



Research Report

Hotel School Students' Views of their Preparation for Work-integrated Learning: An Exploratory Study

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Received 05 December, 2005; accepted in revised form 08 March 2006

South African hotel schools offer national diplomas in Hospitality Management and Food and Beverage Management, both of which include compulsory work-integrated learning. This gives the students the opportunities to apply what they have learned and to be prepared for the workplace once their training is complete. Research was undertaken to determine whether the preparation in the classroom for this experience was the best possible. Questionnaires were distributed to students (N=15) who had completed their final work-integrated learning semester. This paper will share how the students, on reflection, viewed their preparation for the work-integrated learning component and what they recommend should be changed or improved by the academic advisors and the industry mentors. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2006, 7(2), 10 - 15).

Keywords: Food and beverage management; hotel school; students' perspective; work-integrated learning; South Africa.

Globalisation is the term used to signal the restructuring of capitalism on a global scale that began in the mid-1970s (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2001). Higher Education and Training (HET) around the world has been forced to respond to the demands placed on the sector by two late modern imperatives, globalization and massification of education (Luckett, 2000). The acceptance of post-apartheid South Africa has made demands on higher education institutions to be responsible towards developing and training learners to meet the challenges of a developing country and being a global player in the international arena.

In the United Kingdom the 'new' universities were formed in 1992, mainly by renaming the polytechnics. These appear to be very similar to the so-called 'old' universities. Although there are few distinctions these days between these, there still remain some differences. These differences include the importance of teaching in the new universities whereas the focus is on research in the old universities. There are also differences in staff grading, teaching contact hours and job responsibilities, as well as the culture and the broader approach in the new universities compared to the sharper focus in the traditional institution (Institute of Technology, 2006). In South Africa, the Universities of Technology (UoT), previously known as Technikons, are comparable to polytechnics or institutes of technology, as they deal primarily with offering three year diploma courses which are career-focused, vocational type

programs in the higher education band. The Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP) (2001, p. 1) explains: "In South Africa, Technikons/Universities of Technology are the equivalent of universities of technology, technology universities, technical universities or institutes of technology found in countries in USA, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Hungary".

A major goal in higher education is to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential, and to support the intellectual growth of students to ensure they are well equipped for the world of work, able to contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfillment (CHE, 2001; Stefani, 1998). Higher education has a particularly important role to play in providing society with individuals trained in such a way that they can respond to the demands of knowledge-based occupations (CHE, 2001), and boast skills required by the South African workforce for participation in an increasingly competitive global economy (Mason, 1999).

What does the labor market or 'world of work' want or expect from higher education nowadays? According to Maslen (2000) more than 75% of Australian graduates from universities and technical colleges were deemed unsuitable for the jobs they applied for as generally they are seen to lack creativity and flair, problem-solving skills, communication and inter-personal skills. So what is important to employers? Diplomats or graduates should demonstrate management characteristics and skills that

include being communicative, computer literate, innovative, initiators, strategic and lateral thinkers, competent, able to work with little orientation, responsible, assertive, decisive, multi-skilled as well as be independent and critical thinkers (Maslen, 2000). A tall order but not impossible if the students are nurtured to achieve their full potential. All of these can be achieved to some degree with the experience gained in the work-integrated learning aspect of a curriculum. Although Walo (2001) comments that these may be developed during the internships, she states that there is no empirical evidence to support these claims.

Higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to prepare their graduates for the world of work by including a component of work-integrated learning to achieve these expectations. In more recent times higher education has seen changes taking place from the on-campus learning approach to the student learning off-site in the work place (Davis & Chisholm, 2003). Higher education at a UoT has to prepare the students for a work environment (CHE, 2001). The vocational curriculum places high interest in competencies like problem-solving, self regulation, reflection, emotional awareness and stress resistance in people in order to cope with the rapidly changing demands of the labor market (Tillema, Kessels & Meijers, 2000).

When students are asked if they have benefited from their time in industry as part of their WIL, their answer will invariably be positive. Academic staff comment on their maturity and wider field of reference on their return to the classroom. According to Dressler and Keeling, (2004) students benefit academically by their increased disciplined thinking, their learning and problem-solving improved, as well as their motivation to learn. They also show improvement in their general commitment and attitude to their academic institutions and being successful in putting theory into practice. In an emerging economy, such as South Africa, the preparation for the industry mentor prior to receiving students on a WIL program may need additional attention. For example, the academic supervisor may need to ensure that the employers do not use the students simply as 'cheap' or 'free' labor, but ensure they experience meaningful training and work exposure (Taylor, 2004).

