

Development of an Educational Audit Tool as a means to ensure the quality and standard of Work-based Learning (WBL) Practice Placement

Abdool Qaiyum Mohabuth

WBL Unit, Centre for Professional Development and Lifelong Learning, University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius

Author E-mail: a.mohabuth@uom.ac.mu

ABSTRACT

There has been a steady trend in Higher Education aiming to inculcate WBL Practice into a range of degrees, as it has been recognised that the value of graduates increases if they are well prepared for the transition to work. University programmes of studies are designed today with the necessary provisions to provide opportunities for students to engage in practice learning so that students at the time of graduation are fit for purpose and practice. Students undertake WBL Practice in industry (off campus learning) to acquire professional knowledge and skills. While many students are satisfied with the support and guidance from mentors, there are however, some students that complain about the quality of the training programme. The accommodating infrastructure and the logistics put in place at some practice settings are poor which resulted in minimal incidental skills acquisition. Many Universities are presently trying to give due recognition to the achievement of their students on practice learning. The training received is evaluated and academic credits are awarded to the students for the critical professional skills acquired. In order to ensure that all students get a safe, fair and equitable WBL Practice, it is therefore mandatory for Universities to put in place robust structure for auditing placement settings.

This paper discusses the development of an Educational Audit tool at the University of Mauritius (UoM) to facilitate the assessment of the standard and quality of the WBL provisions and support that are needed to offer students proper learning opportunities for their placement practice. The Audit tool has been tried and tested at various local placement settings involving public, parastatal and private organisations. The result is conducive as it allows organisations to know where they stand in terms of placement provisions. In addition, the tool has contributed to ensure that the work setting provides the necessary learning opportunities to enable students to achieve the WBL outcomes required. The audit tool has also proved to be helpful in making appropriate recommendations with respect to the ongoing quality monitoring, maintenance and enhancement of the WBL environment.

Keywords: Audit tool, Placement Provisions, Professional skills, Standard and Quality, Learning opportunities.

1. Introduction

The trend of today's educational philosophy at tertiary level is geared towards the formal integration of work experience into the theoretical curriculum. Most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are adopting a structured educational strategy that progressively integrates academic study with learning through productive work experience in the field related to student's academics or career goals. New challenges and opportunities have emerged for work integrated learning as a teaching and learning methodology. WBL has, in some respects, struggled to emerge as a transformative force in HEIs' curriculum. WBL learning is also referred to by a variety of terms, namely experimental learning, industry training, work place learning, placement learning and internship etc.

For students to benefit fully from a planned work experience, WBL must be understood and in-curriculated in partnership with relevant external partners from industry. Decision making for students to participate in off campus WBL in industry or the community should be based on the assessment criteria and optimal evaluation of possible outcomes. The assessment of the critical skills should underpin the knowledge and discipline contents and should attract academic credits aligned to quality assurance. The overall benefits of such a quality management approach, along with effective curriculum design strategies, will enhance the ability of HEIs to comprehend and to enhance education and training based learning as an academically viable pedagogy for career-focused qualification. The implications for curriculum development create opportunities for re-curriculation that should promote new paradigms and approaches to teaching and learning, assessment and service delivery (Aurangzeb, 2008)

In conceptualising quality assurance in higher education, Centrex (2004) defines quality assurance as the means by which an organisation confirms that conditions are in place for students to achieve the standards set by the training organisation. The workplace is not a learning institution, but rather a place for productivity and profitability. Therefore, academic institution should ensure that learning of students are properly planned and structured. The

quality assurance practice is therefore considered important for it enables a work setting to become a learning organisation where students can acquire core skills necessary for their professional development.

HEIs and the world of work, though very different, are increasingly being encouraged to develop links. French (1993) argues that such links enhance students' learning. In his view, "educational institutions teach about life, but essential learning i.e. real life itself, actual experience only happens outside, in the field". Work placement encapsulates this view. Sandwich programme model in undergraduate degree model is intended to allow students to combine academic study with practical experience and provide the opportunity for each type of learning to inform the other.

