

# Work integrated learning: where there's a WIL, there's a way

**Tony Hudson** reflects on his experiences of an innovative work integrated learning programme in Durban, South Africa.

This article reports on an innovative partnership project: *Creative Industries – Creative Solutions*, between Continuum, the Centre for Widening Participation Policy Studies based at the University of East London (UEL) and the Department of Visual Communication and Design (VCD) at Durban University of Technology (DUT) in South Africa. It attempts to reflect on the challenges of designing and delivering a particular work integrated learning (WIL) programme. Work integrated learning enables students to experience workplace practice and professional culture, as well as enhancing their knowledge, skills and personal attributes which are difficult to foster through academic study alone.

The creative and cultural industries (CCI) constitute an important and growing global economic sector (Cunningham, 2007) and as Guile (2007) has noted, career development programmes for the sector are an international priority. The CCI form a significant employment sector in both the London Thames Gateway region in



England and the Durban Metropolitan Area in South Africa, where UEL and DUT are located respectively. For learners in both countries whilst the chances of employment and career options will increase by getting a degree before entering the labour market; employability can be enhanced and employment opportunities in the sector increased through appropriate work experience.

Employability in higher education is not a new debate, but since the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) it has assumed greater prominence as part of successive government policies to increase the skills base in the UK. The HE system, as Knight & Yorke

(2003:3) have argued, “has been charged with promoting graduate employability.” In England, employability is one of the performance indicators on which higher education institutions are measured against benchmarks set by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

At DUT it is a requirement that all courses should have a WIL component, however the extent to which this requirement is implemented varies depending on the field of study. Whilst staff in department of Visual Communication and Design have successfully worked with a ►



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▶ range of employers to provide simulated work experience for learners, employers have been reluctant to offer learners paid internships.

Our research with learners in London (Percy & Hudson, 2007) and Durban (Hudson, 2010) confirms the challenges learners from widening participation or non-traditional backgrounds encounter when seeking to gain work experience or employment within the creative and cultural industries. Such learners often lack the cultural capital and financial resources necessary to obtain work experience or internships in the CCI sector, many of which are unpaid.

Funding from the UK Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) under the Education Partnerships in Africa (EPA) programme administered by the British Council, provided the opportunity to develop a creative solution to the challenge of developing a meaningful WIL programme at BTech level for graphic design students. The

innovative solution was to set up a graphic design studio within the DUT, staffed by student interns, which would provide a service, primarily to external clients, but also to internal clients with a graphic design requirement.

The project team at DUT, led by the Head of the Department of Visual Communication and Design, Piers Carey assisted by lecturer Rowan Gatfield, set up the studio in a previously underutilised loft space - think artist's atelier - at DUT's City Campus. Final year students on the National Diploma (ND) (a three year programme equivalent to an ordinary degree) in Graphic Design were given the brief to develop a brand for the new studio. They were also invited to apply for one of the four internships which would enable them to gain a BTech (a one year honours course) in graphic design through work integrated learning. With a distinctive brand and name, the Workspace studio started trading in January 2010 with four interns, supervised by a studio manager and an assistant

studio manager. In the field of graphic design we believe that the WIL programme at Workspace is unique in terms of content, delivery and duration. There are graphic design departments in Australian, UK and US institutions where learners are given the opportunity to work on "live briefs" but not to the extent and duration that Workspace interns are afforded. Interns are required, in addition to their creative work, to engage in all aspects of the business including administration, finance, liaising with suppliers, developing proposals and strategy documents, pitching and managing client relations. They are also required to conduct independent research to produce an academic report on an area of study related to the professional practice of graphic design.

During the project funded phase, the interns coped with a number of challenges including, forced relocation due to refurbishments at the City Campus coupled with the impact of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

The interns learned valuable lessons about contingency planning and business continuity as well as the need for a sense of humour! At the end of the project funded phase the Workspace studio, due in no small part to the dedication of the staff and creative output of the interns, not only demonstrated proof of concept - to successfully deliver a work integrated learning programme on campus, but had become embedded within the institution and was rapidly moving towards becoming self-sustaining. In such a brief article it is impossible to capture all of the institutional challenges that have to be overcome when implementing an innovative project nor recognise all those who contributed to its success. However it may be expedient to highlight some of the lessons learned from listening to learners.

Whilst the primary aim of the project was to enhance employability by setting up a self-sustaining graphic design studio to provide WIL internships, the project also envisaged that the studio would be used as a site for research as well as a catalyst for further employer engagement. In terms of research outputs colleagues at DUT have delivered a number of presentations at international conferences including the Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE) and Design Education Forum of South Africa (DEFSA) and published in peer reviewed journals. In terms of employer engagement, industry interest in the Workspace studio and student demand for internships led to other members of academic staff in the department setting up internships. A total of five paid internships were arranged, two with a local university and three with a large graphic design company, with all of the interns registered for the BTech in graphic design through work integrated learning.

In feedback sessions all of the interns were vocal about their experiences in the workplace. On some issues, such as remuneration, variety of work, and academic support there were clear differences between the interns based in the Workspace studio and interns based elsewhere. Whilst the Workspace interns received a lower salary in comparison to other interns they benefitted from more creative freedom, accessible academic support, the opportunity to experience a wider variety of tasks and roles within the studio, but most importantly the opportunity to link theory to practice. The interns who were employed in a graphic design company, whilst pleased to be earning a reasonable salary, felt constrained by the lack of creativity, and disappointed by the limited opportunities to experience a wider range of tasks within the company. What was evident from the feedback from interns in the graphic design company and the other local university was the absence of any mentoring by the employer. The issues and concerns raised by the learners reflect the fact that employers in Durban are not experienced in supporting WIL programmes and many academics are unfamiliar with the theoretical underpinnings of WIL and how best to deliver it in the CCI.

Hopefully, this brief article illustrates that work integrated learning programmes have the potential to deliver significant benefits to: learners; academic and professional staff; and industry. However, the challenge is not only to ensure that adequate resources are provided to deliver a quality programme and experience; but more importantly to enable students who will follow non-conventional career paths in the CCI to become lifelong learners.

## References

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On the Monopoly board of life Tony Hudson started down the Old Kent Road, avoided jail, passed GO, but failed to collect £200! A social scientist by training and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy Tony is an experienced manager, teacher and researcher. He has worked in the voluntary sector latterly as General Secretary (Chief Executive) of a learned society and taught on a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at a number of HEIs. At UEL this has ranged from teaching on a fast track access course to contributing to the EdD programme. In his current role he manages research and evaluation projects locally, nationally and overseas.