphasis is also placed on commerce as a catalyst of socio-economic upliftment. In such an environment more capable graduates able to work and add real value in a business are highly sought after commodities. The creation of knowledge is far more student-based and is bringing in a new trend of closer interaction between industry and university faculty and their students who experience work-integrated learning. The question is whether or not universities are meeting the needs of society and if there is indeed an articulation between societal demands and the academic programmes of higher education institutions? (UNESCO, 7 : 1998).

For universities to be regarded as providers of practical education, they would have to be “training good members of society” (Maurasse 1999). In the South African context, HEIs have been established with a distinct link to the political needs of the state as well as the needs of certain sections of industry (Cooper and Subotzky 2001). Graduates with high-level skills are in great demand. Graduate employability and an increase in employment levels are pivotal interests of the government. In any event, the employability of graduates has huge outcomes for the reputations of the universities from which they emanate. Universities thus need to ensure that their students are equipped with the necessary discipline knowledge and skills. The skills the graduates obtain should also be generic, to an extent, and thus easily transferable. Ideally graduates should have industry experience obtained through work-integrated learning programmes. This is not a new idea, but should be latched onto by especially service-related courses where theory in practice is desired.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT MODELS OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

The literature reviewed shows that globalization in its many guises is a major contributor to the renewed debate on the role of higher education (Duderstadt 1999). Economies are increasingly knowledge-based and this implies that the role of higher education is now more significant than ever before. There are increasing moves to corporatize universities and make them servants of industry in a managerialist-functional approach (Ibid). Newman’s vision of undergraduate liberal education (Newman 1996 [1899]) and the Humboldtian model of the research university (Von Humboldt 1970 [1809]), are slowly conforming to new societal needs. Students now require greater technological literacy and research and development skills to enable them to be more productive and cater for the demands of industry. Knowledge is now more student based than before and this leading to a trend of closer interaction with industry. Students who are equipped to add to a business’s competitive advantage are sought after commodities, especially in countries like South Africa that are gradually becoming more integrated into the global economy. Universities can be strengthened by grounding them more into the local community. This would result in research initiatives which will more closely address the economic and social needs which arise out of rapid globalization and greater international recognition will be gained by more contributions to new knowledge that can solve societal problems on a global scale (Maurasse 2001).

There are three predominant models which have developed since the early 1990s which have greatly impacted on the thinking about the role of higher education in a world which is becoming increasingly globalized. The first model is the one which envisages universities to be places where civic responsibility, citizenship and democratic values are promoted. Multicultural themes are integrated across the learning curricula of such institutions and students are prepared for employment in ethnically diverse societies (Murphy 2000).

The second model is the one which labels universities as ‘entrepreneurial’. These universities position themselves to serve the needs of industry as a means of obtaining funding to offset the limited availability of public resources set aside for higher education. Consequently, there has been a major move towards partnerships with business and this has in turn led to growing corporate influence in how universities govern themselves and plan their curricula. This implies that universities are serving

the market and are neglecting their role in contributing to equity and the development of the community at large (Subotzky 1999).

In contrast, many universities argue that higher education-community partnerships are essential to alleviate the plight of the poor in society at a time when civic infrastructures are breaking down, the environment is becoming increasingly degraded and when unemployment rates are rising daily, leading to increasing crime rates. According to Lisman (1998), universities can play a great role in promoting social and economic changes, provided that they have a sense of civic purpose and are able to effectively analyze political and socio-economic situations. They should also educate their students to become socially conscious and empower them to work to enhance society. Universities are thus urged to re-curriculate where necessary and to promote problem - solving skills and interpersonal skills in their student complements. Only in this way will students be able to address the myriad of social problems which plague society and which are the products of globalization (Dominelli and Hoogvelt 1996).

