

# **Developing skills through work integrated learning: important or unimportant?**

## **A Research Paper**

### **Abstract**

The Library and Information Studies (LIS) Program at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) places students into work placements during their second and third year of study. During their second year, students are placed in public libraries and in third year, students are placed in special or academic libraries. The success of any work integrated learning (WIL) program is dependent upon the three main parties: the student, the institution and the work placement. Work integrated learning affords the students an opportunity of putting theory into practice as well as to gain practical experience in the real world of work. As part of the author's doctoral study into the development of a cooperative education model for library and information science/studies in South Africa, questionnaires were sent to work placement supervisors to solicit their views on work integrated learning practices. During 2012, third year library and information studies students were required to scan job adverts related to librarianship. Students scanned both national and local newspapers as well as institutional/organizational websites to identify skills required by employers when compiling job advertisements. Skills were identified from the job advertisements and twenty-six (26) library related skills were selected. Questionnaires were distributed to work placement supervisors via email. The questionnaire had a total of twenty-nine questions and question twenty requested work placement hosts to rate the importance of the twenty-six skills from "important" to "unimportant". This paper therefore aims to present some of the findings that were received from WIL supervisors.

## **Introduction**

The South African higher education landscape consists of traditional universities, comprehensive universities and Universities of Technology. Through literature searches the author has come to understand that there seems to be no consensus on the terminology used to explain the period students spend in work placements and the time that they spend in work placements. The Council on Higher Education (South Africa) published a *Work integrated learning: good practice guide* (2011, p.6) and it clearly clarifies this by saying that WIL in various forms has always been a distinguishing feature of professional education, even though it has not been called 'WIL'. Eames (2003) explains cooperative education (co-op) as a program that links academic learning within an educational institution with a period of a student being placed in a work placement. Cooperative and work integrated learning (CWEL) is a term created by the World Association on Cooperative Education (WACE) to acknowledge and embrace all forms of experiential learning utilized by industry and educational institutions to prepare the next generation of global professionals. WACE further provides the other terms that are encompassed within CWEL, namely, cooperative education, internships and semester in industry. WACE defines cooperative education as. A number of authors (Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009; Abeysekera 2006; Haddara & Skanes, 2007) emphasize that the important role of any cooperative education or work integrated learning programme is to prepare students for the world of work by exposing students to real life situations in the real world. Coll, Zegwaard & Hodges (2002,19) further state that the aim of cooperative education worldwide is to prepare students for the workplace by developing specific and generic competencies that they believe will be useful to employers. The authors further state that some skills may be obtained in the classrooms on campus; others are best developed in the workplace via work-based learning that

forms part of cooperative education programs. This statement is further supported by Bates, Bates & Bates (2007, 121) in that field placements have the function of providing a pre-induction experience prior to the student's graduation and provide students with an opportunity to test the theoretical knowledge learnt at university and to put it into action in the complex world. Du Pre (2009,26) also states that the advantage of work integrated learning for both students and employers is that students "hit the ground running" when they enter the work place. Another important area of cooperative education is the fact that it is a triangular relationship involving three main parties, namely the student, the institution and the employer (Groenewald, 2004, Haddara & Skanes, 2007). Work integrated learning literature has further revealed that cooperative education is an umbrella term that encompasses all other types of learning in the workplace which may be work integrated learning (WIL), work-based learning, internship, service learning and in-service training.

There are a number of authors that discuss skills needed by employees when entering a new job, though none of those deal with the library and information sector per se. Coll, Zegwaard and Hodges (2002) are of the view that both 'soft' and 'hard' skills are a requirement for an employee to perform better in the workplace. The authors explain that hard skills are those associated with technical aspects of performing on the job; and soft skills (behavioral skills) are referred to as interpersonal, human and people skills. They further explain that soft skills may also include the ability to communicate well. Within the library and information sector one can also differentiate between soft and hard skills. Soft skills are those that an employee can use anywhere irrespective of the area of specialization and hard skills are job specific. This is further supported by Freudenberg, Brimble and Cameron (2011,80) as they define generic skills "as a set of skills that have potential broad application to a range of disciplines".

## **Definition of concepts**

*Classification* is the arrangement of things in logical order according to their degrees of likeness, especially the assignment of books or other items to their proper places in a scheme of classification (Prytherch, 2000, 152).

*Cataloguing* may be explained as a process of using a cataloguing code (e.g. *Anglo American cataloguing rules*) to describe an item so that there may be no confusion as to which record is being described.

*Library and/or information science* refers to the discipline or branch of learning of library and information science/studies and may be abbreviated as LIS. This discipline is generally concerned with recordable information and knowledge and the services and technologies their management and use (Raju, 2004, 10).

