

Chapter 11

Work Integrated Learning in Higher Education Hospitality Courses

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a qualitative study looking at Work Integrated Learning (WIL) in a higher education institution. The empirical dataset for this qualitative study was collected through student and industry focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with Masters students and managers of hotels in Sydney, Australia. The study provides an understanding of the key concepts, issues, and methodologies of applying WIL practices. The results show that a formal qualification together with a structured work placement develops students' knowledge and skills and is beneficial in developing a hotel management career.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is to report on a research project on Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and in so doing discuss its importance in higher education using Blue Mountains International Hotel Management School (BMIHS) as a case study.

The purpose of the project was, firstly, to determine hosts' expectations of hotel master's students when they entered their placement in the industry, and alternatively students' expectations when entering industry placement. The second purpose was to determine what type of placements students were offered and what opportunities were afforded to them while working in the position. Although the project focused on hotel management, many of the practices identified in relation to WIL can be implemented in other business disciplines.

The study and its findings emphasise the importance of evaluating the performance of WIL and addresses future challenges and issues associated with the way WIL can contribute to overall course success. In essence, the study provides an understanding of the key concepts, issues and methodologies of applying WIL practices. The principal purpose of the project was to:

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- Identify what expectations students have before entering their industry placement,
- Identify what expectations exist by industry of master's students entering industry placement,
- Identify and describe the various roles and opportunities afforded to students while they are on industry placement,
- Determine the perceptions of students who are now in the industry as to how their knowledge was developed from their theoretical studies at school to their practical experiences in the workplace, and
- Identify areas requiring modification for both academic institutions and the industry.

BACKGROUND

The tertiary sector plays an essential role in supporting and enhancing appropriately skilled and developed human capital in order to assist in the challenges faced by industry. Now, more than ever, young people are encouraged to follow a higher education path. In addition both parents and students expect higher education to adequately prepare students for the working world. While Australian graduates generally do well with respect to overall employment outcomes, their performance in the workplace has come under significant scrutiny in recent years with some industries complaining that many graduates lack the necessary practical skills to perform in the early years of transition into employment (Pensiero & McIlveen, 2006). The Australian Industries Group reported in 2009 that employers were dissatisfied at that time with the lack of relevant work experience by graduates, and their lack of application and focus on teamwork and customer awareness. Surveys conducted by the University of Canberra (2004 and 2008) indicated that overall a significant gap existed between the expectations of the industry and universities with respect to graduate skills (Shah & Nair, 2011).

Need for Industry Skills

In a highly competitive environment striving to exceed customers' expectations, managers need highly developed skills in information-gathering, decision-making and action-taking; as well as strong interpersonal skills and active involvement with planning, organising, staffing, leading and controlling (Shenhar & Renier, 1996). The development of such skills cannot come from acquiring technical knowledge and management concepts through education alone. "It comes from an understanding of and a feel for factors such as organisational politics and culture, the art of influencing others, and the ability to delegate, the skills of timing, presentation and selling ideas, not just having them" (Teare, 1989, p. 312).

The key findings of the *Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills* report by DETYA (2000) found that the most valued attributes in business graduates were academic achievement in a suitable discipline, time management skills, written business communication skills, oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, team working skills, problem solving skills and comprehension of business processes. Walsh and Taylor (2007) point out that while skill requirements vary across organizations, employment experience and transferable skills are consistently acknowledged as crucial (Scott & Revis, 2008).

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