Developing talent through work-integrated learning

By Seow Poh Sun and Gary Pan

IN RESPONSE to the fast-changing work environment, universities today are shifting their emphasis from teaching content to applying, and reflecting knowledge through experiential learning. A popular form of experiential learning is work-integrated learning (WIL), which provides students with the opportunity to apply their learning from academic studies to relevant work experiences and reciprocate learning back to their studies.

In a WIL environment, students may be challenged to manage projects or tasks in unfamiliar environments, and develop implementable solutions. This way, students can better understand the theories and frameworks taught in class and supplement them with hands-on learning through real-world application and solution development. Through WIL, students gain practical insights and apply what they have learnt in the classroom to real-world practices. WIL provides students with valuable exposure and increases their employability.

One such WIL model that has worked well is the collaboration between KPMG and Singapore Management University's School of Accountancy through its SMU-KPMG Cyber Risk and Forensic work study elective programme (WSEP) initiative, launched in 2020. The WSEP consists of 2 courses in SMU, followed by an extended 20-week internship at KPMG, with an option to extend for another 10 weeks. The 2 courses are Forensic Accounting and Investigation, and Foundations of Cybersecurity. During the extended internship period, students will work for 4 days at KPMG and be given 1 day off to return to campus and take 2 courses concurrently during the internship period.

There is demand for professionals in the field of cyber risks and forensics, said Lem Chin Kok, head of forensics and partner at KPMG Singapore. One key motivation for KPMG to collaborate with SMU on the WSEP is to help develop the talent to meet the growing demand for such professionals. By participating in WIL, employers are helping to groom future talent. Students who participate in WIL get exposure to the corporate world and are likely to perform better upon starting work.

As people are the greatest assets, it is important for organisations to spot talents earlier and play a decisive role to help transform them. WIL could be 1 strategy for employers to strengthen their talent pool. This is increasingly important due to the talent shortage in the industry. Both employers and universities could partner and play complementary roles to help Singapore address the talent shortage situation and develop a future-ready talent pool.

Students were also appreciative of the opportunity to take on an extended internship during the semester and study at the same time. Usually, students embark upon a 10-week internship during their vacation break between semesters. If they wish to take on an extended internship, they will need to apply for a leave of absence and worry about delaying their graduation. The WSEP makes it more flexible for students to better interlace academic learning with structured on-the-job internship training. Students were excited to learn new things and apply what they have learnt in school, at work. Besides gaining technical competencies, students appreciated their supportive mentors and the opportunity to network. This helps them to find out more about the industry and have a better understanding of it as a career pathway that they could pursue upon graduation.

Successful WIL implementation requires the employer, teacher and student to re-frame their thinking on what learning entails and how learning should occur. This new way of thinking may challenge the traditional understanding of the learning process and shape new learning behaviour. The employer, teacher and student thus play critical roles to ensure a successful WIL programme.

Employer as a facilitator

Encourage students to ask questions and where appropriate and question students' assumptions and approach. Student learning is driven by their questions, which can be classified under 4 categories: (1) information gathering queries that mainly seek basic factual information; (2) bridging questions that attempt to find links between 2 or more concepts; (3) extension questions which lead students to explore beyond the scope of the problem, resulting in creative invention or application of the newly acquired knowledge; and (4) reflective questions that are evaluative and critical, and sometimes contribute to decision-making or mindset changes.

Therefore, the ability to ask the "right" questions, as well as the extent to which these can be answered, are important in sustaining students' interest in the project/task. The aim is to enhance their ability to think creatively and flexibly, recognising the need to adapt thinking and knowledge to novel situations. It reflects students' awareness that learning is continual, and solutions in professional practice often require nuanced application of knowledge.

Students' work performance may be evaluated on the quality of the output of project work or task assignment. Assessment procedures are embedded in the learning process, focusing on authentic tasks and considering the learners' individual orientations and fostering their meta-cognitive skills. This is useful because as students enter the workforce, they will be judged not only on their performance outcomes, but also on their ability to collaborate, negotiate, plan and organise. WIL effectively equips students with this toolbox of skills and prepares them to be successful in the workplace.

Teacher as a champion

Inspire, encourage and stimulate. Stimulating students' motivation is a crucial issue that should be tackled by the teacher to ensure that students are able to successfully attain the intended learning outcomes. The teacher ought to inspire students with a purpose, make clear the learning goals and present the intrinsic values obtained from the learning experience. The contextualisation and the goal-setting process are key to promoting students' motivation in pursuing WIL.

Student as a self-directed learner

Reflect what is learnt in WIL. The 5 levels of reflection are:

(1) Technical reflection: Students write specifically about course content matter and conceptual ideas and problems;

(2) Reflection in and on action: Students reflect on their performance at work, both in teams and individually;

(3) Personal reflection: Students discuss and chronicle personal growth, changes in attitude and epistemologies, and evolving relationships with other workers;

(4) Deliberative reflection: Students look beyond the course content and make connections with other disciplines and other areas; and

(5) Critical reflection: Students reflect on the construction, operation, and power structures of the course and provide constructive criticism to improve the learning environment.

WIL presents yet another opportunity to bridge the academic-practice divide. Both employers and universities could work together to provide more opportunities for hands-on learning and improve the university experience for students. This would help to develop a future-ready talent pool. To make WIL work effectively, critical roles in WIL need to be identified early and performed well. Without a clear understanding of the roles played by teacher, student and employer in WIL, role conflicts may arise to impede learning.

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