

KEEPING WIL ALIVE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

As the mergers of the higher education institutions in South Africa take shape, there is an increased awareness under students, prospective students and industry of the need for work integrated learning. The intention of this paper is to make the reader aware of the important role of work integrated learning (WIL) as part of a curriculum and also how the recent mergers within the South African higher education institutions made the marketing of WIL simple. In the first part of the paper I will focus on the recent mergers within the South African higher education institutions and the impact on the WIL programmes, with specific reference to Fashion and Clothing. With the elimination of the technikon structure and the implementation of three types of university structures throughout South Africa, a concern of losing the practical education component within the higher education surfaced amongst the general public and the industry.

In the second part of the paper I will explain how this concern is present in two ways. First are the ever increasing enquiries from prospective students on the university approach to WIL. Second is the approach to WIL by the various industry role players. I will briefly explain the past and the present approaches to qualifications within the higher educational institutions of the country. I will also discuss the role that WIL played as a curriculum component. To illustrate this I will draw a comparison between the Fashion and Clothing courses at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. I will furthermore illustrate the success rate of WIL as part of the technikon structure and then by explaining the new university structure, I will highlight the concerns of industry and prospective students alike. The paper will reflect on feedback from various industry role players and their stand on WIL. The paper will conclude with a new plan for the Fashion Department of Cape Peninsula University of Technology, grounded in the proven successes of the past.

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Introduction and literature review

Inspired by Daniel Pink through his book *A Whole New Mind*, I would like to aim the focus of this research to identify the skills and competencies required by fashion students in the South African fashion retail context. In Pink's book he refers to six essential aptitudes on which professional success and personal satisfaction will depend on in the future. He describes *design, story, symphony, empathy, play* and *meaning* as fundamental human abilities that anyone can master (Pink, 2005). In view of the disruptive sea of change that has taken place in the South African socio-political and socio-economic spheres over the past decade the fundamental human abilities described by Pink seem to be more than ever what would be necessary for future students of higher education in South Africa.

Higher education has not escaped by the changes in South Africa and this new era demand that South Africa's education standards be revisited. A new education epoch was embraced in 1995 after former President Nelson Mandela appointed a National Commission of Higher Education to investigate and recommend a new landscape for higher education (Reddy, 2004). Following the National Commission, a National Working Group was established to advise on restructuring the institutional landscape in higher education. International higher education has been focussing on the needs created by market changes for many years, but according to Pityana (2004), higher education in South Africa experienced a decade of ferment.

Universities, which by inclination are conservative institutions, have had to contend with rapid and imposing change (Pityana, 2004). For South Africa to respond to these changes, education had to focus on the results of the investigations by the National Working Group. After the release of the document entitled *Student Enrolment Planning in Public Higher Education* (Department of Education, 2005) the Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor, highlighted some of the troubling features uncovered in higher education. Most

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important was the fact that growth in higher education has been driven by institutional interests and not by sectoral or national deliberations and plans. It is my opinion that when higher education programmes are actively engaged with Work Integrated Learning (WIL) the demands of industry cannot be ignored. I would therefore disseminate my research through the lens of Pink's (2005) list of essential attributes. His first refers to *design* and he explains that it is no longer adequate to offer a product or service that is only functional. In current economic conditions and modern life styles customers engage with something that is fanciful and emotional engaging. The incorporation of WIL into higher education adheres to precisely this point. Students prefer to engage in the practical application of their studies and interacting with real life experiences offers exactly this (Dale & McCarthy, 2004).

Unfortunately the absence of planning and industry placements in the South African scenario has exacerbated the quality problems and has led to high student drop-out rates, with almost 50% of admitted students dropping out of the system without receiving a tertiary qualification (South Africa, 2007).

This is also true for fashion education because the fashion curriculum has not kept pace with these changes and a rebalance of the curriculum, based on what is strategically relevant and required by the industry, should be implemented. This research investigated and evaluated the constant changing surroundings and the influence it have on fashion education. The research also presents suggested improvements to the curriculum set out in the light of, and keeping in mind the requirements of the educational and working environment as well as student expectations.

The research

Qualitative research aim to bring about an in-depth understanding of the circumstances of the problem and the reasons that are governing this trend. In the work presented I aim to give answer to 'why' with a lesser focus on 'how'. The data gathered was

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collected through various ways which includes interview transcribes, emails, notes, feedback forms, focus groups and media reports or clips. Through this method I strived to gain a better understanding into the development of the hurdles and obstacles that gets in the way of the traditional execution of WIL programmes within the current South African Higher Education scenario and through this identify the skills and competencies required by fashion students in the South African fashion retail context.

Mergers within the South African higher education institutions and the impact on the WIL programmes

As mentioned in the introduction higher education institutions in South Africa arrived at a cross roads and new strategies had to be designed to improve the current options. In March 2001 the former Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, announced the National Plan on Higher Education (NPHE) which was set to change the higher education milieu in South Africa (Hall, Symes and Luescher, 2004). Subsequently the South African higher education sector has been transformed through a sequence of mergers and incorporations. The previous 36 universities and technikons were restructured into 22 institutions. This resulted in the formation of three types of public higher education institutions in South Africa, namely: traditional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology. A traditional university refers to a university that has either stayed the same or has merged with another university. A comprehensive university is a university that has merged with a technikon and a university of technology is created from the merger between two technikons (Hall, Symes and Luescher, 2004). Traditionally universities were academic institutions, whereas technikons offered a combined academic and technical education. Technikons therefore engaged in work integrated learning and co-operative industry training. According to the Department of Education (DoE) the objective of the restructuring was to establish institutions that are superior in its capability of meeting current job market demands,

