

Expectations of Industry Based Learning: A stakeholder approach**Abstract**

It is very difficult for a service provider to meet and exceed expectations when the stakeholders' expectations are unknown. Employers, university mentors, and students are significant stakeholder groups in the long-established Industry Based Learning (IBL) program at Swinburne University of Technology. Although studies have explored the benefits of this type of program, the expectations of the three stakeholder groups is an under researched area. Therefore, this research explored the expectations of employers, mentors, and students involved in IBL to both increase knowledge of stakeholders' expectations from this type of program, and to identify gaps and mismatches in expectations, if any, between the stakeholders.

Employers, students and academic mentors were interviewed to explore their expectations and their perceptions of the other stakeholders' expectations. The interviewees included current, past and prospective IBL students as well as employers and academics with extensive knowledge of this professional learning option.

Results revealed interesting agreements and disparities. Three distinctly different comparisons between the stakeholders' expectations and perceptions of expectations were made that identified four gaps: a means-ends gap of expectations between employers and students, a gap in students' perceptions of the other stakeholders' motivations, a service expectations gap of the university, and a gap in recognition of the university's role in the partnership.

Overall the academic mentors had the best understanding of the expectations of both the students and employers due to their extensive experience with the program. However, the gap in expectations of the university's role in the partnership requires urgent attention.

Keywords: Industry based learning, stakeholder theory, stakeholder expectations, WIL partnership

Introduction

The outcomes of work integrated learning programs, locally and at a national level, will be improved if stakeholders are partners in the program. The Australian higher education sector needs to show that their degrees generate work-ready graduates and meet the professionalised workforce requirements, with work integrated learning (WIL) touted as a solution (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Preto, 2008). The higher education sector is under pressures from the government, industry and community to demonstrate how their WIL programs link to a productive workforce.

Additional pressures on universities abound. Students in higher education are juggling competing demands and this is resulting in decreasing numbers of students opting to undertake optional work placement opportunities like Industry Based Learning (IBL) (Bullock, Gold, Hejmadi and Lock, 2009). Academics are expected to fulfill multiple roles with little reward for participation in WIL programs: indeed such activities are seen as career limiting as they are not deemed to be scholarly (Patrick et al 2009). With an increasing number of universities offering WIL options competition for industry placements is greater than ever before.

It is difficult for a university to meet and exceed stakeholder expectations with its WIL programs if these expectations are unknown. Patrick, et al. (2008) found that the quality of the engagement between WIL stakeholders is an important issue that arises and that a stakeholder integrated approach is required to improve program implementation. This study investigated the expectations of the three key stakeholders, industry, students and the university, of the long-established IBL program at Swinburne University of Technology.

IBL, which is a 6 or 12 month paid industry placement, has recently been incorporated as a component of a new Professional Learning Model (PLM) and there is a need to develop an effective way to evaluate the outcomes of the IBL experience in order to demonstrate how the student's full time paid industry placement in a relevant discipline area generates a work-ready graduate (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2008).

Background

It is being proposed that a shift away from the traditional learning-on-the-job approach towards a stakeholder approach to WIL programs will have an impact on stakeholder expectations and therefore program engagement. Industry partners offer placements for numerous reasons varying from financial imperatives (that is, a value-added ethos) to an approach based on stakeholder imperatives (or a transformative ethos). The adopted ethos has significant implications for stakeholders' expectations of program outcomes, benefits, and costs. Specifically, a stakeholder or partnership ethos fosters a long term view, seeks collaboration, and considers the learning and

benefits for all stakeholders (Harvey, Moon, & Geall, 1997). An effective WIL program based on a stakeholder approach can tie up scarce resources since it involves a managed partnership approach with intense engagement and clear agreements that the traditional approaches to learning on the job do not necessarily entail and for this reason the cultural shift towards the adoption of a stakeholder approach is still evolving (Orrell, 2004; Patrick, et al., 2008).