Research Context: Work-integrated Learning in South African Hotel Schools

South African hotel schools offer national diplomas in Hospitality Management, and Food and Beverage Management, both of which include compulsory work-integrated learning. The hotel schools introduced work-integrated learning into their programs in the early 1970s, and have since set a high standard. Over the years this has been refined to meet the educational and assessment needs of the CHE.

The Hospitality Management and Food and Beverage Management curricula require two releases of work-integrated learning. The first is in the second year, followed by the second release in the final semester in third year. At the University of Johannesburg (UJ), in the School of Tourism and Hospitality (STH) the students have one six

month period at the School and the final six months the students are placed in industry units around the country.

Besides the formal release to the workplace in the third year, the students are exposed to a realistic work environment on campus of kitchens, restaurants, conference facilities and a bar. They prepare and serve the food and set up the necessary facilities under the guidance of chefs and restaurant instructors as well as assist with customer needs. This work-integrated learning is important as it gives the students the opportunities to apply what they have learned in the classroom and to be better prepared for the actual workplace.

In the STH, unlike most other departments in the institution, there are two dedicated work-integrated learning instructors who not only find the places for the students, but they visit each of the students at least twice in the training period. The visits are for the purpose of ensuring that the students are being exposed to the various work areas in the unit, as well as to carry out assessment in conjunction with the industry mentor.

These academic instructors have developed good working relationships with certain hotels, foodservice provider companies, private caterers, lodges and the like. Industry mentors and recruitment officers of hospitality companies are approached regularly by the academic instructors who are continually on the "look-out" for new opportunities, as well as maintaining good relationships with regular participants of the program. The links with industry provide the academic instructors opportunities to establish employment options for the students and the regular communication can result in creating new approaches to the content, and teaching and learning of the curriculum, (Reeve & Gallacher, 2003). The collaboration allows for the UoT educators to understand the needs of the industry and to better prepare the students for the work-integrated learning module.

To prepare the students for their work-integrated learning, two 60 minute class periods are time-tabled per week. One of these lessons is used for invited guests to promote the company they represent and inform students of expectations if placed there for their work-integrated learning, or even at a later stage be employed by the organization. In an indirect way this is a form of marketing of the company to the students which assists in future recruitment. The other period is spent preparing the students on topics such as writing curriculum vitae, handling sexual harassment, interview skills, working with staff, disciplinary procedures, group dynamics and other such skills.

The visits by the STH academic instructors to the units, minimizes the chance that students are taken advantage of and used as cheap labor rather than full time employees doing the tasks, and that they achieve the outcomes set by the academic instructors. During the visit, the academic instructor meets with the industry mentor and the student to discuss the student's progress or any problems of concern to any of the parties. These visits ensure that the students get the training that they should, although there are times when they are used to replace a permanent staff member who may be ill or on leave. A great deal of time is spent on preparing

the students for this rather daunting experience, and there are times when it may not be adequate.

Most of the students who participated in the pilot study were based in industry units in and around Johannesburg which meant that they did not have to move from their accommodation but needed to make their own traveling arrangements. Prior to starting their work-integrated learning, each student attended an interview with the employer. This may not have been at the actual unit but at the head office of the company. The questionnaire was developed with this background in mind.

The academic instructors would like to know if this preparation is sufficient, effective or has an impact on how the students cope with their work-integrated learning, especially in the first month. This research was undertaken to establish this amongst the Food Service Management students.

Research Methodology

Research Purpose

The research was to establish if the training carried out in the classroom prior to the students entering their work-integrated learning unit, prepared them adequately for the experience, particularly in the first month. As this is such a significant and relevant part of their training, it is important for the academic instructors to be familiar with the students’ opinions to minimize their apprehension. The results will assist in improving the preparation of the students for their placements, making their first weeks of work-integrated learning easier, as well as informing the industry mentor of apparent shortcomings that need be addressed.

The purpose of the research was refined to four areas:

1. How were the students introduced, received and orientated in the workplace?
2. What human resource aspects affected them?
3. Was the experience rewarding and why?, and
4. What could be done by the educators to assist in preparing them better for work-integrated learning?

Data Collection

The research was conducted amongst the third year students who had completed their work-integrated learning as a requirement for the National Diploma of Food and Beverage Management. The students were contacted telephonically to confirm their facsimile or email details. It was found that approximately half of the student cohort had left their places of training and were therefore not contactable due to either them traveling abroad or having accepted permanent positions elsewhere. Questionnaires were distributed to those students who were contactable either by fax or email.

The main data collection instrument was a self-completion questionnaire, which was designed to seek opinions, expectations and suggestions of the preparation for the program. Of the population of 28 students, 15 responded to the questionnaire.

