

# THE SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS OF GEOGRAPHICALLY DECENTRALISED LEARNER SUPPORT WITH REGARD TO WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING CO-ORDINATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on eleven years of co-operative education co-ordination in the making at a distance education institution. It contains examples of a user-friendly interface with the Integrated Tertiary Software administrative systems. The paper shares with readers the effort that is envisaged to ensure progress. The paper also presents readers with an alternative administrative process, based on student submissions rather than data captured at registration. [The content might also be useful to multi-campus residential institutions.](#)

The case study outlined in the paper has been a trying one. Despite executive approval and institution-wide consultation, many initiatives did not come to fruition. Implementation often did not materialise due to inadequate resource allocation. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this paper is in the sharing of what did **not** work. Readers can take cognisance of these issues, avoid them and thus possibly achieve success much sooner.

The paper starts by defining key terminology and is followed by a short historical overview. Then there is a brief reflection on unsuccessful implementation, followed by an exposition of an Intranet-based co-ordination system. The case study continues by explaining the current administrative system under construction, followed by an attempt to provide role clarification. Finally, there are some concluding remarks.

## MEANING ASSIGNED TO THE TERMS 'CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION' AND 'WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING'

'Work-integrated learning' (WIL) is defined in the new comprehensive Unisa's WIL policy as "an umbrella term, used at Unisa, to include experiential education/teaching strategies such as clinical training/teaching/practice, internship, professional practice, experiential training/learning, supervised learning/practice and work-based learning".

WIL is a defining element of a holistic educational strategy that is known as co-operative education (Co-op. Ed), which advocates the formal integration of structured real-life experiences into the programme curriculum. The Unisa ([2005a](#)) WIL policy names nine fundamental principles of co-operative education.

The next section sketches the backdrop of the case study that unfolds in this paper.

## A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Approximately four years before the merger with the University of South Africa (Unisa), the former Technikon SA (TSA) held an institutional workshop, on 22 March 2000, where the idea of a roles matrix regarding WIL emerged. Four-and-a-half years prior to that, in August 1995, the former Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) evaluated TSA's co-operative education practices and reported a number of shortcomings. About 15 months later, at the beginning of 1997, TSA initiated an institutional process called the *Decentralisation Work Group* (DWG) to address the decentralisation of various processes from the main campus to the institution's regional offices. A number of task teams were created to focus on particular aspects. The brief of *Task Team 21* was to develop a policy framework for co-operative education, including the role of the regional learner support offices and their heads (Regional Directors). At

an institutional gathering, held in August 1997, the various task team reports were presented. A step-by-step Co-op. Ed. implementation plan was approved by Rectorate (executive management) on 16 March 1998. This included, among others, (a) changing the registration process to enable the identification of those students in need of placements in order to undergo their prerequisite WIL; (b) the introduction of a committee of Senate to attend to Co-op. Ed; and (c) the purchase of the Integrated Tertiary Software (ITS) module for Co-op. Ed. administration in June 1999. In August 1999 (about 18 months after the approval of the implementation plan) a subsequent SERTEC evaluation resulted in conditional accreditation of TSA's experiential learning practices. In September 1999 a *work group* of the Co-op. Ed. Committee of Senate started working on an institutional model, which was approved at a special meeting of the executive of Senate (with extended attendance of all those members of Senate that were available), held on 7 December 1999. The *work group* produced a presentation and presented it institution-wide during February 2000. This process culminated in the workshop mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, which also identified the need for a small Central Co-op. Ed. Unit that would serve as a hub between the various academic departments and the regional learner support structure. The mandate of the *work group* was extended to produce TSA's Co-op. Ed. policy, which was approved by the executive of Senate on 21 September 2001. However, an evaluation committee, comprising delegates from the former SERTEC, the former Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), conducted a follow-up evaluation on 12 September 2001. The outcome of this evaluation was favourable, but in order to ensure implementation, the evaluation committee decided that experiential learning would be reviewed during the first HEQC audit of the institution. It was specified that the implementation of the Co-op. Ed. model must be maintained.