The way in which the relationships between the three stakeholders are viewed can produce very different expectations of roles and motivations of the stakeholders. The partnership relationship between WIL stakeholders has been the subject of some research reported in the literature (e.g., Cushen, 2005; Orrell, 2004; Reeve & Gallacher, 2005; Smith & Betts, 2000; Smith, Mackay, Challis, & Holt, 2006; Yasin, Czuchry, Martin, & Feagins, 2000). These studies covered various aspects of WIL partnerships such as the formality of the agreements, the problematic aspects of partnerships, roles and relationships between stakeholders, partnership models, and levels of involvement. Interestingly, the ways in which these studies view the students' involvement are often quite different. Students can be viewed either as a customer or as a product of a partnership between the employers and universities, even when fully integrated partnerships are being discussed. Most often the partnership is viewed from the perspective of the student as a learner.

The WIL literature that has studied expectations has either done so for a subset of stakeholders (like faculty) or with a particular focus (like workplace learning) (e.g., Freestone, Thompson, & Williams, 2006; McCurdy & Zegwaard, 2009; Mihail, 2006; Pearson & Chatterjee, 2004; Ram, 2004; Smith, et al., 2006; Trigwell & Reid, 1998; Zegwaard & Coll, 2003). This study is the first systematic study to examine all three stakeholders' expectations to determine whether or not all stakeholders have compatible expectations of the outcomes of the IBL program at Swinburne University of Technology, in the Faculty of Business and Enterprise (FBE), and to identify gaps between their expectations.

'Stakeholder theory'

Various currently available versions of stakeholder theory put the organisation at the center of the system and do not consider the changing nature of relationships (Key, 1999). This suggests that a 'traditional' application of stakeholder theory will not suffice for the triangular and dynamic relationships between IBL stakeholders. There is not yet agreement on definitions or perspectives of stakeholder theory, yet it is acknowledged that identifying the stakeholders' influence or impact on the partnership provides important strategic insights (Payne, Ballantyne, & Christopher, 2005; Polonsky, 1995). In some partnership arrangements it is necessary to consider the relationships

of powers and influence between stakeholders who are not central to the project in order to develop successful engagements (Bourne & Walker, 2005; Smith & Fischbacher, 2005). Furthermore the whole system and the unfolding dynamics of the partnership need to be considered for an adequate understanding of the motivating descriptions of the relationships in the partnership (Key, 1999). The multiple stakeholder relationships involved in the IBL program and the different progress stages of the IBL program call for different levels of involvement from the stakeholders, and could have implications for stakeholders' expectations. This study has begun to shed light on some of these issues by exploring stakeholder expectations of the IBL program and gaps between the expectations.

Methodology

In order to explore the expectations of the three stakeholder groups associated with IBL in the Faculty of Business and Enterprise (FBE), stakeholders were invited to participate in the research. Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured approach to better explore the expectations and perceptions of expectations of each interviewee. Twenty three interviews (7 students, 8 employers, and 8 mentors) from current and past IBL program participants were conducted and the interview data (transcripts of the interviews) were analysed for key themes using a simple descriptive method. The themes identified for each stakeholder group were compared to identify gaps and agreements in stakeholders' expectations.

Findings and discussion

The interview led to the identification of three distinctively different comparisons that can be made between expectations and the perceptions of expectations of the other stakeholders from which to identify gaps. The comparisons brought to light three important types of gaps which are discussed next.

Type 1 gap – important findings

Type 1 gaps were found by comparing a stakeholder's expectations with the perceptions that the other stakeholders held of that stakeholder's expectations. For example, the personal expectations that students expressed were compared with the comments of employers and academics relating to their perceptions of students' expectations. These expectations were then compared and contrasted.

A means–ends gap in expectations.

When students were asked about their expectations of IBL their responses were strongly aligned with the many benefits of IBL and WIL for students that have previously been identified in the literature (Cleary, Flynn, Thomasson, Alexander, & McDonald, 2007; Patrick, et al., 2008; Weisz & Smith, 2005). In particular students focused on career expectations such as the opportunity to have professional workplace experience and developing

professional skills, as well as the opportunity to investigate various career options. The potential to take a break in studies and have an opportunity to mature were some of the personal benefits mentioned by students.

