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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
<u>1</u>	A Feasibility case Study of Implementing Corporate Social Responsibility from Employee Perspective with Special Reference to Marg properties, Chennai Dr. Simeon S. Simon, Dr. Janakiraman and Dr. Clement Sudhahar	<u>1-20</u>
<u>2</u>	Rule-Based Phonetic Matching Approach for Hindi and Marathi Mr. Sandeep Chaware and Mr. Srikantha Rao	<u>21-41</u>
<u>3</u>	<i>Work-Integrated Learning Program in Colleges and Universities – An Analysis</i> <i>Dr. S. Kaliyamoorthy and S. Sridevi</i>	<u>42-60</u>
<u>4</u>	Education Management for advancing rural india Ms. Simmi Tyagi	<u>61-75</u>
<u>5</u>	An optimization routing model for collecting infectious medical waste Ms. Sopnamayee Acharya and Dr. Sandeep Tiwari	<u>76-100</u>
<u>6</u>	Model Formulation for Quantitative Research on Purchase Intentions of Car Owners Mr. Balakrishnan Menon	<u>101-129</u>
<u>7</u>	An Event Study Analysis to Evaluate the Efficiency of Stock Market With Respect To Dividend Announcements in Public (SBI Bank & PNB Bank) and Private (HDFC Bank & ICICI Bank) Banking Companies Vinod Kumar, Shelly Singhal and Gaurav Kamboj	<u>130-166</u>
<u>8</u>	CONSUMER EDUCATION & AWARENESS Dr. Hawa Singh and Ms. Monika Singh	<u>167-182</u>
<u>9</u>	The Smoked India Ms. Sangeeta Mohanty and Ms. Chitra Sikaria	<u>183-201</u>
<u>10</u>	Depository System in India: An Appraisal Ms. Kiran Chaudhary and Mr. Ramesh Kumar Malik	<u>202-220</u>

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Title

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING PROGRAM IN
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES – AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs are becoming popular with students, government, employers, and universities. A major benefit of a WIL program is the increased employability of students, and this matches well with the present trend whereby students expect a pay-off from their investment in education. Curriculum is one of the important products that universities offer to their stakeholders, but the curriculum has received less attention than might be expected. This paper discusses issues related to designing a WIL program for a post-graduate degree program. The importance of WIL programs in general is followed by discussion on how WIL, work and knowledge are related to each other. Issues relating to designing a successful WIL program are discussed by its faculty, academics and the employers as stakeholders in the program. The WIL program's implications for the post-graduate curriculum are also discussed.

Keywords: Curriculum, experiential learning, work-based learning, work-integrated learning.

Introduction:

Education is being viewed more and more as an investment by students. An Australian study reveals that students and their parents search for educational courses, universities and varying fee structures, in expectation of a pay-off from their increasing investment in education. Therefore, it could be argued that they tend to seek vocationally oriented courses.

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has provided universities with an opportunity to offer a best product that students will appreciate as a pay-off for their investment that will enhance their branding and will attract students by re-marketing of their traditional academic courses as vocationally oriented courses. In the UK this has resulted in the re branding of technical colleges as universities and trimming the distinction between technical colleges and universities. This has put pressure on traditional academically oriented universities to offer more vocationally oriented programs and courses to attract students.

WIL is becoming increasingly popular with governments, students and industry, allowing academics to enter into a new discourse of knowledge whereby universities should now compete for research and teaching funds with managers, practitioners, and technocrats.

The literature often describes WIL by two different terms: work-based learning, and experience-based learning. The term WIL was coined to encompass the increasing diversity in the modes of vocational learning. Curriculum is one of the important products that universities offer to their stakeholders, but the curriculum has received less attention than might be expected.

The aim of this paper is to explore curriculum issues related to designing a WIL program in relation to a post-graduate degree curriculum.

DESIGNING A WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING (WIL) PROGRAM

(1) STUDENT PREPARATION FOR WIL

Research has shown that the most significant attributes of work readiness identified by employers are not necessarily those related to content knowledge of the discipline, but are common across all workplaces. Research suggests optional on-campus counselors are not effective in providing this training.

The benefits of greater connectivity between context and learning have been identified by education researchers worldwide, resulting in enhanced outcomes for students, employers and educators.

