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Community Based Learning, and how this Policy can be Applied to Enhance the Learning Experience for Students on the Degree Course in Construction Economics and Management

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MA in Higher Education.

Paper on Higher Education Policy

**Community Based Learning, and how this policy can be applied to
enhance the learning experience for students on the degree course in
Construction Economics & Management**

Report by Fiacra McDonnell.

8th February 2011

**A study investigating the Dublin Institute of Technology's policy
regarding Community Based Learning, and how this policy can be
applied to enhance the learning experience for students on the degree
course in Construction Economics & Management.**

Introduction

This paper looks at certain aspects of higher educational policy, both nationally and internationally, with an emphasis on innovative solutions regarding work placement. When ministers of education met in Leuven in April 2009 to review progress on the Bologna process, they defined a series of high level objectives for the decade ahead from 2010 to 2020. One of these objectives centered around employability through work placements embedded in study programmes, McMahon, (2010). The current economic climate in Ireland will make this objective a challenging prospect with record levels of unemployment showing little sign of abatement. Traditional work placement modules may not prove flexible enough for employers in this climate where many of their other employees are being made redundant. Indeed resentment may present itself where students are employed to fulfil roles recently vacated due to redundancy. There is nothing new about having work placement modules within undergraduate courses, however the current state of our economy is in unknown territory, and our modules and policies must adapt to deal with work placement within this context.

My professional background is in the Construction Industry, and no other sector has experienced such a monumental collapse. My particular interest in work placement centres around my lecturing commitments in Construction Economics and Management, on Quantity Surveying courses in DIT, where we are attempting to address the absence of work placement modules on a number of courses. It is coincidental that this debate is being conducted while industrial output in this sector is in a state of meltdown. With this environment in mind, the challenge posed is to formulate a model which will reflect the current state of industry. This paper aims to examine DIT policy with regards to community based learning and how it may influence module design going forward. Why have I focused on community based learning? My colleagues in industry have informed me that traditional work placement may not be feasible over the next number of years due

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to financial constraints. There may also be ethical implications for students employed in roles without remuneration, where redundancies have been imposed within those companies. I have set myself the task of investigating alternatives that may provide the same learning outcomes as traditional work placement modules.

The outcome of February's general election will probably affect the nature of higher education policy over the next number of years with polls suggesting that a Fine Gael – Labour coalition is likely, Collins (2011). A new government will be faced with choices on controversial areas such as the reintroduction of student fees and the funding of higher education in general. Interestingly, Fine Gaels pre-election job strategy plan includes a section on student work placement. Their document Working for our Future provides for the creation of 45,000 placements for college interns, who would be paid entry rates, work 20 hours per week, and receive €3000 bursary for further training, Cullen (2011). Although pre-election manifestos may never amount to any concrete future higher education policy, the very existence of this plan suggests that political parties are taking this issue seriously.

This paper will discuss the background of work placement within the Quantity Surveying profession, investigating how higher educational policy may influence decisions on that area going forward. It will investigate the area of Community Based Learning as a modus operandi for introducing work placement modules on Quantity Surveying courses, drawing on past experience from similar modules within the DIT. A literary review will be conducted on current literature surrounding community based learning to develop my understanding of the principles of that method, and how it could be used in the Quantity Surveying context. I will also review current DIT policy in relation to this form of learning, and with analysis determine whether this policy could enhance the teaching and learning on Quantity Surveying courses.

Background.

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Within the Quantity Surveying profession, the education of practitioners has always had strong links to industry. The history of the Quantity Surveying profession dates back to the late eighteenth century, and the educational needs of the profession have been closely fostered by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), since its foundation in 1868. The traditional route for prospective Quantity Surveyors was to serve their time in the form of an apprenticeship in a Quantity Surveying practice, and eventually sit professional exams set by the RICS. Structured degree courses have been in existence since the early 1970's. If students successfully pass a recognized degree course, they are exempt from the RICS professional exams. Students who have obtained a degree in Quantity Surveying must subsequently complete two years in suitable employment before attending an Assessment of Professional Competence interview, which can lead to chartered membership of the institution. Concern has been expressed by the RICS that many of their accredited degree courses which are delivered in various third level institutions worldwide, do not contain work placement modules at undergraduate level. My own experience involves delivering lectures on various modules relating to the undergraduate programme titled Construction Economics & Management or Quantity Surveying Studies, as it's more commonly known. This course has an excellent reputation within the construction industry for producing high calibre students, who are well versed in all aspects of the Quantity Surveying profession. However there has been an ongoing debate within the school on whether a work placement requirement should be introduced into the course. This topic has been an area of hot debate among lecturers, with views polarized on the merits of such a change.

The main opposition to the introduction of a work placement module is based on the following points:

- The course has been highly successful over the years, so why now?
- The collapse of the construction industry will make it extremely difficult to find willing participant companies.
- Students on work placements are in many cases left with menial tasks which don't add to their learning experience.

Those in favour of work placement make the following points:

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- External Examiners have suggested that this would be a positive addition.
- Industry has indicated that they would support the introduction of this type of module.
- Students are strongly in favour of work placement.
- RICS have expressed concerns over the absence of a work placement module.

