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## **A situational Analysis of the factors and Processes that influence quality Work Related Learning: A case of the Midlands State University**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

The concept of Work Related Learning (WRL) is now a reality that has seen numerous organizations the world over organize conferences to address the issue of linking theory and practice. Such organisations include the Southern Africa Society for Co-operative Education, (SASCE), the World Association for Co-operative Education (WACE) and Midlands State University in Zimbabwe, which has enshrined in its mission statement the philosophy and practices of Work Related Learning. (WRL) The objective of this paper is to identify and recommend the implementation of essential pre-requisite factors, processes and procedures that underpin successful implementation of WRL programmes. The process of obtaining relevant data has been done through a situation analysis of all the stakeholders' views and attitudes in order to identify unmet needs and unused opportunities for WRL quality processes.

Research findings have revealed that there is need for a critical path analysis through all the stages and processes of orientation of all stakeholders in teaching and learning, learner's placement, supervision and assessment and feedback. Comments from students have demonstrated a critical need for clear policy guidelines for students, employers and other workers in the companies where students are placed since some of the employees see students as threats that come to replace them. Research was identified as one of the key beneficial benefits to companies who employ students on WRL.

From an analysis of the views expressed by representatives of stakeholders, it can be concluded that there is no substitute for systematic planning and monitoring of all aspects of WRL. The whole process should be guided by clear policy statements to ensure clarity of purpose and intention of all members of the university i.e. lecturers, students and industry.

A lesson learnt is that a quality product is a result of quality input and monitoring through a quality control process. It is therefore recommended that all tertiary institutions with a WRL programme should regard this concept as both a philosophy and a methodology, and that WRL should be seen as critical in the review of curriculum with industry's input.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Midlands State University, like many universities in the region and the world over has adopted the concept of Work Related Learning (WRL), otherwise referred to as work integrated learning (WIL) as a philosophy and methodology. In an attempt to create an efficient and effective WRL information management system, an interactive web-based database has been developed. The database includes a list of all students; their departments and the companies where students are placed for WRL. Companies' details include contact persons, supervisors and location of the company. The system has the following system modules: Students Information Module, Lecturer Information Module, Company Information Module, Faculty and Departments Information Module, Assessment module and accounting module. This WRL Information System was developed to create a systematic well-managed WRL placement, supervision and assessment system. It is an interactive online database, which makes information available to all stakeholders.

However, it has been realized that producing quality graduates requires a deliberate effort to develop a critical path analysis through all stages and processes. This requires systematic planning, monitoring, supervision and assessment at all stages of training learners through work related module. Furthermore, there is need for participation and commitment by all stakeholders in the training process in an effort to produce quality graduates.

### **Contextual framework and related literature.**

Hertfordshire School Advisory Services in the UK has defined work related-learning as any planned activity that uses the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work including learning through experience of work, learning about work, working practices, and learning the skills for work.

On the other hand, the Qualification Curriculum Authority (QCA) of the United Kingdom emphasizes that young people should be provided with opportunities to recognise, develop and apply their skills for enterprise and employability. Employability in this regard refers to understanding knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualities that young people will need to thrive in their future working lives.

It is therefore argued that, in order to assist learners in making a successful transition from university to adulthood and employment, it is the responsibility of the educational institution to provide opportunities for them to learn about work, for work, and through work. The content and emphasis given to each of these WRL elements will differ depending on the level of the learners, their curriculum needs, and the socio-economic environment of each country. These types of

knowledge, skills and attitudes can only be acquired at the place of work where all young people should learn about the way business operates, employers and employees' roles, and rules and responsibilities in the real world of work.

The Midlands State University's vision states that it is a development- oriented university, pace- setting, and producing innovative and enterprising graduates. This means that the graduates produced from the university should be capable of handling uncertainty and responding positively to change, able to create and implement new ideas and new ways of doing things. Entrepreneurship is the "niche" for the University and therefore innovative and enterprising skills should be assessed in the learners during their years at the University.

### **Effective Work Related Learning**

To achieve effective work related learning, clear policy statements are a pre-requisite to ensure that all stakeholders fully recognise the importance and value of WRL for all parties involved. Systematic planning and monitoring of all aspects of WRL through identification of appropriate strategies, which specify the roles of all involved should be an integral part of one's WRL programme.

