Pathway for student self-development: A learning orientated internship approach

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Higher education is facing new challenges in preparing students for the workforce. As demands increase for students to differentiate themselves when seeking employment, it becomes necessary for higher education and vocational providers not only to understand these challenges, but also to provide a pathway for students to develop the skills necessary to become sought-after employees. This paper presents a learning orientated internship approach as one such pathway that aims to provide students, as adult learners, with the opportunity to apply their knowledge and gain new skills in a work context. The paper provides insight into students self-reported learning outcomes after undertaking the learning orientated internship program. Preliminary findings reveal that communication, interpersonal skills and personal insights are common areas of self-development through this program.

Introduction

Preparing students for the challenges of industry is a central role for higher education. Industry, however, is seeking a new breed of student (Nicholas 2009), one that can differentiate themselves from peers by being able to engage with the organisation, the community and the world. Higher education must understand these challenges and provide a supportive transition into the workforce by fostering the necessary learning to compete in the marketplace.

As the workplace evolves, there are significant influences which govern and shape the need to provide a pathway for our students. With globalization and increasing international competition (Carnoy 2002), there is pressure on organisations to innovate for differentiation and manage the adaptation to change effectively. Greater emphasis is being placed on knowledge creation (Gow & McDonald 2000) and technological innovation (Castells 2000) for organisational competitiveness. There is more demand now on individuals and their social and economic lives (Moreland 2005). As many organisations become aware of their social and ethical responsibilities, pressure is being placed on graduates to not only have job-related skills but an awareness of the environment, ethics and the community (Jackson 2009a). Employers are also placing greater emphasis on graduates who are 'work ready'. Soft skills are becoming highly sought after qualities, moving away from competency-based recruitment decisions towards the ability to effectively communicate, interact and empathise with client needs (Hodges & Burchell 2003).

In presenting our case for a pathway for transitioning students into the workplace, we begin by discussing workplace learning through soft skills and learning frameworks. A work-related learning program is then presented, as one such pathway for preparing students for industry. We then present our findings from analysing students' self-reported soft skills through the program and offer support for

higher education to engage with industry in a dual effort to prepare graduates who are ready for the workplace.

Learning in the workplace

Learning soft skills is important for professional and organisational success. Soft skills are often interchanged with the term 'generic skills', or contrasted with hard, technical skills and discipline-specific skills. The definition of 'soft skills' includes communication skills (Stovall & Stovall 2009), interpersonal skills and elements of personal characteristics such as emotions and values (Kohler 2004). Soft skills have been linked to employability (Stovall & Stovall 2004), expectations of industry and professional bodies (Jackson 2009b, Murphy & Calway 2008) and according to Goleman (1995) soft skills can be attributed to an individual's success or failure more so than technical skills or intelligence. The development of these skills prior to graduation can therefore be critical in the preparation of students for the workforce.

Learning frameworks such as work-based learning (WBL), work-integrated learning (WIL) and work-related learning (WRL) are becoming leading mechanisms for student learning in a work context. WBL is learning through paid or unpaid work by applying knowledge while at a higher education level (Gray 2001) but specifically focused on the academic-prescribed learning outcomes (Moreland 2005). Soft skills may be learnt through WBL; however, the primary focus is not on personal development or workplace learning techniques.

WIL encompasses all vocational and higher education activities which are directly linked to an enrolled program and centres on integrating learning and practice (Bohloko & Mahlomaholo 2008). WIL is similar to WRL in that it allows students to develop essential skills such as communication and problem-solving, while applying classroom learnt knowledge. However, while soft skills may also be developed through

WIL initiatives, what differentiates WRL practices is reflective practice and lifelong learning.

Reflection is critical to professional development and learning from experiences. Used in higher education, reflective assessments in the written form (such as a journal) can be used to reinforce learning (Beck & Halim 2008) and meet academic requirements. Reflection allows students to identify links between theory and practice, as well as uncover other issues that concern or puzzle them (Gray 2007). Reflective assignments provide students an avenue to support their learning by transforming tacit knowledge into explicit, codified knowledge to be shared with others and to inform future decisions. WRL fosters student learning through reflective techniques (Bockbank, McGill & Beech 2002) and promotes higher order metacognitive skills, such as judgment (Hager 2000) for self-managed learning.

