

Identifying student work skills and personal values for work-integrated learning: A host organisation perspective

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ABSTRACT

There is a wealth of experience and expertise in managing and supervising existing student placements as part of the Work-Integrated Learning experience (WIL). However, to maximise our capacity to address the potential diversity of WIL students, there is a need for greater insight into the key demands and expectations of relevant industry/host organisations. Such knowledge is fundamental to develop and refine existing frameworks for assessing student suitability for placement and employability, which in turn will inform the preparational learning for placement and the student's success in placement. This paper shares and discusses the interim findings from the first stage of an incremental survey conducted with placement host organisations across disciplines in Planning & Sciences, and Social Work & Human Services, in an Australian university. This cross-disciplinary research uses a quantitative data collection method and analysis of preselected work skills and personal value attributes, informed by relevant literature across both discipline domains on tertiary student work placements and fundamental employability facets. Through this approach, the potential and value of cross-disciplinary research, teaching and cooperation is highlighted, concluding that the trend shown in the data points towards an imperative to include a focus on personal values within tertiary education teaching practices.

Keywords: Employability; work skills; personal values; Work-Integrated learning; graduates, soft skills, hard skills

INTRODUCTION

WIL has become an integral and important aspect in tertiary education for a wide range of reasons. One of the many aspects emphasised is, to educate and prepare students for successful integration into employment. With the rising costs in tertiary education, potential students undertake research associated with universities' employability ranking, to decide where best to prioritise their investment. In turn the ranking is also highly instrumental to universities for establishing them in the appropriate education market, in their bid for student numbers.

But what exactly are those required work ready skills? Are those baseline skills for employability success differing depending on the discipline or field of work? Finding answers to those questions can enable tertiary education providers to evaluate current teaching practice in the light of employer's expectations, but also provide greater clarity on the definition of work ready skills.

This research project is designed to investigate diverse industry or host organisation perspectives on the fundamental work skills and personal values desired from tertiary work placement students. The research will directly contribute to the limited existing literature and understandings of the nexus between cognitive (thinking/mental skills/knowledge) and affective (emotion/feeling/ attitude or self) learning domains across different disciplines (based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains - 1956).

The results are further intended to inform the development of "best practice" suitability assessment frameworks and curriculum design for preparational learning for diverse work placement opportunities, and subsequent graduate employability. Consistently, in spanning a period of over two years the project facilitates knowledge reiteration based on industry feedback and/or changing demands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over recent years the pool of scholarly literature around Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is filling up steadily. Depending on academic disciplines and geography WIL is also referred to as practicum, field placement, internship, job shadowing, cooperative education and work experience (Von Treuer, Sturre, Keele, & McLeod, 2010). This article uses the term WIL as the blanket description of the variations in terminology. A wide range of literature discusses necessary core skills required by students for successfully completing their WIL training from the perspective of meeting academic requirements. Here the focus is on the important element of applying appropriate assessment tools (Jackson, 2015; Agllias, 2010) but also how to design curriculum to bridge the theory learning and practice learning nexus through the development of best practice models (Coll et al., 2009). Most of the literature discusses the topic of core skills with the inclusion of a host organisation's or employer's perspective. Here it becomes increasingly apparent how elusive the concept of core skills is. For example, existing models differentiate between disciplinary skills, generic skills but also include elements such as disciplinary content knowledge and workplace awareness (Bennett, N., Dunne, E & Carre, C., 1999). Yorke and Knight (2004) refer to the USEM model, which is an acronym for four inter-related elements of employability, namely: Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs and Metacognition. The USEM model forms part of a large body of research-based scholarly work on employability, but still or because of its complexity these models do not articulate to non-experts in the field, such as students and their parents, what exactly is meant by employability.