Once the goals and objectives are set for any programme, valid and reliable instruments for measuring and assessing these objectives should be developed. A measuring instrument should be based upon the conceptual scheme to measure performance or product. It is therefore important to have a valid and reliable set of measuring tools to conduct quality assessment of the learners' performance. The instrument should therefore be developed by the lecturers in consultation with employers and be clearly understood by the learners who must be assessed. It is therefore important to have a valid and reliable set of measuring tools to conduct quality assessment of the learners' performance. . The critical issue is to identify the quantity and quality of inputs (means) and outputs (ends) by employers and lecturers

However, since assessment instruments are tools that can be used constructively for developing the learner's knowledge, skills and attitudes, they can be used positively or misused with destructive consequences. (Andrew H. Van De Ven and Diane L. Ferry, 1980).

### **Developing assessment criteria**

While objectives or attributes to be measured are the desired end products, criteria are operational dimensions representing the degree to which the objectives are met. As already alluded to, the process of developing criteria for measuring identified attributes should be co-operatively developed. This process should be viewed from three perspectives; selection of concrete observable

characteristics or dimensions that are to be measured and used as indications of goal attainment; (2) specification of standards and cut off points on the above dimensions and (3) determining the importance to be assigned to each dimension (Scot & Campbell, 1977). The above process should be part of the necessary preparation of students before going out for work related learning.

### **Assessment Forms**

The assessment forms for Midlands State University differ from department to department. However, besides specific skills and knowledge, which different Faculties expect to be developed, most forms contain the following sub headings:

- A. Personal characteristics
- B. Interpersonal skills
- C. Quality of work
- D. Organisational skills
- E. Student's evaluation and comments
- F. Summary of student's performance by supervisor (see appendix 1.5)

The student is expected to sign confirming that he agrees with what the supervisor has said about him.

### **Learner's Work Plan:**

The assumption made about the above instrument is that the attributes, knowledge, skills and attitudes identified will be developed during the learner's stay at the workplace for WRL. If the attributes are to be achieved the learner's work plan should contain them. The progress file should be linked to the faculty or department's key attributes to be measured, which are specified in the assessment form. Campbell (1977) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between matters of value and facts. These have to be stated in the work plan and recorded in the progress file. The work plan ensures that the learner is exposed to a balanced working environment, which enables him to develop the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that is expected of him at the end of the work related learning period. Both the supervisor and the learner should develop the work plan. It should contain objectives to be achieved. Campbell further points out that goals are employed in at least three ways; i.e., as a target to achieve as providing direction and setting constraints on behaviour, and as providing criteria for identifying and appraising selected aspects of the learner's performance. The work plan works as a guide for the learner's operational activities.

### **Progress file:**

A progress file is a record of what the learner will have done in relation to the work plan and any other activities covered. It provides the learner with an opportunity to comment on his performance and engage in a reflective thinking

process linking theory and practice. The progress file then enables the lecturer to gain an insight of the learner's work. It is therefore important to have a valid and reliable set of measuring tools to conduct quality assessments of learners' performance. The progress file should be linked to the faculty or department's key attributes to be measured, which are specified in the assessment evaluation instrument. This will enable the lecturer to ask questions about activities carried out and recorded in the progress file. In addition the progress file provides coherence for the learner by drawing on all aspects of his/her learning and by supporting a process based on the learning cycle outlined in the work plan that also underpins WRL

### **Policy Guidelines**

Successful WRL modules require a strong partnership between employers and Higher Education. This partnership is valuable in promoting WRL and improving the quality and quantity of such experiences. If the partnership is to achieve intended goals, the vision, mission, aims and objectives of WRL should be clearly stated on the policy guidelines, so that all stakeholders operate at the same level.

### **Orientation**

The implications of the above statements are that orientation seminars and workshops need to be organized for lecturers and learners at university and employers and employees at the workplace. This is important because the learners' exposure to other employees enables them to develop interpersonal skills, work habits and responsibilities for job tasks.

While the depth of learning is significant; a good work plan and progress file are necessary to prevent work responsibilities from conflicting with opportunities for learners to gain wide-ranging knowledge of the work place (WRL Guide for Family Literacy and Adult Education Origination p.15.).

### **Research Purpose**

This is an intervention situational analysis study aimed at identifying, analysing and recommending implementation of critical WRL quality processes and procedures that underpin successful implementation of WRL modules at the Midlands State University. It seeks to identify the missing links between the significant critical WRL quality processes identified in the vision the university 's and strategic plan and the potential work quality process. In the process of research, it has identified unused opportunities and unmet needs (Stufflebeam 1972).

