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Essay

The Role of The Placement Coordinator: An Alternative Model

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An analysis of the cooperative education literature resulted in the identification of three models for the role of the placement coordinator; a simple administrative role, as part of a centralized unit of coordinators whose role is still substantially administrative in nature, and a model in which coordinators hold joint positions as placement coordinators and teaching faculty within their specialty areas. In this article we propose that this latter role offers significant advantages. Advantages include the ability of the coordinator to get to know the students better through classroom interactions, leading to a better understanding of the employers' business and to enhanced matching of student and employer. Such a model also increases the opportunity to forge strong links with employers, leading to collaboration in other ways. Disadvantages identified include the difficulty of balancing the coordinator's role with that of other academic activities, particularly research, and relatively high administration costs. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, 2000, 1(1), 9-14*).

Keywords: placement coordinator, role, science, technology.

The benefits of cooperative education programs for the student, employer and learning institution have been well documented and include financial rewards and career enhancement for students (Apostolides & Looye, 1997; Wessels & Pumphry, 1995, 1996), cost savings for employers and increased collaboration between industry and learning institutions (Dowdle, 1996; Dubick, McNerney, & Spietzer, 1996; Gorman & Scott, 1996; Pickles, 1993, 1995, 1996; Pratt, R., 1996; Somers, 1995). The successful achievement of some or all of these benefits, for example, enhanced collaboration between the employer and the learning institution, depends on the administrative structure of the program and the position of the coordinator within it.

During the evolution of cooperative education, or work-integrated learning (also referred to as sandwich degrees), as a recognized educational process, the role of the person at the hub of the process, the placement coordinator, has been the subject of much variation and debate. Wilson (1972) stated, "a coordinator is an educator whose specialization is the provision of meaningful learning experiences in the form of work situations and the assisting of students to relate these experiences to their educational goals" (p. 57). Few coordinators would argue that this definition remains the core function of the placement process. Mosbacker (1969) stressed that the role involves more that that of a simple "placement jockey" and examined the role of the coordinator in the realms of career counseling and allied the activities of the coordinator, to the stages of career planning. She also acknowledged the roles played in administering the placement process, developing and maintaining relationships with employers, providing the link between cooperative education staff and faculty, and promoting the professional status of cooperative education. Some authors emphasize the academic nature of the role of coordinators and asserted that they should be viewed as educators and hold a rightful place in faculty (e.g., Pratt, C., 1973). More recently Janisse and Van Gyn (1998) emphasized the increasing recognition that the role should include enhancing and monitoring learning, and overseeing assessment, as well as the previously described roles.

There have been a number of models described for the administrative structure of cooperative education programs over the years (Gerrand & Saunderson, 1994; Heermann, 1973; Linklater, 1987; Pratt, C., 1973; Ricks, 1996; Saikali & Jain, 1997; Stull, Loken, Bartkus, & Bratton, 1994; Wilson, 1970). Wilson (1997) classified organizational models as decentralized and decentralized. A decentralized program is organized as part of an academic department and functions totally within it. A centralized model functions by means of a single cooperative education department or

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group, that is responsible for all the students across subject disciplines. There is also a centralized-decentralized model that consists of coordinators housed within their departments, but the program is overseen by a central group that serves to set policy that applies throughout the institution. These models represent a continuum of degree of interaction between the coordinator and the student, the employer and the faculty. The placement coordinators' role varies significantly according to the model.

The Role of the Placement Coordinator

We have identified three fundamentally different positions or roles held by coordinators. In some programs students are simply provided with lists of prospective employers (e.g., on a physical or electronic bulletin board) and are required to secure their own placement with minimal administration or other activity by staff (Eames, 1998; Eames & Rowe, 1996; Jancauskas, 1998; Linklater, 1987). In these situations the role of the coordinator is very hands-off, with the coordinator acting purely as an administrator with little interaction with employers, and a limited amount of contact with students and faculty.

A second model is seen in which programs are administered by a central administration unit in which the placement coordinators are clustered together in a centralized group separate from the faculty (Heermann, 1973; Linklater, 1987). Although coordinators may have more interaction with employers in this model, they are seldom specialists in the subject discipline. These coordinators assist students into placements and work actively with students and employers. However, their function is mostly administrative and does not extend to a deep knowledge of the business of the employer.

