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**Smart Partnership Between
Universities And Industries Through
Work-Integrated Learning**

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WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING : ESTABLISHING SMART PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND INDUSTRY

INTRODUCTION

About two years ago I stood before a similar audience in this same university to share some of my experiences as a recruiter and employer of the country's graduates. If my memory serves me right I said then that much had to be done by the university to prepare students for life outside this safe and protected sanctuary also known as the university, which, some will argue can be quite remote from reality. I pointed out then that employers, while not expecting instant world class engineers, world class accountants and managers, were interested in entry level graduates with the right attitudes and orientation and by all counts employable and trainable. I went on to suggest then that one way to prepare students for work is to expose them as much as possible to the work situation while they were still studying.

Less than two months ago I stood before an international audience of educators and employers at the Cape Technikon in Cape Town, South Africa and expanded the point I made some two years ago. I argued fairly strongly I think for the establishment and nurturing of what I call a smart partnership between university and industry so as to achieve the needed integration of work and learning which will produce graduates who are employable and trainable, graduates who have the eyes for what works in the work situation.

Today, at the risk of repeating an old theme for some at least, in the audience, I propose to tease out some of the key elements in the smart partnership with the hope that this partnership can become pervasive and feature as an important ingredient in the country's higher education culture.

I will build my arguments around the three players in the partnership namely the university, students and industry. I will however start off by reviewing our understanding of work integrated learning which is also known as cooperative education.

WORK INTEGRATED LEARNING

In Malaysia work integrated learning is not altogether new. In my days at the ITM, I was involved in managing students vacation work placements. The practice then was that all the students from whatever discipline must clock in industry training although industry training was not a requirement for graduation. One fairly new university, UUM took this same model from the day they were established and now I believe all the universities in this country practice some form of industry training if not for all their students, for some students who study disciplines that have an obvious need for work integration.

Like in most countries then, there are two types of cooperative education (I am using this term interchangeably with work integrated learning).

First, there is the structured work experience which is a prerequisite for graduation required of students in all branches of engineering, medicine, teacher training and the like. The second type of cooperative education is a rather informal not-for-credit work experience principally to expose the students to the realities of life and work and what they can expect when they join the work force in the future.

In the first case with the whole programme of study backed up by a properly organised and in many cases properly evaluated work experience students have ample opportunity not only to get a feel of work culture but also to sit alongside experienced industry personnel and learn while working, quite akin to the master - pupil system in learning the trades in days gone by. An attractive feature of this type of cooperative education is that in many cases the professional bodies such as found in engineering,

medicine, accountancy and law help in the design of the work experience programme having as they do a vested interest in the type of professional that will join their ranks in the future. The inputs by these professional bodies do in fact make the whole curriculum design more relevant and closer to reality.

One weakness in this is the time allocated for work experience. I would argue for at least six months if not a full year to make it meaningful. Further I would argue that students must be engaged to do some real project with a beginning and an end and that they are given certain responsibilities and tasks which relate to their work.

The second type of cooperative education the not-for-credit programme, I believe has some very serious weaknesses which require urgent attention. By definition this type can take any form, from one month pure exposure to industry to a longer period of prescribed tasks such as a research on topics which may interest employers or useful to students as thesis materials.

During my time both in academia and industry, I have seen students who are simply there in industry because the employer provides that opportunity for whatever reasons or are there because the employer can benefit from a “cheap” pair of hands to do some mundane tasks.

Very often students get demotivated, don't know what is going on around them and have no targets to work at.

In my thinking there is some deep seated problems connected with this informal work experience programme. Firstly, I suspect the university does not really know what sort of work experience programme should students of economics or management or social science get. Are there some professional bodies in these areas who can help design such a programme? If there are, does the university consult them; if not professional organisations per se practising economists or managers? Or is the university (and the students) contented only with a non structured exposure to life at work only?

Notwithstanding all of these comments, I do not hesitate to say that we have seen the good and the bad in cooperative education in this country. Like in everything we do I would urge that time has come for everyone to discard the bad and improve upon the good.

This has become so very important today because the world of work has changed tremendously. The structure of businesses and industries have changed to cope with the global forces of competition, new technologies and new ways of doing things, more affluent customers, borderless businesses and deregulation. Gone are the days when an employer is prepared to take graduates with no other skills except perhaps the study skills that had enabled them to pass their examinations. Employers today require graduates who are multi-skilled i.e. have a combination of technological, economic and commercial skills, interpersonal relations, teamworking and communication skills and change management skills.