“In a selfish way that is why you go on IBL: to set up your own opportunities in life.” [Student IBL015]

“People are gonna want it because they can get an experience out of it to start with... So they’re obviously going to be sitting a little peg above another person they are competing with to get a job.” [Student IBL017]

Employers perceived that students were participating in IBL for the training and developmental aspects as well as to gain professional work experience.

“They’re looking for work experience, ... specifically around their chosen field to see if it is the direction they want to pursue.” [Employer IBL014]

“I also think they expect to get training and development, whether it’s formal training or if it’s on the job training.” [Employer IBL019]

On closer examination of what employers said about students’ expectations it seems that some employers (ostensibly those who have extensive experience with many IBL students) place training and development and mentoring as most important for students while other employers would quote students own words about their expectations. From an employer that employs many IBL students:

“It’s that ongoing learning [the training and development mentioned earlier] ...and not be left to their own devices, just the reassurance that they are going to have that support there over the twelve months.” [Employer IBL019]

From an employer who has had few students:

“This is some of the feedback that I have got from some of the students we have had. And it is basically a chance to acquire actual work experience in the real world...They all say, look going to university is fantastic but when you actually have to transfer those skills into the real world it is a very different story.” [Employer IBL006]

It seems that students are expressing their expectations as ‘ends’ or outcomes that is their employment and careers whilst only one student mentioned training and development expectations. Employers on the other hand, who have had extensive experience with students, acknowledge the ‘ends’ expectations of students, but emphasise that the ‘means’ expectations, the training and development during the placement, as the most important to students. Employers with limited IBL experience either did not know what students’ expectations were or quoted what they had heard from students.

A motivations gap in perceptions of expectations.

IBL employers had two key reasons for participating in IBL, the first a business expectation whilst the second was more altruistic. Employers primarily expect to develop and potentially recruit new employees, whilst they also expressed a social obligation for providing employment opportunities for students and future graduates.

Academic mentors were representatives of the university in this study and they expressed the view that the university, which has a long and proud tradition of IBL, offered IBL to expose students to the professional work environment, so that they can develop skills and explore career options. On a more individual note, they believed that IBL was offered so that students had the opportunity to develop personally and earn an income.

Students have perceptions that the employers' and university's motivations for being involved in IBL were related to business, financial, or marketing tools reasons. This influenced students' expectations of the other stakeholders. The students' perceptions were quite different in substance to the expectations that employers and mentors had expressed, although a small number of students mentioned the more altruistic expectations. Students had high expectations of employers, and recognized some of employers' own expectations, but collectively the students believed that the main reason that employers offered IBL was for the cost benefits which can be realised. For example student IBL015:

Researcher: Why do employers offer IBL? Student: "Monetary benefits. At the start I wasn't that good but as I progressed they get an employee for almost half the wage of a [full time] and I would say I performed just as well... they are getting the right employee for minimal cost."

Researcher: What are their expectations? Student: "The same for any other employee whether IBL or not. They expected a lot out of me. At some stage I even thought the workload was too much."

Students felt that the university used IBL as a marketing tool, as well as a way to meet student demand or expectations. All students expressed sentiments similar to the next example:

"Probably a reputation thing. I came to [the university] because of IBL. ... It's a major attracting factor for future students." [Student IBL021]

In addition to the marketing motivations, two students' perceptions of the university were that

"They genuinely care about our future when we graduate to be successful; they think it's important for us to get real experience, that it will help us." [Student IBL016]

Type 2 gap - important findings

Type 2 gaps were found by directly comparing one stakeholder's expectations with another stakeholder's expectations recognising that one stakeholder may express expectations (of contributions to be made or benefits to be derived) attributable to another stakeholder. For example, the employers' expectations of the services required from the university were compared with the students' and academics' expectations of the services required from the university. This helped to identify imbalances or gaps in the contributions stakeholders recognised as required of them or the benefits they could derive from participating in the program.

A service expectations gap.