The third model is referred to as the Learning Region and Learning Economy model and it is based on the belief that universities are obliged to function in many overlapping areas of responsibility. This is based essentially on the idea that nation states have an ever-decreasing regulatory capacity and the mobility of global capital at a time of widespread political and economic de-regulation. It is also impacted upon by the decentralization of economic organization, the reduction of the monopoly of nation states in policymaking, representation, legitimacy and questions of identity (Duke 2000). As commercial activities are a catalyst to socio-economic development, there is a far greater need for a higher education institution – industry interface.

Considering these factors, higher education institutions which regulate economic activity are becoming more regionalized and their economic success is more dependent upon trust, norms and values and their tacit personal knowledge. It is thus imperative to find ways in which the global economy can work by unlocking resources which distinguish one place from another (OECD, 18, 19 : 1999). Universities and industry which have been operating in distinct domains are inexorably moving closer to each other and creating meaningful synergies. This is imperative as the economy is being integrated into the global economy.

Given this closer proximity, learning is obliged to include the building of student competencies to cope with the demands for new skills in knowledge intensive sectors and universities should not therefore, simply provide access to information.

WHY IS UNIVERSITY-INDUSTRY SYNERGY NECESSARY? THE CASE OF HOSPITALITY EDUCATION WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING.

In terms of the Learning Region and Learning Economy Model, which sees the role of higher education as a player with many overlapping roles in the world, WIL (also referred to as experiential learning or cooperative education) is an important and necessary practice. Given this, an interactive and collaborative relationship between hospitality industry businesses and education providers is essential if mutually inclusive goals are to be met. The hospitality industry is always on the lookout to recruit and select students who are trained well and who have the necessary

knowledge, skills and attitude to make a meaningful contribution to it. Hotel groups are placing great emphasis on recruiting and selecting the “right” employees and they realize that they have a vested interest in developing close links with universities. Hospitality schools at universities also realize that they need to work closely with industry. The needs of the South African hospitality industry are constantly changing to meet the demands of a burgeoning tourism industry. Links between industry and university thus allow the changing needs to be tracked and acted upon.

Universities should promote, at a national level, the local and regional role of learning partnerships in future development and the idea of lifelong learning to enable graduates to cope with changing skills demands. They should play a major role in the implementation and achievement of national initiatives to support this vision. They should also develop formal contact arrangements with the key strategic players in lifelong learning and develop and support strong regional networks. Collaboration with industry and the community at large is vital. Industry needs to play a greater role in encouraging WIL experience for students as this provides an ideal opportunity for academics and employers to build long-term relationships and a greater potential for working together to meet industry needs and wants, as in the tourism and hospitality sector, for example. Universities will not be able to work effectively without many partners from all traditions and persuasions. It is these partners that will assist them to enrich their various overlapping learning regions (OECD, 19, 20 : 1999). Universities do not merely contribute skilled human resources to industry, they also contribute in intangible ways and their relationship is becoming more mutually interdependent.

There should be processes in place which protect students from exploitation by certain industry employers. Conversely, certain hotels have found students to be ineffective. Despite these failures, industry on the whole has little doubt that WIL is a very meaningful process and they see it as one they would like to possibly even extend (Harvey, Moon and Geall 1997). It is essential that well thought out quality mechanisms and modes of assessment be in place if WIL is to be meaningful for students, industry and higher education institution staff. Ideally, students should be provided with a pre-WIL orientation and training before their immersion into the work-place setting and this should be followed by a series of meetings between lecturing staff, industry employers and the students. Students, lecturers and industry need to have a very clear understanding of the learning objectives of WIL. Ideally, students should be involved in the negotiation process so as to obtain a sense of ownership and to take responsibility for their own learning (Harvey *et al* 1998).

HOW DO STUDENTS, INDUSTRY AND HIGHER EDUCATION STAFF BENEFIT FROM WIL?