Marketplace informed literature, such as available through Career Advice portals and institutions is discussing graduate employability with a reference to required soft skills (Skills, 2011). Balcar (2016) and Hurrell, Scholarios & Thompson (2013) take up the task of discussing their understanding of the soft skills and hard skills debate by connecting increasing focus on the productive potential of soft skills to changes in the labour market. Over the past 25 years the move to a global economy with its increasingly competitive labour market lead to a shift in defining employability from training for a 'job for life' to 'employability for life' as noted by Moreau & Leathwood (2006). Consideration is also required of the impact of a declining manufacturing economy due to automation and an ever increasing reliance on service-based occupational structures and expansion in low-level service jobs on the skill sets demanded of employees (Hurrell, Scholarios & Thompson, 2013). Taking into account the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2016) findings that the proportion of people studying has increased across most demographics over the last ten years highlights another trend in the changing labour market, which reflects employer's expectations where a degree is now more often a pre-requisite for a job, not representing anything more than a 'threshold to requirement in addition to other evidence of suitability' (Purcell, Morley & Rowley, 2002 as cited in Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, p.308). Such assertion implies an understanding of tertiary education as a domain where so-called hard skills – discipline specific knowledge - are being actively taught and measured, whereas soft skill is a more elusive concept in limited connection with a qualification (Balcar, 2016).

Lloyd and Payne (2009) argue that the relabelling of social competencies that otherwise could be considered as personal attributes, dispositions or behaviour to 'soft skills' bears some very practical and analytical dangers. For example, Payne (2006) argues that there might be great limitations in training 'genuine empathy and compassion' that underlies soft skills as they are understood as 'deeply wired in the brain through a combination of genetic imprinting and primary socialisation' (p.20). Balzar (2016) offers another definition of soft skills 'as learned behaviour based on individual's predisposition' and argues that therefore soft skills are indeed to some extent 'acquired skills' and more than 'psychological traits, preferences, motivation and other predispositions usually called non-cognitive abilities' (Heckman et al., 2006; Heckman and Rubinstein, 2001 as cited in Balcar, 2016, p.454).

Despite their differences, both positions have in common that some form of biological preposition is assumed that allows a person to function better or more effectively in the emotional realm of human interaction. Hong (2016) discusses such observation to ascertain that often 'soft' skills are associated with women, while 'hard' – rational, analytical – skills are to be found in men. Without going any deeper into a discussion around the gendered perception of what is referred to as soft skills or hard skills it is important in so far as to provide an explanation for our conscious decision of refraining from this terminology around soft and hard skill in our survey. This move is further supported by an understanding of the acquisition of skills and values and its resulting attitudes and

behaviours as discussed in Social Work & Human service's relevant literature. With a definition of values as standards of behaviour, this profession's central focus is on making sense of values and ethics and their influence on a person's actions and behaviour (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). In this context values and the resulting attitudes and behaviours can be seen as socially constructed and therefore changeable. This perception is in so far relevant as it then allows for the conclusion that values, personal or professional, can indeed be taught and therefore grounded in a solid knowledge base otherwise referred to as hard skills.

As employers are in the position to hire or fire it appears highly important to explore their expectations of graduates' work skills and personal values. It appears that not much literature focuses yet on the interrelation between personal values and work skills and its translation into graduates' employability success. In this context personal values, it appears, is a set of 'soft skills' which, if it's addressed at all, is rather taught alongside work skills and academic knowledge, in its extent depending on the discipline, but also on the individual educator. Personal values therefore, can be seen as a set of skills that is to be expected, implied and assumed to be possessed, but not actively taught.

This research project looks at the nexus between skills and values in a broad cross disciplinary context and from a host organisations and industry perspective. The focus is on the host organisations perspective as they are the potential future employer of new graduates.

METHODOLOGY

This is a preliminary, explorative and investigative study with the focus on inclusion of an employer's perspective to fill the gap between tertiary institution's learning outcomes and employer's expectations.

Based on the application and feedback from the previously developed Work Skills Development framework (WSD) (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2010), and internal piloting, the research survey has been designed as an online questionnaire delivered by the Survey Monkey software platform. Specific work skills and personal value attributes have been informed by relevant literature on tertiary student work placements and fundamental employability facets.

