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JUGGLING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND EMPLOYERS IN THE WORKPLACE ARENA: A

discussion of the future direction of the Work Experience program within
Property/Valuation education at RMIT University, Melbourne

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Abstract: The model of work based learning (Cooperative Education) in the School of Property, Construction and Project Management at RMIT University is three days a week, full time, paid work, for a minimum of 26 weeks in the final stages of the Property and Valuation degrees. Work based learning has been a formal component of the property and valuation degrees at RMIT since 1977 and most of the current employers were once students in the same program. At the moment there is a shortage of graduates in the property and valuation industries and even the academically weak students have found places, but in an ever changing and competitive world this situation may change and we need to ensure that the program is both relevant and worthwhile.

This paper examines the experiences and expectations of both the students and employers, via individual personal interview held during the academic biannual visit to the workplace and an anonymous survey. As the numbers of new students in the school has recently increased, automatic work placement may no longer be the case and strategies will have to be implemented to take this possible scenario into account. In order to be better equipped to make these decisions, this research has been initiated to clearly understand the needs of the employer and the experiences of the students. Thereby having the necessary tools to both better prepare the students and also be able to expand the employer base into a broader business forum.

Keywords: *Work Based Learning, employer satisfaction, student expectation, educational relevance*

Introduction

Work based learning has been part of the Property/Valuation degrees at RMIT University for 30 years. During this time the cohort of students has grown to the current level of approximately 100 students annually. It is envisaged that within two years the students expecting to undertake formal work experience could be double the current enrolment of 35 students. This means that the current comfortable system of rolling over student places with the same core group of employers will no longer be sufficient. Additional work placements will need to be sourced and this makes a perfect time to review the existing system. The program has been running under the current model since 1977 and it is time to reflect on the aims and purpose of the work experience in industry program.

In Australia, governments are very supportive of work based learning and it is clear from prospective student responses that it is an attractive component of the Property and Valuation degrees from the student perspective. This paper addresses the question of whether the existing model can continue, or does the whole program need to be restructured?

Review of Literature

When designing curricula for university students, there are a number of criteria that must be considered. Learning outcomes and graduate attributes are at the top of the list RMIT University has a capabilities statement which overreaches the traditional learning outcomes to encourage the development of a broader and more rounded student, who acts as a professional, reflects as a citizen and learns from their experiences. (School of Property, Construction and Project

Management, 2003) Bowden and Marton (1998) believe that university studies should equip students with the ability to deal with situations in the future which are unknown until they occur. They must be guided to expect the unknown and be able to meet the challenge. They argue that simply giving students the facts is a static situation and does not prepare them for the dynamic and every changing world that they will confront in the workplace. Candy (2000) takes this idea even further and describes “lifelong learning” as all aspects of education and training at all stages of life and wherever it occurs. If universities are to promote lifelong learning there are five areas that universities need to consider:

- The structure of the curriculum
- The content of the curriculum
- Teaching methods
- Approaches to assessment and
- The student support system. (Candy, 2000)

In addition to the teaching and learning activity that takes place in the university itself, Candy (2000) maintains that opportunities exist to link with students from all cultures, ages and other institutions (vertically), with learning in industry and other areas outside the university (sideway links) and continuing into post-graduate studies (forward links). The work experience program discussed in this paper forms part of this process by combining learning within the university, vertical learning through a cross-section of students and their disciplines and the sideways learning by links with industry. When discussing teaching and assessment strategies, Candy (2000) maintained that the teaching approaches most likely to encourage students to engage in lifelong learning skills include those that involve real-world learning. This is supported by de la Harpe and Radloff (2005) who encourage universities to ensure that learning environments are a student centred process, rather than content focused and that learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment tasks be aligned.

Snyder (2003) noted that often the cultural environment of higher education did not encourage active learning in students and teachers needed to be creative in their subject matter to encourage creative learning. Snyder maintains that teachers must take a risk and experiment with different teaching styles and methods to facilitate change. D’Andrea and Gosling (2001) discuss the gap between educational rhetoric, such as “enhancing the student experience” or “quality of learning” and what is often actually delivered to the student. It comes back to student expectation. If students are informed about the different processes and the educational reasons for them, they are more likely to be supportive of their introduction. If students know and expect the learning process to be different, as work experience is, they understand the value of independent and creative thought processes and this can be shown to them as being characteristics highly sought after by industry. Burke et al (2005) found that team work and communication skills are valued by

