

## UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL WORK-READINESS IN THE WORKPLACE

*The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched.  
They must be felt with the heart” – Helen Keller*

*Abstract: Global workplace competence in the twenty-first century requires the challenge of understanding the shared operation of cognitive and affective skills required in the workplace. Yet, the existing application of academic learning to the workforce in work integrated learning [WIL] focuses mainly on cognitive skills. To maintain a synergy between the cognitive and affective domains this study introduces the concept of Emotional Work-readiness (EW) and unlocks the potential of the cognitive skills to provide a deeper understanding of affective skills in the workplace. EW informs the capacity to recognise and manage emotions and social behaviours of oneself and those of others in the workplace. A validated employability framework, the Work Skills Development Framework [WSD] (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2009, 2014), is used as the base to elucidate EW. In the methodology each of the six core employability skills in the WSD is associated with a cognitive and affective function and an associated reflective practice, to understand EW. In including the emotive factor in the concept of EW, it provides a more profound understanding of the synergy between cognitive and affective work skills. The study provides a generic model of reflective practices which can be modified to discipline specific studies in WIL. The methodology is innovative and the outcome contributes to acquisition of life skills in the workplace and in developing global workplace competency.*

Keywords – affective skills, cognitive knowledge, work-readiness, work integrated learning, emotional intelligence

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### INTRODUCTION

The challenge of twenty first century employability is having a shared understanding in the application of both cognitive and affective skills required in the workplace. Educational programs need to focus on specific industry requirements and prepare students to be work-ready. Curriculums of many universities now incorporate training via work integrated learning, placements, internships, workplace experience or blended learning to prepare students for employability. These courses often incorporate reflective exercises and simulations to enhance graduate work readiness (Hughes et al., 2013). However, as Smith et al (2014) state, work-readiness cannot be assumed simply by incorporating employability training in a curriculum. Instead there has to be an accountability process to enable the monitoring of outcomes from traineeship learning. In this study the term work integrated learning (WIL) is used generically to identify all types of student traineeships that integrate academic learning with application to the workplace.

Universally research has focussed on the need for cognitive skills in employability such as working speed and expanding technological options (Cate & De Haes, 2000), critical thinking performance (Ku Kelly, 2009), and discipline knowledge (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

However these cognitive skills alone are inadequate for work-readiness and employability (Fallows & Stevens, 2000). Although researchers have long argued employer dissatisfaction in graduate work-readiness ironically they continue to accentuate the need for learning more cognitive skills, such as use of new technology, problem solving skills, personal skills (Mhinga, 2013; Jones et al., 2010; Smith 2002; Teichler, 1999) at the expense of affective skills. This study is an outcome of that need to introduce affective skills in the WIL curriculum. It is supported by recent research on work-readiness and employer feedback on the need for affective skills in the workplace (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2014, p.207).

### **Background to WIL**

The term WIL is used internationally to identify programs that add a practical employment based learning component to university learning [Kramer & Usher, 2011]. WIL opportunities incorporates work-readiness and contribute to employability prospects. However there is limited research on how to achieve work-readiness and even less on the contribution of emotive and social skills [affective domain] to work readiness.

WIL focusses on gaining job experience, but are the students work-ready? Patrick et.al, (2008), defines WIL as “an umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum.” However, traditionally educators are known to focus on the cognitive domain of learning (Shephard, 2007) including a position paper by Universities Australia (2008) summarising the work skill attributes in a longitudinal study which focus on the cognitive skills. Does this mean our traditional teaching methods produce students proficient only to describe, comprehend, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate their experiences without actually changing their attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings?

Although some researchers may specify social and emotive attributes of interpersonal relations, social skills and personal development (Wilton, 2012), there is no substantial evidence of incorporating these skills in the WIL curriculum.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study unlocks the potential of the cognitive skills for a deeper understanding of affective skills by students, and introduces the concept of Emotional Work-readiness (EW) as a pathway for building work-readiness capacity.

The purpose of this study therefore is to introduce the concept of Emotional Work-readiness, discuss its practical application through reflective practice, and illustrate its contribution in bridging the gap between cognitive and affective domains to produce work-ready students.

The paper will first discuss the concept of Emotional Work- readiness and its relationship to theories of emotional intelligence in the workplace, secondly, the role of reflective practice in getting the message across and finally its contribution to WIL.

