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Art & Design students' perspectives on work-integrated learning and challenges: a case study of STEP Institute of Art, Design & Management, Pakistan

Abstract

Educational norms and demands are changing all over the world. The conventional education system is no longer such a popular choice. Students demand an educational system that offers real-time learning and practical applications for the knowledge they acquire. Work-integrated learning is both new and attractive to students. This concept is gaining importance in educational institutes worldwide as it serves the changing needs and expectations of students. This study aims to understand Art & Design students' perspectives on work-integrated learning. It was conducted at the STEP Institute of Art, Design & Management, Pakistan, where 100 students were selected through purposive sampling. The results of the study suggested that students have a clear understanding of work-integrated learning. Moreover, they highlighted some of the most critical aspects of the integrated learning environments they experienced during their studies.

Keywords: e*xperiential learning, recent trends in education, students' understanding of WIL, TVET and WIL, work-integrated learning*

1 Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is one of the main components in today's world of education. A work-integrated learning approach is essential in the TVET sector, as it should be in mainstream education. This system enables students to gain hands-on experience and knowledge of industry through internships, workshops, industrial visits, and other activities. These efforts help students to gain practical exposure to the industry during their studies (Billett 2009), broadening their horizons and consolidating the theoretical information gleaned from their studies. This plays a crucial role in developing a workforce with industry-oriented knowledge and skills (Huq & Gilbert 2013; Tinning et al. 2012). The definition of work-integrated learning varies in different professions, but the main essence of the concept remains the same. Some professions refer to work-integrated learning as fieldwork; others as internships. The medical profession defines it as clinical experience (Berndtsson et al. 2020; Hu et al. 2018; Myhre et al. 2013). Regardless of the terminology, the underlying component of WIL is that it is designed for college students to bridge the gap between their place of instruction and the operative environment (Dehnbostel & Schröder 2017). An external manager can support this process for undergraduate college students who accept work placements (Hall et al. 2017).

WIL is widely believed to enhance undergraduates' employability and their readiness for the world of work. Students are also in a better position to develop appropriate skills for the workplace during their studies, such as teamwork, communication, self-control, critical questioning, and troubleshooting. It presents an opportunity to develop their personality and expand on career training. In work-integrated learning, undergraduates learn how to conduct and manage themselves in specific contexts which will improve their chances of gaining employment (Samara 2018). Combining theory and practice helps to develop expertise and skills, as well as finding real-time solutions to immediate problems (Lavery 2017).

For students, one of the aims of attaining an academic diploma or qualification is to make it easier to find work. Students always prefer a degree with a higher rate of employability and better economic prospects. Employers expect graduates to possess the requisite understanding, competencies, and capabilities, which they are more likely to find among experienced students with experience of industry-oriented culture and skills. Employers often complain that new graduates are not sufficiently prepared for the work environment, often lacking basic capabilities, e.g. painting. Feedback from employers reveals graduates to be weak in problem-solving, commercial enterprise know-how, IT management, communication, and teamwork competencies. Most employers complained that graduates were skilled only in primary capabilities (Weichselberger 2016). A McGraw-Hill Education survey (2018) indicated that just 41% of U.S. college students are adequately prepared for their careers. Not even half of the students were ready to join the workforce in its true sense. Prospective employers claim that new graduates are poor at critical thinking and problem-solving, have a little eye for detail and lack writing proficiency. The findings are surprising, as one would expect these aspects to be developed throughout university studies (Khampirat et al. 2019).

Education is increasingly being considered as an investment, with students seen as capital. In some instances, students and their parents evaluate universities and costs in expectation of a pay-off from increased funding in education. This can lead to more vocationally orientated searches. There is always an element of integrated learning in vocational education. Students today are less keen on conventional education, based largely around theory, instead, they expect a degree syllabus to incorporate vocational aspects. WIL (work-integrated learning) has provided universities with an opportunity to offer a product that scholars will appreciate as a pay-off for their investment, thus enhancing their brand and attracting college students by focusing on vocationally orientated presentations. In the United Kingdom, this has seen technical faculties rebranded as universities, narrowing the distinction between technical faculties and universities. Academically orientated universities now offer more vocationally orientated courses to attract students (Valadkhani et al. 2004).

Work-integrated learning is the talk of the town, essential to TVET and mainstream education. This study aims to investigate students' perspectives on work-integrated learning. To this end, a study was conducted with senior students of the STEP Institute of Art Design & Management, Lahore. Data was collected by interviewing 100 students in four different programs: fashion design, textile design, graphic design, and interior design.