Students benefit immensely from WIL in a number of ways. They develop an appreciation of their future work-settings and develop skills which will make them more employable. WIL is thus an important vehicle by which student learning is enhanced and students benefit as they learn to apply subject knowledge in general work situations. Their practical skills are also enhanced and this also makes them more confident in an academic setting. Aspects such as time-management and self-discipline are also developed in WIL settings. It has been the case at the School of Tourism and Hospitality that many students often secure jobs from their WIL placement. Generally, time spent in a workplace environment allows students the

opportunity to make invaluable contacts and a network of support is established. Not only are WIL students more likely to be employed when vacancies arise, but they are also more likely to command higher salaries as well. Students on WIL get the opportunity to be exposed to real work related to their career choice (Linn 2004).

Students are reported to be more mature and confident after WIL experience and are keener to be involved in discussions which enhance their learning experiences. A greater contextualization and understanding of the world of work has been reported by students, proving that WIL is invaluable. There have however also been cases where certain students found they did not benefit by WIL. In these cases it was clear that industry simply used the students as cheap sources of labour to exploit for the benefit of particular hotels.

Industry is keen to have newly selected employees who are productive from their first day at work as this will reduce training costs for them. In any event, for most industry employers, there is the benefit of extra employees at low or no cost in some cases. Employers also benefit in that they have an opportunity to give potential employees a trial run without any obligation on their part. Students on WIL experience often bring fresh ideas into a business and are in themselves a meaningful link between industry and the higher education institution from which they emanate.

Bisoux (2003), explains that as universities are now more revenue-based in terms of their management paradigm, the role of industry in the university model is far greater than was previously the case. Student competence has become increasingly critical in the creation and sustaining of a hotel's competitiveness and as most businesses desire to obtain a strategic competitive advantage, such students are highly sought after. It is also far tougher for graduates to find suitable employment. This makes work-integrated learning even more meaningful for them as they are able to demonstrate their capabilities to potential recruiters.

Higher education institution staff also benefit as their students experience optimum learning conditions in various day-to-day scenarios. There students are able to see their subject area in a real-life setting. Lecturers may also become involved in greater research initiatives to the benefit of industry. Many lecturers have become consultants and assist employers with assessing the employability skills that potential new recruits should have for a business to be more effective.

It is clear that the hospitality industry today is not merely a customer of university hospitality school outputs, but rather an important and vital stakeholder. Industry thus needs to be highly pragmatic and demonstrate real commitment to providing WIL opportunities that are meaningful for students.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BARRIERS FACED IN WIL?

The greatest barrier facing meaningful WIL is a lack of commitment on the part of certain students, industry employers and higher education institution staff. Beyond this lies a lack of resources, especially funds, to enable employers to provide WIL opportunities. Industry has costs related to time and effort in dealing with higher education institutions. There is also the problem of establishing a suitable placement

position for a WIL student. This problem leads to many students saying WIL was a waste of time as they were placed in one or other position for most of their six months stint, and did not really learn anything new. On the other hand, many students do not take any initiative and responsibility for their learning while on WIL. Many employers do not fully realize that WIL students are in fact the potentially influential customers of the future and become involved in exploitative practices when offering WIL. Employers often complain about what they perceive to be shortcomings in the educational system (Coll and Eames 2000).

HOW CAN INDUSTRY-UNIVERSITY LINKS BE ENHANCED?

Universities need to grow real involvement with industry so as to afford students the opportunity to gain invaluable “hands-on” experience and to further facilitate business growth. Beard (1994), makes the following recommendations:

1. A greater degree of industry-university collaboration will allow easier integration of industry needs to university programmes on offer.
2. Programmes can be greatly improved by encouraging the participation of guest speakers who can describe and discuss personal experiences in the workplace.
3. Academic staff should keep their skills updated and undertake consultancy in some form or other as regularly as academic timetables allow.
4. Industry and universities can undertake joint seminars.
5. Industry can provide financial support to university development programmes.
6. Industry can fund applied and academic research initiatives.