The researcher and the educators responsible for work-integrated learning developed the questionnaire. The

questions were based on aspects that were identified during the academic instructors’ visits to the industry units. During the interviews with the students and industry mentors, these areas of concern became more apparent. It was felt that by questioning the students, problematic issues could then be addressed when preparing the next cohort and the industry mentors could be given guidance on how to improve the reception of the new intake of students.

Certain questions were closed and the open questions allowed the respondents to explain their perceptions, experiences and suggestions on how the classroom preparation for the work-integrated learning could be improved. This allowed the students to answer openly and not be restricted to a pre-established set of questions determined by the researcher (Yuksel, Yuksel & Hancer, 2003).

Research Findings

The questions were grouped into four areas as listed above and the research findings are now reported using these as headings.

How were the students introduced, received and orientated to the workplace?

Of the students, 93% indicated that on their first day of work they were generally well received. Their comments included that they were welcomed “with open arms”, introduced to staff and were shown around the facilities. The remaining seven percent felt uncomfortable as they were left to their own devices and had to find their way around.

The majority (80%) of the students felt they were ready for the start of this training period due to the lessons and preparation done by the academic instructors. They were asked what in their opinion would have made it easier for them on arrival at the training unit. Their answers included:

- Be introduced to the manager and staff
- The expectations of the industry mentor should be expressed, preferably in a written format so that there is no misunderstanding or apparent confusion at a later stage, and
- Staff members at the unit must understand the role of the learner in relation to their own positions; example, that the learner is there as a trainee and will not be offered an employee’s position unless vacant.

All the students (73%) within a radius of 75km from the university attended an interview with a representative of the organization, who may have been the recruitment officer or the unit/catering manager. The remaining 27% were placed too far away for it to be economically viable.

In answer to the question if the interview had been of benefit, 80% agreed that it had been. They felt that the experience was richly rewarding as it had improved their confidence, they were able to ask questions and express their viewpoints. In certain situations the rules and procedures were explained, which was valuable before starting the training.

All of the trainees felt that the environment in which they found themselves had been conducive to learning.

TABLE 1

Hotel school students’ views of their preparation for work-integrated learning (N=15)

	Yes (%)	No (%)
How were the students introduced, received and orientated in the workplace?		
Were you well received at the workplace?	93	7
Did you feel ready for the first day?	80	20
Did you attend an interview with the industry mentor prior to starting?	73	27
Do you think this interview helped?	80	20
Did you find the working conditions conducive to learning?	100	0
Were you assigned to a mentor?	87	13
Was the mentor or any other person assigned to you, helpful?	80	20
Did you attend an induction/orientation programme?	66	34
Was the induction programme useful to you?	100	0
What human resource aspects affected them?		
Were you accepted by the staff?	87	13
Did you experience any difficulties with staff?	53	47
Did you consider the working hours and conditions to be fair?	80	20
Were teas / meals included?	87	13
Did you receive a reimbursement?	100	0
Did you feel that the “pay” was fair?	33	67
Do you feel that the reimbursement was necessary?	100	0
Would you be happy to receive this training without reimbursement?	13	87
Was the experience rewarding and why?		
Was the environment professional?	93	7
Was this a rewarding experience?	93	7
Did you experience any negative situations that you had not been prepared for, such as sexual harassment or staff disciplinary action?	20	80
Did you understand the role you should play in the unit?	80	20
Were you well treated?	93	7
Would you work for the company if offered a job?	66	34
Were you offered a position at the company?	60	40
What could be done by the educators to assist in preparing them better for work-integrated learning?		

Mentors were assigned to 87% of them, of which 80% said that the mentor had been helpful. In one case the negative feedback was due to a personality clash between the student and mentor.

Some sixty six percent of the students had attended an induction or orientation program which ranged from 45 minutes, to a few hours, to as much as one week. Of those who experienced an induction/orientation program, all indicated that this had been useful as they were familiarized with the rules and procedures of the organization.

Which Human Resource Aspects Affected the Students?

Staff at the respective units had accepted the students as 87% said they did not experience any major problems with staff. Of the 13% who had problems, the main reason given was that the fulltime staff felt their positions were threatened by the possibility of more efficient students replacing them. There was therefore some jealousy and animosity which led to the undermining of

the individual; one learner experienced intimidation, while another was threatened with being beaten up; another was told she was too assertive and should behave like a trainee and not have allusions of grandeur. When the students who did experience problems were placed in managerial situations, they did not have the respect of the staff.