2 Research objective

This study aims to explore the perspective of students regarding work-integrated learning:

- What is students' understanding of work-integrated learning?
- What is the importance of work-integrated learning according to students?
- What aspects of integrated learning were included in the course of study?

3 Purpose statement

Work-integrated learning is in demand among students in the present era. Students rate institutes based on their levels of technology or the trends they follow. Around the world today, conventional education systems are lagging behind the ones teaching the latest techniques and skills used by industry (Colley et al. 2003). Institutes of learning in Pakistan still have a long way to go.

The purpose of the current study is to explore students' perceptions of work-integrated learning, looking at the following questions: Which aspects of integrated learning are already included in their courses, and which elements need to be updated?

4 Significance

Work-integrated learning is one of the most critical aspects of the educational sector. Students view the cost of their education as an investment they want to recover in the course of their careers. Students have high expectations of educational institutions in terms of training them to survive in a competitive, cut-throat market. The conventional system of theoretical knowledge is growing increasingly obsolete. If institutes and students rely on outdated systems, they will never sustain themselves in the market. Knowledge of the latest trends, updated software systems, markets, and general workplace culture is crucial for every student (Osman & Kamis 2019).

Work-integrated learning is essential in all educational fields, but especially in certain programs like fashion design, graphic design, information technology, and business management where trends and innovations develop so quickly. Studying students' views on work-integrated learning is vital. Which aspects of work-integrated learning are included in their coursework and which elements are missing?

This study will help educational institutes understand students' perspectives and design their programs accordingly to attract students. Market competition exists not only for students but also for institutes, so the latter must focus on the needs and demands of students when planning their programs.

5 Literature review

The term work-integrated learning is primarily used in the Australian education system but is also gaining global recognition as institutes worldwide adopt the practice (Patrick et al. 2008). The literal meaning of work-integrated learning is to establish an educational system that provides theoretical knowledge and real-time exposure to industrial work environments. Various definitions of work-integrated learning are as follows:

- The practice setting that is used to gain experience during the industrial course of study (Chand et al. 2021)
- An umbrella which encompasses several stratagems that combine bookish knowledge with practical exposure within the curriculum (Patrick et al. 2008)
- An approach that minimizes the distance between the classroom and industry. It merges on-campus and off-campus study patterns (Rowe et al. 2012, 246).

The roots of experience-based knowledge or work-integrated learning can be found in the philosophy of Dewey (1938), who argued for the value of experience in learning. WIL embraces the idea of experience-based study and intersects with skilled labour in a variety of methods and sites. WIL offers an approach to studying in universities and higher education that sees the boundaries of the college as permeable, with a flexible curriculum incorporating industrial practices and skills. Institutes adopt practices such as industrial tours, modelled practices of industrial apparatus, and workshops (Williams 2017). These engagements with the place of business take college students from study halls into authentic work locations. WIL is dependent upon the context and discipline of pedagogical methods combined with practical experience within the workplace. Activities that represent WIL can range from low to high levels of authenticity and engagement in the place of work. WIL is reasonably dependent upon pedagogical techniques context, area, and purpose (Ferns et al. 2014).

In recent years, there has been a clear shortage among graduates of the skills required by industry, due to the gulf between industry and academia which grows wider as technology and trends race ahead. Students with traditional theoretical knowledge do not fit the industry profile of hands-on experience and market-oriented skills (Freudenberg et al. 2010). Work-integrated learning is not as simple as its looks. It requires special arrangements at various levels. Potential solutions include partnerships with different industries, scholarships (to bear the burden of experiential learning), and host organizations where students can be trained. At the level of practice, partnerships or the mutual efforts of all stakeholders are required to develop a competent workforce. The stakeholders include government, industry, institutes, students, and supervisors (Forsyth & Cowap 2017).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) has been accepted as a powerful technique to transition from traditional higher education institutions to vocational institutes. WIL integrates the place of study and the site of business. College students apply theory to practical situations, they interact and engage in self-reflection to improve their working talents in professional practices (Mingdan et al. 2021). Perceptions of work-integrated learning are related to its

successful implementation. However, WIL programs vary broadly throughout the globe. Not all cooperative training (co-op) students succeed in WIL (Vo 2018). The effectiveness of WIL is built on the characteristics of the organization, manager, pupil, organizational environments, and administrators. Assessing the overall performance is dependent on the extent to which students have advanced their working abilities. Practitioners and administrators should explore the benefits, strengths, and weaknesses of WIL placements (Khampirat et al. 2019).