The collaboration between industry and university is a gradual process but it is one which is very worthwhile. Business schools such as the UCT Business School (University of Cape Town) and GIBS (Gordon Institute of Business Science - University of Pretoria), for example, have strong relationships with industry through teaching and research and, to an extent student placements. Collaboration at all levels is not only desirable but essential. GIBS seeks to create opportunities for dialogue and interaction across different elements of society, so that they can work together to alter the socio-economic environment for the betterment of all South Africans. They also encourage a peer mentoring environment to address leadership challenges (www.gibs.co.za).

HOW WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAMMES CAN ENHANCE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY?

The School of Tourism and Hospitality in the Faculty of Management of the University of Johannesburg, sends students on work-integrated learning programmes and has done so very successfully for over thirty years. Placements of students are supported by industry which will ultimately be recruiting and selecting new employees from their ranks. The students value the experience they obtain as it makes them more work-ready. Academics favour this approach as it allows their students to experience theory-in-practice. It is essential however, that students are placed in quality learning environments, whether they be in hotels, guest houses, industrial kitchens or any other related workplace. They need to be well supported by supervisory staff and mentored by university staff as they undertake meaningful work

which is able to transform their learning (Britzman 2003). The placement of students is deliberate and supported by supervisors and they are assessed to ensure that the highest standards are maintained and that they are cared for by industry while ‘on-duty’. They are systematically evaluated as to the achievement of critical learning outcomes. Work-integrated learning can only be effective if all parties to it are recognized with clearly spelt out memoranda of agreement between them.

According to Moody (1997), the best type of placement programme is the one which involves the hosting business from the outset and where it demonstrates a genuine commitment to student learning. Students are not to be regarded as “cheap sources of labour” by their hosts. There must also be tangible, short-term benefits for the business in which students are placed. Students should be able to complete assigned tasks and they should also receive training-on-the-job as this will enable them to gain new insights. They will also be able to face the pressures of a real-life workplace environment.

Ideally, the student should experience a wide range of involvements and should be used in a number of operational areas. Their communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills should be developed more in a holistic training environment. It is in this ethos that the collaboration between industry and university is strengthened and in which ideas are integrated and more meaningful industry research conducted. Students are also able to optimize their opportunities in obtaining and developing meaningful work-related skills that complement the academic theory learned on campus and they also strengthen their post-graduation work-placement possibilities. Business should also encourage the students to develop their problem solving capabilities while the education process should provide opportunities for them to use creativity to develop solutions to ambiguous problems in the workplace. In reality, circumstances oblige managers to make decisions without knowing all the variables. There is also a strong entrepreneurial component in fostering creative problem solving techniques. Generally, students should be encouraged to think entrepreneurially and become initiators while also developing their social skills in a culturally diverse environment.

The students’ horizons are broadened and their acumens and knowledge bases are also expanded by discussion with both industry supervisors and mentors on pertinent issues in the workplace. Generally, work-integrated learning programmes enhance existing individual expertise and build greater capacity within the higher education institutions that apply them.

MENTORING IN WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAMMES

The quality of learning in the workplace must be monitored carefully after all parties involved are clear about the aims of WIL and their individual responsibilities. A learning contract is an effective mechanism in this regard. This should be followed by pre-WIL orientation and training. Ideally, students should be mentored on a one-on-one basis where a senior-level industry mentor assists a protégé, over and above the students university mentor/lecturer. Business that intends to implement mentorship needs to take various aspects into consideration before implementation. These aspects include the formulation of clear objectives and expectations as well as time-frames for the completion of the assigned tasks which should all be realistically achievable.

Mentors should focus on the skills that will enable a student to perform better in the workplace (Jensen 2003). Key skill development areas need to be identified at the outset and the student must be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Where there are more than one student at a particular hotel, for example, they could be mentored as a group. Generally, the mentoring relationship should be highly structured if it is short term. It will also be formally established and more able to meet specific organizational objectives. There are times when the relationship will be less formal and involve spontaneous help by the mentor. Industry may decide that a student on a work-integrated learning programme is suitable from the outset, to be groomed to take over a position of an employee who is about to leave the business. In this scenario, the mentorship becomes more long-term. Either way, mentors must be available as needed to discuss dilemmas faced by the student, to listen or share special knowledge (Shea 1998). The mentor must be able to assist the students to assess their strengths and weaknesses and determine which competencies need more development.

