

Developing Workplace Skills via Employer Projects

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Abstract

Employer engagement in education is gaining momentum in universities today via activities such as employer projects, internship, workplace visits, etc. The research will explore the effectiveness of an employer relations project in developing workplace skills among pre-university students in a private university. The paper utilizes a mixed method approach and the primary method is a questionnaire to determine students' attitude towards the project. The qualitative study will probe deeper into student experiences towards the task. This was done via focus group interviews. A key finding will be the importance of small group collaboration in developing students' soft skills and personal development.

Keywords

Collaboration, team skills, workplace skills

Introduction

The role of universities in preparing graduates for the workforce is a longstanding and controversial issue. This is compounded by the ever-changing needs and expectations of employers who argue for work ready graduates on the one hand and graduates who have to face the reality of the unfamiliar work situation on the other. Over the years, scholars have highlighted essential workforce skills for employees to stay relevant in the ever evolving and challenging job market. Research on work related or employer projects among graduating students is gaining momentum among higher institutions of learning in Malaysia especially in the race to achieve high employability rate among graduates. However, research on employer projects among pre-university students is rare. Hence, this study will explore the impact of employer projects on pre-university students in developing their personal and entrepreneurial skills.

Purpose of Study

This employer project is designed to explore the effectiveness of an employer project assigned to 238 pre-university students majoring in business and information technology doing the English Language Skills 1 and 2 at a private university in Malaysia. The research will focus on these questions:

- i) What were students' attitudes towards the project?
- ii) How effective did the employer project promote workplace skills among students?

Subjects

The population for this study consists of 238 pre-university students at a private university in Malaysia. They are enrolled on the English Language Skills 1 and 2 courses. For the purpose of this paper, the researchers will focus on the employer project work which was a competitive enterprise among students in eight classes to raise funds and awareness for the conservation and preservation of turtles and their habitats in Malaysia. The study takes place in week 9th during the fourteen week semester. The cooperative model used were groups of 8-10 students who were grouped heterogeneously by the lecturer.

Tasks Design

The students were assigned a project in collaboration with the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia to raise funds and awareness for the conservation and preservation of turtles and their habitats in Malaysia.

The project requirements

1. A Five Day Fundraising Challenge

The students were required to plan and set up fundraising booths for the campaign themed 'INTI Hard-shelled Heroes'. Students had the opportunity to apply their creativity in producing, procuring and selling of various items and services in accordance with the terms and conditions set by the employer, WWF Malaysia. Space within the campus grounds was to be used to set up their booths. All items and services were obtained by the students using a capital amount set by the individual classes. All profits gained minus initial capital are given to WWF Malaysia for the conservation and preservation efforts. The winning team will receive a WWF tote bag.

2. Online Awareness Campaign

Students were tasked to create and update an awareness campaign page dedicated to providing information on turtle conservation and preservation efforts as well as a platform to advertise and inform the campus community on the fundraising campaign. The awareness campaign page was set up two weeks before the 5-day Fundraising Challenge.

Stages in the project methodology

Stage 1: Briefing for Project Leaders

Selected students and volunteers are briefed on the various responsibilities and tasks to be completed by each class. The leaders are also informed of the restrictions set by the employer, WWF Malaysia and details of the project spending capital and profits.

Stage 2: Planning the Budget, Sales and Marketing Strategy

Each class prepares a set budget for their 5-day Fundraising Challenge. The budget is monitored and guided by the lecturers and the elected leaders of the class.

Students of each class divide themselves into teams to manage, procure and execute their plan for 5-day Fundraising Challenge project. An awareness campaign page is set up by the elected leaders. The page link is distributed to all students by their respective leaders. Contents of the page are to be updated by the students to include facts and advertisements of their 5-day Fundraising Challenge.

Stage 3: Profit Calculation and Student De-Briefing

Profits and loss are tabulated and presented in a report form to the lecturers. Lecturers are to de-brief the students on the project. Students share their experiences, concerns and suggestions on the project.

Role of the instructors

During this employer project, the 5 instructors served as facilitators guiding and motivating the students in their planning and executing of their fundraising activity.

Methodology

This is a mixed method research and both qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously. Both data will be triangulated for an informed decision backed by research. The aim is to explore students' entrepreneurial experiences throughout the fund raising project, the challenges they faced in achieving project outcomes and their contribution to the employer project. A three-point Likert scale design will assess students' attitude and commitment towards the project. Neo's 13-item survey questionnaire together with open ended questions will be administered on the 10th week of the semester.

The research is driven by the following research questions:

Research question 1 – What were students' attitude towards the employer project?