The third type of program is one in which coordinators hold joint appointments and are at least partly within faculty (Eames, 1998; Eames & Rowe, 1996; Heermann, 1973; Jancauskas, 1998; Linklater, 1987). In this model coordinators are subject specialists and have strong links with students, faculty, and deep knowledge of the business of the employer.

There are a number of potential difficulties encountered by cooperative education programs in modern times. Perhaps the overriding concern centers on securing quality placements which may prove problematic, for example, when faced with increased roll growth, or times of economic recession (Colling, 1994). How then is an educational institution best able to secure appropriate placements in the face of increasing student numbers or during times of recession? An important part of the success of any program is continued support of employers, and this is most likely to occur if the employers have a successful placement experience each time they employ a student. A rewarding placement experience not only increases the likelihood of the employer taking on another student in subsequent years, but satisfied employers can be used to help the induction of new employers. Arguably one of the most effective methods of ensuring a good placement experience is to achieve the optimum match of student with employer (Coll, Eames & Halsey, 1997).

In this paper we propose that the use of a variation of the third model described above, in which coordinators form a centralized group and hold joint placement coordinator-teaching faculty roles. We believe this model is an effective means of ensuring an optimum match of student with employer. We illustrate our views with a description of a New Zealand science and technology program that employs such an approach, and reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of this model.

Cooperative Education in Undergraduate Science and Technology in New Zealand

There are a large number of cooperative education programs in New Zealand, covering diverse subject disciplines such as nursing, engineering, sports and leisure studies, business studies, technical trades, social work, hospitality and tourism, media studies, teaching, fashion, information technology, and science and technology (Eames, 1998; Eames & Rowe, 1996). The BSc(Technology) degree offered at the University of Waikato is unique among undergraduate science degrees in New Zealand universities (Chapman, 1994; Coll, 1997). It is a four-year degree in contrast with the three-year BSc degree. A number of science majors are offered, such as, physics, chemistry, biology, the earth sciences, computer science, mathematics & statistics, and a variety of specified programs, such as, biochemistry, biotechnology, forestry, and environmental science. The latter programs combine courses from different subjects in order to give the student the relevant knowledge for these multi-disciplinary areas. The structure of the BSc(Technology) degree program at Waikato has been described in detail previously (Chapman, 1994; Coll, 1997). Essentially the degree consists of a BSc with the addition of two management papers and a total of twelve months relevant paid work experience, comprising two work placements one of three months duration at the end of the second year, and a second of nine months duration, at the end of the third year (Figure 1).

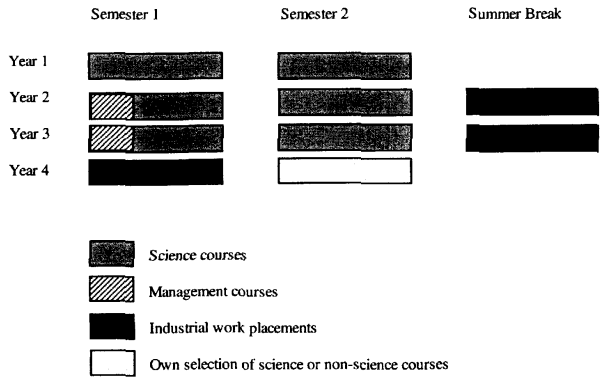

Figure 1

The structure of the BSc(Technology) program at the University of Waikato

The program has been in operation since 1974 beginning with modest numbers, fewer than 10 students. However,

from 1980 through to 1995 the roll increased dramatically to around 200, although this has stabilized somewhat in recent years (Coll, 1997). When the roll was low, teaching faculty facilitated placements in a fairly ad hoc manner. However, with the rapid roll rise it became impractical to continue with this informal arrangement and from 1993 to 1996 the University responded with a significant input of resources in terms of increased staffing. At this time a group called the Cooperative Education Unit (CEU) was established with staff appointed to joint teaching faculty-placement coordinator roles. Hence, the program at Waikato is now administered by the CEU, a centralized team of specialist coordinators, each with research and teaching experience and direct faculty links in the subject area for which they are placement coordinators. Current CEU staffing comprises eight joint appointments (of a total full-time staff-equivalent of ca. 4.0), and a full-time administrative assistant.

