

# Enhancing work integrated learning and graduate competencies in sport facility and event management

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## Aim of paper and research questions

There are three stakeholders, students, lecturers, and sport industry supervisors who have a role in helping the learner maximise tertiary work integrated learning (WIL) opportunities and developing the personal attributes and capabilities required of a graduate (Fleming & Eames, 2005). This paper reports the findings of a qualitative case study (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2003), which aimed to help learners maximise WIL and graduate competencies by presenting best practise examples. The research questions were:

- What pedagogical approaches are used to facilitate WIL and what impact do these have on student learning
- How can stakeholders assist students in developing perceived graduate competencies during their work place experience to enhance employability?

## Literature review

The importance of developing competencies that are required by graduates in the work place has been highlighted recently in research fields such as business and science (Burchell, Hodges & Rainsbury, 2000; Coll & Zegward, 2006; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Sleaf & Read, 2006). The benefits of WIL experiences to enhance these competencies have also been emphasized (Dressler & Keeling, 2004). In the sport industry, practical work experience, good communication skills, and passion and enthusiasm along with a strong business knowledge base have been highlighted, as being important requirements for employability (Bell, Grebert, Partrick, Bates & Cragolini, 2003; Wiersma & Bradbury 2004). In particular, the WIL experience can provide a point of difference for graduates that employer's value (Herbert & Rothwell, 2005; Martin & Hughes, 2009).

## Research design and data analysis

### *Context*

The stakeholders were students, lecturers, WIL supervisors, and employers linked to the Sport Management Program, Massey University, New Zealand. Students undertake either a three year Bachelor of Business Studies degree or Bachelor of Sport & Exercise degree majoring in Sport Management. The work experience component of these two degrees involves final year students completing a major facility and/or event based project over two semesters based within a sport organisation. The learning experience is facilitated and supported by an industry supervisor from the placement organisation as well as by an academic supervisor from the University (Fleming & Martin, 2007; Martin & Leberman, 2005).

### Methods

The choice of a qualitative case study approach is particularly appropriate when evaluating educational (Merriam, 1998) and business programs (Bassey, 2003; Hussey & Hussey, 1997). This current case study was undertaken in two parts. First, three focus group interviews were undertaken with the stakeholders (students (5), lecturers (3), and industry supervisors (5)) involved in maximising WIL opportunities. Second, open ended questionnaire feedback was analysed from sport management graduates (30/100). The descriptive responses were coded and then combined into themes. This content analysis aims to convey the holistic understanding and meaning of the phenomena under study (Hussey & Hussey, 1997; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). The nature of qualitative and case study research seeks to form a unique interpretation of events rather than produce generalizations, but it is expected that the findings of this current project can be transferred to other WIL contexts (Stake, 2008; Yin, 2003). The credibility and dependability of the research was enhanced by triangulating the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), involving relevant documentation (e.g., course/ paper outlines, graduate profiles, etc.) and literature.

### Results

The key themes identified related to the main pedagogical approaches used were:

- Students – reflective journals/ assignments, lectures/ workshops, group discussion, academic and employer supervisor feedback;
- Academic supervisors – practical case studies, models, frameworks, problem solving, class discussion;
- Employers – employee focus, HRM practices, undertaking a range of tasks.

Key themes (and typical best practice responses) related to student learning and graduate competencies were:

- Self-confidence and communications skills;
- Initiative and personal planning, and organizational skills;
- Industry and business knowledge, and customer service management;
- Professional networks and professional ethics.

### Discussion and conclusion

The findings indicate that integration and learning is fostered *implicitly* principally by reflection-*on-action* (Schön, 1991) involving reflective journals, and assignments/reports post-placement (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Students commented that there was an expectation that there would be some degree of integration of on-campus learning on placement (Apostolides & Looye, 1997). Although academic supervisors acknowledged that the degree of integration of theory and practice was variable and depended on the level of critical reflection (Gray, 2007). From an employer's perspective it depended on the type of organization and work activities the student was involved with, as well as the knowledge that the student had prior to entering the WIL experience (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985).

Overall more *direct* attempts are required from all three stakeholders to facilitate integration of on- and off-campus learning. The findings of this study will also assist stakeholders in determining what competencies students should focus on throughout their WIL experience in order to enhance sport management graduate competencies and employability (Martin & Hughes, 2009).

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