WRL is intended to enhance the student's ability to engage in working life and employability, including learning through the experience of work (Quality and Curriculum Authority 2003). While traditional, work-oriented frameworks seem to focus on the person-job fit, WRL activities place emphasis on the development of the graduate to better fit the changing economic situation, societal developments and the evolving job market (Moreland 2005). Successful WRL promotes learning across the life span (Moreland 2005), and therefore encouraging students in higher education to adopt the principles of lifelong learning is increasingly important in order to capture these learning skills throughout their adult lives.

WRL programs engage students at the early stages of their adult learning lives. Due to the changing higher education population, students are increasingly being considered as adult learners because they are either adults 'biologically, legally, socially or psychologically' (Benson 2006: 339). The degree of autonomy and self-direction experienced in higher education also reflects qualities of an adult

learner (Benson 2006). A WRL program that promotes lifelong learning and addresses the need to better transition students into industry is presented here.

Learning orientated internship approach

The Commerce Internship Program (CIP) at the University of Wollongong is an undergraduate program that provides a pathway for students to engage with industry. Aligned with the perspectives of WRL, this program adopts a learning-orientated, pedagogical approach in that it has a core focus on student learning. Boud and Falchikov (2007) argue that foregrounding learning and promoting the importance of learning beyond university is missing in the discourse of higher education.

Student learning is supported and enhanced through several key features of the CIP program. Firstly, the program offers an industry environment suited to practice. This means ensuring that the environment meets the needs of all parties involved, to best allow students to practise their skills and knowledge. Secondly, as the program is embedded in a subject, the program promotes an assessment framework focused on learning. The assessment draws students' attention to generic workplace areas such as team work, culture and different ways of thinking, through reflection. Details on the assessment are presented further in this section. Lastly, the CIP program affords a supportive transition into the workplace. All students are provided support from the program in the form of regular contact, including workplace visits. Students are also allocated a mentor within the workplace to nurture their development.

With student learning at the heart of our pedagogical approach, the CIP framework (Clements 2009) was further built on meeting the needs of its stakeholders; the host organisation, the faculty and the student. According to Jackson (2009a), higher education must play a more active role in understanding the interests of our stakeholders.

Subsequently, this program was designed in conjunction with discussions from industry which identified a need for a flexible and resource-effective program that made a real business contribution. For this reason, CIP is a short, 16-day placement, conducted during session. The placement description is based on the needs of the host organisation, as is the selection of the student. One semester before the placement, host organisations submit a description of the role while students apply for the program through an online application system with a cover letter and resume directly to the faculty. After a short-listing process with faculty academics, the host organisation is invited to interview three students from whom they make their selection. The placement can be conducted anytime during the following semester.

The faculty's needs are met through fostering community partnerships and contributing to graduate development. The faculty engages with organisations by providing knowledge-filled graduates as well as potential collaboration for future research opportunities. Quality, flexibility and sustainability are key attributes driving the program. Students are provided with a supportive transition into industry through an initial pre-placement meeting at the host organisation's premises with the coordinator and workplace mentor. This meeting orients the student with the organisation and discusses their role in further depth. At this time, formal agreements are signed by the organisation and by the student, outlining legal obligations, such as IP, insurance and confidentiality. Throughout the placement, students and coordinator remain in contact through emails, text messages and placement visitations.

The needs of students are also met through this three tiered stakeholder model. The internship fits into the university semester, qualifies for six credit points and exposes them to real-life business challenges and operations through participating in organised and independent learning activities. As entry into the program is based on

industry selection, the program is open to all second and third year students studying an undergraduate Bachelor of Commerce degree. This is different from the traditional apprentice scheme or work experience model, due to the focus being drawn away from developing job-related competencies to a WRL perspective of developing the graduate for the workplace.

CIP is designed to prepare students for the workplace by enabling them to develop reflective skills to encourage lifelong learning. To be prepared for the workforce, 'students need to develop their own repertoire of assessment-related practices that they will be able to use when confronted with learning challenges throughout their working lives' (Boud & Falchikov 2007: 5). Therefore, in addition to the practical component, the program is embedded in a third year elective subject and utilises a combination of face-to-face and online mediums to assess and prepare students. All assessments are submitted online through an e-learning forum. Assessments include a daily e-log, four modules: workplace environment, team work, creative and critical thinking, and a reflective journal. E-logs are due the Monday after an internship day, this being a timely and flexible assessment method to monitor students' activities, provide support and offer feedback on their reflective techniques.

