Managing the transition from the classroom to the workplace: Beyond the duty of care

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Industry is increasingly demanding graduates that are work ready. Preparing students that are not only technically competent but that also display the necessary soft skills for industry, presents a challenge for higher education. Experiential learning programs can offer students the opportunity to develop these skills and practice discipline knowledge, however for program sustainability higher education must meet the needs of its key stakeholders. This paper presents an intensive internship program that aims to supportively transition students into industry, while focusing on key stakeholder engagement. A *beyond duty of care* approach is presented through the design, structure and application of the program with emphasis on the student and industry partner.

Keywords: Industry relationships, workplace learning, experiential learning programs

Introduction

Concerns have been raised from employers regarding the readiness of graduates entering the workforce and the undergraduate programs that support this transition and develop critical skills (Hernandez-March et al, 2009; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). In this global competitive marketplace, organisations are seeking graduates that not only have technical skills for the role but also the soft skills to effectively communicate, interact and empathize with client needs (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). The emphasis therefore is placed on higher education to provide experiential learning programs that develop students in alignment with industry expectations.

In order for these programs to be successful and sustainable they must deliver on the needs of key stakeholders; the students, industry partners and higher education (Clements, 2009). This paper sets out to provide a framework for addressing the needs of these stakeholders, with particular emphasis on adopting a *beyond duty of care* approach in relation to the structure, design and application of experiential learning programs. The first part of the paper provides a working model of an intensive, stakeholder focused internship program. The second part of the paper details the *beyond duty of care* approach and the seven principles employed through the program. The paper concludes with a discussion on the application and challenges of this approach.

Key stakeholder engagement

Figure 1 presents a model of key stakeholder engagement for higher education experiential learning programs. Students, organisational stakeholders and faculty are strongly linked by the connection to

learning and graduate outcomes. Students are provided with the opportunity for work placement in host organisations and, in turn, contribute to their host organisation by performing tasks that enhance operations or contribute to a project. The faculty, further informed by industry and student engagement with organisations, is better equipped to develop knowledgeable graduates as well as the potential for collaborative research opportunities with industry. Driven by the key attributes of quality and flexibility, the program further embeds the faculty's graduate outcomes and helps to ensure that graduates are social responsible, innovative, flexible, communicators, connected, and informed. The model is currently applied in a regional university internship program for business students. This intensive internship program provides the context for the reminder of the paper.
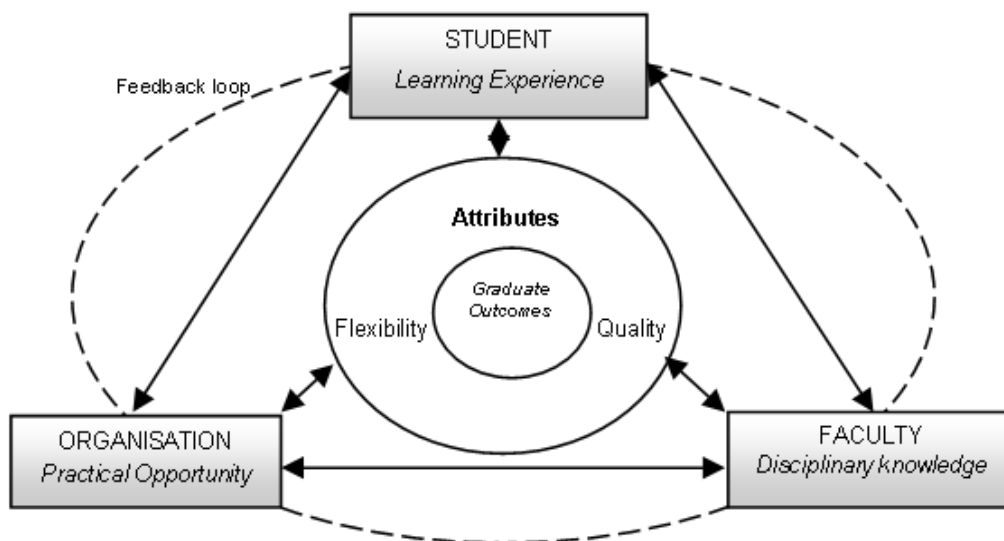
Figure 1: Key stakeholder engagement model

The Commerce Internship Programme at the University of Wollongong, consists of students participating in a 16 day placement at a host organisation during session. Placement positions are competitive and require students to apply online for organisational roles related to their selected discipline. While students are short-listed against a placement description provided by the organisation, the final decision to award the student an internship is made by the organisation and based on a formal interview process.

