The Strengths and Weaknesses of a ‘Learning while Earning’ Variation of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

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ABSTRACT

The background focus of this discussion about work-integrated learning is the three streams of undergraduate Built Environment programs at Central Queensland University that are accredited by their relevant industries. CQU’s students’ truly work-integrated learning experience may be considered to be a ‘self-paced flexible learning while earning’ process. Relevant background theories of philosophy and the more recent manifestations of WIL are discussed at length in considering the strengths and weaknesses of the formal and informal opportunities for putting theory into practice in this alternative form of work integrated learning.

Keywords: Built Environment, Learning While Earning, Work-Integrated Learning

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. To WIL or Not to WIL

Given the current volume of research and debate in the literature about work-integrated learning (WIL), one could be forgiven for wondering if that might be leading towards a complete change of the power-balance in relationships between universities and industries (Choy & Delahaye, 2011, Newman, 2012), or is there simply a risk of entangling the previously clear demarcation between theory and practice? Is it possible that some might now be passing over the theoretical baton to industry or will that control of content be retained by the education providers?

There are many forms of WIL, including worker-learners, integrative learning, internships, practicum, supervised practice and project-based learning (PBL) for example that currently form essential content in curriculum design for higher education institutions (Smith, 2012, Purdie, et al, 2013, Jackson, 2013). For an earlier publication this author proposed that the mixed forms of work-integrated learning that our students undertake may be categorised as a form of ‘self-paced flexible learning while earning’ WIL process.
1.2. Structure and Delivery of our Built Environment Programs

Three streams of study that are the background focus of this document are offered at Central Queensland University (CQU) in the School of Engineering and Technology. These are the Built Environment programs, which are directly related to the construction management, building design, and building surveying and certification professions.

Six undergraduate awards are offered for part-time study only:

- Bachelor of Construction Management which has four years equivalent full-time study load (EFTSL);
- Bachelor of Building Surveying and Certification (4 years EFTSL) from which there are two exit awards;
- Bachelor of Building Surveying and Inspection (3 years EFTSL);
- Associate Degree of Building Surveying (2 years EFTSL) which is also available for direct entry;
- Bachelor of Building Design (3 years EFTSL);
- Associate Degree of Building Design (2 years EFTSL).

In common with other universities offering programs that are provided for intrinsically linked professions, appropriate coursework is shared between all programs within the three discipline streams. The remaining coursework is exclusively specific to a single stream or program to ensure its content has the approval of the relevant industries’ professional expectations of our graduates and the university’s academic standards.

All undergraduate programs offered in the Built Environment streams are now delivered online in distance education mode, following many years of correspondence format delivery. The current format utilises Moodle e-courses, allowing a web presence for each course/subject with online availability of course resource materials, announcements, videos, the uploading of assessment items by students followed by their feedback from markers, online discussion forums, plus interactive online lectures go some way towards providing a virtual classroom.

Students in the same situation as ours; undertaking studies without face to face contact, would benefit from developing the self-awareness of metacognition that would enable them to become a “self-regulated learner”. Zimmerman claims that self-regulation is “the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills” (2002, p. 65).

1.2.1. Strengths

For those students who choose to remain in a regional home or work-based location while studying and working, the online distance delivery of programs is a considerable advantage. By the same rationale it is equally advantageous for regional employers wishing to retain trainees.

1.2.2. Weaknesses

In the first stages of the distance education format studies, the lack of face to face contact increases the challenge of undertaking university level study for those new students and this is especially so for mature students.

1.2.3. Opportunities

Changes in the industry due to economic downturns or similar causes that may lead to reductions in, or complete loss of employment, can be translated into the opportunity to take up or accelerate studies towards one’s preferred profession from one’s home region, which is distinctly possible when those studies are available in distance mode of delivery.

1.2.4. Threats

Variations in broadband internet accessibility may be limited when, like a number of our students, their employer requires them to work in seriously remote locations such as central Australia or the highlands of Papua New Guinea for example. This seriously impacts upon their
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