The aim of this research was to explore students' self-reported learning outcomes and development through reflection at the completion of CIP. It was assumed that students would have developed skills relating to their discipline-specific knowledge as their placement role was selected to be that of their discipline. Given that experiences and the level of learning will differ between students, the goal of this study was to investigate and identify the common themes amongst student perceptions pertaining to their softer skills, which are those not concerned with their discipline in practice. In summary, this paper therefore investigates the softer skills developed through

a program that has a key focus on stakeholder needs, flexibility and reflective learning.

Method

Data Collection. Students' reflections from CIP were examined and selected due to their usefulness in gathering rich insights into the underlying dimensions of work practice (Clegg 2000). Data were gathered in two stages: first, reflective journals were analysed, and second, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The reflective journal is a culmination of the e-logs submitted at the completion of their placement and allows the student to take a step back and reflect on their internship as a whole. The reflective journal requires students to respond to six open-ended questions or statements. Students were asked to 'draw on what you have experienced during your time on work placement to reflect on your learning'. Three questions were eliminated from this analysis as they were descriptive in nature, outlining the student's role and organisational structure, or specific to the transfer of discipline knowledge. The statements analysed in this case included:

1. Identify specific skills you developed during your placement.
2. Identify what you have learnt from a personal perspective, during your internship placement, including the possible identification of strengths and areas in need of improvement.
3. Reflect on your overall experience and discuss how this might inform your future university studies or progression into your chosen career.

Students were also invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews aimed to probe and clarify responses (Aaker *et al.* 2005), to allow students to further elaborate on the key themes and to validate the analysis from the reflective journals. During the interviews, the same three statements were used as guides;

however, the authors sought clarification and the opportunity to reveal further insights into the themes uncovered from the journals.

Sample. A convenience sample of 28 students enrolled in the Commerce Internship Program at the University of Wollongong was invited to participate in the research. Of the 28 students, 17 were female and 11 male, two of these were international students and only one identified themselves as a mature-aged student. These students were all undertaking Commerce majors, with 12 students in marketing roles, six students in management positions, four students in accounting, three students in finance and three students in economics. The roles undertaken by the students were diverse and based on the requirement of the organization, however may be identified as roles that a graduate or entry level professional would undertake. The placements also varied given the organisational type: 10 placements were at local small and medium enterprises (SMEs), seven were in national or international businesses, six were at local governments, and five were in not-for-profit organisations. In total, all 28 students provided their reflective journal to be analysed and agreed to participate in an interview.

Analysis. Reflective journals were the focus for data analysis as these provided rich, self-reported insights into their practical learning experience (Smith *et al.* 2007). Results from the semi-structured interviews were used to further reveal and clarify key themes which emerged from the analysis. Reflective journals were coded individually for key terms, expressions or phrases. This technique is known as 'open coding' (Strauss & Corbin 1998: 32) and has been employed in the analysis of open-ended questionnaires to reveal common themes (Yanamandram & Noble 2005). An external third party also coded the data, to minimise the risk of overlooking important concepts (Walter 2006). The two authors and the independent researcher followed the process of inter-rater reliability in qualitative research whereby the dataset was independently

coded, then collectively compared for agreement to uncover common themes (Armstrong *et al.* 1997). Firstly, reappearing analogous categories or key terms were placed into sub-themes as identified by the researchers, then secondly, these sub-themes were grouped into larger key themes based on their commonalities and judgment by the researchers. The authors discussed and resolved any concerning expressions by considering the meaning in the given context, to reach agreement on the themes that had emerged in the data.

Findings

Three key themes emerged as a result of the analysis: communication skills, people skills and personal insights. Further to the discovery of these three key themes, it was revealed that the degree to which students self-reported these themes lends itself to the identification of three dimensions: self-assurance, self-improvement and self-awareness. The first dimension, self-assurance, denotes ownership of the belief or skill to which the student is referring. For example, if the identified skill was listening, the comment observed would be 'I am a great listener'. The second dimension is self-improvement, which suggests the student recognises the development, improvement or growth of a belief or skill. An example of self-improvement would be 'I have improved my listening skills'. The final dimension is self-awareness, which implies recognition on the part of the student of the need to improve the belief or skill. In this instance, an example would be 'I need to work on my listening skills'. These dimensions provide a snapshot of the students' perceptions of themselves and what they have learnt or developed during the internship placement. Each key theme from the data, as identified by the findings from the analysis and amplified with insights from the semi-structured interviews, is discussed briefly below and presented with examples in the following tables.