2. HEIs and Industry partnership

HEIs will need to continue to refine their roles and adjust their programmes in order to address the demands and needs of the industry. WBL form integral part of professional education, particularly in applied sciences, engineering and business. The work place is present in these programmes both as a learning resource and knowledge production and studies are simultaneously cultured into academic and work force knowledge system. While these have been the acknowledgement of the role of the work place, there has been no attempt to theorize how work based knowledge differs from academic knowledge. How work and academic system might interact. Consequently, the role, of higher education claims to play in the development of work place, it has strived away from researching the world of work and has very little explicit discussion of the theory of WBL and practically no evaluative research to trace the impact of career focused programmes. Before HEIs can ensure that students are adequately (prepared, supported, supervised) for the life in the work environment, academic themselves need to understand how to integrate experiences, across different areas of learning.

Organising student WBL experience, practice period or apprenticeship programme is a challenging task. A particular challenge in the case of work-related learning is that, compared to school-based learning, it involves partners who may have different views of learning and of the aim of student placements. While students and academics find it important to define learning goals at the beginning of the learning period, the negotiation of learning goals is not always in the interest of employers, as some studies have shown (e.g. Virolainen, 2006; Virtanen and Tynjala, 2008). The primary goal of employers is to make a profit, which may mean, if students are seen as a free or inexpensive workforce, that their learning needs are neglected. It is therefore important for HEIs to work on a win-win policy for encouraging employers to view students' placement as an important resource contributing towards the organisations' benefits and goals and at the same time allowing HEIs to expose their students for skills acquisitions. This may be supported by Culshaw, (1987) and Richardson & Blakeney (1998) which confirm that work placement has proved to be cost-effective, allowing employers to use students rather than permanent employees for certain tasks.

3. The Placement Environment

Learning in a workplace environment is different from learning at a university environment. One of the main differences between learning in the formal educational system and learning at work is that the former is based on formal, intentionally planned educational activities while the latter is mostly informal in nature (Eraut, 2004b; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Arnold, Loan-Clarke, Harrington and Hart (1999) found that work placement could foster some skills more effectively than academic study, namely social skills and the ability to deal with fast moving environments, decision-making and coping with uncertainty. People do learn at work and the learning is most usually integrated and shared. It can be said that there is little that people cannot learn at work. This may be supported by the typology of learning outcomes at work developed by Eraut (2004b) which includes the following categories of learning outcomes: (1) Task Performance, including sub-categories such as speed and fluency, range of skills required and collaborative work; (2) Awareness and Understanding, involving understanding of colleagues, contexts and situations, one's own organisation, problems risks, etc.; (3) Personal Development with aspects such as self-evaluation and management, handling emotions, building and sustaining relationships, and the ability to learn from experience; (4) Teamwork with subcategories such as collaborative work, and joint planning and problem solving; (5) Role Performance, including prioritisation, leadership, supervisory role, delegation, crisis management, etc.; (6) Academic Knowledge and Skills, such as assessing formal knowledge, research-based practice, theoretical thinking and using knowledge sources; (7) Decision Making and Problem Solving, involving, for example, dealing with complexity, group decision making, and decision making under conditions of pressure; and (8) Judgement, including quality of performance, output and outcomes, priorities, value issues and levels of risk. Interaction between students and experts is of crucial importance in workplace learning. Billett (2004) has distinguished between direct or close