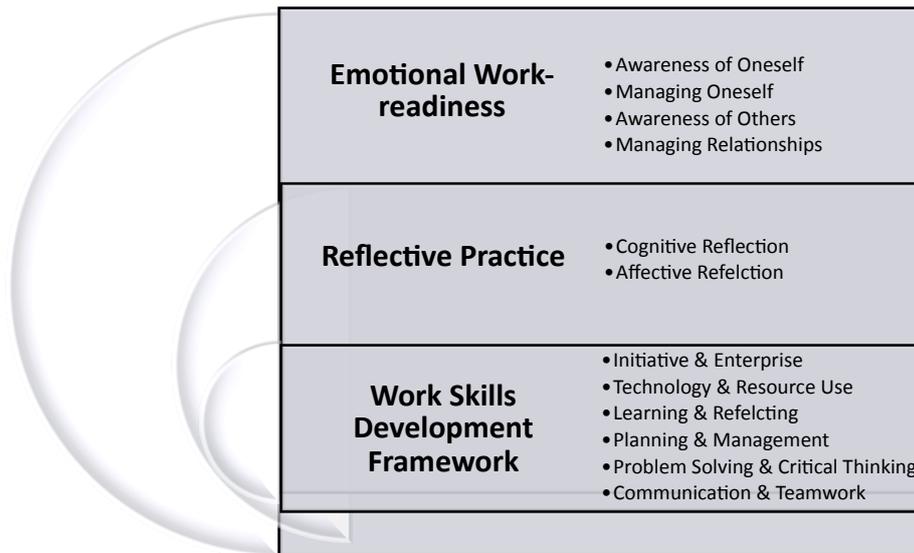
## **METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative methods generally aim to understand attitudes in terms of ‘what’, ‘how’, ‘why’ of an experience rather than ‘how many’, or ‘how much’ used in quantitative methods. The research methodology in this study is qualitative and suited to the purpose of the study.

Emotional work-readiness, an innovative concept, is introduced through a model of reflective practice explicitly focussing on both cognitive and affective attributes of the workplace and uses the Work Skills Development framework [WSD] (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2009, 2014). In this paper each of the six core employability skills in the WSD is allocated a cognitive and affective application and associated reflective practices to project Emotional Work-readiness in the workplace. This symbiosis of the cognitive and affective domains becomes evident in the conceptualisation of EW.

As illustrated in Figure 1, firstly the student identifies the six comprehensive work skills identified in WSD. In the next stage, the student reflects on specific cognitive and affective skills relating to each of the six work skills (Table 1). This is then followed by the use of reflective practice to comprehend the what, how, why, for whom [cognitive] together with emotive and social reasoning (affective] of the cognitive application. In applying the EW concept, the impact and management of these relationships are assessed, not just on the individual (oneself) but on others as well. This synergy between the cognitive and affective domains gives a more profound understanding of affective skills by students, and thereby contributes to Emotional Work-readiness (EW).

Figure 1 : The Structure of Emotional Work-readiness



### **Work Skills Development Framework (WSD)**

The WSD is a conceptual framework which has been tested and applied to WIL students since 2009. It is an assessment tool based on Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) employability framework (2006), graduate employability attributes (BIHECC, 2007), and Blooms taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2003) for delineating the levels of autonomy (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2010). The WSD mirrors the concepts and philosophy of the Research Skills Development Framework (RSD) of Willison and O’Regon (2006).

The WSD has provided a generic classification of employability skills by categorising them into six work skill facets - Initiative & Enterprise, Technology & Resource Use, Learning & Reflecting, Planning & Management, Problem Solving & Critical Thinking and, Communications and Teamwork (Table 1). Each of these facets enable students to focus on work skills and develop their careers (Fugate et al., 2004).

### **Reflective Practice**

Reflection and reflective practice have become popular topics of scholarly dialogue in WIL (Rosin, 2015). It is customary for WIL teaching to use reflective practice to surface the unconscious to the conscious. This study believes conscious questioning of one’s emotions are required to understand one’s underlying beliefs, values and attitudes to the workplace.

