

Work Experience Parallel with Academic Studies for Architectural Students

Abstract

A significant element in the Queensland University of Technology architecture program is the work experience component undertaken in parallel with the students' university studies. This enables the students to obtain a deeper understanding of architectural theory and practice through the application of their architectural knowledge in 'real life projects'. By obtaining work in architectural offices the students experience the economic realities of a building project and through this work experience the students are given the opportunity to work collaboratively; to become effective communicators; and to be participants in the analytical and creative analysis of a building project. Although all students obtained the required minimum work experience it was discovered from the reports received that a significant percentage of the students who have worked about two years were given responsibility for various stages of projects (which was not anticipated) and thereby were able to demonstrate in their reports greater development of their graduate capabilities.

Keywords: parallel work experience, practice, architecture.

Introduction

In recent times increased emphasis has been placed on the Australian higher education to improve the employability of graduates (Franz, 2008). It is anticipated that the current financial situation since October 2008, will increase this pressure to ensure that graduates on entering the workforce will have not only the required education but also the necessary skills to be immediately employable in their chosen profession. By having work experience or work integrated learning incorporated into the undergraduate program the employment outcome for the students is greatly enhanced. Where a student is not adequately prepared for architectural practice, the graduate can "have unrealistic expectations and these

results in widespread disappointment” (Ostwald, 2008). This problem is avoided in the Bachelor of Architecture course at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia, by having a practical experience component that prepares its students for graduate employment. Because of the length of time to be worked in the QUT program (minimum 72 weeks) it gives the students the opportunity to develop their skills and graduate capabilities to a high level and this paper explores this aspect.

QUT Program

In the QUT program the students obtain their own employment and become paid employee of a firm. QUT is therefore not a party to the employment conditions between the students and their employers. Under this arrangement the problems of inappropriate job placement of a student by the university as identified by Weisz and Kimber (2001) is avoided. The significant feature of the QUT system is that the students do not have a year leave from academic studies for work experience as in other Australian schools of architecture but instead students undertake the work experience while at university so that the practice and theory are experienced in parallel which enables the students to obtain a deeper understanding of the theory concepts.

Analysis of Students' Experience Reports

An analysis was made of the 114 student reports received in 2007 and 2008. In these reports the students were requested to reflect on their practical experiences and were encouraged to outline the benefits they achieved and were given the opportunity to make any other comment about the program. All the reports were very positive about the program and the students all indicated that the work experience helped them in their university studies and

prepared them for employment after graduation by giving them an insight into the profession and the operations of an architectural office.

The reports were assessed on the type of information supplied; the type of experiences obtained; and the extent of the student's involvement in those experiences. Approximately 10% of the reports supplied the minimum information with brief answers for the standard questions and only gave limited information about the experiences obtained. The second group (58% of the reports received) showed that the students had considerably advanced their communication and team building skills and received special tuition from an architect by working directly with that architect on various phases of the building process. However, in the third group (32% of the reports received) the students supplied information that clearly showed that they not only had the experiences encountered by the second group but also in the process were allowed to take on varying degrees of responsibility for sections of a project and in some cases managed the work of junior staff. For students to be given this responsibility opportunity there appears to be a number of factors involved. Firstly the student had to have worked a sufficient period to gain the necessary skills and the confidence of one's employer. The necessary period will naturally vary depending on the student's previous skills, knowledge and attitude. Based on the author's observation of students' reports over a number of years and the author's own personal experience in employing students, the required period appears to be at least 18 months or two years. The majority of students who reported being given increased responsibilities had been working at least two years. In discussing this situation with a number of students in the third category it was apparent that many enjoyed this role as it gave them greater satisfaction, improved their standing in the firm and it also increased their financial situation.

The other significant factor was the student's attitude to taking on responsibility. Based on the report received the students appear to fall into one of three categories. There are those who do not want to take on any responsibility and only do the work required of them. With the high building activity during the period 2000 to 2008 and shortage of staff the attitude of these students was tolerated. The second group was those students who were willing to take on increased roles but were only given limited opportunities by their firms for various reasons. The third group was those who were given and welcomed the opportunity to take on considerable responsibility. Students in this last group clearly show that they have achieved a high level of self-reliance and leadership potential.

Discussion

Based on the information supplied by students in their reports and interviews and the author's experience in running an architectural office, the work-based learning of students is a laying process of experiences as reported by Raelin (1997). This involves working in a small team led by an experienced registered architect where the student is exposed to new knowledge, new skills and procedures for the design and documentation of a real project within a budget constraint and to be completed within a determined time-frame. In addition to doing tasks under direction, the student will also be learning by observing the work undertaken in other teams and observing generally what happens in the office. A considerable amount of the learning obtained in an architectural office is "implicit learning, meaning the acquisition of complex knowledge that takes place without the learner's awareness that he or she is learning" (Raelin, 1997). Although one is not involved in other office projects one will come across enough information to show that other architectural projects in the office have different issues to be solved. Where the students have made full use of the opportunities offered by work experience they have greatly advanced their

graduate capabilities in the areas of skills required to be successful in the discipline of architecture; to be effective communicators; to be able to work independently and collaboratively; and to possess self-reliance and leadership skills.

Conclusions

The parallel work experience with academic studies is successful when there is ample work in architectural offices and these offices are prepared to be partners in the training of the students. Depending on the attitude of the student it would appear that the maximum benefit of the program for a student can only be achieved when the student has had an experience of being responsible for a section of an architectural project. This opportunity is normally not given until a student has worked about 18 months or two years when the student generally is able to achieve the trust of the firm to be given that responsibility. The changed financial situation affecting the building industry since October 2008 could result in limited work opportunities for architectural students in 2009 and this could present some interesting challenges for the program.

References

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