The choice of this administrative model was deliberate since the belief was that the critical requirement consisted of securing the best possible match of student to the placement, thus ensuring employer satisfaction. It is no simple task to achieve a good match of student with employer. It is our view that achieving a good match requires an in-depth knowledge of the organization, the work to be undertaken, and arguably most important of all, the student. High academic ability of students is the main criteria for some organizations like private or Government research institutes, and a match of student with employer may be more straightforward when the requirements are clearly evident in students. Typically, however, more than half of the placements occur in the private sector (Coll, 1997). Private sector employers seek a variety of skills in students; as well as strong academic ability, these employers rate interpersonal skills, and the ability to work in a team as of major importance (Chapman, 1995; Chapman & Kirk, 1992; Coll et al., 1997; Hodges, 1998; Rainsbury, 1998).

It is in general difficult to assess a student's interpersonal and communication skills pre-placement, particularly if the coordinator has limited contact with the students. Because the placement coordinators at Waikato are also teaching within their respective disciplines, they come to know the students well on a personal and professional level, particularly as practical class sizes in the School are relatively small (ca. 20-30 with 3-4 staff providing supervision). Moreover, in the third year of the degree most subject disciplines involve students in small-scale projects with students working with faculty on scientific research, providing additional contact. That is, the placement coordinators get to know their students as individual people rather than simply possessing knowledge of them on paper.

The University of Waikato, established in 1964, is one of the younger tertiary institutions in New Zealand and has an enrolment of approximately 10,000 equivalent full-time students (EFTS) and staffing of approximately 150 full-time equivalent academic staff. The School of Science & Technology is one of the smaller schools with an enrolment of around 1000 EFTS. The comparatively modest size of the School and thus departments means that student contact with faculty is relatively high. Because the first industrial placement does not begin until the end of the students' second year, the coordinators have already taught the students in a number of classes. In particular, the supervision of practical classes described above offers coordinators an opportunity to get to know the students well, and to assess practical laboratory skills along with interpersonal and communication skills. Many of our employers are very particular about a student's ability to fit into their team, and the coordinator's detailed knowledge of the student increases the likelihood of achieving a good match.

Because coordinators also are subject specialists, they are able to relate effectively with industry professionals during site visits and are able to gain a good appreciation of an employer's needs, improving the likelihood of achieving a good student-employer match. Furthermore, coordinators are able to act as conduits for collaborative research activity as they have a good knowledge of the abilities and interests of their faculty colleagues. Currently almost one third of Masters level degrees at Waikato involve industry collaboration and in approximately 30% of cases the collaboration resulted directly from the coordinator's relationship with the employer. Such collaborative research serves to strengthen links between the University and employers, and allows employers to see additional tangible benefit from their involvement with the program.

Evaluating the Success of the Placement Process at Waikato

It is our assertion that the joint placement coordinator-teaching faculty role for the coordinator ensures a greater likelihood of securing the optimum match of student with employer, as a result of increased contact and consequently knowledge of the student.

In order to measure how successful the CEU has been in achieving this aim regular surveys of students and employers are conducted. At the end of each placement employers are sent an evaluation form in which they are able to comment on an individual student's performance. The CEU assembles an annual advisory committee meeting in which invited employers meet with the entire CEU in a formal setting and are given the opportunity to express their views about the program and support structures offered. A recent comprehensive quantitative inquiry of employers found a high level of satisfaction with the program (Chapman, 1997; Coll & Chapman, 2000). Employers reported that their greatest area of satisfaction with the performance of the CEU was in relation to the matching of a student with their operational needs (Coll & Chapman, 2000). In addition to employer feedback, student surveys are routinely carried out at the end of the placement, using a placement questionnaire. The summative results of these surveys are described in detail elsewhere (Coll et al., 1997; Eames, Coll, & Halsey, 1996); but overall the results support the view that students perceive that they have been matched well with an employer, with nearly 90% of the students satisfied with their work placements.