Participants have been recruited on the basis of existing and newly established contacts identified as relevant University (sample study) student placement host organisations in the broad areas of Science, Planning and Social Work.

In addition to personal, host organisation and discipline related details, the survey consists primarily of two rank order questions followed by an open ended "other" option which allowed participants to provide alternative suggestions or recommendations. The first question relates to work skill priorities with 14 predefined work skills and the second question considers personal values with 10 predefined personal values to rank according to the participant's priority. The order of options had been randomised for each survey to reduce positional bias. After the initial 6-month period, which concluded in December 2016 the responses received were analysed through the use of Survey Monkey query outputs in the form of weighting scores based on the ranking process.

As the planned time frame for this research project spans over a period of 24 months, the data received was analysed after the first 6 months to discuss preliminary trends. It is hoped with consecutive data analysis in 6-monthly increments to provide further interim and incremental results.

Given the diversity and vast spatial distribution of potential host organisations (within Australia) the online/electronic format was expected to be the most convenient, accessible and suitable for cross-disciplinary data collection and analysis, albeit a paper version of the online survey being available for participants with limited internet access and mailed out on request and data manually entered into survey monkey on return for collation.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the analyses of the received survey data three perspectives have been applied – an overall perspective irrespective of discipline background, then an analysis from the perspective of the discipline of Planning & Sciences

and third the currently available data has been analysed from the perspective of the Discipline of Social Work & Human Services.

The survey asks participants to rate a list of 14 predefined work skills with '1' being the most important work skill in their organisation and '14' the least required work skill. Next, the host organisation rates a list of 10 preselected personal values, with '1' being the most important personal value and '10' being the least important personal value. Each question also provided the participant to elaborate about a work skill or personal value that is of importance to them, in regards to employability, and not been captured as yet in the predefined selection.

Organisations invited to participate in this survey had a university student, from the sample study site, on placement at the time of the survey. The invitation for participation was emailed out to student placement host organisations in August 2016. In total 123 placement organisation had been invited for participation in the survey with 24 responses received, which translates into an overall return rate of just under 20%. Categorisation according to disciplines indicated, a response rate of 33.3% for student placements in Planning & Sciences with 15 host organisations approached and 5 responses received. The return rate from host organisation in the Social Work & Human Services sector stands at just under 18% with 18 responses received from 107 invited organisations.

Work Skills

The preselected work skills given to participants for ranking according to organisation's priority comprised: Identification and use of appropriate resources; Self-management, time management and goal setting; Problem Solving; Teamwork skills; Critical thinking and reflective practice; Context specific knowledge, Professional conduct and work ethic; Communication (listening, verbal/non-verbal, written); Cultural sensitivity and competence; Computer/digital and technical literacy; Interpersonal abilities; Leadership/Management; Lifelong learning; Focus on service-user. The selection of these specific work skills is drawn from the list of expected learning goals attached to course subjects in both disciplines.

Analysing the data across all participating disciplines (see Appendix, Fig.1) Communication, and Professional conduct are ranked highest, followed by Critical Thinking. The lowest ranked work skill across all disciplines is Leadership/management.

Categorising by disciplines show that within the discipline of Planning & Sciences (Fig. 2) the ranking of the two highest prioritised work skills is still the same. A variation of outcomes occurs in the third highest ranked work skills, which is, Self-management, Time management and Goal setting. This may be attributed to the overall type of work, which might be more individualist and project focused as compared to the field of Social Work & Human services delivery where Leadership / Management is ranked the lowest.

The results for the Discipline of Social Work & Human Services (Fig. 3) match with the overall analysis of the work skills appraisal. Critical thinking and reflective thinking is a set of skills extensively taught to students and an integral requirement of the profession itself, and this employer ranking is no surprise. The matching results (Fig. 4) between the Discipline of Social Work & Human Services and the cross discipline results is most likely caused by the numerically higher participation from professionals in the field of Social Work & Human Services.