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equalizing access and sustaining student growth. This process was carried out in two phases. The first phase was implemented on 1 January 2004 when most institutions were merged or incorporated with other institutions, and the second phase took place on 1 January 2005 (Department of Education, 2007). To date, many higher education institutions still operate in a very similar manner as before and even the new mission and vision are not yet clear. The reason is that organisational strategies can only become clear once the Council of Higher Education has clarified the role that each of the three different types of universities will have in South African higher education, and how the three types will differ from one another (Cloete, 2009). The prominence of the educational offerings at the various universities and where they fit on the national educational framework have to be finalised. Due to these uncertainties, Naidoo (2009) investigated the perspectives of deans from merged institutions. The deans expressed various frustrations for example, poor communication, excessive amounts of time spent on operational issues, different perspectives that result in dissimilar operating styles, to name but a few. Naidoo (2009) concludes with the argument that universities appear to provide a setting for deans and departments to either succeed or fail. The lack of clarifying the role and position of different universities within higher education, is presently the hurdle of quick and responsive changes to curricula and it is through the adjustment in curricula that the necessary demands from industry and the 'new student' can be accommodated. The difficulty in formalising the structure and role of the three types of universities is exemplified in fashion design. The fashion course, which was formerly placed in technikons, is now placed in both universities of technology and comprehensive universities, thus creating additional complications in the formalisation of structures and roles (Hall, Symes and Luescher, 2004). This creates a situation where the credibility of work integrated learning does not appear to have the same standpoint as before. Universities of technologies will by the mere fact that they are created by previous technikon structures, have

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a strong work integrated learning approach whereas in comprehensive universities, the technikon structures will have to be absorbed into the former universities structures.

The reality is that the process of clarifying the role and position of the different universities is sluggish and creates uneasiness with future applicants and future employers. Post-merger student enrolment at a technikon used to guarantee some type of work integrated learning and both the students and industry depended on this expectation. This expectation expressed by both industry and students points to the second essential aptitude listed by Pink, namely *story*. Pink (2005) describes how effective arguments always have an equally effective counter argument, and therefore the ability to develop effective structures of persuasion, communication and self-understanding has become the capability to also fashion a compelling narrative.

Industry expectations

This section of the research identifies the expectations and the outlook from the fashion industry. The methods used to gather the relevant data include personal interviews, site visits, and workshops with industry partners. From the data gathered the following realities were discovered. Industry reports a lack of these personal attributes in graduates which become evident during job searching. Retail placement officers confirmed that in general, applicants with no WIL experience are eliminated first. Although most South African fashion retailers are keen to employ new graduates, Moodley (personal communication, September 25, 2009), Kassel (personal communication, October 13, 2009) and Bradley (personal communication, October 8, 2009) agreed that they prefer students with some form of experience through work integrated learning. They agree that a WIL programme helps in the maturing of students before they enter the job market. This reaffirms in the outcome of the workshop data which classified WIL as one of the top five must have

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for fashion graduates. The importance of work integrated learning as part of a curriculum can also be reiterated by illustrating a comparison between the Fashion course and Clothing Management course at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Clothing Management has been involved with a structured work integrated learning programme for the past 30 years. These students are generally snatched up by the industry because of the work experience and readiness that they have acquired through the work integrated learning programme. Fashion students have only been exposed to industry through an informal arrangement, as the fashion course does not have a formal work integrated learning programme in place.

Keeping WIL alive

Taken into account the factors discussed thus far, explaining the limitations for fashion students to partake in a formalised WIL programme, I have consolidated research data gathered during the completion of my master's degree and applied this data to develop a WIL programme for fashion students. Although an immediate implementation of WIL is not possible, I have designed projects to engage the students in a learning process that exposed them to industry. The response was exhilarating. During feedback sessions with students Daniel Pink's list of essential aptitudes proved to be on the button. Students articulated the awareness of *symphony*, *empathy* and *play*. This discovery came about when students had to apply more than just analysis, but also engage in a bigger picture. While dealing with the scope of the project they had to cross boundaries and find new ways of dealing with real-life problems. While working as part of a group, students realised that logic is not the only tool to solve problems. They had to recognise that the ability to comprehend why humans behave like they do, and building relationships and caring for others only come through *empathy* and it is this ability that will distinguish them from others. This ability will help to build healthy relationships in the future. Through all of this *play* is often lost as it makes place for the

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serious part of life called a career. It is often forgotten that creative thinking and the best ideas are often created during *play*. The last of the essential aptitudes expressed by Pink (2005) is *meaning*. Through engaging in WIL, students not only learn to accumulate information; they develop into individuals who can see opportunities instead of problems, and they can find meaning in the abundance of information of the modern world. By applying these essential aptitudes they are able to bring out more creativity by increasing trust and responsibility and create focused presence and lead from the now (Natorp, 2009). The feedback from these students and the motivation from industry experts are now used to strengthen the inclusion of work integrated learning into the new Fashion Curriculum.

Implication

Reflecting on the data gathered and the invaluable feedback from students, it is clear that the incorporation of WIL into the Fashion Department, will contribute to a better prepared graduate. Pink's statement that *design, story, symphony, empathy, play* and *meaning* will guide our lives more and more and shape our world proves to be true. For that reason the only way to prepare fashion graduates for the future is to develop individuals with high concept and high touch abilities (Pink, 2005) through the incorporation of a successful work integrated learning programme.

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