**TABLE 1: Emotional Work-readiness: A model of Reflective Practice with sample reflections [based on WSD, 2014<sup>1</sup>]**

| <b>WSD Facet</b>                                                                                                                         | <b>Initiative &amp; Enterprise</b>                                                                                                                                   | <b>Technology &amp; Resource Use</b>                                                                                                                                          | <b>Learning &amp; Reflecting</b>                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Planning &amp; Management</b>                                                                                                                                                         | <b>Problem Solving &amp; Critical Thinking</b>                                                                                                                  | <b>Communication &amp; Teamwork</b>                                                                                                                               |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cognitive Application</b>                                                                                                             | <i>Student is goal directed and clarifies &amp; embarks on role</i>                                                                                                  | <i>Applies skills, knowledge, technology and other resources to find &amp; generate information</i>                                                                           | <i>Critically evaluates role and reflects on lifelong learning skills &amp; career management</i>                                                                                  | <i>Organises and manages self while being perceptive to managing the needs of others</i>                                                                                                 | <i>Analyses &amp; synthesis of information to create coherent understanding</i>                                                                                 | <i>Communicates and collaborates with others and applies ethical. Cultural, social &amp; professional standards.</i>                                              |
| <b>Cognitive Reflection [examples]</b><br><i>Know</i><br><i>Comprehend</i><br><i>Analyse</i><br><i>Synthesize</i><br><i>Evaluate</i>     | What are my expectations from the placement?<br><br>Who will assist me in clarifying my role?<br><br>What is the professional code of conduct?                       | Do my existing skills support my role?<br><br>What changes did I make in generating new information?<br><br>What technical skills and knowledge do I have to support my role? | When do I feel stressed?<br><br>Do I use feedback to improve my learning?<br><br>What are my long term goals?                                                                      | Do I articulate my ideas, visions clearly to others?<br><br>How well do I set timeline to coordinate my tasks?<br><br>Do I have clear project goals and deliveries?                      | What are the major challenges in my role?<br><br>What is my approach to conflict resolution?<br><br>Am I better at resolving problems on my own or with others? | How well do I understand ethical, social, cultural conduct in the workplace?<br><br>Do I speak clearly & directly?<br><br>Am I better as a leader or team member? |
| <b>Affective Application</b>                                                                                                             | <i>Communicates feelings, beliefs and thoughts openly and defends personal rights and values in a socially acceptable, non-offensive, and non-destructive manner</i> | <i>Adapts emotions, thoughts &amp; behaviours to unfamiliar, unpredictable circumstances when applying skills, knowledge &amp; other resources</i>                            | <i>Copes with stressful or difficult situations and believes in managing or influencing situations in a positive manner &amp; remains hopeful &amp; resilient despite setbacks</i> | <i>Ability to be self-directed &amp; free from emotional dependency on others while making decisions, planning &amp; engaging in daily tasks</i>                                         | <i>Resilient, individualistic &amp; shows transparency, adaptability and drive to meet standards of excellence</i>                                              | <i>Articulates interpersonal understanding and acts with social consciousness, &amp; concern for greater community</i>                                            |
| <b>Affective Reflection [examples]</b><br><i>Feelings</i><br><i>Thoughts</i><br><i>Reactions</i><br><i>Emotions</i><br><i>Behaviours</i> | Will this role help me achieve what I want?<br><br>How am I adjusting to the new environment / change?<br><br>What are my feelings about others in the workplace?    | How comfortable am I in accepting new skills?<br><br>How do others react to changes / innovations I have made?<br><br>How did I react to adapting to my new role?             | How do I manage stressful situations?<br><br>Do my feelings affect my performance?<br><br>How do I feel learning new ideas / skills?                                               | How do I feel working with others towards shared goals?<br><br>Do I inspire others with my leadership / management skills?<br><br>How well do I meet the needs of others in my planning? | How do I overcome major challenges?<br><br>Do I help others in coming out of difficult situations?<br><br>Do others' emotions impact on my decision making?     | How well do I responded to diversity?<br><br>Do I show sensitivity in understanding others?<br><br>Do I listen to others with respect?                            |

<sup>1</sup> Bandaranaike, S., & Willison, J. (2014). *The Work Skills Development Framework*. <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/rsd/framework/frameworks/>

The reflection required is, not so much “*Why am I feeling this way*” but to understand one’s underlying beliefs to ask “*am I feeling hurt because they didn't do what I wanted? Am I unhappy because I'm not perfect? ... Am I angry because they don't understand my challenges?*” Asking the right question will provide the right answer. Reflections yield feelings, and feelings affect behaviours. It is possible to have negative impacts like losing one’s initiative and motivation to pursue a career, if one receives negative feedback all the time and fail to understand the reason for it.

