

The intricacies of developing a work readiness programme for South African Business degree students

Karen Dos Reis

Economics and Management Science Faculty, University of the Western Cape, South Africa.

Abstract

Global research studies have shown that students perceive their academic qualifications as having a declining role in shaping their employment outcomes. While academic credentials are still seen as a significant dimension of their employability, students increasingly see the need to add value to them in order to gain an advantage in the labour market. To mitigate these concerns, a work readiness programme was developed to educate students about professional behaviour, dress etiquette and ethics necessary for the work place.

It is against this backdrop that undergraduate students in the Economics and Management Sciences Faculty were invited to participate in a pilot study to develop a work readiness programme. About eighty six Business degree students participated voluntarily and attended several workshops hosted by human resources industry experts such as HR talent managers, consultants and directors. Students who successfully completed the programme doing an online assessment were automatically registered on a database to find short term employment in a business where they practice the graduate attributes for the world of work. The major challenges encountered while develop the programme were as follows: convincing employers to provide students short-term work placements and modifying the programme several times to suit both the student and employer.

Keywords: *work readiness; undergraduate students; graduate attributes.*

1. Introduction and Background

A baseline study was conducted on South African graduates from the perspective of employers by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2009). The purpose of the pilot survey was to take stock of the views and expectations of employers and their evaluation of the quality of graduates produced by South African Higher Education institutions. The study found that there is a need to increase a student's employability skills while still at university. These cover a multitude of issues from life skills to soft skills, from instilling a work ethic to personal initiative and that gaps between employer expectations and higher education outcomes need serious attention.

Another concern highlighted in a study conducted by Hinchliffe (2011) is that students perceive their academic qualifications as having a declining role in shaping their employment outcomes in what is perceived to be a congested and competitive graduate labour market. While academic credentials are still seen as a significant dimension of their employability, students increasingly see the need to add value to them in order to gain an advantage in the labour market. With graduate numbers increasing on a global scale, universities have a responsibility to promote the employability, work readiness and mobility of their graduates (Andrews & Higson, 2010).

This article reports on a pilot project that was conducted on a project that gives students the opportunity to find short term employment in a business where they can learn about their specific disciplines. In addition to this, students could develop soft skills and tacit knowledge of the workplace that is not necessarily embedded in the university's curriculum. Potential employers, on the other hand, will have the opportunity to access students' names on a database to assist them with administrative tasks (eg. data capturing, reception work, filing, etc) on a short term basis while giving students the platform to learn about their respective disciplines and developing graduate attributes.

2. Context of the study

The university where the study was conducted, is one of four higher education institutions in the Western Cape Province in South Africa. It was established by the apartheid government for coloured students and is currently classified as a previously disadvantaged university. This university was directly involved in the fight against apartheid and became known as the 'University of the Left' (Walker & Badsha, 1993). During the late eighties, the university allowed access to black students. Most of the students come from poor communities and underprepared public schools. The Economics and Management Sciences Faculty is the biggest faculty in the university, with more than five thousand students registered.

This project aims to give students the opportunity to actively participate in a real working environment that will give them the space to reflect on the concepts and skills taught at university. Moreover, to develop the graduate attributes that is not explicitly embedded in the formal curriculum.

Currently, eighty six students successfully completed this programme and are registered on a database to find short term employment. For example, a student could assist a business with preparing invoices for two days and in this way the student is learning about a specific operational element of a business and the opportunity to develop the attributes required for the world of work.

So how can employers connect with students? The first step is for the employer to submit a work request with the job specifications and period the student will be required to work. Thereafter, the administrator checks the database of students who meet the requirements. Following this process, the administrator sends the CV and contact details of the student to the employer. The employer is required to contact the student for an interview. After the successful recruitment, the employer is required to inform the university of the placement. The student must sign an employment contract and email a copy of the contract to the administrator. Upon the completion of the mandated work, the administrator sends an evaluation form to the employer and student to complete. The university will use this information and feedback to further improve and enhance the programme.

3. Aim and objectives

Based on the context given above, this article has one main objective and that is to develop a work readiness programme that gives students the platform to develop the attributes required for the world of work before they graduate. In order to achieve the aims and objectives, the main research question was: *What are the intricacies in developing a work readiness programme for students in a Business degree programme?*

4. Literature review

A study conducted by Van de Rheede (2012) found that employers' expectations of university graduates need more attention in the current university curriculum. Examples of these expectations are the importance of soft skills and independence of thought. Employers are of the opinion that graduates lack work experience and suggest that universities design and implement programmes that will give students the opportunity to gain practical experience in the world of work before they graduate. These types of programmes will address employers' expectation that graduates have work experience before they consider them for employment. A South African study of employers' perception of graduate

employability showed that 80% of their respondents (employers) indicated that the graduates they employed were not ready for the work place. It was also stated that graduates expectations of the workplace were not realistic to what is offered by the employer.

Employers regard work experience as an indication of what graduates are capable of doing beyond what is stipulated on their respective degree programmes. A report released by the South African National Treasury (2011) revealed that employers regard inexperience graduates as a risky investment. Employers need to give graduates extensive training before they can contribute productively to the business which discourages them to employ graduates without work experience. Findings in a South African study revealed that students who were exposed to practical training while studying found it easier to transition from university to the workplace. This study also highlighted that confidence can only be developed in an authentic working environment such as the work place and not while sitting in a classroom taking lecture notes (Van de Rheede, 2012).