employers, especially at middle management levels. Employees who excelled at these levels received promotion faster than others. Watson (2002) noted that construction and property accrediting bodies in the United Kingdom rated communication and group dynamics as being important graduate attributes, along with industry knowledge and professional awareness. He also discussed the advantages of case studies and field work in improving the learning experiences of students, by offering a broader knowledge base and through linking theory and practice. As well as expectation, motivation also plays a large part in tertiary education. A motivated student has a positive approach to their studies and their work and this is usually reflected in their results. Zusho and Pintrich (2003) found that if students believed that they could do certain tasks then their ability to do so under stress were improved and their use of learning strategies increased. The type of learning that takes place in the workplace enhances this type of motivation and self-efficacy levels, as everyone is learning together and over the same time frame.

As well as the positive attributes of students doing work experience as part of their undergraduate degree it is necessary for the program directors to be aware of student expectations and the fact that many may be unrealistic in their approach to the workplace. Mello (1998) emphasised that students on placement need to be aware that work experience is very different from what they are used to in the traditional classroom. In the workplace it is the responsibility of the student to actively manage their learning development process. Students undertaking work experience need to be comfortable taking the initiative, asking for assistance and confronting problems. It is also important that they have experiences such as these in their formal studies leading up to the work experience, to ensure that independent thinking can occur. Unlike traditional group activity, which is very common at university, Ballantine and Larres (2007) advocate cooperative learning to simulate the type of teamwork that is expected within the workplace. They see the basic difference between the two as being the degree of individual accountability and independence that a well structured cooperative learning program will have. They also advocate that groups are chosen by the instructor to ensure a mix of learning styles and personalities, as is consistent with the workplace. Self selected groups may be more comfortable for students, but they are unrealistic with respect to the workplace and do not challenge the students to learn the communication skills necessary to succeed in a workplace environment. Schaafsma (1996) comments that successful co-op programs in Australia are seldom critically examined because it is only when problems occur at work that any attention is given to the operation of the program. He goes on to note that we are missing an opportunity to capitalise on evaluating situations of "contested learning". Many students in workplace situations find themselves in situations of domination, which has been socially constructed in the language and experiences of work and it is these contested learning situations that they often have to deal with on their own. It is only if they deal unsuccessfully with these that the program coordinator is called in. In support of work experience as part of university education

Ng and Burke (2006) analysed results of a study of 4,851 business students across Canada, with regard to job potential. 1,870 of these were co-operative education (work experience) students and 2,785 were not involved in this type of program. The co-operative education students were found to have a better understanding of their own abilities in a working environment. They were also reported to have higher self confidence, more realistic expectations and placed greater emphasis on the people and work dimensions of a firm, rather than its reputation. They also highlighted that it was these very skills that employers were seeking. Employers had expressed a preference for university students who had completed a period of work experience during their degree. This fact that work experience enhances future employment prospects is further supported by Callanan and Benzing (2004) in a study of 163 final year business students in the USA. The study showed that 58% of students who had completed cooperative education had a job organised on graduation, compared to only 17% of non-cooperative education students. To sum up, the odds of securing a job were 4.43 times higher for those completing work experience than for those who did not. There are many excellent reasons why work experience in industry can enhance the learning experience during the years at university, but the program needs to be managed well and all the activities must be closely monitored. It is important to not only interview the students, but to also give them the opportunity to be anonymous in their responses.

Methodology

This paper examines the premises that drive and the processes that exist, in the Work Experience program for undergraduate Property and Valuation students at the School of Property, Construction and Project Management at RMIT University. The author believes that well designed work experience offers three important outcomes:

- Educational – by enhancing an increased knowledge base,
- Industry experiences – by working with and along side practitioners and
- Socialisation – by learning to coexist in a communal environment for a period of many weeks.

Although the current program delivers all three outcomes, it has been in place for 30 years and most of the energy goes into placing the students, with limited resources to manage the program. The students are satisfied because they have a job in a professional arena and the employers are happy because they have intelligent and cheap trainees. But we are a university and our focus needs to be on learning. The program as it stands at the moment creates very little interaction between the university, the students and industry and we are failing to capitalise on important assets. Where is the feedback and where is the educational content and interaction? This research examines the question of how we can develop work placements that enhance the

educational experiences of the students and at the same time work with industry in a cooperative manner.

At present there are 35 students in work experience placements, within 20 organisations in the property and valuation area. All of the students and their related work place supervisors, have been visited by the researcher and interviewed in an informal manner. No serious issues were raised at these meetings and they were followed up with separate questionnaires for employers and students. These surveys came with self addressed envelopes and were returned anonymously. 15 employer questionnaires and 30 student questionnaires were returned. Although this is only a small survey, it represents a 75% response rate from employers and an 84% rate from students with a number of issues being exposed. It is envisaged that this type of research will continue, especially as the group size is expected to double over the next two years.