Table 1 illustrates the cognitive and affective context of each of the work skills and their reflective applications. The possible list of reflections in each of the work skill facets is extensive and therefore only a sampler is provided in Table 1. The reflections are generic and can be adapted more specifically to individual disciplines. This methodology is strongly supported by Mezirow (2000) who suggests cognitive and affective domains as integral to the understanding of critical self-reflection.

It is an established fact among educators that teaching and extracting information with an affective content is difficult (Shephard, 2008). To overcome this issue, in this study the method used by the authors to elicit student reflections was reflective dialogue including face-to-face interviews.

## **ANALYSIS**

In order to understand the values, outcomes and the reasoning behind Emotional Work-readiness this section discusses the influence of emotional intelligence (EI) in the making of EW, the role of the affective domain within that context, and the use of reflective practice to stimulate individual thinking.

### **Theoretical foundations of EW**

It has been noted that customarily universities have focussed on cognitive domain of learning - what we know and understand, how we describe, comprehend, apply, analyse, synthesise and evaluate (Shepard, 2008). In contrast the affective domain is about awareness of values, attitudes and behaviours in the workplace, and the conscious management of oneself, and behaviours of others. It deals with things emotionally such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations and attitudes (Krathwohl et al., 1973).

While Salovey & Mayer framed emotional intelligence within a model of intelligence, and Bar-On extended it to a personality theory, Goleman spoke more specifically on the application of EI to the workplace (Goleman, 1998). Goleman (2001) also refers to the ‘natural divide between the mind and the heart or between cognition and emotion and suggests cognitive abilities lack the human flair for feeling (p.3). He believes the desired outcome is the ability to perceive emotions, generate emotions and emotional knowledge, and reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.

In this study the affective application and reflection (Table1) is an offshoot of the Goleman model of Emotional Intelligence. Yet unlike the EI models, EW is neither a measure of quotients and intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Bar-On 1998) nor a predictor of job performance (Goleman, 2001) but a qualitative measure to support reflective practice and engage in the affective domain (Figure 2).

In practice when a student focuses on the application of Technology and Resource Use (column 3, Table 1) to find and generate information it is not uncommon at the beginning of a placement to reflect on “*do my existing skills support my role?*” The cognitive reflection here is on knowledge competence where the student questions his ability of knowing.



**Figure 2: Affective applications in Emotional Work-readiness**

As illustrated in Figure 2, the student then extends this reflection by examining one’s feelings (Awareness Individual Emotions) reflecting “*How comfortable am I in accepting new skills?*”

or, reflects on managing one's emotions when adapting to new skills (Managing Individual Emotions). These new skills may be too difficult to comprehend and therefore personally and emotionally unsettling or may generate thoughts on "*what will be the reaction of others in the workforce if a mistake is made*"? (Awareness Emotions in Others) followed by "*How can I prevent others negative feelings towards me*"? (Managing Others' Feelings).

EW thus promotes the co-existence of the cognitive and affective reflections in delivering work skills. Reflective practice entails thinking about or reflecting on what you do and associated with experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). In applying EW the student makes the 'unconscious' action [e.g. taking on new skills] conscious by reflecting not only on one's own feelings and thoughts but also on the views and emotions of others.

In summary, the application of EW requires firstly identifying the six generic work skill facets within one's own discipline and then using reflective skills for a holistic understanding of what is required in a workplace and understanding what is meant by work-readiness.

### **Role of Reflective Practice in EW**

In using Reflective Practice in EW, the student has the predisposition to change if the expectations are not met and the ability to express emotions appropriately. In Table 1, WSD facet - *Learning & Reflecting*, the student reflects "*when do I feel stressed?*" In response examines the emotional impact - "*How do I manage stressful situations?*" The function of EW is the ability to understand an issue [cognitive] and then reflect on it [affective] to find the emotive and/or social reasoning for the emotion. In this example, the answer to managing stress could be – more patience, speak to someone or look for another perspective. Bandura (1977) refers to this as motivational reasoning central to the concept of self-efficacy, or a person's belief in their ability to manage and to persist under difficult circumstances and provide the motivation to keep going on.

The value of reflective practice is widely accepted as a tool for learning in higher education and a critical component to WIL. Reflection helps manage emotions, increases motivation and provides positive change in the workforce and used to promote personal growth and enhance learning (Kanthan & Senger, 2011).