## **Research Context: Work-integrated learning in the library and information studies program**

Library and information studies students at the Durban University of Technology enjoy two different work integrated learning placements during their studies. In second year, students are placed in public libraries of their choice for a period of six weeks. In the third year of study, students have an option of either being placed at an academic or a special library for eight weeks. Third year students submit to the work integrated learning coordinator, three names and contact details of work placements suitable for their WIL. A spreadsheet of hosts with contact details is then formulated and kept for future reference. During WIL students are either visited by an academic staff member or if this cannot be done a telephone interview is conducted with the supervisor and the student. The aim of visiting or calling the student is to clarify any questions

that the host or student might have and to check if the student is really learning in the work environment. The library and information studies program enjoys good relations with library and information professionals mainly due to the fact that the program has a functional advisory board that contributes to the program and provides input into work integrated learning issues pertaining to the library and information services sector. Some employers require students to send résumés, application letters and attend an interview. In most cases the employers allow the academic lecturer/WIL coordinator to select the best student for them. Before third students are released for work integrated learning, they undergo '*work preparedness*' offered in one of their third year subjects known as Library and Information Professional Practice 3 (LIPP3). This subject covers an array of modules in order to prepare them for the world of work. Students are reminded of communication skills (both verbal and oral), discussions on time management and role play attending interviews.

## **Methodology**

A questionnaire schedule was designed and administered to students that have completed WIL, work placement supervisors and library institutions that offer the library and information science/studies programs. This paper will only present the findings from work placements supervisors that have hosted DUT library and information studies' studies (Appendix A). Third year students were given a task of scanning library and information sector job advertisements in newspapers as well as institutional websites. Students had to work in groups and present to the class their findings. The brief was to look at the requirements for each job (educational requirements, experience required for a position and the different job titles advertised). This exercise was the basis of question 20 in the questionnaire (Appendix A). The author then

formulated question 20 that had 26 skills and tasks relevant to the library and information professional entering the workplace.

This paper further aims to report on the views of library and information sector work placement supervisors regarding the importance of a wide range of skills or tasks required for a student preparing for work integrated learning. Questionnaires were e-mailed to DUT LIS work placement supervisors (n=34). Employers had to rank the skills using a 5 point scale. Employers ranked communication skills as an important skill for a library and information student. This study answers to the call by Coll, Zegwaard and Hodges (2002, 19) that there should be further research into employers' views of aspects of cooperative education.

### **Research Objective**

This paper reports on work in progress. The overall aim of the study is to develop a library and information cooperative education model for higher education institutions in South Africa. In doing so, the author seeks also to document best practices from all the library and information academic institutions. Questionnaires for the study were sent to students, work placement hosts and academic institutions involved in WIL but this paper will only present the findings of those work placement supervisors (n=21) who had responded at the time of writing this paper.

### **The data collection instrument**

Library and information sector work placement supervisors were sent three attachments via e-mails: a letter of informed consent, (a requirement from DUT that participants need to accept or not accept to be participants); a covering letter for the questionnaire (detailing why the research is being conducted and the benefits) and the questionnaire. A list of all work placement supervisors that assist in hosting students for work integrated learning is kept. Question 20 on the

questionnaire (of 29 questions) required participants to rank the skills needed by students in order to function in a library and information providing agency. The skills were presented in a random order and included both soft and hard skills as differentiated by Coll, Zegwaard and Hodges (2002). The ranking scale used the terms very important, important, moderately important, of little importance and unimportant. Participants were also asked to list any other skills that they felt were omitted from the list.

### **Administering the instrument**

This paper reports on a section of a large scale research project that is being conducted on the library and information studies cooperative model in Higher Education Institutions in South Africa. Thirty-four questionnaires were emailed to work placement supervisors. Twenty-one questionnaires were returned fully completed and the data could be used for analysis purposes. In total, a response rate of 62% was achieved.

### **Data analysis**

The returned questionnaires were coded by giving them identification numbers (001-021) for ease of analysis. Question 20 had 29 different skills that work placement supervisors had to rate between important and unimportant. These were then coded (*very important =1; important =2; moderately important =3; unimportant =4 and of little importance =5*). Using *Moon Stats* the author was able to develop tables and graphs that are presented in this paper.

## **Research findings**

Coll, Zegwaard & Hodges (2002) clearly distinguish between soft and hard skills. Hard skills in relation to this paper are specific to the library and information sector which include classification, cataloguing, indexing and abstracting. Soft skills refer to communication skills, interpersonal skills and computer skills. The study revealed that though the library and information sector deals with the preparation and presentation of information in order for users to be able to retrieve information from a number of information sources (for example, books, the internet and online databases). The work placement supervisors still regarded the soft skills of communication, interpersonal and computer literacy as very important in the library and information sector services. All respondents rated communication skills as very important (100%), interpersonal skills 85.71% and lastly computer skills received 95.24% for very important.