During the second half of 2003 TSA engaged in formulating a new Co-op. Ed. policy, which was approved on 12 December 2003. Following a decision of the Senate Tuition Committee of the new comprehensive Unisa, a process was initiated by the Acting Academic Planner to harmonise the tuition policies. This included the formulation of a WIL policy. An institution-wide consultation process that started in September 2004 concluded with the approval of the WIL policy by Senate on 18 May 2005 and by Council on 29 July 2005.

Against this historical background, the next section reports on an unsuccessful attempt at the implementation of decentralised Co-op. Ed. Co-ordination.

#### INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION UNSUCCESSFUL

Committed to implementation, the Central Co-op. Ed. Unit initiated the following in accordance with the roles matrix mentioned above:

- Asked the various academic staff members responsible for the instructional programmes involved to compile synopses of the kinds of WIL placement opportunities that should be secured, as well as the nature of work-integrated learning required, to serve as guidelines for the regional learner support staff
- On 3 October 2001, based on the statistics of the 2001 registration, the various regional centres and offices were provided with the statistics of anticipated placement opportunities they needed to identify. The aim was to capture sufficient opportunities of different kinds on ITS by February 2002.

As students registered for the relevant WIL subjects or modules during the first registration of 2002, they would have been identified accordingly. Individual students would then have been matched with the specific available opportunities. In this way the work-integrated learning placements would have been facilitated. However, by 30 January 2002 not a single WIL opportunity had been captured on ITS. It was decided

that an "Electronic WIL Placement Manual" must be compiled to assist the regional offices with the identification of 'job' opportunities and to help them understand the process. The next section describes this manual.

## AN ELECTRONIC WIL PLACEMENT MANUAL FOR REGIONAL STAFF

The electronic manual (Unisa, 2005b) was designed by a team led by the Central Co-op. Ed. Unit and comprising regional and academic staff representatives, supported by relevant Information and Communication Technology (ICT) staff who executed the design. The electronic manual interacted with the actual data on ITS.

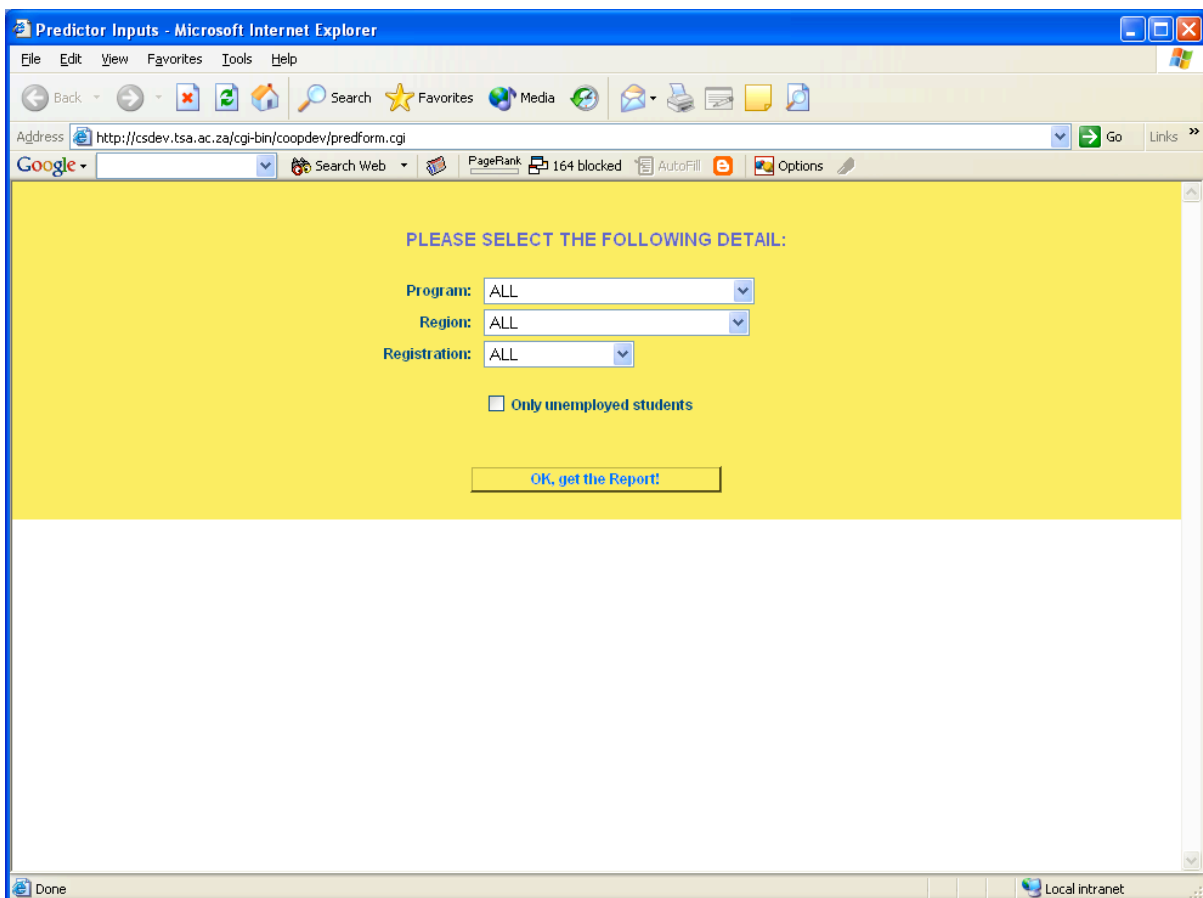
The top frame of the electronic manual home page had six (6) hyperlinks, namely:

Home      **Registration**▼      Orientation      Letters      **Placements**▼      FAQs

Two of these hyperlinks were followed by down arrows. If the user had clicked on those links, one at a time, the following additional hyperlinks would have appeared respectively:

<b>Registration</b> ▼ ↓	<b>Placements</b> ▼ ↓ ↓ ↓
Prior to Registration    At Registration	
<b>Planning</b> Capture Opportunities    Search Opportunities    Search Learners	

If the user clicked on 'planning', a screen like the one below would have appeared:



The drop-down boxes on the right allowed the user to make specific selections, e.g. either a specific programme or all programmes; alternatively, a specific region or all regions. If the box 'only unemployed students' was selected, the number of students in

need of placements was determined (assuming the information on the ITS system was correct). If the box 'only unemployed students' box was not clicked, the total number of students (employed and unemployed) was determined. The user then clicked on 'OK, get the Report!' and the information appeared on screen, after being extracted from the ITS tables.

Whereas the 'planning' function was meant for determining the number (per programme) of WIL placement positions required, the 'search learners' function was meant for identifying specific students for placement purposes.

#### Information about the WIL of various programmes

In order to arrange suitable WIL placements, regional staff needed key information about the programmes concerned. For this reason the following information was made available electronically and was kept up to date:

#### **Programme title**

- A. **Calendar title and number** (in which the specific programme's information is given) as well as the page reference
- B. **Any reference(s) to the Internet or Intranet** pages that contain information about the work-integrated learning component
- C. The **work-integrated learning 'subject' or module — name and code** (If more than one for a particular programme, list all names and codes.) If linked to a subject, as a component thereof, give the subject name and code and indicate that work-integrated learning is a component thereof.
- D. **Lecturer(s) responsible** for work-integrated learning (name, telephone, fax & email; cellphone — if lecturer is willing to give his/her number)
- E. **Administrative person(s) responsible** for work-integrated learning (name, telephone, fax & email; cellphone — if person agrees)
- F. The following **information is presented synoptically**, using the words in bold as headings:
  - Prerequisites** applicable to work-integrated learning, if any, and at what **'year' (level)** it should ideally take place
  - The expected **period** of experiential learning
  - What** does the work-integrated learning **entail**, what is it **about**, what is the **scope**?
  - Indication of the preferred **workplace settings** (required/possible areas of work exposure), as well as the **types of organisations**
  - What, if anything, is **expected from** the work-integrated learning placement provider (the **employer**), e.g. supervisor or verification of logbook entries?
  - What must the **student complete and submit** with regards to work-integrated learning?
  - How does the **evaluation** of work-integrated learning take place?
- G. What are the procedures with regard to **accreditation and recognition of prior work-integrated learning (ARPEL)** if a student claims extensive work experience relevant to the work-integrated learning requirements?
- H. What **alternatives** would be **permissible** if it is impossible for a student to complete the specified work-integrated learning, e.g. an observation report or a practical mini-thesis?