In overall, the data reflects other research undertaken around the topic of employability skills where communication skills including writing skills and organisational skills have been identified as universally requested work skills (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015; Hansen & Hansen, 2016). It needs to be addressed that from the researcher's perspective the work skill around organisational practice had been grouped under Professional Conduct & Work Ethics. It should be noted that employers listed the following work skills as essential to them and their area of work. These have not been listed in the original work skill list in this research. They are:

- A better understanding of business practices - e.g. letter writing, report development, briefing papers etc.
- Organisation skills
- An interest in working in the sector post-graduation
- Counselling
- Ability to take direction

- Group work/informal education
- Conflict and Mediation skills

Therefore, the original list needs to be amended to include above facets.

Personal Values

A set of 10 preselected personal values was presented to the survey participants for ranking according to their organisation's priority - Empathy; Positive attitude; Innovation; Honesty/integrity/morality; Dependability/reliability/responsibility; adaptability and flexibility; professionalism; self-confidence; willingness to learn and Initiative/motivation.

The data analyses for both disciplines combined (Fig. 4) shows willingness to learn as the highest ranked personal value, followed by Honesty/Integrity/morality and positive attitude in third place. The personal value of innovation is the least prioritised personal value in this current data analysis.

Analysing the data according to disciplines shows some greater variation than in the previous categories pertaining to work skills. Host organisations in the Disciplines of Science & Planning (Fig. 5) rank dependability/reliability/responsibility in first place, followed by positive attitude and a willingness to learn. The lowest priority was given to the personal value of self-confidence.

In comparison, host organisations in the Discipline of Social Work & Human Services (Fig.6) prioritised the personal value of Willingness to learn in first position, followed by Honesty/Integrity/morality and then Empathy. The lowest priority was given to Innovation. Seeing though that Self-confidence is ranked as the second least required personal value, there appears to be a trend across both disciplines. The differentiation in priorities by disciplines is not surprising given the nature of each discipline.

The provided additional personal value attributes that participants missed from our pre-defined list were Ethical practice and Accountability in the Discipline of Social Work & Human Services. The comment provided from the Discipline of Science & Planning reads as following: "Good Work Ethic - Being prepared to work hard at the start on simple task. To (sic) many students show up thinking that the task they are given are beneath them - rush them and prepare products that is of a very poor standard." These comments again suggest modification to the pre-selected personal values to capture further detail.

The survey results to date show some interesting trends in regards to host organisation's expectations of student's work skills and personal values. Further research is required to capture a more comprehensive picture and to establish if trends can be confirmed at the conclusion of the research project. Either way, the present data can be used to evaluate which of those prioritised work skills and personal values are being currently included in the teaching of placement students.

From the preliminary data it is clearly evident that a close interrelation between preferred work skills and personal values exists as we argue that work skills such as Professional conduct & work ethics and Communication requires a set of personal values identified as Honesty/Integrity/morality supported by a willingness to learn.

CONCLUSION

The introduced methodology and survey framework presents a useful tool which can be easily used in any discipline setting to widen the available research data. It also suggests many potential implications, prospects and avenues for development. Participant's time investment into the survey is minimal with an anticipated 5-10min to complete the survey, which potentially helps to encourage a higher return rate.

The existing data shows consistency in work skills across the researched disciplines, but also implies an early indication that there may be a differentiation in the ranking of personal values depending on discipline background. The limited availability on literature around host organisations or employer's expectations and requirements of specific personal values in their employees suggests a limited recognition of the interrelation between personal values and work skills.

Therefore greater awareness around the importance of personal values and an integration of the same into teaching and placement preparation for students is essential to fill an identified gap. The data received up to this point suggests that an expansion of the quantitative data collection through qualitative research methods could possibly provide some detailed answers to filling this identified research gap. This would allow for an exploration of survey participant's understanding and interpretation of the interrelation between the selected work skills and personal values to explore the assumptions made in this study, that of employer's preferences for core personal values differ according to professional background.

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