Industry should be especially careful to select their mentors based on their previous records of accomplishment in developing people. Ideally, the mentor must be a role-model who is always willing to serve in the role and they should also have excellent communication and listening skills. The environment offered to the students should be confidential and nurturing and allow them to raise concerns and ask questions pertinent to the work they are expected to undertake (Young 2003). Mentors can also offer guidance and emotional support and they should enhance the objective analysis of situations and the application of insights to the workplace. In essence, it is the mentors who unlock the students' potentials to maximize their performance and to influence them to achieve the desired outcomes both academically and technically.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three predominant models which have developed since the early 1990s which have greatly impacted on the thinking about the role of higher education in a world which is becoming increasingly globalized. Each of these has a role to play in quality higher education and each of them can utilize WIL.

In the first model multicultural themes are integrated across the learning curricula of such institutions and students are prepared for employment in ethnically diverse societies (Murphy 2000). Universities that offer WIL promote civic responsibility, citizenship and democratic values and as such are involved in the first model. In the second model, universities are labeled as 'entrepreneurial'. These universities position themselves to serve the needs of industry as a means of obtaining funding to offset the limited availability of public resources set aside for higher education. Those that have WIL, are entrepreneurial and do just that, and have strategic partnerships with industry to the benefit of all stakeholders. The third model, the Learning Region and Learning Economy model, is based on the belief that universities are obliged to function in many overlapping areas of responsibility. Universities offering WIL are involved in these overlapping areas of responsibility and while considering industry needs, also serve society at large.

Higher education institution staff must be given the resources and time to interact with WIL employers and should incorporate WIL into programmes of study where relevant. Staff should have enough time and resources to interact meaningfully with

industry. As WIL has great potential to enhance higher education, universities must be willing to submit their endeavours to critical industry scrutiny and debate and be able to adapt curriculum changes to account for the unique and changing needs of the hospitality industry. As employability is the main objective of students, it is a primary objective of higher education institutions to design curricula and the students' experience of learning in such a way as to make them more employable. Students must be developed into capable individuals who will be effective in their chosen occupations. This means that greater opportunities must be promoted for students to engage in top-notch work-related experiences and that their development and success is measured effectively. WIL experience means that generally, graduates are produced that meet the needs of industry far better than would have been the case if WIL was not undertaken.

While industry does have many needs and goals, it is vital that educational goals remain the dominant factor for consideration when contemplating WIL practice (Coll and Eames 2003). Industry and university need to build more collaborative relationships with long-term strategic vision. The White Paper for the Transformation of Higher Education, it is argued that quality in education includes the development and delivery of relevant curricula which contribute to providing high-level skills training which is able to develop professional and knowledge workers with globally equivalent skills, and who are socially conscious and responsible, thus contributing to the social transformation of South Africa (National Plan : 2001). Government should try to use all means at its disposal to promote WIL opportunities and must recognize that WIL plays a huge role in the development of employability skills by students. Funding could be provided by both government and industry to assist higher education institutions to establish and monitor WIL experience, to the benefit of all stakeholders.

The WIL programme is in line with quality assurance in higher education as it develops the capabilities of individual learners for personal enrichment, as well socially and leads to economic growth and an increase in employment. It is thus my contention that it be utilized more by universities in a wider range of academic disciplines. The School of Tourism and Hospitality of the University of Johannesburg is in my opinion well on the track of providing society with what it expects of institutions and provides career-specific education that is respected and needed by the hospitality industry. It is thus a leading centre for innovation in hospitality education. Despite this it could and should further develop networks and partnerships to facilitate the further transfer of knowledge to a rapidly expanding industry. Hopefully this short paper has added the understanding of the role of Universities in society, the quality they have and the efficacy of work-integrated learning programmes.

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