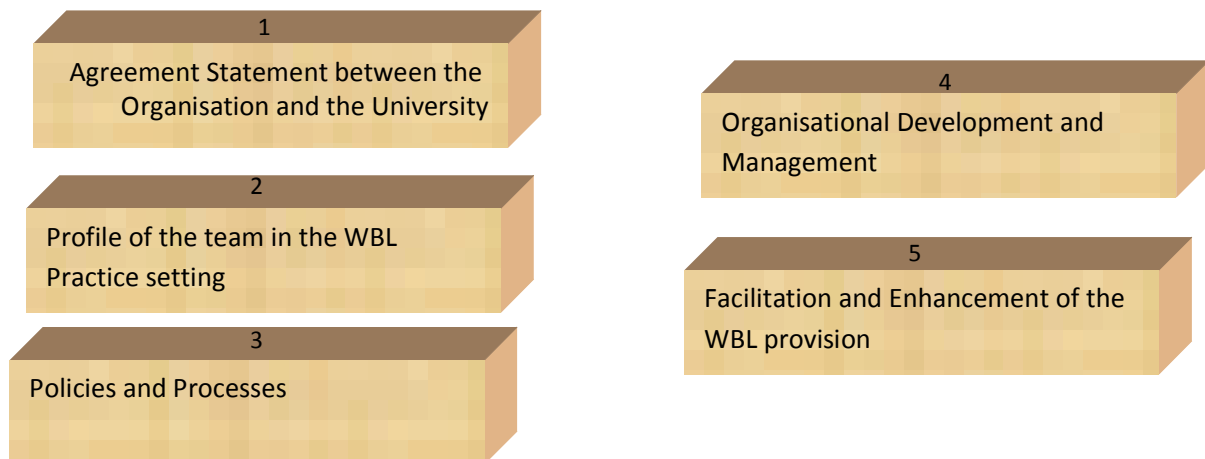
guidance and indirect guidance. The former is salient to knowledge that would be difficult to learn without the assistance of a more experienced and knowledgeable partner. Learning processes or concepts that are hidden require close interaction with more experienced co-workers who can make these practices or concepts accessible. Indirect guidance contributes to how tasks are undertaken and completed. At the very beginning of student practice students are generally called to work in peripheral, less critical areas of practice and gain more responsibility as their competence develops. Crucial in the learning process is interacting and working under the guidance of more competent workers, observing their ways of doing the job, and participating in the practice. This depicts learning processes at work mainly as a novitiate activity where the experts take a role of mentors. Mentorship thus plays a crucial role in the placement environment ensuring the continuous support and guidance required for students to acquire learning outcomes set.

4. Methodology used for tool development

Qualitative research methodology has been chosen for the investigation of the opinions, perception of employers, students and academics. Qualitative method allows for in-depth investigations of the parties experiences and perceptions. Participants are related in such a manner that would elicit their emotions, attitudes and experiences that comprise the human factor in social research. Qualitative research attempts to create descriptive analysis that emphasize deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena. The aim is to extract the required information necessary for modeling the audit tool. In addition, the study of the placement environment detailed above proves to be helpful in implementing the tool. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. This method allows to look for people who are most suitable for the study and who can provide the most valuable information. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants were related because of their suitability and ability to provide rich information in order to learn a great deal about issues of central importance for the development of the tool. 25 students (5 students from each of the five faculties at the UoM) who have completed their WBL practice were selected. These participants were selected to provide and reflect a sample of diversity that represents the range of characteristics in order to gain wide perspective students that are in the same respective faculty. Students have undergone their practice in diverse work settings ranging from Secondary schools, Telecom Industry, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Sector, Tourism Industry and the Construction Industry etc. A sample of 20 mentors from the same set of work practices were interviewed together with 10 academics who have been acting as link tutors during the student's placement practice. In these interviews, attempts have been made to obtain explanations of perceptions and opinions that were rich in detail and sensitive to content. In addition, probing questions were used to clear certain issues, which were unclear. These interviews were open-ended and participants were afforded the opportunities to talk comfortably in a conversational fashion. It is considered necessary to conduct two types of interviews: (1) informal interview (2) formal in-depth interviews.

5. The Audit tool Model

Based on the facts gathered from the tripartite partners (employers, students and academics), the tool has been designed. The primary aims of the educational audit tool being : (1) to ensure that the work setting provides learning opportunities which enable the students to achieve the stated WBL outcomes; (2) to assess the standard and quality of the WBL opportunities, provision and support offered to students; (3) to give recognition to the expertise and contributions of the employers to the maintenance and enhancement of the educational suitability of the WBL environment; (4) to seek and review information and evidence which support the quality of the learning opportunities, provision and support for students on WBL experience; (5) to identify those areas in which organizations need help and support to improve and develop the quality of the learning environment.; (6) to make appropriate recommendations in respect of the ongoing quality monitoring, maintenance and enhancement of the WBL environment. The tool makes provision for evidencing processes across five core aspects of the WBL practice placement.