Theme 1: Communication skills

The first key theme relates to communication and includes the following categories: general communication, identification of specific communication methods, effectiveness of communication and communication audiences. Table 1 presents a matrix with examples of students' reflections demonstrating the four sub-themes of communication and the three dimensions. Interviews revealed that, although students felt they had general communication skills prior to the internship placement, it was the opportunity to practise these skills in a work context that was valued. Most students also agreed that they felt more confident overall with how they communicated after the placement. It was further revealed that students who initially felt very nervous with the tasks and the environment, over time felt more comfortable as they got to know their colleagues and the workplace which enabled them to speak up and ask questions. Students elaborated during the interviews that they were surprised in their own capabilities in communicating with CEOs and general managers. They revealed that they thought they would feel intimidated, however learnt that they were 'people just like us'.

Table 1: Examples of dimensions in the Communication Skills theme

Theme	Sub-themes	Dimensions		
		Self-assurance	*Self-improvement*	*Self-awareness*
Communication Skills	General communication skills	"I believe I have identified my communication skills as a strength"	"I also developed my communication skills"	"My communication skills are in no way perfected and therefore further active improvement in this area would greatly assist"
	Specific communication methods	"I was able to use my written and oral communication skills, which I previously demonstrated with essays and reports as well as class presentations"	"I found the internship presentation has improved my presentation skills"	"[A} personal quality that I need to improve [is] confidence when presenting"
	Effectiveness of communication	"I used persuasion and negotiation skills to justify the benefits of the recommendations"	"As I became more confident I began proactively requesting and suggesting work, but given my nature I had to push myself to be more forward and self-promoting"	"A weakness that I believe I still need to work on is my assertiveness [after] I had completed a given task and needed something extra to do"
	Communication audiences	"Even when I was engaging one on one with the General Manager, I found it easy to hold an intelligent conversation"	"The main skill, which has been worthwhile achieving, is building confidence in communicating with senior managers"	"A personal area for improvement identified from my role at [sic] is in tailoring of communication skills"

Theme 2: People skills

The second key theme is around people or inter-personal skills and includes: business relationship skills, working with people and workplace friendships. Table 2 illustrates with examples these three sub-themes with the dimensions self-assurance, self-improvement and self-awareness. Students who discussed their networking opportunities during the interviews, revealed that, while this was their first time, most felt quite at ease networking and can now appreciate the value of building relationships. Although many students agreed that they had improved teamwork skills, only a small number of students who worked relatively autonomously felt as though they did not have the opportunity to practise teamwork as they had hoped. Few students also referred to their groupwork in university assignments as setting a precedent for teamwork activities. Through asking students to elaborate on workplace friendships in the interviews, it became apparent that most of the students had developed friendships while on placement, however their reflective journals gauge un-solicited insights and underrepresented this topic. There was no evidence of students reflecting on the need to work on making friends in the workplace, under the self-awareness dimension.

Table 2: Examples of dimensions in the People Skills theme

Theme	Sub-themes	Dimensions		
		Self-assurance	*Self-improvement*	*Self-awareness*
People Skills	Business relationship skills	"I feel my networking skills were particularly strong"	"By corresponding with business partners and clients, I have begun to build my professional relationships and contacts"	"I should take a more active role in getting to know my lecturers… I guess this all comes down to networking and the ability to build relationships"
	Working with people	"By being determined in building my relationships with others, I could better understand my position within the organisation"	"An important skill which I had developed was human interaction"	"I believe I need to speak up more and get people involved so that things can be achieved as a team"
	Workplace friendships	"I formed strong working relationships with my fellow team members and have remained friends outside of work with some of them"	"I learnt that joining a new social circle can be fun and exciting as well as terrifying"	N/A