Results of employer interviews and surveys

At present there are 20 employer organisations taking part in the Work Experience program. Many of them have been sponsors of the program for many years. They include Knight Frank, Charter Keck Cramer, M3 Property, Mirvac, Multiplex, CBRE, Australia Post, FKP Developers, Stockland, Savills, Centro and United Group. The attached **Appendix One** is a copy of the questionnaire sent out to employers. 15 of the current employers returned the questionnaire and the results indicated that 90% were aware of the program through their association with RMIT University and 10% had been approached by students seeking a placement.

30% were with the program for the first time this year, a further 30% had been employing work experience students for between two and five years and the remaining 40% had been part of the program for over 10 years.

In answering the question about their expectations, most of the employers used terms such as “expected the students to be willing to learn”, “be enthusiastic”, “have the ability to undertake simple tasks under instruction” and “be proactive”.

The benefits they sought from the program are summarised in the following list:

- To introduce students to wider experiences.
- Allows employer to assess student with regard to future long-term employment.
- They run this program in conjunction with their graduate program.
- It brings new skills and fresh perspectives
- Enables students to see how organisations operate.
- It introduces them to a professional work environment in a supervised manner.
- Provides students with valuable business knowledge.

Only one employer mentioned a shortfall and this was having insufficient time available to train the students. This I think was a brave and honest statement which is a true indication that other employers fail to admit to.

With regard to rating their placement students, confidence, knowledge and communication rated between 4 and 5 and a unanimous 5 for enthusiasm from all respondents. **Figures One and Two** indicate the position of communication and confidence on graphs. Overwhelmingly the survey indicated that the current employers are more than content with the Work Experience program.