## **Research design**

To achieve the above research purpose, this study adopted a qualitative approach with grounded theory underpinning the methodology. Grounded theory is an interactive process in which data and theory, lived reality and perceptions about norms, are constantly engaged with each other to help the researcher decide what data to collect and how to interpret it ( Hellum and Steward 1998). This design was chosen because it facilitated the use of the next question technique and enabling the exploring of emerging issues among stakeholders. The main method was qualitative, since the research was concerned with the WRL quality processes rather than with the outcome.

## **Population and sampling**

The research used the blocking stratified sampling procedure to get a representative sample of learners and lecturers from all faculties and the companies where learners are placed for their work related learning. Midlands State University has students placed in all cities and towns in Zimbabwe, including rural areas.

**Companies** – A total of 20. Supervisors from 20 companies were interviewed representing manufacturing, marketing, agriculture tourism, services and government departments. **Students:** A total of 26 students from different faculties were interviewed. **Lecturers:** 10 from different departments were interviewed.

## **Data Collection**

The main instrument used for data collection was a structured interview schedule and documentary analysis of learners' work plans, progress files and log sheets. The interview method allowed the researcher to go back or phone to clarify issues that had arisen as a result of the employees or supervisors -making statements that conflicted with or contradicted what the learner would have said earlier on. The learner's work plan and progress files were analysed compared with the evaluator's instruments used by lecturers and supervisors to assess the learner's performance.

## **Analysis of Data**

The analysis framework has been developed from views and comments from lecturers, learners, employers and employees. Validation of data was through triangulation of the same questions asked all stakeholders on orientation, assessment, work plan and progress file. It is descriptive in form. To validate

empirical data, triangulation was used to address the same issues among all stakeholders.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The discussion is based on findings from the employees, employers, learners and lecturers. The focus is for orientation of all stakeholders, work plan for the learners, evaluation instruments progress files and learners' interaction with co-workers at the workplace, and learners' views. Reference is also made to policy guidelines.

### **Policy Guidelines**

Analysis of the official university strategic plan, employer's manual guide and student WRL guide gives the impression that policy guidelines and procedures are in place to enable all stakeholders to operate on the same wavelength. Clear policy statements ensure that all stakeholders are fully aware of the importance and value of work related learning. However, interviews with some of the stakeholders revealed that not all stakeholders had access to WRL Employer's Manual and Students Guide to Work Related Learning since the distribution of these were not complete. It was suggested that these should also be posted on the Work Related Learning Website.

### **Orientation**

Lecturers were asked how they prepared students for WRL. The responses differed from department to department. Some departments admitted that they are too busy teaching and therefore do not have time to prepare students for WRL. They suggested that the WRL Office should take up that responsibility. "Our major input is coursework," commented one lecturer. On the other hand; some departments said that they prepare their students to meet the reality of the world of work. Students' responses to the same question indicated that they felt that they were not adequately prepared. One student said, "We were only advised on how we should conduct ourselves i.e. be punctual at work and meet your deadlines." They felt that the departments should have discussed with them the attributes and competencies for which they were being assessed. "What you are told at university becomes different in the workplace." When the student was asked to explain herself on what she meant, she went further to say, "we are only taught theory without practical component." Asked to suggest what practical component could have been given to her class? "Well we could have had a University Magazine which would have exposed us to story writing and editing skills and learning the basics of publication and publishing. When we come here, we are thrown to the deep end. They expect us to have basic skills in story writing and publication." Supervisors in the work place were also asked to comment on the preparedness of the learners who come for work related learning. Their views differed depending on the departments from which learners

had come. Many employers commented positively about students from the University stating that the learners were well disciplined and hardworking. A few companies said that they would not take students from other universities except those from Midlands State University.

Most employers did not formally introduce students to all the departments in the companies. This created an unfavourable environment for the learners, who did not receive as much co-operation when they needed information from other co-workers from different departments. These caused a few problems in some cases, as repeated by a number of students. "They see us as threats to their jobs". This problem could have been avoided if workers had been given a proper orientation to the learners. One of the learners said "when you are seen as a threat it becomes difficult to ask for information freely and you are never sure that the information you receive is correct" It is clear from the interviews that took place that the issue of orientation is still an area of concern. There is need for the Work Related Learning Office to standardise orientation at all stages so that all learners have the same information and are aware of all procedures. In a way it could be agreed that more preparation is required to equip learners with relevant knowledge for the work place.