A positive aspect was the *esprit d'corps*, the teamwork and cooperation between certain fulltime staff and the students. As one student said the skills learned “could never be taught to me in a classroom or learned from a book.” The interpersonal communication skills and real-life situations of having to deal with clients and customers, the application of what they learned in class and putting the theory into practice, seeing how operations work, and how the unit is organized, were all practical issues that were appreciated. Eighty percent of the students felt that the working hours and conditions were fair, although one mentioned that her family did not understand why she had to work the hours that she did! Eighty seven percent of the students were given tea and

meals as part of their 'package', the remaining 13% had to budget for this from their remuneration.

The institution negotiates reimbursement for the training the students receive, and all of them received a monthly minimum of R1200 (approx. US\$180). Without exception, they all felt it was necessary to be given this money as it was needed primarily for transport. It was mentioned that they were often expected to stand-in for staff that went on leave, and thus felt they should be reimbursed. Two (13%) indicated they found the money to be an incentive rather than a necessity and they were grateful for the opportunity to gain knowledge.

Was the Experience Rewarding and Why?

Most of the students (93%) said that their working environments were professional and that it was a rewarding and worthwhile experience (93%). Their comments included that they had learned:

- To deal with staff
- To handle complaints and crises
- To work independently
- The application of theory to practice
- That the real world was not what they had expected, and
- About a broader view of the industry.

Twenty percent of the students experienced negative situations including sexual harassment, dealing with theft and being threatened with being beaten up. On the positive side they realized the necessity of teamwork, and the handling of disciplinary procedures. Most importantly, the students realized they now had a proverbial "foot in the door" for their future careers.

The students (80%) understood how they fitted into the unit as a trainee and what role they played, whilst 93% said they were well treated. When asked about the learning that they had experienced in the workplace, their comments included:

- There are deadlines which must be met
- Follow the production schedule
- Mistakes are not easily forgiven
- One is responsible to complete tasks,
- Teamwork, and
- Disasters can occur at any time.

From a personal development aspect the students commented they had learnt:

- To cope under pressure
- New administrative skills
- Perseverance
- Patience
- To be decisive, and
- To express their opinion.

When asked if they would work for the particular organization where they had undertaken their work-integrated learning, only 66% said they would. Sixty percent were offered positions either as assistant catering

mangers, bar managers, a hostess, or to work in the kitchen. This is not a reflection of the inadequacies of the learner, as many places do not have vacant positions and on graduation many wish to travel to broaden their experience.

What Could be Done by the Academic Instructors to Assist in Better Preparation for Work-integrated Learning?

The students were asked to give their comments on what could be done by the academic instructors to better prepare them for this phase of their training. The students mentioned that often their opinions are not accepted by either the industry mentors or academic instructors. They would like to know about handling stress and felt they themselves should be open-minded, ask questions and express themselves. Through having to work shifts and long hours, they discovered the true nature of a demanding and time-consuming workplace and that the real world is different to what they had anticipated and far less glamorous. Despite these harsh realities of the industry, the majority were of the opinion that the work-integrated learning period had been a rewarding experience.

Concluding Remarks and Observations

The suggestions that the students gave should be taken into consideration by the STH academic instructors in preparing them for their work-integrated learning:

- The interview should be with the actual unit manager (rather than the recruitment officer) at the unit so the student has information about the place where the training will take place
- Information of the assigned unit should not be given out at the last moment. The individual learner should be allowed to have a say as to whether the selected unit is acceptable to them or not for whatever reason/s
- Academic instructors should not over-emphasize the negative issues of the work place, but rather be more encouraging and positive
- The STH academic instructor should stress to the industry mentor that the learner is there to learn and not be used as a source of 'cheap labor', and
- On a positive note, students mentioned Faculty staff "did a great job", in preparing them for the work-integrated learning.

Implications and Recommendations

The sample size was small so it would be unwise to use the findings as a strict rule of thumb. However, it does alert the academic instructors to the needs of the students. It is recommended that the industry mentors should ensure that there is a structured induction program. During this time the student should be given guidelines, as well as rules and regulations within which they will operate. By introducing them to the resident staff and showing them the facilities, the student will have a greater sense of what is expected of him/her. The industry mentor should outline the responsibilities of the student within the unit, to the resident staff and of course to the student. This will prevent any uncertainty and passing of blame.

There will always be a few students who feel that they were not sufficiently prepared for their work-integrated learning module. A student may have been absent from a class when certain topics such as sexual harassment was discussed or felt insecure by not having actually been to the assigned unit, but it appears from the feedback that the students are sufficiently well prepared to cope with the first month of their training. Fenwick's (2003) view is that reflection can act as the pathway from event to knowledge by changing the new experience into knowledge; this notion nicely sums up the overall outcome of this work-integrated learning module.

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