WIL in Australian universities has led to increasing competition and the emergence of several innovative WIL processes aimed towards broadening engagement with industry, increasing student numbers, and preparing students for a dynamic, evolving workplace in the Australian economy that is characterized by entrepreneurship and innovation (Kay et al. 2019). The following best-practice ideas for the design and management of WIL can be a useful guide for universities and industry partners.

1. Identifying knowledge that is quintessential to the curriculum.
2. The work-integrated study is designed to deal with the industry-oriented needs of various newcomers. New students focus on these aspects and expect to be offered appropriate programs.
3. The specific study includes learning how to research and how to deal with unexpected or novel problems.
4. Experience is graded to encompass more varied and innovative issues. New problems in the industry require unique solutions. Institutes must develop a creative workforce to compete in the university.
5. Students expect excellent levels of supervision and mentoring.
6. Learning goals are both technical/expert and wide-reaching (with profession exploration, key competencies, and graduate attributes).
7. All events and practices are designed to help students apprehend their roles.
8. Work integrated learning helps in achieving more practice and control of the curriculum taught.
9. Reflective practice is a major component of integrated learning. Past experience and self-reflection tools are used to make future strategies.
10. Partnerships should be built with firms, industries and professions.

A work-integrated learning environment has a long-lasting impact on the students. It greatly affects the attitude, attributes, and development of students. Universities and industries each have their perceptions of desirable student characteristics. There is a need to align criteria and develop a common framework for the students (Damoah et al. 2021). It is the responsibility of higher education institutes to develop desirable attributes in students and produce graduates who can contribute to the economic and social development of society. Skills greatly enhance the chances of employability and help graduates in their social and economic uplifting (Bridgstock 2009).

Teaching programs are increasingly being evaluated in terms of students' readiness for work, encompassing factors such as non-technical, non-scientific, accepted, and transferrable talents, along with teamwork, conversation, and problem-solving – these are among the maximum essential abilities favoured by employers (Wibrow 2011). Broader aspects of labour readiness that have been measured in university college students consist of organizational acumen, social intelligence, personality traits, and work competence. Professional abilities, including creativity and critical questioning, are essential in digital technology (Grand-Clement 2017). As such, there is a widespread shift in interest in teaching academic practices that embrace collaboration, teamwork, and other interpersonal or smooth skills, which often depend upon face-to-face interaction (Schweinsberg & Garivaldis 2020).

With the dominance of monetary and industrial powers in the 21st century, higher training institutes have been influenced by 'social performance ideology' in the curriculum. Competition and market demands add to the pressures of social performance for graduate students. Social efficiency ideology aims to set out a curriculum that maximizes a person's social utility or productiveness (Russell & Martin 2014). This phenomenon seems obvious in institutes where teachers are considered "technicians" who educate students in "competencies" so they are better matched to employment. In this regard, students always prefer institutes that focus on social performance ideology and help to develop skills and employability. A good education institute trains students in all aspects, economic and societal. There is a consensus among literary scholars that higher educational institutes are the agents of academia and industry in the modern era. They are shifting from conventional frameworks to more permeable boundaries, giving students a taste of industry and markets during their studies (Schiro 2012).

6 Methodology

Work-integrated learning is in demand among today's students. They rank institutes based on technological capabilities and receptiveness to trends. Nowadays, conventional education systems are lagging behind the ones teaching the latest techniques and skills used by industry (Colley et al. 2003). Institutes in Pakistan, meanwhile, still have a long way to go. The purpose of the current study is to explore students' perceptions of work-integrated learning. Which aspects of integrated learning are already included in their courses, and which areas need to be updated?

The STEP Institute of Art Design and Management, Lahore, offers programs in areas like fashion design, textile design, interior design, and graphic design. Over 100 graduates of these faculties participated in this case study to ascertain students' knowledge of work-integrated learning during research and their subsequent recommendations. The case study method was used to collect data. This method is useful when a researcher wants to explore a specific phenomenon in detail. Data is collected with minimal or zero interference from the researcher (Rashid et al. 2019).

Graduates were asked open-ended questions in a series of telephone interviews. All ethics of the research process were followed. Students were allowed to share their views openly without any pressure. No graduate was forced to answer questions in a specific manner. Graduates were free to decline any question or withhold information they did not want to share. All data was recorded precisely, with no data scraping or additions.