The first component of the audit tool deals with the agreement of the potential placement providers with the University in offering placements. The partners should first agree on student capacity with focus on the optimum number of students the practice setting is able to support at any one time. Equally important to evidence under this section, the communication processes put in place in establishing the link among the students who have gained their WBL practice experience at this placement setting.

The second section of the document deals with the profile of the mentors in the WBL Practice setting. There is need to keep records of the mentors profile at a placement setting stating their academic and professional qualification related to the practice, the number of years of work experience as well as the number of years of service they possess at this particular practice setting.

The third component of the audit tool is reserved for the WBL Policies & Processes. There is need to evidence whether the learning needs are approached in a systematic and planned manner starting with an orientation plan used to induct students at the beginning of their WBL experience. Placement providers should also be able to demonstrate that instructions were given as regards to health & safety issues, work protocols, confidentiality needs, industrial relations and customer care as well as employment regulations. Evidence must also be provided that students' performance and achievement of core competencies are measured in accordance with the assessment guidelines and criteria established.

The fourth section makes provision to record evidences that the work related activities are discharged in an efficient and safe manner. It is important to testify whether students engagement in the work setting is supervised by designated trained mentors, whether students contribution within the organisation are valued and whether students are permitted and encouraged to attend relevant meetings which could enhance their WBL experience. In addition, it is important to note whether there is a feedback mechanism in place for students to improve their learning & performance.

The last component deals with the facilitation and enhancement of the WBL provision which includes the evidences to be demonstrated about the practice environment as regards to the conductivity to learning including the availability of adequate learning resources to support the students on practice. Under this section, organisation needs to show how the learning is facilitated through effective guidance, support and proper mentorship.

A sample of the five components is included in the annex. Any organisation wishing to become a WBL training setting must undergo a satisfactory educational audit. The audit process is initiated by liaising with the relevant organisation to arrange a convenient date and time for the audit to be undertaken. It is important to ensure that the relevant placement personnel has the WBL Audit Tool at least seven days prior to the audit and is familiar with the process and the tool. The audit is conducted by a lead auditor from the University. Trained mentors and the training manager of the organisation participates in the audit. Views from students who are gaining or have recently gained WBL experience at this work setting are incorporated in the audit document. The lead auditor completes a summary sheet on the same day and ensure that copies of this are sent to the training manager. The outcome of the audit is then classified under three main categories : (1) recommended for WBL placement; (2) recommended for WBL

placement subject to specific conditions being met within a specified period of time; (3) requires further improvement and re-audit to ascertain progress.

6. Challenges facing the application of the tool

The audit tool has been tried and tested at various local placement settings involving public, parastatal and private organisations. Almost all the participating organisations value the tool, as it allows them to know where they stand in terms of providing a resourceful learning environment at their work place not only for the benefits of students, but more importantly for their own staff benefits. However, it has been observed that for some placement providers, it is difficult to gain the organisations' commitment to engage themselves for the audit as they feel that it is time consuming. Some public organisations have constantly postponed the audit as they fear that they may not be able to address the issues if found unsuitable after undertaking their audit.

7. Conclusion

The model presented has proved to be successful. It contributes towards ensuring the suitability of organisations for the WBL provisions. Placement settings that are audited, are found to be better prepared to welcome students and students rated them high in terms of good placement providers. HEIs that make room for credit rated WBL placement within their curriculum, need to establish auditing processes for their placement providers. This will ensure uniformity in the learning opportunities and provisions offered by these practice settings. It is important to ensure a two-way flow of information between placement providers and HEIs in order to ensure that quality enhancement activities are consistent with overall quality assurance responsibilities.

