Using the Work Skill Development Framework (WSD) to Build Rigour into WIL Programs

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Abstract

This workshop aims to help participants apply the WSD Framework to WIL programs. The growing importance of "soft" (or "generic") skills is acknowledged. The workshop is based on developing techniques that identify the work skills that students require for employment and then how to develop learning and assessment activities to enable students to build a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate that they have key employability skills valued by employers. To assist workshop participants, examples of practice will be provided.

Introduction

It has been long acknowledged that university graduates require skills other than just the technical or disciplinary knowledge required in their chosen profession. Apart from relevant theoretical and technical knowledge gained in a graduate's degree, success in a chosen career is also dependent on many "soft" skills, which can be acquired not only through the program's learning goals and outcomes, but the learning and teaching environment within the institution and experiences outside a student's course of study (Piper 2013).

Feedback gained from the 2016 QILT (Quality Indicators in Learning and Teaching) Employer Satisfaction Survey indicates that of all graduate attributes across all industries and disciplines, currently employability skills have the lowest rating, as shown below in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Employer satisfaction with graduate attributes and overall satisfaction, 2016 (%)
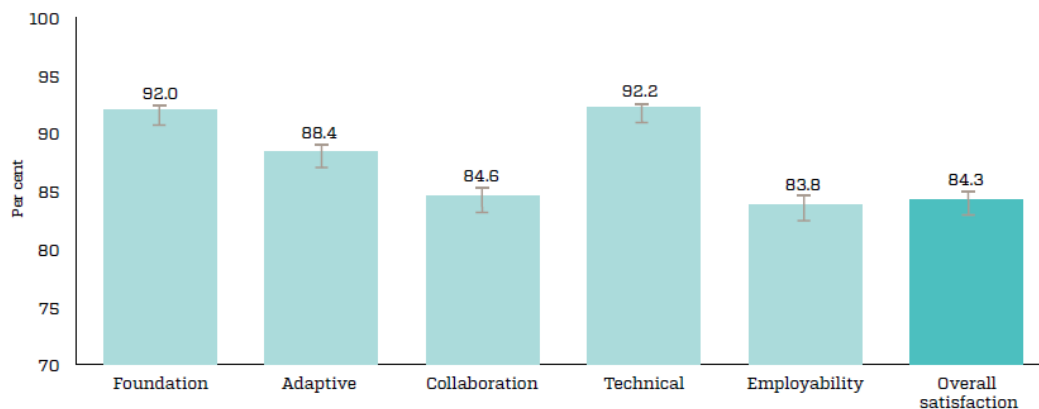
(Social Research Centre, 2017)

Every Australian University program has learning goals and outcomes which describe the type of graduates the program aims to produce by the time students successfully complete their degree. These learning outcomes include skills which are ranked as the most important by employers: such as initiative and self-direction, communication, interpersonal skills and cultural awareness or fit (Graduate Careers Australia 2016). These so called "soft" skills have been embedded into the curriculum of most courses within most universities, and can therefore be assessed by teachers to a certain degree. However, not all programs' learning outcomes include the 'softer' employability skills such as the ability to work under uncertainty, curiosity, resilience, ability to meet deadlines, demonstrating initiative, acceptance of criticism or failure and confidence in ability and knowledge. Additionally, flexibility of practise, working in a digital world and taking responsibility for personal professional development are becoming increasingly important employability skills

One of the major reasons teachers are reluctant to incorporate these skills in their traditional course-based assessments is the difficulty of objectively evaluating their students' competence, particularly in a way that can provide evidence of a skill to a prospective employer.

While it is difficult to assess these softer skills in the classroom, it is possible to judge a level of competence in the use of these skills through Work Integrated Learning (WIL) offered by many professional programs. Members of the NSW MELT core are using the Work Skills Development (WSD) framework to build objectivity and rigour into WIL related programs and assessments.

The WSD framework is one of the sister frameworks that has emerged from the Research Skill Development Framework. It was specifically developed to assess a student's performance in a WIL context (Bandaranaike & Willison 2010). Like the other MELTs, this framework has a number of facets which describe both concrete work skills (such as facet B, "Find & Generate data/knowledge") and the softer skills

(such as facet F, which includes 'sensitivity in interpersonal communications'). The extent of student autonomy within the WIL program also helps to evaluate the level of independence and self-direction that students display in the workplace, based on the horizontal axis of the WSD framework diagram.

As part of the conference proceedings, we have presented two papers that illustrate the use of the WSD Framework in specific disciplines. In the first paper, Mayorga (2017) describes how specific professional skill requirements for aspiring professional accountants are integrated into the WSD to develop a customised professional skills growth framework for a work integrated learning program set in an accounting and business management context. In the second paper, Baafi et. al. (2017) discusses how the WSD Framework is used to develop students' autonomy and independence in a mining engineer program.

Workshop Structure.

This workshop has two aims. The first aim is to guide participants through the process of identifying key employability skills that their students need to gain graduate positions in their respective disciplines. The second aim is to walk participants through the process of developing learning and assessment activities which will enable students to build a portfolio of evidence demonstrating that they have key employability skills valued by employers. We will provide specific examples of learning activities which develop specific work skill facets as well as students' independence and autonomy in completing WIL tasks. We expect that participants will leave the workshop with new learning activities and more rigorous assessments that will enhance their discipline's work integrated learning programs.

Key concepts and questions to be explored

1. **How do you identify specific employability skills valued by your discipline's employers?** Given there are many websites and published papers which outline the skills employers seek in new recruits, how do you identify the set of skills which apply to your particular discipline? Who do you approach to narrow down the particular skills the employers want in their recruits?

2. **How do you gather evidence** to substantiate that these skills are valued by your discipline's employers?

3. **Do specific disciplines differ in their desired employability skills?** Apart from the specific technical skills required for the profession, many skills are 'generic' and desirable in all workplaces. What are the skills employers look for across all disciplines? How do we determine key skills?

4. **How do students gain the skills** employers in your discipline value? In your tertiary program? Through activities external to your tertiary program?

5. **Presenting the Work Skills Development framework as a tool for student self-reflection**. This model includes the specific workplace skills most employers are seeking in their employees.

Students can use this tool to self-reflect and identify skill gaps or opportunities for growth. How could you incorporate the use of this framework in your program?

6. **What key skills in the WSD Framework should your program target**? How can your students build a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate they have these key skills?

7. **How does the teacher facilitate a student's movement from a low to a high level of autonomy?** What WIL learning activities facilitate students' movement from level 1 to level 5? What time frame is needed to achieve this development? Can the target development be achieved in a single WIL placement or does there need to be a foundation before work experience is undertaken?

8. **How does the instructor decide on the types of tasks which assess these skills?** What are the types of assessments which will demonstrate a student's competence in each of these facets?

9. **What types of assessment would be appropriate for 1stand2ndYear students** and what would be the expected level of autonomy achieved? How would this approach be used to shift students' achievement in later years? How do we shift from the left to right hand side of the WSD framework?

10. **How are these skills reported to employers?** What are the types of reporting strategies that can be taken away by the student and included in their resume or professional portfolio?

By the end of the workshop, participants should have developed their own framework designed specifically for their context and for their students' work skill development, which can be applied or adapted to their own circumstances.

References

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