Worlds apart? Developing a professional competency assessment framework that links university education with ‘real world’ practices in the Construction Management and Nursing disciplines

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An important part of higher education for the Nursing and Construction Management (Con Mgt) disciplines is to promote the professional competencies of their students. However, the disciplines at times are perceived not to support these professional competency requirements. This impacts heavily on students as these professions require graduates who are ‘work ready’ on finishing their degrees. To address this potential issue, Australian professional accreditation bodies prescribe professional competencies that University degrees need to deliver. In addition, many accreditation bodies require students to engage in periods of practical work experience [often referred to as work integrated learning (WIL)]. However, studies have shown that students often question the relevance of the theoretical concepts they are taught at university in relation to what they learn from their ‘real world’ workplace experiences. Indeed, students and academics sometimes regard WIL and university learning as unrelated entities (Williams, Sher & Simmons 2009).

A recently awarded Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) research grant entitled ‘Facilitating work integrated learning through skills-enabled ePortfolios in the Con Mgt and Nursing disciplines’ is currently being conducted at the University of Newcastle, Australia. It is investigating WIL within the two disciplines and aims to demonstrate how these practical skills may be embedded into ePortfolio platforms. The project deliverables will include online resources which align WIL with formal learning, reports on the potential of ePortfolios to enhance WIL practice, online teaching resources and support for academics incorporating WIL in their formal lessons and finally, discipline specific continuing professional development modules that link WIL with formal university curricula.

Still in its initial stages, the project aims to develop a robust learning framework that facilitates and encourages reflective learning during students’ WIL activities. Such a framework will enable students to link theoretical concepts they have learnt at university with their practical experiences (Levett-Jones, Fahey, Parsons & Mitchell, 2006).

To-date the project has been developing competency alignments for the framework that will showcase to students how their university courses relate to each other and to their profession. The framework shows how the skills and competencies students acquire at university and during WIL meld together to enable them to graduate as professionals in their respective disciplines. The process of creating the framework has so far involved an analysis of competencies from different accreditation bodies resulting in a hierarchy of skill sets within these competencies. For instance, generic synergies such as; ethical practice, team communication and occupation health and safety practice were identified in the competency domains. This paper will discuss the proposed learning framework development and review data gathered for the project. It will also discuss some of the related issues arising from developing the framework. In conclusion, the paper will examine how work based competencies can be documented, demonstrated and assessed to enhance students learning outcomes to strive towards creating a learning environment consisting of both practical and theoretical knowledge.