The success of a Communications based, Nature Conservation, Work Integrated Learning simulation through a UNISA and Ernest Oppenheimer & Son partnership on Telperion Nature Reserve

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Abstract:

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) placements and opportunities within the conservation sector, for National Diploma Nature Conservation (NDNTR), University of South Africa (UNISA) students are few and difficult to access. This challenge impedes the graduation rates of these students. A UNISA and Ernest Oppenheimer and Son (EO&S) partnership has been formed to address this important issue by planning and providing WIL focused opportunities on Telperion Nature Reserve. The findings from a single simulation based opportunity are highlighted and discussed. The simulation specifically focused on Communication outcomes of the NDNTR WIL student.

The simulation process was a success with all ten participating students being pronounced competent in all the predetermined Communication outcomes. Two of the ten students were able to complete their WIL requirements and graduate.

The Universities need to maintain high academic standards, quality of teaching, learning and assessment processes were all guaranteed as a result of UNISA mentors ensuring compliance with the required outcomes.

Introduction:

The NDNTR comprises of 360 credits of which 120 credits make up the WIL component. WIL can loosely be defined as time spent by a senior student, in the sector, putting theory into practice under the mentorship of an experienced and skilled professional. It requires a sustained co-operative relationship between sector WIL service providers and a higher education institution, to achieve a set of predetermined academic outcomes, critical cross-field outcomes and sector required soft skills.

The NDNTR qualification has been re-curriculated, thus requiring currently registered students to qualify by the end of the 2016 academic year and placing pressure on the Department to assist these students who are in the 'pipeline'. WIL placements and opportunities for NDNTR students extremely difficult to access across the country. This challenge has therefore been identified as a 'weakness' in the Department of Environmental Sciences, 2013 Strategic Plan[1]. In an effort to address this 'weakness' and meet the College of Agriculture and Environmental Science's 2012 Strategic Plan[2] a collaborative partnership between UNISA and Telperion has been created.

As a part of this partnership a Communication outcomes-based WIL excursion was piloted on the Telperion Nature Reserve, which simulated a tourism experience with guests. The simulation entailed the use of game drives and interpretive walks. This WIL excursion was facilitated and piloted in an effort to meet academic requirements of the NDNTR qualification, in the absence of a participating sector WIL service provider.

Methodology:

The seven day (10th to 17th June 2013) Communications-focused, mentored excursion was conducted with ten NDNTR students (Figure 1) on Telperion. The first five days of the programme provided the students with the theoretical grounding in the specific communication strategies they would be implementing with their guests, while also allowing time to build their skills and experience through practice, co-operative learning and peer review processes.

Figure 1: The NDNTR WIL student group

The four 'guests' comprised of a WIL academic from New Zealand, two UNISA academics and a non-academic. The NDNTR WIL students conducted a meet and greet, a formal presentation, game drives (Figure 2), interpretive walk, a static display and a sundowner which was assessed by the guests. These summative assessments, along with the Departmental mentor's and the Communications lecturer's assessments, would provide the WIL academic mark as required by the outcome and WIL framework of the NDNTR qualification. It must be noted that each student was allocated specific activities to conduct as part their assessment.

Figure 2: Game drive and sundowners hosted by the NDNTR WIL students

Results and discussion:

The simulation of a Nature Reserve Guest activity programme proved most successful. All ten students met the Communication linked outcomes of the WIL component of the NDNTR qualification and were deemed competent in their specific communications-based activity (Figure 3). The summative assessment results reflect the typical distribution of competencies, ranging from 52% to above distinction mark, namely 82%. And with the average mark set at 65% Two of the ten students assessed became eligible for graduation in 2013. Each participating student logged a total of 43% of the notional hours required by their Communication's aspect of WIL.

Figure 3: Two WIL students logging WIL hours while being assessed

UNISA's successful partnership with Telperion has meant that UNISA, as the Higher Education Institution has negated the need to rely solely on the sector WIL service providers to provide NDNTR students with all of their WIL requirements. Students are therefore able to graduate sooner as total reliance on these service providers has decreased.

Conclusion:

The simulation of a functioning guest orientated nature reserve proved that simulations of certain WIL outcomes are possible as an alternative to formal work placements within the sector. By providing a variety of such experiences across the country, a greater student population's need for WIL placement and mentorship can be addressed.

Greater quality assurance is guaranteed as students are exposed to specific and outcomes based related activities, directly linked to their NDNTR WIL requirements.

References:

[1] Department of Environmental Sciences Strategic Planning Workshop report; 11 and 12 October 2012

[2] UNISA College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences; Strategic Planning Workshop Report; 28 and 29 August 2012