It is obvious to me the way to meet employers requirements these days is not merely through cooperative education but also through a vigorous even dramatic revamp of the basic university curriculum. I will not however dwell on this as we are here to discuss cooperative education which as I have implied can help prepare graduates for the competitive world of work.

SMART PARTNERSHIP - THE UNIVERSITY

A smart partnership is where two or more organisations with seemingly different objectives discuss and agree on a set of common platforms which will enable both the organisations to achieve an agreed set of targets which will benefit both.

Hence the university with its basic objective of dissemination of knowledge and training of manpower, of thinking and scholarship, of inquiry and discovery can indeed establish a partnership with industry who are in reality consumers of trained manpower, consumers of knowledge and consumers of the output of inquiry and discovery.

If we believe in this premise then the partnership can be made to work. And cooperative education can thrive if this partnership exist. A close examination of why some of the cooperative education schemes do not work well in this country will reveal that between the two main players - the university and industry - there is a dire lack of understanding of what their roles are or more importantly of how the matching of their two objectives can result in mutual benefits i.e. producing employable and trainable graduates.

This could be due to a number of reasons. I will talk about the university first.

Much as the world of work has dramatically changed, the world of learning i.e. the university must also change. One key area where change must take place is the mission of the university. In the days when learning was undertaken for its own sake, when learning was principally about adding on to the body of knowledge in particular disciplines, the university was basically shaped

and managed as a centre of excellence, a centre of scholarship and inquiry sometime oblivious to the real world where knowledge is required not for its own sake but rather to help in problem solving.

This mission of being a centre of excellence is in my opinion still prevalent in the universities in Malaysia and admittedly there are some good reasons for it. However, the university must not shut itself off from its other mission which is to produce trained manpower relevant to the changing needs of the work culture. Lest I am misunderstood, I am not saying that universities in this country are totally closed to this. For many years now, I have seen many examples of research that is relevant to the needs of industry, curriculum designs that incorporates the new sciences of information technology and management in a borderless environment. But I think much more needs to be done. On the part of university academics and administrators there must have a proper understanding of industry profiles and how these translates to manpower development and training.

As I have suggested earlier on the basic learning design or curriculum has to be revamped so as to make it more relevant and more fit for purpose. Skills such as communications, problem solving techniques, interpersonal relations and change management must be included in all disciplines. In this respect it is heartening for me to see that in my recent encounter with a university in Cape Town, I found that the engineering faculty of that university had started teaching the soft skills such as communications to engineering students.

The other area of change has to do with the teaching staff of the university. The practice now is that a doctorate is a requirement for teaching in the university. Not so long ago a university in the Klang Valley announced publicly that only PhDs will be recruited as teaching staff. I have very little sympathy for this as I think PhDs don't necessarily make good teachers of students who unlike the PhDs will work in a totally different environment. The university is missing a lot in not recognising work experience. Nor does the university encourage its staff to spend time in industry.

Like the students I believe much value can be achieved if university lecturers are required to do industrial training for a period of time. I believe that the best place for this is the sabbatical leave practised by many universities in this country. Instead of spending time in another university environment wouldn't it be much better for university lecturers to be seconded to industry or other organisations wherein they will get a feel of and experience on a first hand basis elements of the work culture?

Equally the university should equate hours spent in industry with publications in learned journals. In a sense the famous dictum of "publish or perish" should in my opinion be replaced with "work experience or no promotion".

This approach if coupled with the reverse secondment of experienced industry personnel into the university will I think result in a much better understanding of industry among the university teachers and administrators. This understanding will in time be useful in designing new

understanding will in time be useful in designing new curriculum and teaching methods.

In summary the university needs to reposition itself. Becoming more relevant to industry needs in its research and teaching must be its prime mission. Getting a mix of strong industry experience with excellent academic qualifications among its faculty members must be considered a priority. In this respect it is interesting to ask the question as to whether the university in this country will accept a first degree holder with say 20 years of industry experience as a full professor?

My basic argument is that the university must become more industry friendly in its mission, in its staff composition and its training design and approaches. Also, the university should devise programmes whereby industry personnel are encouraged to use its facilities such as the resource centres, recreation facilities, laboratories and the like. The smart partnership will have to be founded on the philosophy that the university is positioned closely with industry with a style of

management and sense of mission that contributes to mutual objectives.