7 Analysis

Work-integrated learning is one of the crucial factors in the success of graduates. Students of the modern era focus strongly on an institute's versatility. Fifth-generation students are usually inclined towards institutes with vocational elements and the traditional education system. Theoretical knowledge alone is not enough, with students preferring to opt for an institute with more vocational aspects and industry links, gravitating towards one which showcases students' strengths through industry-oriented competitions and creates more opportunities to sample the actual market and industry. The case study conducted at STEP Institute of Art, Design, and Management provides insight into students' understanding of work-integrated learning. More than 100 students from four different programs took part. The key aspects they wanted to see in the institute were:

- Industrial links
- Teachers with the industrial and market knowledge
- Updated software and lab equipment as used in the industry
- Industrial visits, workshops, internships, and job placements

7.1 Industrial links:

Industrial links are ties between the institute and the industry related to its degree programs. Industrial links are one of the most critical aspects of work-integrated learning. Students prefer an institute with relevant industrial links. Knowledge is transmitted to students in universities to support their entry into the workforce. Academia cannot achieve this goal in isolation, however. Synergies between academia and industry can lead to better schooling, innovation, and technology exchange, ensuring that graduates have the abilities and understanding required to transition into work successfully (Mpehongwa 2013). The link between academia and industry is imperative, in either a formal or informal structure. This creates many opportunities for students to meet people currently working in the industry which they will ultimately become part of. These people can offer guidance to students on the latest trends and demands of the industry.

In a sense, they are also lecturers, teaching students the real-time requirements of industry and theoretical knowledge. Industrial links will help students to use their theoretical knowledge (Ozcan & Islam 2015). The formation of cooperative relationships between HEIs and corporations can benefit society. As one of the respondents said:

"The institute needs to develop industrial ties. Education is not reading books, but transferring knowledge into real-life situations." (Participant 37)

7.2 Teachers with industrial and market knowledge:

Teachers, mentors, supervisors, and facilitators play a significant role in the life of the students. The faculty of an institute is one of the essential aspects of students' personality development. Students look up to their teachers either intentionally or unintentionally. Teachers' knowledge and experience contribute significantly to students' understanding of the subject (Gudmundsdottir & Hatlevik 2018). In a position of authority, teachers need to be experts in their specialist subjects and demonstrate authority, laying down guidelines for new students to follow. What the lecturers say and do in class acts as a model for inexperienced persons and may have a substantial effect on new students' capacity for improvement. Successful instructors use their full range of expertise and competencies for the benefit of their students. The importance of instructors' competence for inclusive exercise is evident in its effect on how pupils study. Instructors with more exposure to the industry can help students achieve their goals by sharing their experiences or teaching them what is required in the industry. Rather than just imparting knowledge from books, these teachers blend in industrial experience, designing classroom tasks with an industrial flavour. Students prefer teachers who help them to develop skills and knowledge which will be useful in the industry. Students always follow teachers with a learner-centric approach and knowledge of the industry (Keiler 2018). Students prefer teachers who preside over a diverse classroom and come up with real-time scenarios or case studies to teach industry-oriented skills.

7.3 Updated software and lab equipment as used in the industry:

Technologies have dramatically changed the way people gather information, carry out research, and communicate with each other worldwide. Technology has removed obstacles of distance, making it possible for higher education to effectively reach – and teach – anyone. Technology integration is being increasingly used in instruction to improve teaching and learning. The rapid development of technology integration has presented a better pattern to find new teaching models (Gilakjani 2017). Industry demands a workforce that is trained in using the software. Technical knowledge can give a graduate a significant edge when looking to secure employment. Students prefer institutes and teachers that combine theoretical knowledge with practical learning, such as using software and machines deployed in the workplace. Learning how to use updated lab equipment and the latest software is crucial for every student. As one respondent noted:

"Without updated knowledge of industrial technology, how will we perform in the industry? The institute has a responsibility to update the technical side of the degree program so that students can learn what is required of them." (Participant 41)

Another respondent explained:

> *"I am very happy that we can use the stitching and dripping machines here in the college. And the college should upgrade them whenever possible."* (Participant 11)

7.4 Industrial visits, workshops, internships, and job placements:

As previously mentioned, lab equipment and technology are critical for learning processes and students' growth. But not all industrial machinery can be brought on campus. Industrial visits present one solution – industrial visits, workshops, and internships all serve the same purpose of integrating students' theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Arranging workshops, seminars, and internships or sending students on industrial tours should inform an institute's strategy as part of the integrated learning domain. Industrial placements or internships are starting to be considered essential in higher education curricula. More college students and companies are aware of the benefits of realistic experience and feedback obtained during internships by making a path program. Students are becoming more interested in internship programs to gather professional skills in advance of their job searches. Meanwhile, companies can use internships to educate students about their business and to refine their hiring system, having already got to know the interns. Internships thus serve three parties: students, educational establishments, and businesses. (Agarwal et al. 2021). One respondent said:

> *"Industrial visits and workshops are the biggest strength of my institute. I have not studied any subject without knowing its vocational side in the entire program."* (Participant 56)

8 Discussion and conclusion

Work-integrated learning (WIL) encompasses various activities that connect industry and education in work and campus settings. The more conventional WIL placements or internships see college students follow their subject in professional surroundings. 'Non-placement WIL' is becoming an increasingly vital element of WIL in which students are engaged in activities with enterprise partners such as subject-based projects, simulations, or role-playing. Work-integrated learning is in demand among today's students. They rank institutes based on technological capabilities and receptiveness to trends. Nowadays, conventional education systems are lagging behind the ones teaching the latest techniques and skills used by industry (Colley et al. 2003).

Institutes in Pakistan still have a long way to go. The purpose of the current study is to explore students' perceptions of work-integrated learning. Which aspects of integrated learning are already included in their courses, and what needs to be updated? To this end, a study was conducted with senior students of the STEP Institute of Art Design & Management, Lahore. Data was collected by interviewing 100 students in four different programs: fashion design, textile design, graphic design, and interior design. The above analysis has shown that participants in the study were well aware of the concept of work-

integrated learning. They have also pointed out some critical aspects of integrated learning that were part of their studies and in need of improvement.

The general trend of the students' responses indicates that they have a clear understanding of the work-integrated learning environment and found it enjoyable throughout their program. The students gave very positive feedback, confirming their eagerness to learn in an integrated environment. Students pointed out various aspects of work-integrated learning which are important to the growth and development of their personalities. Students shared their experiences of working in an integrated learning environment and how it helped them in industrial settings. STEP's interaction with various industries, certifying bodies, and international bodies broadened the range of students' experiences. Almost 80% of STEP graduates found work in reputable organizations immediately after graduation. The skills and aptitude gained through the integrated learning environment were significant contributing factors to this marvellous achievement.

The students also identified areas of the process which could be improved. Teachers' knowledge and experience represented the most critical area for the students. Teachers without industrial experience are ill-suited to the integrated learning environment. Another critical factor highlighted by students was the importance of adding new software or upgrading the existing technological knowledge in the context of their courses. The industry is progressing rapidly day by day and higher education institutions need to keep pace and share their knowledge of technological advances with students. The whole idea of the integrated learning environment revolves around developing the students' knowledge and experience of industrial processes. It is undoubtedly true that not all industrial processes can be taught on campus; this is why off-campus learning and outdoor visits are important. Industrial visits serve this purpose.

One of the major problems highlighted during the study is job placement immediately after graduation. Students need assistance in searching for suitable employment. Fresh graduates are often rejected or offered minimal remuneration by industrial companies. This process must be addressed by creating stronger links between academia and industry. In conclusion, it can be noted that students set great store by teachers' industrial experience, along with the availability of industry-standard software and machinery, strong industrial links, and organized workshops. All these aspects are supported by the existing literature (Houcine & Zouheyr 2019; Mingdan et al. 2021; Ozen & Ergenekon 2011; Schweinsberg & Garivaldis 2020).

Work-integrated learning is essential for every stakeholder in the educational sector. Students, teachers, institutes, industry, and government must pay attention to this latest trend and create as many opportunities as possible. In response to employers' calls for productive, progressive, and globally conscious personnel, higher education providers are required to increase the chances of student employability through co-curricular applications and curriculum-embedded tasks, including WIL. However, many demanding situations hinder collaboration between universities and employers in establishing WIL possibilities with

practical benefits for themselves and their students. This may lead to an imbalance in WIL in terms of matching demand and expectations. The impact of this study is highly significant in understanding students' perspectives on integrated learning. The industry-academia axis can use this analysis to establish a system that is beneficial to all parties. The study can be used as a basis for future research to triangulate the findings of this study with the perspectives of teachers and industrial stakeholders.

9 Future recommendations

The current study centres on art and design students. Future researchers can implement the same ideas in different disciplines in Pakistan. Moreover, researchers can take into account academic and industrial points of view to propose a structure for non-TVET institutes. Future researchers can also inculcate WIL and behavioural approaches to identify differences in the attitudes of students who experienced an integrated learning environment.

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