In addition to the practical placement, the program is embedded in a third year elective subject and utilises a combination of face-to-face and online mediums to assess and prepare students. All assessments are submitted online through an e-Learning forum. Assessments include completion of a daily e-log, a reflective journal and four modules covering areas such as; the workplace environment, team work, creative and critical thinking.

Beyond the duty of care

The term 'duty of care' conveys a legal code of practice by which individuals ensure their actions do not knowingly cause harm to others. In higher education this code applies to our obligation to provide reasonable steps to protect students from foreseeable risks; adequate supervision and instruction; and, safe and suitable premises and equipment (O'Halloran & Murn, 2005). The authors of this paper believe that it is not enough simply to adhere to a minimum standard of reasonable care or to only adopt a risk evasion strategy. Rather, we contest that the recipe for a successful experiential learning program involves moving beyond this standard, to successfully and supportively transition students into industry.

To ensure optimal transition of the student from the classroom to the workplace our approach is to provide an environment of support to both the host organisation and the student. Our approach is largely driven by higher education in the initial stages of the placement, allowing industry time to begin the relationship with the student. The organisation then takes over the process of managing the transition for the student within their own workplace as a graduate, to be treated as a potential employee. The student takes charge of their own transition towards the middle of the placement

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duration, meaning the student becomes self-directed in their learning potential to maximise their learning experience. This approach suggests that all key stakeholders play an important role in the transition of the student from reliance in higher education to a successful participant in industry. Informal industry feedback is collected at multiple stages of the process and in the form of meetings, written and regular phone updates. The informal nature of the feedback in this case ensures the focus remains on developing the relationship without imposing research or other potentially time consuming provisions.

This approach is unique in comparison to existing experiential learning programs. While some programs directly engage with their industry partners, caution must be taken to not place emphasis on industry delivering against academic requirements, such as assessment of the student's performance. Many programs require students to source their own placement opportunity independent of the faculty, particularly those that are compulsory for the attainment of the degree, resulting in little to no direct contact from the coordinators of the program. These practices, although arguably operationally resource effective for the coordinator or academic, may not be as conducive to fostering supportive learning environments and lasting relationships.

Supporting students in their learning and development is not new. Frameworks have been established to support students in open and distance education where often technology plays a central role (Tait, 2000). However few experiential learning programs adopt the notion of key stakeholder engagement and support in their andragogical approach. Much has been written on enhancing teacher's support of their students' learning and engagement in the classroom (Reeve et al., 2004) yet very little scholarship explores this in the area of practical placements.

Principles of the *beyond duty of care* approach

The authors have identified seven principles in this approach that have been employed in the Commerce Internship Programme.

1. *Involve industry early on in program development.* There are multiple benefits in engaging industry partners early on when designing an experiential learning program (Cord & Clements, 2010). These include the opportunity to collaborate, align program with industry expectations and ensure the model meets their needs. Potential outcomes that can result from this principle include an invested interest in the program and subsequently student development, sustainable relationships and recognition for the faculty and program.
2. *Minimize interruption to business.* When designing the program, informal industry feedback revealed the need for a program that is flexible, easily adopted and one that fits in daily business operations. Industry stakeholders also articulated a need for value-added activities to the business. Feedback from industry reflects this; "This program provides me the innovative and flexible mechanism to allow us to provide learning opportunities for students in our organisation… Not having to change our routine to accommodate student learning outcomes means the student will experience a larger array of everyday activities".
3. *Connecting the two worlds.* To best support both host organisations and students, academic coordinators must assist in aligning both the students' workload and host organisations' requirements. To this end, students in the Commerce Internship Programme are on placement two days a week during session. The coordinator works with both parties to facilitate a mutually beneficial schedule of placement days, which can sometimes involve assistance in swapping students' tutorials.
4. *Supported introduction and setting expectations.* A pre-placement meeting is arranged prior to the commencement of the 16-day placement. This meeting is attended by the academic coordinator, workplace supervisor and the student and is held on the host organisation's premises. The pre-placement meeting provides an opportunity for the student to gain familiarity with their host organisation and its location, discuss expectations, schedule the 16 days and ask any necessary questions such as parking, dress code and work hours. At this time an industry partner agreement and a separate student agreement is signed, outlining legal matters such as IP, insurance, grievance procedures and confidentiality.
5. *Managing initial placement days.* At the beginning of session all students on the program attend a lecture at the university, intended to best prepare them for this new learning environment. A university expert on equal employment, workplace discrimination and policies runs a workshop and discusses contemporary issues such as being on Facebook in company time. Students are required to complete an online module after the lecture called EO-Online to consolidate