## **DISCUSSION**

The contemporary world requires students to be work ready, employable and to sustain their employability (Marrock, 2008; Pool & Sewell, 2007). Emotional work-readiness highlights the inclusion of emotive and social applications in work readiness, the awareness of the individual to one's emotions and emotions of others, and skills in managing those emotions both within oneself and socially. In being work-ready amongst other benefits, EW helps reduce stress, recognise and manage emotions, connect with others using nonverbal communication, deal with challenges, and resolve conflict positively.

This study accentuates a general reluctance to incorporate affective skills in the practice of WIL learning and that there is more to work-readiness than cognitive skills. Chalkley (2006) suggests a possible reason for this in "it is the difficulty in teaching affective attributes that has stumbled its application in higher education teaching".

The aim of EW therefore is to prepare graduates to enter the workforce fully qualified in the application of both cognitive and affective skills through an understanding of reflective practice. Reflective practice is known to increase motivation and engagement in the workforce and build a cohesive work environment (Beard et al., 2007). Students will be more engaged in learning when they feel competent in what they are doing. This is supported through guided reflective practice in this study. Boekaerts (2010) confirms students free up cognitive resources when they are able to influence the intensity, duration and expression of their emotions, and are more persistent in learning when they can manage their resources and deal with obstacles efficiently. In associating the cognitive and emotive reflections with each of the WSD work skills it is possible for WIL students to learn the co-existence of the two domains and that feelings, thoughts, reactions, emotions and behaviours are associated with cognitive applications.

Training in WIL is closely related to industry and government concern with productivity increases, labour skills shortages, and international competition. WIL and associated internships, placements are the pathway for work-readiness but the existing focus and pedagogy must change to include the affective domain and the delivery techniques. In the long run EW helps develop a tripartite relationship between employer, university and the student.

Although the existence of cognitive and affective domains are referred to by researchers in the past (Shepherd, 2008), the interplay between the two domains has not been communicated in training graduates to work-readiness. From this point of view the methodology expressed in this paper in relation to EW is an important contribution to meeting employer and industry goals of the future.

This study has contributed towards WIL pedagogy in connecting the cognitive and affective domain through the use of reflective practice, and illustrates the potential to increase motivation and confidence of students and lifelong learning skills.

### **Limitations**

The limitations in this study are mainly associated with attitudinal behaviours and discussed below with reference to its impact on educators, mentors and students.

A possible limitation with educators is, having largely avoided incorporating affective goals in the curriculum owing to the easier delivery of cognitive goals there could be a resistance to change. Changing the attitudes of existing educators who have faith only in cognitive assessment will be an issue since they believe emotive reflection is purely a personality trait beyond the scope of a WIL educator?

From the point of view of students using reflective practice may be a concern owing to the privacy of revealing one's inner feelings and beliefs in relation to others, when working with an employer for fear of damaging personal relationships and/or WIL partnerships? This however may be overcome if the reflective journal is kept confidential? The reflective journal should remain a learning tool and not considered a public weapon.

WIL Mentors / Supervisors could object to assessing reflective journals depending on the in depth analysis required and the time available to be involved. A possible solution could be developing online e-journals incorporating specific sets of questions for each work facet with an inbuilt marking system.

## CONCLUSION

This study unlocks the potential of the cognitive skills for a more indepth understanding of affective skills by students in introducing the concept of Emotional Work-readiness (EW) as a pathway for building work-readiness capacity. It suggests that a critical element to WIL is the pursuit for affective learning outcomes, values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. It also defines the theoretical foundations of emotive and social behaviours and interprets emotional work-readiness (EW) within this context. The analysis is supported by an established work skills framework, the WSD and its six generic work skills.

The methodology in this study is innovative, comprehensible and adaptable. The use of guided reflective journal writing to record both cognitive and emotive reflections assists the student to make a connection between the two. By associating cognitive and emotive reflections with each of the WSD work skills it is possible for WIL students to learn the value of their feelings, thoughts, reactions, emotions and behaviours together with cognitive reflections and note the synergy between the two. This approach is particularly important in higher education teaching and learning to give new life and change to student thinking and also to develop a closer tripartite relationship between employer, university and the student.

Research that contributes to the pedagogy of teaching has recently been identified in Australia as a priority to higher education teaching (Smith et al., 2014). Work-readiness and future employability is a function of the fusion of cognitive and emotive skills. Educational pedagogy therefore needs to incorporate new ideas in the curriculum to benefit students and build a better rapport with industry and the community to create a more sustainable workforce for the future.

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