Both employers and students alike expected the university to provide extensive support prior to the placement, as well as during the placement and in one case after the placement. They expected that the university would be involved in assisting students to apply for the placements as well as orienting students to the professional work place, prior to the commencement date. IBL employers expected universities to provide students with opportunities to develop essential workplace skills.

In general, the university mentors had the most realistic and aligned perceptions of both the other stakeholders' expectations. Yet, there was little recognition by the mentors about the students' expectations related to the university's support required and even less to the employers' expectations about the university's support required, except perhaps indirectly through their suggestions for improvements to the program, or in mentioning how they fulfilled their obligations as mentors in the program. Only one staff member working as administrator for the program acknowledged that the university provided a link between employers and students through administration of the IBL program.

Type 3 gap – important findings

Type 3 gaps were found through a three-way comparison of perceptions and expectations which helped to identify gaps associated with third-party expectations. These gaps were identified by taking a stakeholder integrated approach.

A partnership-role expectations gap.

One of the most surprising revelations of the study was that both employers and students were uncertain as to why the university offered IBL beyond the students' learning and gaining work experience. Employers and students perceived expectations of the other party, namely, the students and employers, which implicitly made

assumptions about the role of the university in the program and the support that students get from their mentors. Yet the employers and students did not directly express their expectations of the university in its supporting role.

Some students (ostensibly the students who had already progressed a long way through their placements) even went so far as to discount the role of the university.

“I think that I [emphasis] could have researched this position description, applied for it and then gone through everything, not done an IBL year in terms of [the university], and then I figure I could have come out with exactly the same outcome.” [Student IBL017] (Note: this student also said that the university had met his expectations.)

Some students (generally those who had not yet found a placement) thought there was a role for the university, but even so did not identify any expectations that the university might have had of employers or of them, as students.

“The employer will provide me with the guts of it, the university will help me, especially in pointing out since I’m just going straight into the workforce and let me know what I need to know and what I need to do. My mentor will help me if I get stuck since this is the first time I will be working in the marketing industry.” [Student IBL023]

Similarly, employers raised mainly benefits for students as both the reasons for providing the program and expectations of the university. Yet the employers had many expectations of students (such as having initiative and drive), which implies a role for the university (such as the content of their courses) and therefore that the university would have expectations of the program (such as the performance of the students with regard to their initiative taking in the workplace). Two employers did not know the role of the university in the program; to the extent that one employer questioned the involvement of the university during the placement.

“I employed the students so when I have a problem I deal with the students. I did not employ [the university] and if I had it would be a different issue.” [Employer IBL008]

Some students expressed similar views of the mentor during the placement directly contradicting previous answers about support required from the university.

“Personally I did not want to be hassled by the [the mentor].” [Student IBL017]

Conclusions and Implications

This research provided insights into gaps and agreements between the expectations of the three main stakeholder groups of the IBL program at Swinburne University of Technology. Overall the academic mentors had the best understanding of the expectations of both students and employers, which is not surprising, as most of the academic mentors have industry experience and have been involved in education for several years, as well as having experience as IBL mentors. On the other hand, current ways of implementing the program are contributing to differences in expectations. Through a review of the WIL partnership and stakeholder theory literature a number of aspects were identified that may be relevant in explaining the gaps and providing opportunities for improvements. The focus on the partnership between the university and employers with the view of the student as a customer or a product, the ethos of partnership, the triangular nature of the IBL partnership with distributions of power and influence across the relationships, and the dynamic nature of the relationships over the course of an IBL placement.

Now that the views of the key stakeholders have been elicited the next challenge is to attempt to align them. The lack of understanding about the role of the university requires urgent attention, as IBL is a very important part of the vision and strategic direction of the university. To date there has been general satisfaction with the IBL program however unaligned expectations may result in a reduction in satisfaction levels, which in today's competitive environment, cannot be afforded.

The higher education sector is being pushed to demonstrate their contribution to the workforce and a stakeholder approach is being suggested as the solution. Without doubt a stakeholder approach will have implications for expectations. This review has shown that it would not be sufficient to apply traditional stakeholder theory without modifications to take into account the three-way nature of the IBL partnership and the dynamics of the IBL program.

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