

Enhancing graduate competencies through work integrated learning

(Research paper)

Abstract

In the sport and recreation industry ‘soft skills’ such as communication, customer service, motivation, passion and enthusiasm, as well as practical work experience have been highlighted in job adverts as being important requirements for employability (Wiersma & Bradbury 2004). A strong knowledge base alone does not guarantee a new graduate employment. Personal attributes and capabilities of the graduate are considered to have a greater influence on success in the workplace (Bell, Grebert, Partrick, Bates & Cragolini, 2003). The aims of this current study were to identify key competencies needed by sport and recreation students entering their cooperative placement as well as to identify the difference between student and graduate competencies. A quantitative research approach was first used within the context of the Bachelor of Sport and Recreation (BSR) at AUT University, Auckland. Seventeen (38%) industry supervisors and 12 (80%) academic supervisors responded to an on-line survey, which rated importance of a list of 24 specific competencies (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2000; Coll & Zegward, 2006). Second, a qualitative open ended survey involved 30 graduates of the Bachelor of Business Studies and Bachelor of Sport & Exercise majoring in Sport Management at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. The quantitative findings indicated that to enhance employability academic programs need to provide opportunities to develop competencies including the *ability and willingness to learn*, the use of *initiative* and *personal organizational skills*. Descriptive comments from graduates pointed out that work integrated learning experiences should be designed to provide opportunities for students to develop in the areas of *communication, self-confidence, relationship*

building as well as teamwork and cooperation. Developing industry and business knowledge that involved customer relationship management and professional ethics were also key competencies highlighted from the findings.

Introduction

Work integrated learning experiences aim to prepare students for the workplace by developing both generic and specific competencies that will enhance employability. Slep and Reed (2006) and Bell et al. (2003) highlight the importance of work placements in developing appropriate competencies for the graduate in the sport science and leisure management areas, respectively. To maximize the learning opportunities, students need to be capable of contributing to the workplace environment and encouraged to reflect on their experiences in order to acknowledge that new learning has occurred (Ferkins & Fleming, 2007). Researchers have investigated the competencies relevant to business, science and technology graduates (Coll & Zegward, 2006; Hodges & Burchell, 2003). However, there is little published research on the perceptions of the skills or graduate competencies that employers desire of sport and recreation graduates entering the workforce.

Method

In the quantitative study, industry supervisors (17/45) and academic supervisors (12/15) of AUT University, Auckland sport and recreation cooperative education students (2006/2007) completed an on-line survey. Supervisors rated 24 specific competencies of work place learning student and graduates (adapted from Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2000; Coll & Zegward, 2006; terms were defined for clarity),

using a seven-point Likert scale (1= unimportant; 7 = important). Mean values and standard deviations were calculated for all competencies.

In the qualitative study involving Massey University, a questionnaire was emailed to a sample of previous graduates of the Sport Management program (30/100), some of whom had also been work place supervisors. The three open ended questions focused on

1. How the following people (students, academic practicum supervisors, theoretical paper coordinators and work place supervisors) could help students maximize their work place experience?
2. The five most important competencies that students should focus on during their work place experience to make them employable
3. How the above people could assist students in developing these competencies before and during the practicum?

The descriptive responses were coded and then combined into themes. The nature of qualitative and case study research seeks to form a unique interpretation of events rather than produce generalizations, but it is expected that the findings of this current project can be transferred to other WIL contexts. The credibility and dependability of the research was enhanced by triangulating the data involving relevant documentation (e.g., course/paper outlines, graduate profiles, etc.) and literature (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2003). The reporting of the descriptive responses attempts to convey the holistic understanding and meaning of the phenomena under study (Merriam, 1998).

Results/ Discussion

There were 9 key themes developed from the qualitative findings. *Enthusiastic participation, self sufficiency, and personal organization* were similar to the top 3

highlighted key competencies from the quantitative findings, *ability and willingness to learn, initiative and personal planning, and organizational skills*. The following typical comments from a student, academic and workplace supervisor, respectively, highlight each theme. These comments have been compiled and published in “*How to make the most of work integrated learning: A guide for students, lecturers and supervisors* (Martin & Hughes, 2009). They aim to help students maximize their work place experience and assist students in developing these competencies during their work place experience.

Immerse yourself... don't go into a [workplace] situation trying to be an observer, but to utterly embrace the experience.

Keep reinforcing the importance of showing initiative and being proactive.

Have action plan type documents and make sure the students are involved in completing these. This may help them see the bigger picture and how things are broken down into smaller tasks.

The soft skills themes identified related to *communication skills, self confidence, customer relationship management* support those highlighted in job adverts as being important requirements for employability (Wiersma & Bradbury 2004).

Learn how to 'talk' to different people and realize that people need to be communicated to in different ways.

Encourage openness so that students understand it is better to ask for help than to get things wrong when it matters.

Get the student to put themselves in the customer's shoes and understand what it is that they want of the service that you provide.

The context specific competencies of developing *professional networks, industry & business knowledge, and professional ethics* were the other three themes identified, although specific *technical skills and competence* were ranked fourteenth out of twenty four in importance for a graduate.

When in [the workplace] organization leave the student persona at the door and imagine yourself as a member of staff and what the required conduct would be for actions, dress, etc.

Ensure the students know clear expectations on their behavior before they undertake their [project(s)]. Maybe they need to have practice meetings, or an induction to being in the workplace.

Have clear expectations for the students about professionalism, and how the organization operates. Ensure there is a good process in place to induct students into the organization.

Relationship building and developing teamwork and cooperation were ranked within the top five competencies desired of the graduate, but from an industry perspective, the biggest gap between student and graduate competencies was identified statistically as *teamwork and cooperation* and *analytical thinking*. Developing these competencies should be focused on during their industry placement, as highlighted by Fleming and Eames (2005).

It's not what you know, it's who you know. Ask the contact to consider their current networks and how they could extend and develop these.

Give the students opportunities to develop and extend their networks via ex-students, visits to organizations, guest lectures, exposure to a range of networks in the community...

Ask students what their job prospects are and then expose them to networks which may help

Academic supervisors ranked *computer literacy* and *written communication* in the top five for the students to have developed prior to starting their cooperative experience. This may be a reflection on the requirements for students to complete the academic assessments (e.g., reflective journal & final project report).

Be familiar with Microsoft documents, including MS Word and MS Excel as well as other computer programs and computers in general.

Give warning to students about the computer programs they are likely to need to use and offer them places to look for information on how to use them if they don't know.

Be willing to teach the students how to use computer programs if they don't know and mentor them while working on it until they feel confident to do it by themselves.

Conclusions

To enhance employability in the sport and recreation industry, work integrated learning programs need to be designed so that students are provided with opportunities to facilitate the development of the competencies identified above. The findings of this study therefore will assist students, academic and workplace supervisors in determining what competencies students should focus on developing and enhancing throughout their work integrated learning experience in order to increase the likelihood of employment as graduates.

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