- The 2<sup>nd</sup> box, 'registration', had a drop-down arrow in order to make a selection. The relevant registration cycle had to be specified in order to get the appropriate information.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> box, 'region' also had a drop-down arrow in order to make a selection. Either a specific area (one at a time) or all areas could be specified.
- For the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> boxes, the relevant codes had to be provided — see the table hereafter.
- If the 6<sup>th</sup> box, 'Only unemployed students', was selected, only those students were identified, which would provide the desired information, provided the information on the student administration system was correct.
- The next "either/or" radio button would produce either the names and contact details of relevant students or only statistics.

#### When a student requests a reference letter

Students often approach regional offices for a letter confirming that they are registered students and that they need to complete WIL. A pro forma letter was made available on the system. When on the home page of the electronic manual, the user clicked on 'Letters' in the top frame:

Home    Registration ▼    Orientation    **Letters**    Placements ▼    FAQs

A screen like the one below then appeared.

The screenshot shows a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window with the title 'Letter Form - Microsoft Internet Explorer'. The address bar contains the URL 'http://csdev.tsa.ac.za/cgi-bin/coopdev/stform.cgi'. The main content area has a yellow background and displays the following text and form elements:

PLEASE ENTER THE FOLLOWING DETAIL:

Student Number:

Qualification Code:

Subject Code:

OK, Print the Letter!

The browser's status bar at the bottom shows 'Done' and 'Local intranet'.

The user entered his/her student number, qualification and subject codes (see 5) and clicked 'OK, Print the Letter!' A letter that contained the student's name, number and programme of study was thus produced.

### Commentary about the facility

Although available online as a tool, the Central Co-op. Ed. Unit was obliged to produce spreadsheets for every registration period and to send hard copies to the various regional offices. The same applied to the programme synopses. The 'capture opportunities' was never utilised.

At a meeting held in Kimberley on 11 February 2003 to discuss the requirements of the Midlands region for engaging in the implementation of the Senate-approved Co-op. Ed. policy, the need for an electronic system for the co-ordination of [work-integrated learning](#) again arose. In consultation with the Director: Information & Communication Technologies, the use of the ITS Co-op. Ed. module was reaffirmed. On 16 April 2003 about twenty regional learner support staff attended a training session at ITS. However, it was only the former Applied Natural Sciences programme group that ever utilised the ITS module to capture and administer the experiential learning of their students.

One year into the merger, in December 2005, a common (Oracle-driven) student administration system for the comprehensive new Unisa was implemented. Work-integrated learning administration was not regarded as a priority and the entire ITS-interactive facility was abandoned. In 2006 WIL facilitation is being done without any system support. The next section presents what is currently being developed.

### A NEW WIL ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Whereas the former TSA registration process made provision for the capturing of employer details at registration, the current Unisa registration process does not. The former process also captured the relevance of the student's work situation to his/her prerequisite WIL. After deliberation with several role players, it was agreed that the information needed for the management and monitoring of WIL placements would in future be gathered by means of the first compulsory assignment. In this way, focused data would be collected only from relevant students, i.e. those who registered for WIL subjects/modules. The 100-series tutorial letters (refer to the flow diagram — appendix A, starting in the top left-hand corner) should therefore contain the necessary instructions to students concerned, as well as the necessary forms — included at the end of the tutorial letter as a tear-off sheet — to submit as an assignment (with an assignment cover). If such a module is 'pure' WIL, i.e. there is no academic component, then the first assignment should also contain sufficient and appropriate evidence to enable Unisa to prove that the student is indeed 'active'. If the subject/module has an academic first assignment, then a unique assignment number must be used, e.g. \*91\* for the first WIL assignment, to avoid confusion. Academics responsible for the WIL component(s) of programmes/qualifications must advise [the Despatch Department \(a specialised unit dealing with all postal matters\)](#) what to include in the student packs by means of the inventory notice.