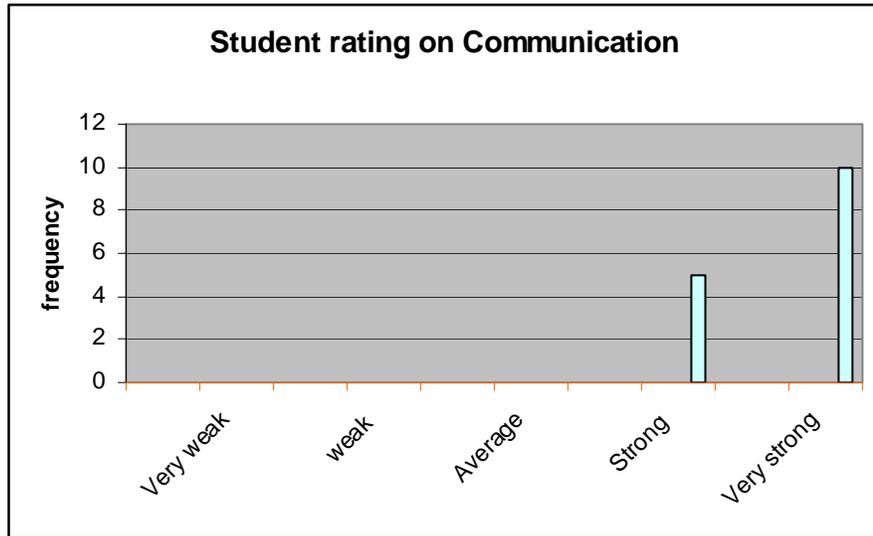


Figure One

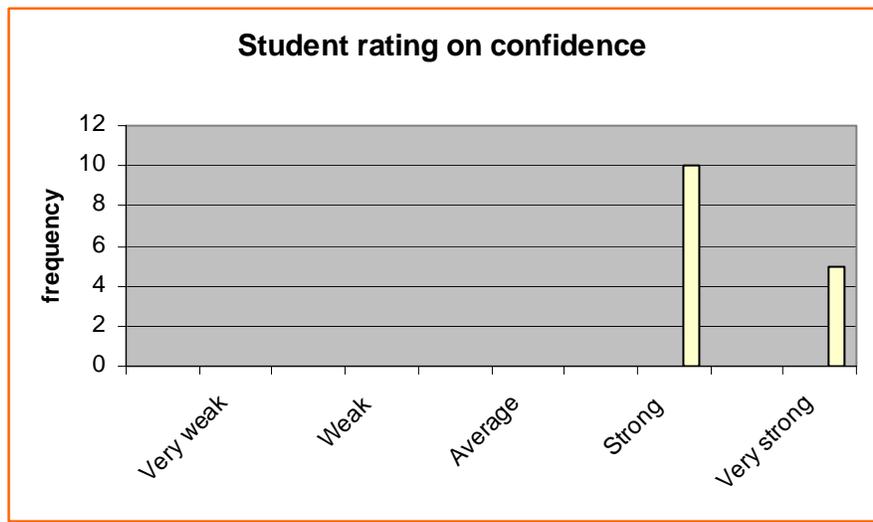


Figure Two

Analysis of student interviews and surveys

The attached questionnaire (**Appendix Two**) was sent to the students currently undertaking work experience. 30 students responded and their results can be summarised as follows. Bowden and

Marton (1998) suggest that student feedback is important in the pursuit of excellence. The purpose of receiving this type of feedback is to find out what is working for them and what is not. Once we have the feedback we need to act on it, or the students will become cynical and disillusioned. It is clear from the interviews conducted in the work place that all the students are finding the overall experience very rewarding; however, the questionnaire gives them the opportunity to reflect on the positive and negative components of their placement. Garavan and Murphy (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with six students on work experience placements in Ireland. They found all six were having different experiences and that often the negative experiences could have been prevented with more accurate briefing about the position and more realistic expectations from the students.

Results from the survey with regard to student expectation concerning their placement, can be summarised below:

- Build a strong knowledge base
- Be able to balance work and university
- Build contact for future career
- Accompany a mentor on their rounds
- Be introduced to procedures
- Gain knowledge through experiencing tasks
- Understand the organisation
- Gain ongoing employment
- Experience different areas of the property industry
- Expected to fit in as an employee, rather than a student
- Expected learning to be ongoing and fast.

All of the students who responded to the questionnaire mentioned gaining knowledge, but only 20% talked about higher expectations.

Likewise for question two, the benefits of the program, 80% mentioned using university knowledge in a practical manner and 50% of respondents looked for wider benefits such as feel part of a team, ease of getting a position through RMIT, know what to expect in full-time work.

More importantly were what they saw as shortfalls of the program and it is these that are addressed in the conclusion:

- Classes not always scheduled to allow for three days of work, especially if repeating courses.
- Some companies interview during the exam period, even though requested not to.
- Insufficient feedback on progress from employer
- Placement not planned by the employer
- No guarantee that you will get a broad based experience range, can be “pot luck”
- Often given repetitive tasks such as mail outs, photocopying etc.

It was noted that all the shortfalls were about the industry placements and scheduling and not about the overall program.

With regard to their likes and dislikes about work experience, they all filled out five things they liked, but 80% of students had less than five complaints. The things they liked can be summarised by; variety of tasks, friendly and helpful workmates, variety of tasks set, quality of equipment, part of a team, rotated to different sectors of the organisation, huge source of knowledge and information and the social events. The things they disliked are; staff not sharing knowledge and expertise, many mentors and supervisors being too busy to help, insufficient employer feedback on progress, no permanent desk, lack of planning for the role, miscommunication, too many tasks to complete, feel pressured, need more direction for tasks, insufficient on the job training, some out-of-date technology and need more delegation of tasks. Within question six were some worthwhile suggestions and these have been considered in the suggested strategies. They ranged from running an induction program either at the university or the organisation, to offering incentive for colleagues to take student with them on tasks. An indication that the student complaints were not overwhelming, is evidenced by the answers to question seven, which is summarised by the following graphs in **figures three and four** below.