Skill development:

Professional engagement skills:

- Communication skill development
- Project management processes, including budgeting and grant application
- Team-building processes
- Workplace literacy
- Independence, assertiveness and confidence training
- Workplace health and safety knowledge
- Legal and ethical obligations and responsibilities
- Cultural awareness and values

- Problem solving approaches

Technical skills:

Options for registered training organizations (RTOs) and external providers to provide requisite technical competencies not within the university or industry capacity to fulfill may be considered. Additional certificates and diplomas may also be awarded.

Attitude and maturity development:

It is essential to build mutual respect and mutual responsibility, that is, both from student to university and employer and vice versa. Students need a mature work ethic to gain real value from the WIL experience.

(2) MONITORING THE SUCCESS OF WIL:

WIL programs should be assessed against defined criteria to ensure their continued success and relevance. Some outcomes that may be useful in defining the achievements of the programs are outlined here.

Improvement of student outcomes:

Recording of student achievements needs to be comprehensive to track the validity of the perception that WIL contributes to significant student improvement. These should be comprehensive data, including postgraduate studies and employment experiences as well as academic results. Standardized data collection would aid comparability of experiences and offer a form of benchmarking. Student's perceptions should also be considered.

Improved communication between employers and universities:

The engagement between industry and universities should result in a win-win situation with enhanced outcomes for both. Academics should gain a greater insight into the workings and expectations of industry, and explore opportunities for practical testing of new theoretical concepts. There must be acknowledgement of industry input and potential. Industry should gain

corresponding advantages of exposure to cutting-edge science and technology and opportunities for cooperative research.

Increased valuing of student learning by all stakeholders:

All participants should appreciate the significance of the different elements of learning and professional development in different situations. The balance between practical and theoretical experience and knowledge contributes to the overall finished professional.

Increased sharing of knowledge between universities and industry:

Through the process of project development and university partnership, as well as through the contribution made by the student, industry has the opportunity to gain knowledge and insights that may otherwise require considerable investment of time and resources. This sharing process should be documented and quantified for validation purposes. Any aspects of intellectual property rights must be adequately protected. Research indicates that the student in the workplace is the greatest facilitating mechanism for transferring new knowledge from university to industry.

Positive cost benefit to employers, job creation through innovation:

Documented evidence shows employers have used new ideas and innovations by students to improve and expand their business practices. It is also an investment in the future, reducing in-house training costs for new employees.

Enhanced professional and personal development of students:

By increasing interaction with the professional community the students develop their professional identity and confidence. This improves their employability and potential for creating an enhanced career path within their chosen occupation.

(3) FEATURES OF PRODUCTIVE WIL DEVELOPMENT:

For an effective WIL program, the environment in which it is developed and implemented needs to be well defined and established to produce constructive outcomes for the stakeholders. The following are essential ingredients for success.

Positive relationships between employers and universities:

A facilitator to promote ongoing relationships within and between employers and universities is necessary for effective and collaborative partnerships with clear objectives. The facilitator position may be internal or outsourced but generally will be based within the university, and will work across a range of curricula.

Industry input into curriculum design:

It is essential to engage industry in the initial planning stages of the curriculum design to ensure relevance and ownership for all parties. Industry could be represented on an individual basis, or through an appropriate professional association. It is important to engage with key HR personnel in the participating organizations as well as content specialists.

Compulsory component of course:

For full benefits, the program should be a compulsory component of the degree course, and have a significant credit value to the student. If insufficient industry placements are available, supplementary authentic and real-world experiences can be simulated within the university and can also be incorporated into genuine university research programs and through partnerships with affiliated research institutes.

Minimal financial cost to universities:

Universities do not have the capacity to increase current funding for courses. Off-campus experiences need to be cost-neutral to the university.

Student input value greater than industry costs:

Positive examples of WIL experiences by employers need to be showcased to encourage active participation and to inform industry of the total value of participating in WIL programs. Examples of positive and beneficial programs can be obtained from experienced practitioners.

Increased professional recognition:

- 1. Mutual recognition**
- 2. Increased acceptance of student capability**

The increased collaboration between industry, universities and students provides a greater appreciation and recognition of the value added by all parties and the importance of each.

The potential for accreditation and registration of practitioners by an appropriate professional body encourages an additional level of professional excellence.