The highest ranking was shared between cataloguing and classification (71.43% respectively). This revealed that these two skills still underpin the library and information sector. Low rates for the very important skill of abstracting and indexing were noted. This was surprising because the author was of the view that they are also important to the sector but the hosts ranked them 47.62% and 52.38% respectively. 38.10% of the respondents regarded problem solving as very important, 52.38% indicated it was important and 9.52% stating that it was moderately important. Other skills that respondents had to rank were: records management, financial management, report writing, binding and acquisitions. Most of these skills were rated very low within the very important level, except for report writing skills that was 52.38 viewed as very important. Records management, only 42.86% rated it as very important; 14.29% stated that financial management was very important.



## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The analysis of the questionnaires revealed interesting themes regarding what hosts think as important skills in the library and information science field. Traditional library and information skills included *cataloguing*, *classification* and these were often referred to as the ‘*core skills*’ of the field. *Cataloguing* and *classification* similarly were perceived as being very important skills which means that these two skills are still the core to the library and information sector. It will be interesting to compare this question with the students’ and academics’ questionnaires once the study has been completed. The findings of this study will enable the library and information studies programme at the Durban University of Technology to check if the curriculum still aligns itself to the needs of industry.

The study has further revealed that library and information hosts view communication skills as very important (this includes both verbal and written communication skills) and further regard interpersonal skills as an important skill. Library and information practitioners work in different aspects within the field: at the circulation desk they deal on a one-to-one basis with library users; as subject librarians they deal directly with students and staff. Therefore, it is not surprising that hosts rated these skills as very important.

The findings of this study will assist library schools to learn best practices that may be included in their curriculum to make sure that students are adequately prepared before entering the workplace. When third year library and information studies students return from their work integrated learning program, during their report back sessions they have always made a statement that financial management was a must and they felt this should be introduced before WIL. WIL

supervisors rated financial management as an important skill rather than a very important skill, this in turn supports what the students have always requested.

The Durban University of Technology is involved in *Curriculum Renewal* an exercise that will see academic departments in the institution revisiting their curriculum with the hope of either changing or remaining as they are. These findings will be of assistance to the LIS program. The academics will be able to support the needs of industry and ensuring that the LIS program produces students who are employable within the library and information sector.

Further research will report on the topic of skills from the students' and academics' perspective and this will be compared to the current findings of the supervisors.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of library and information work integrated learning hosts who participated in the study.

## References

- Abeyssekera, I. (2006). Issues relating to designing a work-integrated learning program in an undergraduate accounting degree program and its implications for the curriculum. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 7(1), 7-15.
- Haddara, M., & Skanes, H. (2007). A reflection on cooperative education: from experience to experiential learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 8(1), 67-76.
- Bates, A., Bates, M., & Bates, L. (2007). Preparing students for the professional workplace: who has the responsibility for what?. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 8(2), 121-129.
- Coll, R., Zegwaard, K., & Hodges, D. (2002). Science and technology stakeholders' ranking of graduate competencies Part 1: employer perspective. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 3(2), 19-28.
- Council on Higher Education, C. (2011). *Work-integrated learning: good practice guide*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
- Du Pre, R. (2009). *The place and role of universities of technology in South Africa*. Bloemfontein: South African Technology Network.
- Eames, C. (2003). Learning to work: becoming a research scientist through work experience placements. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 4(2), 7-15.
- Fleming, J., Martin, A., Hudges, H., & Zinn, C. (2009). Maximizing work integrated learning experiences through identifying graduate competencies for employability: a case study of sport studies in higher education. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 10(3), 189-201.

Freudenberg, B., Brimble, M., & Cameron, C. (2011). WIL and generic skill development: the development of business students' generic skills through work integrated learning. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 12(2), 79-93.

Hodges, D., & Burchell, N. (2003). Business graduate competencies: employers' views on importance and performance. *Asia-Pacific Journal of cooperative education*, 4(2), 16-22.

Raju, J. (2004). First level library and information science qualifications at South African universities and technikons: a comparative study of curricula. *South African journal of library and information science*, 70(1), 9-19.

*World association on cooperative education (WACE)*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.waceinc.org/about.html>

## Appendix A

### (One part of the questionnaire that deals with skills)

Students need skills in order to function in a library and information providing agency. Listed below are skills that may be general and/or relevant to LIS sector. Please rate the importance of the skills listed below with regard to your expectations from the students.

Task description	Very important	Important	Moderately important	Of little importance	Unimportant
1. Communication skills					
2. Interpersonal skills					
3. Report writing skills					
4. Problem solving skills					
5. Computer literacy skills					
6. Customer care					
7. Work ethics					
8. Presentation skills					
9. Acquisitions					
10. Binding					
11. Inter-library loans					
12. Cataloguing					
13. Classification					
14. Indexing					
15. Abstracting					
16. Digitizing					
17. Preservation					
18. Conservation					
19. Library promotion and marketing					
20. Information retrieval					
21. Conducting a reference interview					
22. Web 2.0 technology					
23. Records management					
24. Knowledge management					
25. Human resources management					
26. Financial management					
Other, specify					