Research question 2 – How effective did the employer project promote workplace skills among students?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this project is embedded in the experiential learning structure as propagated by Kolb (1984) and how this learning is in tandem with workforce needs. Kolb (1984) asserts that learning is more effective and more enduring when it is substantiated on the personal experience and followed by a thought process about the experience. Kolb's experiential learning cycle is apt as it views the school, in this research the university, as a playground for entrepreneurship endeavors and for students to learn, unlearn and relearn knowledge, skills and attitudes. A work playground involves people working together to accomplish shared goals. Within cooperative situations, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial not only to themselves but also to all other group members. In this research, students work in small groups to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1993).

Gallup, Inc. in collaboration with Microsoft Partners in Learning and the Pearson Foundation, developed a 21st century skills index: collaboration, knowledge construction, skilled communication, global awareness, self-regulation, real-world problem-solving, and technology

used in learning. Similarly, Harvard Innovation Education Fellow Tony Wagner through investigating the education sector and interviewing industry leaders and studying the global workforce at large identified seven survival skills of the future. Wagner's seven skills for the jobs are critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, assessing and analysing information, curiosity and imagination. As such, students should be given opportunities to acquire these skills via the curriculum. For example, project-based learning, case studies, problem-based learning, teamwork activities, and student leadership development activities can be utilized to provide students with the necessary skills. Requirements for work practices such as the ability to monitor and prioritize tasks and develop non-routine and creative thinking rather than merely following standardized procedures become essential skills graduates need to learn. (Reich, 2002).

Every business venture revolves around a business idea that is feasible, viable and can be translated into a venture. Employer engagement in education is a process through which students in educational settings connect with members of the local industry towards some purposeful outcome. Evidence from research proves that experiential entrepreneurial projects are meaningful as students are able to make real business decisions, discuss problems with peers and make informed decision which would improve on their reflective skills (Graham, 2004). The benefits here are threefold. The employer benefits from the latest theories and fresh ideas from the academic world, the institution benefits from the practical input from the professional community and the students benefit from the chosen field of study and prospective employment in the company. In a 2017 study on 824 teachers in the United Kingdom entitled Education and Employers Research: Making the Grade, Kashefpakdel et al. attested that employer engagements enhance young people's ability to draw connection with future economic outcomes, expose students to new role models and understand relevance of education to employment. Thus, employee engagement for students can offer learning experiences that deliver outcomes more effectively than traditional experiences (Raffo & Reves).

Sarasvathy (2007) argues for an entrepreneurial mindset among students which can be achieved via opportunities provided for active business idea generation, discovering business idea and developing feasible business concept and implementing these ideas over time. Rae and Varswell (2000) argued that a curriculum that stimulates open mindedness and critical thinking together with entrepreneurial actions such as competitions and business simulations will enrich student experiences and enhance the development of their entrepreneurship skills and knowledge. Researchers have also suggested that getting students outside their comfort zone into an engaging and active environment allows for powerful self-discovery and learning process to seep in (McMullan & Boberg, 1991; Munro, 2008). Ayob et al (2011) found that his students' creativity dimensions have been nurtured and enhanced as a result of problem solving process involved in an international robot contest. Students concluded that the experience exposed them to develop creative thinking and innovative skills including having a positive outlook, building upon group ideas not obtained in conventional lectures.

Findings and Analysis

Results of the study were clustered according to the three-point Likert scale design data, research questions, group interviews, observations and the approaches described in the methodology. The qualitative data from the open ended questions in questionnaire and focus group interview explore students' perspectives and their attitudes and challenges toward the entrepreneurial activity.

Research Question 1: What were students' attitude towards the project?

Table 1: Results of the questionnaire. Percentage of responses on cooperative survey items for the Employer Relations Project (N = 238)

No	Item	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Std. Deviation
1	We were able to achieve our group goals	62.2	32.4	5.0	0.5893
2	Our group leader was very effective	66.8	31.1	2.1	0.5211
3	I enjoyed collaborating with team members	76.1	22.3	1.7	0.4745
4	I was able to contribute well to the project	55.5	42.9	1.7	0.5323
5	The collaboration enhanced my personal development	57.6	40.8	1.7	0.5304
6	My group members contributed well to the project	63.9	33.6	2.5	0.5374
7	The collaboration was a challenge, but I enjoyed it	64.7	33.2	2.1	0.5266
8	My group was able to work together effectively	63.0	34.0	2.9	0.5476
9	We were able to solve our challenges as a group	66.8	30.3	2.9	0.5393
10	I found the collaboration very motivating	50.8	45.0	4.2	0.5782
11	My group communicated well with each other	57.1	39.9	2.1	0.5553
12	The collaboration was a challenge, but I enjoyed it	56.7	39.1	3.8	0.5713
13	My group taught me some things I would not have learnt on my own	55.5	37.8	6.7	0.6212

Overall, the findings favoured a positive attitude towards the project with higher percentages exceeding 60% in team work collaboration