It is envisaged at this stage (21 February 2006) that the 'First WIL assignment' — see appendix B for the proposed draft — would be submitted like an ordinary assignment. It would be captured (only course code, semester code, assignment number and student number) by the Assignment Department ([a specialised unit dealing with the processing of all assignment submissions](#)) of Student Administration and bundled under a 'Covering Docket for Assignments'. [It is envisaged that in due course, when the newly acquired scanners are operational, it might be feasible to capture the actual data and electronic document onto the system at the Assignment Department.]

It is essential to note that in the College for Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (CAES), as well as in the School of Engineering ([of the College of Science, Engineering and Technology](#)) and for a few other isolated programmes, the academic staff must approve both the mentor and the organisation where WIL is to take place. The

Assignment Department therefore needs to forward the questionnaire to the relevant academic department first for approval.

At this stage it seems that the only capacity to capture data would be by Library Management Services. Rather than creating an involved sub-system, which might not be used to capacity, it is suggested that only core indicators be captured for use in searches. The student's submission would then be scanned by Imaging and stored on the Work Flow System, for use by the various role players, as and when required. However, the system needs to make provision for multiple submissions of both mentors and/or workplaces (WIL providers). This is because many students in CAES are obliged to go to several 'workplaces' in order to complete the prerequisite WIL.

#### ROLE CLARIFICATION AND NEEDS OF VARIOUS ROLE PLAYERS

The WIL division of the Directorate: Tutorial Services, Discussion Classes and Work-integrated Learning (TSDL) is responsible for the institutional co-ordination of WIL processes.

Placement facilitation and the co-ordination of monitoring take place at regional offices.

However, WIL is ultimately (as part of the academic structure of a programme/qualification) an academic responsibility.

Student administration and ICT, however, both play a crucial support role.

The table below indicates the output needs of the respective key role players from the system.

TABLE 1: ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM OUTPUT NEEDS OF THE VARIOUS KEY ROLE PALYERS

	Central WIL co-ordinating office	Regional office WIL staff	Academic staff member(s) responsible for WIL
<b>Extract for each registration period:</b>			
Number of WIL-subject registrations per geographical area	X	X	X
Actual students for WIL-subject registrations	X	X	X
Number of students that are in need of placements for WIL per geographical area	X	X	X
Actual students for WIL-subject registrations that are in need of placements for WIL per geographical area: Student number, name, physical location, gender, race	X	X	
The biographical information of individual students, i.e. names, addresses and contact numbers	X	X	X
The academic record of individual students		X	X
<b>Look up <i>student numbers</i> of students</b>	X	X	X
<b>Generate letters of introduction for individual students that are seeking placements</b>	X	X	

Standard pro forma & "mail merge": Title, initials & surname; student number; programme/qualification; and subject for which WIL is required			
<b>Capture WIL opportunities solicited/secured</b>		X	
<b>Capture work placements and/or workplace mentor details (or change/update these)</b>		X	
<b>Look up available students, should an organisation approach Unisa</b>		X	X
<b>The allocation of students to "WIL tutors" for monitoring purposes</b>		X	
<b>Extract students allocated to a "WIL tutor" for monitoring purposes. Information that this report should contain:</b> Student numbers and names; contact details of students; WIL placement and contact details; and the WIL workplace mentor and contact details		X	X
<b>Capture when the monitoring visit(s) took place</b>		X	
<b>Extracts from the monitoring record per student</b>			X
<b>Extracts from occupational field sectorial distribution of WIL placements</b>			X
<b>Extracts from previous registration period</b>	X		

## CONCLUSION

Whereas 60% of programmes at TSA had a WIL component, only a small percentage of the comprehensive Unisa's qualifications/programmes include WIL. This is a deciding factor with regard WIL processes. [The university's administrative systems that cater for a few thousand courses/subjects cannot be changed to make provision for the unique needs of a few hundred WIL courses/subjects.](#)

Previous non-implementation and lack of progress were largely a result of inadequate dedicated resources. There is a sense of optimism that the current initiatives will take root, although not rapidly. The system flow diagram proposed in this paper will only be implemented with effect from the 2007 registration.

[Both the former and the currently being introduced systems might be worth the while to be considered by multi-campus residential institutions for co-ordination of WIL.](#)

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