5. Research methodology

The research design used for the pilot study was a case study design (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009, 2014). In accordance with qualitative research, a case study design assisted the researcher to understand and gain sufficient insights of the processes required to develop a work readiness programmes for undergraduate students (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009, 2014). The researcher's approach in developing a work readiness programme is based on Yin's notion that work readiness is a phenomenon that encompasses the support students are given to develop the attributes required for the world of work (Yin, 2009, 2014). Thus, the researcher is of the opinion that the provision of a work readiness programme as an intervention strategy can be used to overcome the current challenges higher education institutions face to adequately prepare their students to meet employer expectations. .

6. Findings: What were the intricacies?

The pilot study was rolled out to second and third year students in the EMS faculty of the university at the beginning of the first and second semester in 2018. Invitations were extended to students and they were requested to respond via 'Google forms'. For the training session in the first semester, one hundred and twenty students responded favourably but only forty six students attended the session. While for the training session in the second semester, two hundred and thirty students showed interest but only forty students attended the session. Five industry experts hosted the workshops and students were required to complete an evaluation form after each workshop.

Numerous meetings were held with the university's Director of the Business Innovation centre to discuss the development of a business and process plan, given the fact that businesses would have to pay a nominal fee to access the database to employ students for short term work placement. A legal contract was also drawn up by the university's law faculty to ensure that the rights of the student and employer are adhere to.

The project also required media coverage and for this reason the researcher worked closely with the university's Institutional Advancement Department to create a short video advert of approximately two minutes to attract potential employers to be part of the programme. In addition to this an E-brochure was designed to distribute to employers. An administrator was employed to send invitations via e-mail to invite potential employers in the Cape Town region to join the programme. She sent a total of one hundred and thirty four invitations via e-mail. After a couple of days, very few responses were received and the administrator was requested to follow-up via telephone to check if these employers received the e-mail. Most employers acknowledged receipt and few opted to have a face- to -face or telephonic meeting with the researcher. Twenty two face- to –face meetings were held and five telephonic meetings. So far, only three employers signed up to join the programme.

The students' feedback of the initiative to start a work readiness programme in the faculty was overwhelming positive. Many of them indicated that this type of programme will equip them with knowledge of employer expectations and that more students in the faculty should be exposed to such programmes. Below is a table of their comments:

Table 1. Students' comments about the work readiness programme (Part 1).

-
- Overall an excellent and informative engagement
 - it was well planned and it was well prepared
 - Very useful information shared that every student deserves to know.
 - Continue and find a way to touch as many students as possible
 - It was a good experience. I learned alot!
 - This is a good programme which I think more students should be aware of.
 - This was more than I expected and actually got me excited for the work space. I learnt so much and I really want to do more and experience more. I believe it should continue
 - Thank you to the EMS faculty for organising this programme, it is really informative
 - The workshop has broaden my horizons in terms in terms of work-readiness, there should be more of these.
 - These sessions were very helpful and I have gain more knowledge about the workplace
 - The workshop was educating, I now know the things that I thought don't matter actually does matter.
 - The course gave a very good insight on the preparations for the workplace, and developing yourself
 - The program was very helpful
 - The presentation was engaging and dealt with relevant issues.
 - This workshop motivated me to put action into my plan in pursuing my goals
 - The programme was very helpful as I now know and aware of what to expect in the workplace.
 - The workshop was well informative and it has helped me to reflect on my career
-

While the student feedback was overwhelming positive, certain students also wrote that the workshop is too long and that industry experts should be invited to form part of the workshop presentation. Here are their comments:

Table 2. Students' comments about the work readiness programme (Part 2).

-
- Wish we had more time to go through the CVs
 - They should invite managers from Accounting firms so that we can ask work related questions
 - having employers or representatives from companies come in and speak would make the workshop more appealing
 - The workshop is quite long and individuals get tired close to the end. However, if the length of the workshop is shorter with the same amount of information being presented, it will be more beneficial
 - They advise about not posting stuff on social media that will backfire you at the end
 - We need more time to learn how to navigate the Xplora Tool
 - Add some possible employers to talk to students
-

7. Conclusion

The development of a work readiness programme requires the involvement of numerous stakeholders. The researcher is of the view that the easy part of this project was to develop the proposal on paper. One of the challenges was the implementation of the programme which required the engagement of industry experts and several units such as the Business Innovation Centre and also the Institutional Advancement Centre. The major challenge so far, was the effort required to convince industry stakeholders to join the programme. An interesting finding is that all the stakeholders whom the researcher had meetings with, agreed that this programme is vital to adequately prepare students for the world of work. In fact, some of them stated that they wished that such a programme was available when they did their tertiary studies.

The way forward, is to go back to the drawing board by contacting those stakeholders whom the researcher had meetings, to establish why their business did not consider joining the programme. This feedback will assist the researcher to reflect and modify the programme. To conclude, the ultimate vision is to create a module that provides students with the practical and theoretical knowledge to equip them for the world of work before they graduate.

References

- Andrew, J & Higson, H (2008). Graduate employability, 'soft skills' versus 'hard' business knowledge: A European study. *Higher Education in Europe*, 33(4) 13 – 22
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative enquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. (3rd edition). California: Sage Publishers Inc

- Jacobs, K (2018). The Rise of the Unemployed Graduates: Who/What is to Blame? Africa Jobs, Blog
- Stake, R.E. 2006. Multiple case study analysis. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Van de Rheede, T. J. 2012. *Graduate unemployment in South Africa: Extent, nature and causes*. Unpublished MPhil thesis, University of the Western Cape
- Walker, M. & Badsha, N. 1993. Academic development and the challenge of curriculum change at the University of the Western Cape: an overview. *AD Dialogues*, 1, 1-13.
- Yin, R.K. (2014). *Case study research. Design and methodology*. 5th edition. California: Sage Publications.
- Yin, R K. (2009). *Case Study research: Design and methods*.4th edition. California: SAGE Publication.