recognition of these issues in the workplace. Learning through reflection is also covered to prepare students for their assessments and to help them get the most out of their opportunity. During the initial days of placement, the coordinator remains in close communication with both supervisor and student, to help build rapport and provide support to both stakeholders.

6. *Actively contribute to relationships.* Mentoring for the student is received from both the academic coordinator and the host organisation. Mentoring benefits for the student can increase the rate of assimilation into organisational culture (Murray, 2001). For mentors, benefits can include a sense of contribution (Murray, 2001) and personal satisfaction (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). In addition, this relationship can bring exposure to fresh ideas (Alpert et al., 2003) and new perspectives (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). This is mirrored by industry feedback "(The student) was wonderful and dedicated to the project. It was beneficial to have an outsider who could bring a new and objective point of view to the organisation".

7. *Online flexible assessment.* To allow for minimal interruptions, technology is used for assessment and student monitoring purposes in the form of a subject-based eLearning site. Based on feedback from industry, who identified time and resourcing a concern when taking on interns, all assessments are conducted and graded by academic facilitators of the program. This overcomes issues with multiple and untrained workplace assessors (Brodie & Irving 2007; Fell & Kuit, 2003).

Application and challenges of approach

The Commerce Internship Programme, through adopting this approach, has been in operation for over 2 years and placed over 170 students in a total of 35 host organisations. In the first eighteen months, the number of industry placements and therefore enrolments increased from 30 to 60 students per semester. While demand from both industry and students steadily increases, the challenge to resource the programme, to handle larger numbers, becomes the issue rather than seeking interested parties.

For higher education providers, considerations must be afforded to the provision of flexibility for academic coordinators and time provided to developing direct relationships. This approach requires commitment from the faculty to support, through resourcing and endorsement, the academic coordinators of the program. Upper management can also play a vital role in supporting the development of systems to aid the smooth running of these programs as well as internal recognition and collaboration from peers. Promoting the program through word of mouth from lecturers directly to students appears to have the greatest effect when marketing the program as well as information sessions where previous students share their stories.

This approach and therefore program sustainability is also driven by the shared philosophical foundations of the coordinators, the faculty and the host organisations. A common understanding that the program is built on relationships and a shared interest in developing student learning is critical to the experience of the student as well as in the interests of the program. The approach supervisors take when mentoring a newcomer, such as an intern, can influence the effectiveness of their learning (Louis, 1980). Adopting a *beyond duty of care* approach, has the potential to increase the learning from the student as it allows them to make mistakes and learn from their experiences. This is a different approach to those work placements that utilize the student to complete mundane tasks or to outsource work. Therefore, individual personalities, relationships and organisational willingness play a key role in maintaining effective programs (Edmond et al., 2007).

According to Jackson (2009) higher education must play a more active role in understanding the interests of our stakeholders. This approach to engaging key stakeholders through a supportive transition from higher education to the workplace can foster productive relationships. This is achieved by enabling a smooth induction process for the student to be involved with the industry partner and enables a strong relationship to be developed between the partner and student, initially managed by the coordinator.

While there is an ongoing dilemma as to the allocation of resources to student programs, this paper highlights the potential productivity associated with industry relationships, when the investment in the relationship becomes the primary focus of the program. It is the relationship that optimises the university's opportunity to engage in other ways with the community and enhances the student learning outcomes. It is the relationship that enables industry to contribute to the student while they are at university. Finally, it is the relationship that provides the supportive pathway to develop other industry engaged opportunities for all key stakeholders.

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