Theme 3: Personal insights

The third key theme that was identified is personal insights, including personal confidence, personal ability, motivation and workplace readiness sub-themes. Table 3 presents these sub-themes with examples to demonstrate the three dimensions of self-assurance, self-improvement and self-awareness. Although there were no examples of students demonstrating self-assurance over their personal confidence levels, during the interviews students contested they felt more confident after the internship and some compared themselves to their peers without practical experience. Interviews also revealed that the content they were learning at university could be applied in a practical setting. Reflective journals in this instance, however, did not represent the findings from the interviews in which most students expressed their enjoyment for the experience, and demonstrated how motivated they now feel for their studies and to begin their professional career. Most students confirmed in the interviews that they felt more prepared to enter the workforce. However, one student stated that although the internship helped minimise anxiety, they still see the 'real world' as far away and feel quite intimidated by the prospect.

Table 3: Examples of dimensions in the Personal Insights theme

Theme	Sub-themes	Dimensions		
		Self-assurance	Self-improvement	Self-awareness
Personal Insights	Personal confidence	NIL	"I developed more confidence in myself and that what I could do would really mean something to somebody and not just be done for the sake of keeping busy"	"I need to have more confidence overall"
	Personal ability	"I feel I really put in my best and have started something of real benefit to the company"	"I saw myself become more confident in my abilities"	"I feel I need to have more faith in the work I am completing"
	Motivation	"I not only enjoyed the experience but I really valued the fact that I was exposed to the practical side of accounting"	"The internship has actually provided me with increased motivation for my financial studies, so that I can obtain higher marks and thus overall, a better graduate position"	"One thing I might change is my attitude toward life after university which will impact my conscientiousness and attempts at study"
	Workplace readiness	"I now feel as a result that I am ready to get out there and face the big bad world and get a grown up job"	"I have also achieved a lot of skills such as confidence in the workplace"	"In many ways, my lack of confidence in raising questions hindered the first parts of my project. This will certainly shape the way I conduct myself within future workplaces and work tasks"

Discussion and conclusion

The findings demonstrate that, while these soft skills are being developed, students are also taking personal insights away from the experience. They also suggest that there is a learning spectrum from which students may move, from self-awareness to self-improvement and self-assurance. Although the journey is a very personal process, from university (higher education) to industry (practice), students who are able to reflect on their experience are better informed on what they have learned and how they will apply this learning in their future employment.

This paper has identified a learning-oriented internship program that seeks to meet industry expectations, by means of developing graduates through reflective learning assessments and placing emphasis on stakeholder needs. CIP has seen students better equipped to engage in learning in professional practice. Further to the individual development of the student, the program has also seen students go on to find employment within their host organisation, be successful in graduate positions and gain local job opportunities through networking.

Within this competitive environment, students need to have both discipline-specific knowledge and the soft skills required to demonstrate, communicate and learn in the workplace. As the graduate marketplace becomes more competitive, students who are short of soft skills may discover that seeking employment opportunities becomes more of a challenge (Stovall & Stovall 2009). WRL internships, work experience and learning-orientated programs can therefore be beneficial in shaping students to become highly desirable graduates through increasing their employability skills and professional development.

Encouragement and support of students and provision of learning opportunities will place students on the pathway for self-development

and lifelong learning. It is the responsibility of higher education to provide a pathway for students to gain the necessary expertise both in the application of discipline-specific knowledge and in the development of the softer skills required for students to engage, interact and effectively communicate in the workplace. The authors suggest that one way of doing this is to embed learning-orientated and work-related programs into academic curriculum in partnership with the wider business community and reinstate learning in the foreground of higher education discourse (Boud & Falchikov 2007).

The limitations of this study include the sample selection, which was taken from the South Coast of NSW, Australia, and therefore findings may not be generalised to a metropolitan prospective. The results are also limited to one cohort, however the evaluation continues as this is an ongoing research focus. Future research may include comparing the different schools within the business faculty, for instance marketing and accounting, to further reveal the nature of discipline-specific learning.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that soft skills developed by the students were influenced through a combination of the program design and the CIP model which provided the context and opportunity for encouraging students to explore and engage with their wider workplace environment, ultimately contributing to the development of these soft skills. We also acknowledge the degree to which individuals embraced and connected with these skills was largely dependent on their personal level of engagement. We advocate that if the students can continue to engage in the development of these types of skills, this awareness will aid their lifelong learning.

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