Figure Three

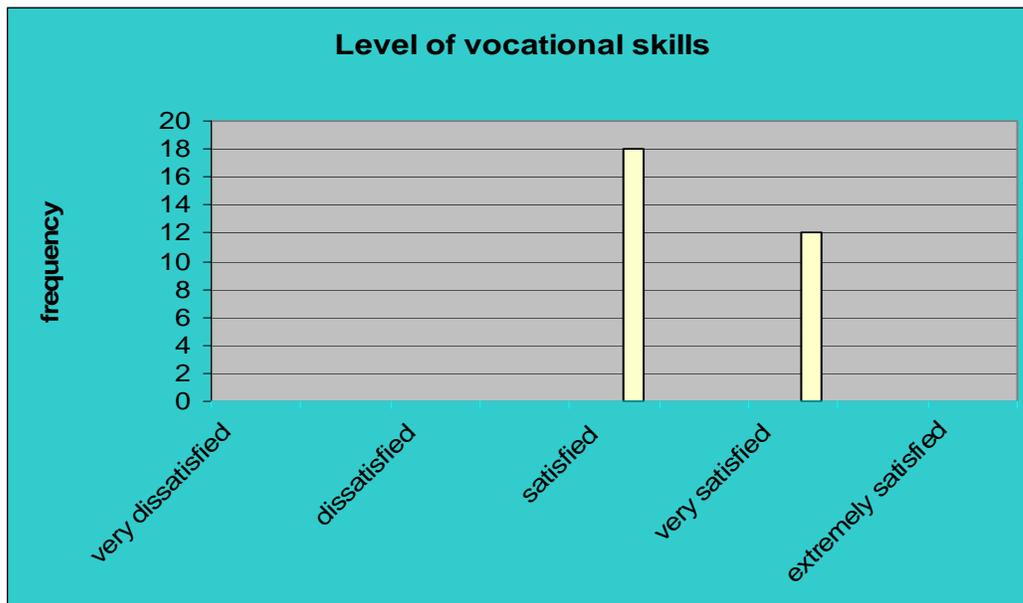


Figure Four

Conclusion and possible strategies for the future

It would appear that even though work experience is difficult to organise and manage, the benefits to the students and the flow on effects to their program and the university, makes it a very worthwhile activity. In addition, educationally they enhance the students' capabilities in ways that traditional classroom teaching cannot. Given the overwhelming support for such a program, both from the students and the employers, the researcher can only suggest that this program be continued. Students value their university experience more when they feel part of the wider community and the School needs to ensure that this sense of community is promoted. In this age of visual and electronic media students want to be kept busy. All of the students interviewed and surveyed, stated that working in industry enabled them to see the relevance of what they were learning at university and they enjoyed being part of a professional group. The evidence suggests that they respond to these experiences in a valuable way and appreciate the efforts made on their behalf, both by the employers and the university. There is no doubt that the employers are satisfied with the current program, as all of them responded favourably and still wish to be part of the process, but the some of the students raised some concerns as to the level of supervision and tasks they received in the workplace. It therefore makes sense to strive harder in ensuring that this partnership between the university and industry is not only continued, but harnessed to deliver a program that is mutually rewarding to all three parties involved, the students, employers and the university.

For this reason the research has suggested a number of strategies that the university might consider when evaluating the current program with a view to improvement. A number of the strategies have come from the returned surveys:

- There is an argument to make work experience optional and/or available only to those students who have a high grade average. This encourages students to make more effort in their university classes, but could also disadvantage the weaker students.
- Should the program be full-time for one semester, or continue as a three day a week one year program?
- Encourage all the employers to offer scholarships, which would make the high grade average not so obvious.
- Invite employers to offer scholarships and involve them in planning the educational process, so that they are more aware of student and university expectations.
- Change this program to be an elite program, something that they strive to obtain rather than something they take for granted. This may help to overcome some of the lethargy that some students exhibit towards their university studies.

The purpose behind most of these strategies is to ensure that both employers and students are committed to the program, not just seeking cheap cadets, or a job. It is important that the university be seen as more than a job agency. If you make it a privilege, this ensures that the students and the employers are focused and keen. Coupled with this change of focus, will be the need for a greater involvement by all academics in the School, to merge the work experience with traditional university assessment, especially assignments and thereby ensuring the continuity of the students' university experience.

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APPENDIX ONE

Employer survey for Work Experience

1. How did you find out about the Property/Valuation Work Experience program?
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.....

2. How long has your organisation been using the Work Experience program?
First time
2 – 5 years
6 – 10 years
Longer than 10 years

3. What expectations do you have with regard to the Work Experience student?
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.....

4. What are the benefits of the program
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.....
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.....

5. What are the shortfalls of the program?
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.....
.....

6. Rate the student from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong) in the following areas (circle)

Confidence

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Knowledge

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Communication

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

Enthusiasm

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

APPENDIX TWO

Work Experience Survey for students

1. What expectations do you have with regard to the Work Experience program?

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2. What are the benefits of the program?

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.....

3. What are the shortfalls of the program?

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.....
.....
.....

4. List five things that you like about your workplace, in order of importance.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

5. List five things that you do not like about your workplace, in order of importance.

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.
- e.

6. How do you think the program could be improved?

.....
.....
.....

7. Rate your satisfaction with the program from 1 (low) to 5 (very) satisfied.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5

8. Rate the vocational skills you have learned on the program from 1 to 5 as well.

1-----2-----3-----4-----5