Clarity of agreement between parties:

It is essential that the expectations and responsibilities of each party are clearly enunciated and accepted prior to undertaking any program. These include legal, ethical and academic responsibilities. Such issues as insurance/work cover need to be clearly defined prior to any engagement, and may vary depending on the nature of the engagement.

FIGURE: 1 WIL PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

INPUTS	PROCESS	OUTPUTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic experience - Resources and Facilities - HR expertise - Practical Expertise - Student Commitment - Attention to learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan process • Establish guidelines • Procure resources • Develop networks • Trial activities • Review and evaluate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum development • Improved student work skills • Greater understanding between stakeholders • Better equipped employees

(4) CONSIDERATIONS TO BE ADDRESSED:

There may be times that government intervention is essential to create and maintain the potential opportunities for participation in WIL programs across a wide range of industries. Those areas most likely to need assistance should be identified and recorded for future action. This may be a changing cohort, depending on economic and environmental circumstances, so continual monitoring is required.

Universities Australia is developing a case for increased government funding to supplement the costs of the introduction and effective implementation of WIL programs over and above usual course costs to all stakeholders.

Some areas that will need ongoing and adaptive attention include those listed here.

Variability within Industry:

Industry is subject to fluctuations in response to economic pressures, and the ability for WIL participation will reflect such variations. This will place a corresponding pressure on universities to maintain courses through periods of downturn in student enrolment.

Capacity of industry:

Smaller industries will have limitations on their capacity to engage with WIL projects due to the demand on temporal, human and financial resources.

University course Structure:

Changes to university curriculum are time-consuming and expensive. Support is needed for curriculum developers to investigate and produce the most appropriate programs for the specific demands of particular industries and professions.

Employer acceptance and expectations:

To avoid misconceptions and misunderstandings between stakeholders, it is essential that employers are not only briefed on their responsibilities, but able to clearly express their expectations, and that any points of contention are clarified prior to any involvement with students. The value of WIL to the employer needs to be demonstrable.

Bridging theory and Practice:

Partners need to work closely together to ensure that the theoretical and practical elements of the project are complementary and assessable in a meaningful context.

Costs to students:

The possibilities for scholarships and paid work opportunities should be explored by the project team to help overcome potential problems related to expenses and loss of income for students undertaking WIL projects.

Maintaining academic Rigor:

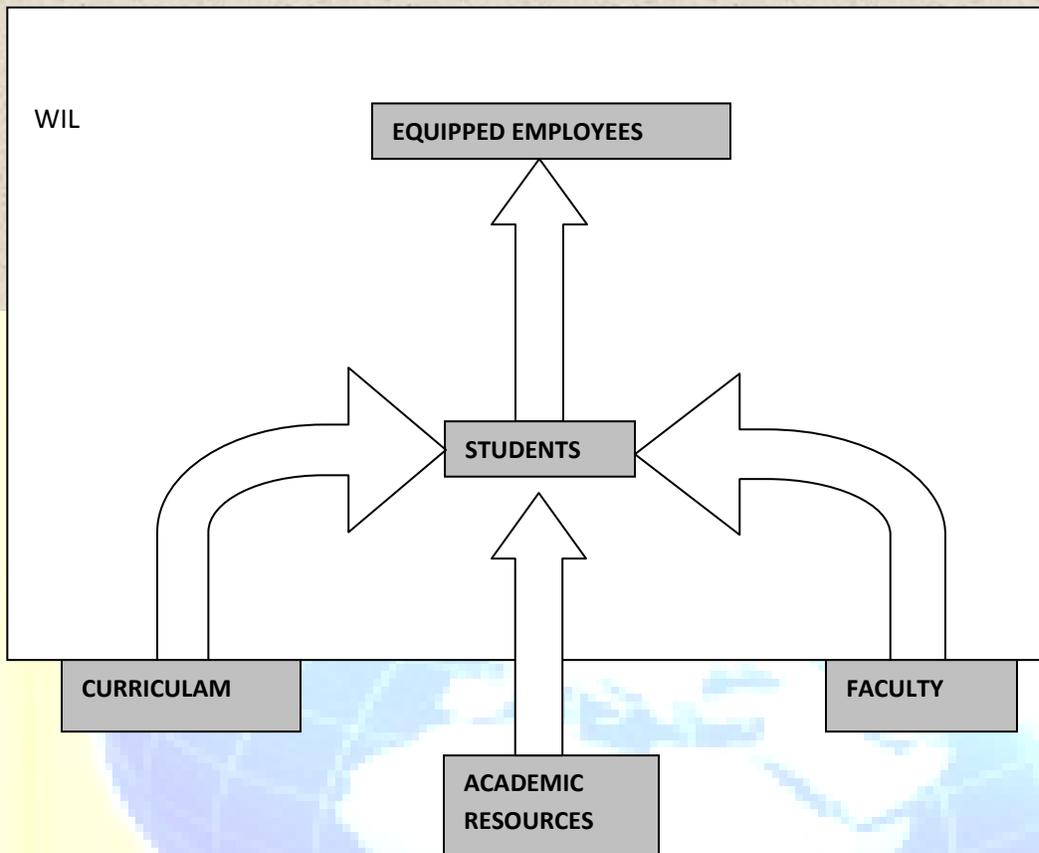
As part of unit design, the assessment criteria should be clearly enunciated and understood by all stakeholders. These should be developed in consultation with the stakeholders. Concepts for assessment, including self assessment need to be explored.