SMART PARTNERSHIP - THE INDUSTRY

But what about industry? Are they positioned to make the partnership work? I will not pretend that industry as a whole is well positioned to make smart partnership work. Like the university, industry needs to do a lot to improve the whole situation.

The basic premise of business is to deliver a fair return to all its shareholders. In this day of intense competition borderless marketing a fair return to shareholders can be achieved by a combination of effective margin management and low cost operation. Businesses today do not shy away from cutting unnecessary expenditures and to many businesses hosting cooperative students for a period of time and channeling both funds and staff time is often seen as an unnecessary cost.

However it is also true that some businesses see work integrated learning as an excellent device in producing the employable and trainable graduates which among other things will reduce their cost of recruitment and initial training.

I have one major proposal for business in this context. And that is to establish within their organisation clear procedures and guidelines for opportunities for work integrated learning with perhaps some dedicated support from managers.

Work integrated learning must not be seen as an ad hoc thing, something that is best described as mere tokenism or an imposed public relations exercise. Businesses must perceive work integrated learning as part of their future recruitment and even as a contribution to the community.

Earlier on I made reference to the fact that businesses need to put a proper procedure and guideline in place for the management of work integrated learning. To ensure this and to avoid the tokenism that I described earlier on I

am quite happy to describe the work integrated learning management model that is in use in my company. The model is as follows :-

1. Request for placement usually addressed to HR is received from student and/or university.
2. HR holds discussions with the potential supervising managers principally to ensure that there is a clearly identified role for the student in the relevant department.
3. The selected supervising manager will then draw up a complete program with assistance when necessary from university administration. The supervising manager takes ownership of the programme from this point.
4. In cases where the manager can only accept one student an interview is conducted if there are more than one applicant.
5. The successful student will then be given a letter of acceptance which contains the work schedules, information on the company and the particular

department, duties and responsibilities, rules on confidentiality etc.

6. On the first day of work the student is given a work station, an identification card, a briefing by the manager of the department's functions and responsibilities in the context of the whole company.
7. The student will then be encouraged to write a set of objectives including how these can be achieved and how performance can be measured.
8. From then on the student will be treated as an employee of the company and is subjected to all rules and regulations of the company. When there are appropriate training programmes for employees, the student may also be given the opportunity to participate.
9. The manager will set a time usually about once a month for a one-to-one feedback session.
10. Upon completion of the programme a certificate is given if the student so require. The manager will also write a report on the student's performance for the information of the faculty responsible for the student.

This or any other similar model will in my opinion ensure that industry plays its part well in work integrated learning. From my experience with some clever ways of assigning staff to perform the functions, cost of management will not be too burdensome.

At this point the roles of other players in the smart partnership need to be mentioned. Firstly, let me talk about the student. In universities in this country we have not succeeded in relieving the students of their one principal concern which is to pass their examinations by simply studying what is taught to them. Anything beyond the prescribed course content is hardly given credit. Indeed a curriculum design which does not include practical work experience limits the students view about what they should learn what skills they should possess. Hence, the students become a victim of circumstances found in university education itself.

There is a dire need to change this. Students must orientate themselves towards a career of their choice and either in their own or with guidance from their lecturers expand their learning horizon. Opportunities where they can effectively apply their knowledge should be used and this includes organising activities which require teamwork and networking and communication. Direct industry experience can certainly enhance all of these.

Then there is the government. And in this country nothing is bigger or more influential than the government. I have argued on many occasions that the government has a lot of vested interest in a focused manpower training and development and uses the university as a source for present and future requirements. Much have been done recently in making the university more responsive such as corporatising the university, shortening the length of study in certain fields and enabling the development of private higher education institutions. However, I have not seen measures introduced to motivate the formal strategic alliance between university and industry especially in the area of focused manpower development.

Measures that can be taken include tax incentives for industry which provide work placements for students, tax incentives for industry which second experience industry personnel to university (provided of course the university accepts this as a way to diversify their teaching experience). Further government can also help fund research undertaken by universities for specific government industries or other key industries. In this respect too with corporatisation, government must not reduce their funding for we have seen too many universities elsewhere suffering from because of the lack of funds.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to urge university and industry to engage in a continuous dialogue, to try to understand each other better. A consortium of universities on the one side and specific industry associations such as the Chamber of Commerce or the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers getting together and talking to each other may well lead to the establishment of a strategic alliance and the formal birth of a smart partnership. This may not be without all the

attendant problems and issues but a step in this direction may mean a lot to the country now and in the future.