Disadvantages with Joint Placement Coordinator–Teaching Faculty Roles

As described above, it is our belief that the use of placement coordinators that hold joint appointments has proven successful in securing a good match of student with employer. However, it is also appropriate that we reflect upon any disadvantages inherent in the model described here. Interviews with CEU staff and senior University administrators have identified two principal areas of concern; staff professional development and the long term cost effectiveness of the model. To put these issues in perspective, it is necessary to background the dramatic changes the New Zealand tertiary education scene has undergone in recent times. The general consensus in New Zealand now is that young people attempting to enter the work force need to be more highly educated than in the past and there has been a large increase in the number of people seeking access to higher education (Bell, 1991; Bell, Jones, & Carr, 1995; 1996). As a result of a number of in-depth studies spread over nearly a decade, the New Zealand Government imposed a partial user-pays system that is still under implementation (Hawke, 1988; Todd, 1994). In addition to increased financial pressure on the tertiary institutions and students alike, these changes have resulted in increased pressure on all staff for research and related professional development, particularly for placement coordinators. Ostensibly, staff performance is evaluated from achievement in scholarship, teaching, and contributions to the wider community. However, unobtrusive observation of the promotion applications process in the School reveals that in reality faculty are promoted mostly on the basis of research output and ability to secure external funding. The significance of this scenario for placement coordinators at Waikato is that provision of a highly professional service within the program will in effect do little to enhance personal development and thus career prospects. Coordinators have a relatively low research profile in their departments compared with full-time teaching faculty; consequently coordinators find it difficult to attract post-graduate students in their respective disciplines. Juggling the running of a program accompanied by the necessity to conduct meaningful research is not easy. However, coordinators have responded by conducting research in science education, although this has necessitated considerable up-skilling and two coordinators are currently undertaking doctorates in science education.

The second major issue identified is the cost-effectiveness of the joint coordinator-faculty appointment model. The fact that coordinators have faculty teaching and research duties, along with the high level of support offered in our program, means that the number of students placed per coordinator, at ca. 40-50 students per full-time equivalent coordinator, is low compared with other programs (e.g., Jancauskas, 1998). Students enroll in industry courses, and currently these courses attract partial Government funding and so the model is sustainable under the current funding regime (Langdon & Judd, 1994). At present funding gained from student fees along with the Government provisions is adequate to cover the costs of administration of the CEU. In the same way that quality tertiary research education in subject disciplines is challenged by under-funding, the sustainability of this model will be increasingly challenged if further funding cuts occur.

Summary and Implications for other Cooperative Education Practitioners

The Dearing (1997) report in the United Kingdom recommended that all tertiary level study should incorporate an element of work-based learning and the recently elected New Zealand Government included a statement of strong support for cooperative education in its political manifesto. It seems unlikely that all degree programs in the UK or New Zealand could include cooperative education components. Nonetheless, it seems that the UK and New Zealand Government at least wish to see greater participation in work-based learning than in the past. To achieve this represents a formidable task, one in which the role of the placement coordinator is paramount. The core business of cooperative education professionals is to secure appropriate work experience that achieves a high level of satisfaction for employers and students alike. In order to achieve this, placement coordinators must ensure that the work experience satisfies the discipline's objectives. To do so, coordinators must be familiar with discipline's course offerings, and in the sciences at least, especially the practical component. In addition, coordinators must ensure there is productive feedback from employers regarding the suitability of course offerings of the institution; for example, ensuring that courses are relevant and up-to-date. In light of the above, it is our belief that for a fast-changing and increasingly complex society, placement coordinators need expertise in their subject disciplines. As joint faculty members, they gain this expertise, are able to facilitate between employers and tertiary institutions and gain in-depth knowledge of their students.

In spite of some disadvantages, the School of Science & Technology at Waikato holds that the benefits of the joint faculty-placement coordinator role far outweigh the disadvantages, since the model adopted results in the best match of student with employer, with consequent high levels of satisfaction. This outcome is valued by the School, since it is seen as a key tool for publicity purposes, and because previous research has shown that it is the matching of students and employers that is seen as crucial by both parties (Coll & Chapman, 2000; Coll et al., 1997). Consequently for the foreseeable future the model will be retained in its current form and is recommended to other practitioners.

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