The purpose of orientation is to ensure that both lecturers and learners focus on the relationship between theory and practice. It is therefore important that, during orientation, learners relate their own interests and attributes to their intended careers so as to make informed decisions on the profession to pursue. One employer said that when a learner was asked to go and cover a function so as to come up with a story for their paper, the learner said "I am a married woman I cannot be seen to be at a function at night." The employer who was also the learner's supervisor said "the learner had not been given enough orientation on what journalism entails."

### **Supervision and Assessment**

Supervision and assessment play a significant role in the quality control process of work related learning. The lecturers, together with learners in consultation with employers should devise a learning plan (often referred to as work plan) identifying the critical attributes, knowledge and skills to be assessed during the work related learning period.. Lecturers were asked to comment if the assessment forms were cooperatively developed. It was clearly stated that the learners and employers were not involved. The majority of lecturers were also not involved. They found the instrument in existence and were not given the opportunity to review it. Those who originally developed the instrument had reproduced an instrument, which had been brought from another university overseas. The assessment form should therefore be developed in consultation with all other stakeholders

The most common assessment form used at the university is divided into the following subheadings:

Personal characteristics, B Interpersonal skills, C Quality of work, D Organisational skills (see Appendix 1.5).

### **Learning Plan/ Work plan**

Since the assessment form is used to evaluate significant attributes and competencies, it should form part of the learning plan or work plan, which is a basic tool in ensuring quality at all points along the continuum of contextual and work related learning (Wrl Guide for Family Literacy p 18) The plan spells out what the learners should be doing, and the skills they will be developing. The learning plans create common ground for assessment by both the supervisor at the workplace and the lecturer. Besides increasing the employer's expectations the learning plan encourages the employer to vary the scope of the learner's work to ensure coverage of the competencies specified in the assessment instrument.

To achieve higher quality in work related learning, the experience should be structured around the objectives agreed on by all stakeholders. In many cases, it was found that the majority of learners interviewed did not have work plans. All they had were job descriptions of the supervisors who were working with them. Lack of learning plans at places of work resulted in learners spending more time on less important tasks, which did not contribute significantly to the competencies specified in the assessment form. This was reflected in a comment made by a number of learners, who said "they see us as a threat because we are potential degree graduates. They therefore divert us to do other small jobs not in line with what we are supposed to do." It was clear that the non-existence of learning plans did not assist in giving direction to either the learner or the supervisor. This was confirmed by one of the learners from the Human Resources Department who said: "we do work unrelated to what we should be doing, operating as messengers, the university should communicate with our supervisors to clarify our roles and responsibilities." However, it was noted that science and computer learners were more focused because they were given specific research projects to carry out such as the development of software, which companies are now using. One of the concerns observed in the science and computer learners is that some of them were not given opportunities to go to other departments but asked to concentrate on given tasks for the period they were placed at a company.

### **Progress File**

Lessons learnt from teaching practices in Education, which houses the oldest work related learning programme at the University indicates the importance, value and significance of record keeping. Teaching practice files contain, among other aspects of teaching, the syllabus scheme of work for the term and lesson

plans; it also has comments on lessons taught i.e. self-evaluation. The file also has assessment reports by the head of department and the school head. When a lecturer goes to supervise the student teacher, the first thing to do is to look at the teaching practice file. A lot is learnt from this file. Appropriate interventions can be devised on the basis of work done and comments made by other supervisors.

Work related learning could take a leaf from this practice when learners are out in industry. Tasks and activities are often routine and repetitive, offering little opportunity for the learners to develop or practice critical thinking skills. In the absence of a progress file, the lecturer, who is away at university and comes in for thirty minutes or so, will not have an idea about what will have happened for the four or six months he was away. The progress file will open a window for the lecturer to see if the learner was making any reference to the theories and principles they have learnt at university. In other words it can be said that the progress file enables the lecturers to review the learners' operations and processes based on the learning plan. The learning plan as described earlier is linked to the attributes and competences specified in the assessment instrument. The unavailability of the progress file results in supervisors making general comments about the learner's performance instead of being specific in terms of competencies. Their responses to how the learner was performing is always "the learner is doing fine" without pointing out what areas still needed improvement. Those learners who have log sheets do not make comments, which would link up their theory with the activities they were engaged in at the work place where they were employed. The learner's comments could be used as feedback of what was happening. One student said, "lecturers do not know what managers are doing because they have no experience of what happens in industry.". However, it should be noted that some Faculties such as Natural Resources Management and Agriculture require learners to produce quarterly reports, which go a long way towards giving the lecturer information on what is happening at the work place and the university through the reports.