Team work

- Team work can be measured by items, 6, 8, 9 and 12.
- There is positive correlation between on students' ability to work together effectively (63.0%, Item 8) and their problem solving capabilities as a team (66.8%, Item 9).
- Contribution of members to the project was at 63.9% (Item 6)

Individual accountability

- Individual accountability to task posed a challenge to students. Individual contribution to project was at 55.5% (Item 4) and this directly affected their motivation towards the activity (50.8%, Item 10) and their enjoyment of the activity challenge (56.7%, Item 12). Hence the inverse correlation between enjoying working with team members (76.1%, Item 4) and enjoying the entrepreneurial challenge (56.7%, Item 12).

Communication, Leadership and Project Outcomes

- Communication, Leadership and Project Outcomes can be measured by items 1,2, and 11.
- Although leadership scores were high (66.8%, Item 2), communication among members posed a challenge (57.1%, Item 12), but this did not stop groups from achieving their goals (62.2%, Item 1)

Feedback from focus group interview

There was a positive correlation between length of study at the university and students' performance of the entrepreneurship challenge. Senior students were more familiar with the concept of employer project, management procedures and managing teams. For example, in the product selection and promotion and setting of booth, experience was an important factor here. In students' words, 'the non-familiarity with friends affected them from understanding each other'. New students to the campus environment 'found it difficult to break barriers in communication and understanding different points of view'.

For example, the 'losing' group, were first semester students and they only sold one product 'nachos'. During the focus group they mentioned that they did not take time to stop and reflect on how to improve on their promotion of product when sales were low the first day. There was no constructive feedback given and compounded with poor group dynamics, the team collected the least profit of RM 38 in this activity. On the other hand, the champion group with profit RM332, were third semester students determined to give their best, and pushed for a variety of products such as 'nasi lemak', 'pearl tea', herbal tea' and 'play station games' and even sourced out for sponsorship. They diversified their products to earn more. The focus group revealed that there was strong evidence of positive interdependence among members in sharing of opinions, supporting and guiding one another to achieve success. Being seniors, they were familiar with team challenges and had the strength and confidence to push members who slacked. Hence, in this class it was evident that team processing was good and members were held responsible for team goals.

RQ 2: Research question 2 – How effective did the employer project promote workplace skills among students?

To answer this, we shall zoom into the top five skills openly selected by the 238 respondents as important during their entrepreneurial activity.

The top five soft skills openly selected by the 238 respondents from the eight classes:

No	Comments / Skills	Percentage
1	Communicative skill	22.72%
2	Teamwork	19.95%
3	Time management	9.34%

4	Critical thinking skill	8.07%
5	Leadership skill	7.15%
Total	$583/867 \times 100 = 67.24$	67.24%

The table above reveals the top five soft skills chosen by respondents ranking from the highest Communicative skill (22.72 %), followed by Teamwork (19.95%), Time management (9.34%), Critical thinking skill (8.07%) and Leadership skill (7.15%). Interestingly, during the focus group interview, teams revealed the exact five skills above as challenges they had to face in groups and also agreed that these were essential business skills for any entrepreneur. More importantly, the top skills above concur with the current and future workforce skills as put forward by Gallup Inc. and Wagner T. As per Johnson and Johnson (1999), teams did imbibe the five criteria in cooperative learning which include positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, group processing and the development of small group interpersonal skills. The challenge was to sustain and improve the effectiveness of the teams. Teams had to think critically of wise business strategies to attract customers and to find alternative methods to sell their items. This skill was also essential in minimizing expenditures on buying food items or materials to sell and maximizing their profit in their sales of services and food. This is apt as requirements for work practices especially in monitoring and prioritizing tasks and developing non-routine creative thinking are essential skills of the workforce (Nagarajan and Edwards, 2014b).

Students learnt the ropes in time management where they needed to strike a balance and juggle between their studies, social life, extra-curricular activities and the employer project. Teams were forced to resolve uncertain complex issues arising from the fundraising event and as per Collins et.al.(2006), entrepreneurship entails complicated and unstructured patterns and that was an ideal environment to nurture critical and problem solving skills.

Conclusions

The findings show that the pre-university students considered the employer project useful in developing their soft skills cum workplace skills such as communicative skills, teamwork, critical thinking skills, time management and leadership skills. The entrepreneurial challenge showed them that driving a business to succeed is challenging and incurring risks and losses, doing market research and meticulous planning is part and parcel of the business world. As stated by Rae & Carswell (2000), a learning by doing project enriches student experience and enhances the development of students' workplace cum soft skills and knowledge. This research focused on student experiences gained during the 5-day fundraising activity. Future research could delve more on how employers could bring more industry relevance skills and drive learning as role models.

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