(5) PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITIES:

A project team representing educators and industry interests needs to be established from the beginning to ensure all stakeholder interests are addressed. This group will be responsible for curriculum development and continued review of course elements to ensure ongoing relevance and cohesiveness to meet the requirements of all stakeholders.

The group would identify and implement appropriate project management and review procedures to ensure effective outcomes for the project. Ideally the project manager would be the WIL facilitator in the university. Processes to progress engagement should consider the win-win elements common in other bipartisan agreements.

FIGURE: 2 TRANSFORMATION OF STUDENTS THROUGH WIL



Design program/course and curriculum to incorporate work experience options

The professional practice program and work experience components need to be integral elements of the curriculum design and contribute meaningfully to the overall degree attributes. To develop real-world, future-focused and authentic experiences as WIL proceeds, engagement with industry groups will/should translate into discernible impacts on and changes in curricula design and degree focus.

Identify appropriate areas to incorporate work placements or in class simulations

Work placements need to be flexible and relevant to the course of study, and the purpose of the placement needs to be identified, whether it is to experience work practices or to achieve a practical and useful project outcome.

Develop mentoring and assessment procedures

Students require both industry and academic assistance so the work they perform and the outcomes they achieve meet the requirements of both the educational institution and the employing organization. These processes must be built into the course structure. It should be explicit that industry needs to visit the classroom both to progress professional recognition and to contribute to curriculum development. Use should be made of available technologies to overcome problems of time and space. Student self assessment can reflect an element of increasing professionalism and independence.

Identify processes for alerting employers to program

To engage employers in the design and planning phases of the program, they must be alerted to the existence of the program. A facilitator or professional organization could greatly assist in the promotion of the program. Existing programs should be explored to identify potential partners in this enterprise.

Develop training for employers to assist in project development and assessment

The project group should identify areas requiring professional development for employers and academics, and seek appropriate means of implementing these processes. These could include basic workplace health and safety issues, insurance, ethics and responsibilities as well as guides for mentoring and assessing student workers.

Help with supervision procedures

The project group could also contribute to the design of good practice procedures to ensure the best interests of all stakeholders are met, including appropriate and responsible supervision of work practices and project performance. This bridges the elements of HR practicalities and academic requirements.

Establish communication procedures to project coordinators and mentors

An essential part of the project design is the mechanism for clear and simple communication pathways between all parties involved in the activity. All significant communication should be

recorded for evaluation purposes. There should be a clear distinction between the academic and administrative responsibilities of the university staff.

Evaluate and review program

Evaluation and review procedures should be built into the program to ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of the range of stakeholders.

Concluding remarks

Graduates and employers feel strongly that industry involvement in all aspects of the post-graduate curriculum is beneficial, particularly because it exposed students to 'real-world' problems and give them experience in meeting deadlines and managing their time. Stronger linkages between curriculum content and 'real-world' examples and applications are repeatedly mentioned by graduates as a means of developing generic skills in the university context. Leadership and entrepreneurial skills, assuming responsibility and making decisions, and demonstrating high ethical standards were felt to be more appropriately developed in the workplace, either during work placement or in an employment situation, than at university where opportunities were more limited. Work placements provided an excellent platform from which students could progress to the workplace and seek further opportunities for their development. The majority of graduates are satisfied with the range and number of opportunities their employers provided for professional and skills development.

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