### **Lessons Leant**

- There are still a lot of challenges among tertiary institutions if quality WRL processes are to be achieved. These challenges can be addressed through the implementation of the concept of co-operative education which recognises that the three pillars of WRL i.e. the lecturers, the learners and employers should work together as partners to ensure a high quality product of WRL.
- Employers and their employees are a critical component of the process of training learners at a workplace. Their roles and responsibilities should not be taken for granted.
- It has been made clear through interviews and comments that clarity of purpose among all the partners is an essential ingredient for the successful implementation of the WRL module.

## **Recommendations**

- That all the partners, including the lecturers, employers and the learners, develop the development of assessment instruments co-operatively.
- That the feedback from the learners who are in Commerce and Industry be compiled for each Faculty and be used as a basis for curriculum review and the improvement of work related learning operations.
- That the issue of learning plans and progress files be considered as basic critical tools for supervising and assessing learners on work related learning.
- That formal seminars and workshops be organised for all stakeholders so that monitoring instruments can be developed which challenge commerce and industry to supervise the learners in a professional and career guided fashion.
- That lecturers should regard work related learning as an integral part of their teaching and learning. It should be regarded as both a philosophy and a methodology.

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Appendix 1.1

**Lecturers’ interview schedule.**

1. How do you prepare students for wrl?
2. What have you identified as major problems among students on work related learning?
3. Do you think you have adequate time with the learner and supervisor during your visits?
4. Do you ask for a work plan and progress file/Log sheet when you visit students on WRL?
5. Which areas do you think should be improved for the university to achieve quality processes in wrl?

#### Appendix 1.2

##### **Employer's Interview Schedule**

1. Do you find the university Students well prepared for the tasks that you want them to perform?
2. What are the major problems that you have found from University Student?
3. Do you produce a work plan for the learner?
4. Do you use the learner's work plan as a source for your assessment?
5. What do you find to be areas of strength among the university students?
6. Does your company benefit from the learner presence in the company?  
How?

#### Appendix 1.3

##### **Learner's Interview Schedule**

1. Do you feel that you are adequately prepared for WRL?
2. What areas do you think the university should improve to produce quality gradates?
3. Are you getting appropriate assistance from your supervisor?
4. Do you have a work plan and progress file?
5. How is your relationship with the other employees?
6. What are your concerns?

7. Were you given adequate orientation at the work place?

Appendix 1.4

**Interview Schedule for Employees.**

1. Do you know why this student is here?
2. Were you requested to assist him/her when assistance is required?
3. How do you feel having him around?
4. Is the student a threat to anybody in the company?
5. Is the student friendly to you as co-worker?
6. Do you think the company is benefiting from the Students presence?

Appendix 1.5

<b>A personal characteristics</b>	<b>G</b> 5	<b>R</b> 4	<b>A</b> 3	<b>D</b> 2	<b>E</b> 1
Self Confidence					
Discipline					
Dependability					
Adaptability					
Drive and Initiative					
Learning Capacity					
Personal appearance/ dress code					
Attitude					

<b>B interpersonal skills</b>	<b>G</b> 5	<b>R</b> 4	<b>A</b> 3	<b>D</b> 2	<b>E</b> 1
Oral Communication					
Written communication					
Compliance and authority					
Teamwork/ Cooperation					

Service orientation				
Dependability				
Customer relations / Service orientation				

<b>C quality of work</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
	5	4	3	2	1
Job Knowledge					
Task Faculty					
Accuracy					
The Management					
Initiative					
Safety Consciousness					
Reliability					

<b>D. Organisational skills</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>
	5	4	3	2	1
Problem Identification and analysis					
Problem solving Judgement					
Planning					
Organisation of work					
Ability to prioritise					
Leadership and potential					

Appendix 1.6

**Student self evaluation and comments;**

(Include problems and challenges faced)

**Summary of student performance (by supervisor/ manager)**

Strengths;

Weaknesses;

**Additional comments** (Give details of specific project/ tasks done, responsibilities covered, targets achieved outstanding achievements, deficiencies. You may use additional paper.

**Signature** (Supervisor/  
**Date**.....

**Manager**.....

**Student**  
**Date**.....

**Signature**.....

**Official Company Stamp**