8. Biography

Mr. Abdool Qaiyum Mohabuth is currently a full-time project coordinator at the University of Mauritius and has the responsibilities in leading and coordinating the WBL programme across the five faculties of the University. He has successfully trained over 200 professional mentors from the industry in supporting, guiding and assessing students on WBL placement. Mr. A. Q. Mohabuth has written various papers in the field of WBL placement. He is an academic with 16 years of work experience at HEIs teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

9. References

- Arnold, J., Loan-Clarke, J., Harrington, A., & Hart, C. (1999). Students' perceptions of competence development in undergraduate business-related degrees, *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(1), 43–59.
- Aurangzeb, C. (2008). *Quality Assurance model for assessment of work integrated learning at higher education institution of Pakistan*, Paper presented at the second International Conference on Assessing Quality in Higher Education, Lahore, Pakistan, Dec 1-3.
- Billett, S. (2004). Learning through work: Workplace participatory practices. In H. Rainbird, A. Fuller, & A. Munro (Eds.), *Workplace learning in context*, 109–125. London: Routledge.
- Centrex, (2004). Quality Assurance Framework. London: Centrex [now National Policing Improvement Agency]. (<http://www.npia.police.uk>).
- Culshaw, J. (1987). Evaluating the sandwich degree. In P. Linklater (Ed.), *Education and the world of work. Positive partnerships*. Milton Keynes: The Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.
- Eraut, M. (2004b). Informal learning in the workplace. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 26(2), 173–247.
- French, R. B. (1993). All work is a placement: An analysis of assumptions about learning possibilities associated with work placements. *Management Education and Development*, 24(4), 406–414.
- Marsick, V. J., & Watkins, K. E. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. London: Routledge.
- Richardson, S., & Blakeney, C. (1998). The undergraduate placement system: An empirical study. *Accounting Education: An International Journal*, 7(2), 101–121.

Virolainen, M. (2006). *Workplace learning and its many models in Finnish polytechnics*. Paper presented at the Seventh International Conference on HRD Research and Practice Across Europe, May 22–24.

ANNEX

Sample of Component 1: Agreement

Lead Auditor Name	
Names of Academic personnel present	
Names of practice setting members present	
Date of present audit	

Please indicate the types of work expertise provided by your work setting.	
Please indicate in which disciplines (field of studies) it is most appropriate for your work setting to welcome students.	
How many students from the University of Mauritius (UoM) have been on Work-based Learning placement in each of the discipline mentioned above during the past 24 months?	
Do you accommodate students for placement from other HEIs? If Yes, indicate the number of students you have accommodated during the past 24 months.	
What is the optimum number of UoM students you feel it is possible to support for WBL practice at your work setting at any one time?	

Sample of Section 2: Profile of the mentors/training supervisors

MENTOR NAME	ACADEMIC & PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION	NO. YRS OF WORK EXP. IN THE FIELD	NO. OF YRS OF SERVICE AT THE PRESENT WORK SETTING	DATE COMPLETED MENTORSHIP PROG.	TRAINED (T) / REGISTERED (R)

Sample of Section 3: Policies & Processes

	STANDARD	YES	NO
1.	There is an orientation plan for inducting students at the start of their WBL experience.		
2.	Students feel that the process of orientation was appropriate for their WBL setting.		

3.	Students have been instructed in important policies e.g. health & safety, equal opportunities, work protocols.		
4.	Mentors remind students of the nature and need for confidentiality, industrial relations, customer care and employment regulations operated in the WBL setting.		
5.	Assessment documentation is completed in line with the University requirements.		

Sample of Section 4: Organisational Development & Management

	STANDARD	YES	NO
1.	Evidence exists that students are exposed to safe work practices in the WBL Setting.		
2.	Students' engagement in the work setting is supervised by the designated WBL Mentor.		
3.	Students' contributions within the WBL Setting and the organisation are valued.		
4.	Students are permitted and encouraged to attend relevant meetings held by the organisation which could enhance their WBL experience.		
5.	Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning & performance.		
6.	Students are given feedback and review as regards to their learning outcomes achievement.		

Sample of Section 5: Facilitation and Enhancement of the WBL provision

	STANDARD	YES	NO
1.	There is an organisational commitment to support WBL Practice.		
2.	Systems exist for supporting and addressing students' concerns about the placement		
3.	Adequate learning resources are available within the organisation to support student's learning needs.e.g. computers, telephones, fax, etc.		
4.	Joint University/Practice setting service quality process exists and includes student evaluation		
5.	Formal structures exist between the University and the work setting to promote partnership in placement learning.		