Although there is some opposition to introducing a work placement module, the points in its favour are convincing, and if we are truly committed to fully implementing Bologna directives, its introduction is inevitable. The main challenge to be addressed is the design of a module which takes into account the current state of the construction industry. In my opinion, community based learning may hold the key to addressing these challenges. The design of this module does not have to be fully inclusive of all traditional CBL module content, however should be reflective of the community based approach, tailoring it to meet the needs of our courses.

Community Based Learning – Literary Review

My interest in Community Based Learning was aroused by a talk delivered by Dr Claire McDermott, from the school of chemistry in DIT, in April 2010, where she outlined the principles involved. It became apparent that no exact definition existed for Community Based Learning (CBL), however in general terms it was somewhere between volunteering and a placement with a requirement that students reflect on their experiences. It encourages active citizenship, civic engagement and social capital, Bringle and Hatcher (1996). When dealing with CBL on an international platform, this form of learning is more commonly referred to as Service Learning, especially in the USA where its usage is more widespread. Service learning is a teaching practice that integrates community and academic learning to promote increased understanding of course content, while helping participating students to develop knowledge, skills and cognitive abilities to deal effectively with complex social issues or problems, Hurd, (2006). In his paper on the effectiveness of service learning, Hurd concludes that service learning “fulfils the dual purpose of promoting outreach to communities and providing the means for distinctive undergraduate experiences. It does so by providing students

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access to diverse cultures through community involvement in a broad array of activities that extend learning, foster leadership skills, and promote civic responsibility.”(Hurd,2006 p.8). This wholly positive attitude to service learning also includes skills and qualities desirable in a competent Quantity Surveyor which makes this learning method so attractive. Butin (2010) points out that while service learning pedagogy is not the “banking” model of education, i.e. traditional or conservative, it enhances a scholarship of engagement and reconnects colleges and universities with their local and regional communities. An obvious fundamental of work placement is to gain relevant work experience in your chosen field, and Arthur (2005) contends that students can develop key skills through work experience via community based learning and he further contends that community based learning is at the core of experiential learning. This idea ties in with my own ideas on the necessity of innovation with work placement modules going forward.

From a policy point of view, the UK Government has embraced the CBL approach by establishing a “Higher Education Active Community Fund” which has provided funding for the establishment of community service programmes based on effective community partnerships in all English universities. Arthur (2005).This commitment emphasises the regard that CBL is held within the UK establishment despite the experimental nature of this approach. Strait and Lima (2009) in their text: *The future of Service Learning* talk about the tremendous growth in the number of young educators working in the field of service learning over the last ten years, however make what could be perceived as negative commentary about Irish policy to this area with the remarks:”the schooling system in the Republic of Ireland is beholden to an overarching economic agenda and that the primary purpose of higher education is linked to prioritising national prosperity” (Strait,J and Lima,M, 2009,p.144). The Council of Higher Education in South Africa have embraced community engagement and service learning which is embedded in their policy documents such as the White Paper on Higher Education(1997) and the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) which have identified knowledge based community service as a key component for accreditation, Bender (2006).

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The literature available on this type of learning is generally of a positive nature. There is a common theme of disadvantage throughout the examples studied which indicates that CBL and service learning goes hand in glove with students working in disadvantaged areas. My module design for a work placement module would be a hybrid model of CBL where although the students would be working on a voluntary basis within the community, it would not necessarily have to be a disadvantaged community.

Why Community Based Learning?

As a school we have had general discussions with regard to work placement with very little research into the various options. The collapse of the construction industry has placed major obstacles in the way of introducing a traditional six or twelve month work placement module with the common denominator being financial. It is not realistic to expect employers to employ students to carry out surveying duties while existing colleagues are being made redundant, and indeed could have industrial relations implications. The system of internships used widely in the USA, has many advantages, where the student is exposed to relevant work practices without remuneration. There is no onus on the employer to cover his costs as is the case with traditional placement and students may get more exposure to high level aspects of the profession.

The main problem with both of the options summarized above is sourcing sufficient willing employers where all students on the course will have a chance to participate and that in my opinion is where Community Based Learning may have a role to play. I feel that education within the Construction Industry must take a radical and innovative approach to address the unprecedented levels of decline.

Throughout the country there are many voluntary organizations involved in the construction of buildings varying in complexity and magnitude. The organizations in question can be anything from the Board of Management on a local school, GAA Clubs, Parish Councils, and so on. Organisations of this nature are in most cases dependant on very limited budgets and are willing to accept any voluntary help available. Obviously

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students are limited with regards to experience of industry; however there are many roles where their input would be beneficial. There will always be professional consultants involved on these projects and I would speculate that these consultants would be willing to co-operate. There are benefits to all parties concerned. The students would gain valuable experience in their field, although they will not receive payment, experience of this nature has many different advantages. This is reinforced by Butin (2010) who advocates that this type of learning is committed to connecting theory and practice, schools and community, the cognitive and the ethical. The voluntary organizations within these communities will benefit from cost neutral technical advice. The third level institutions participating in this model will have vast numbers of work placement options which is a major problem at present.

Example

I am involved on a voluntary basis with the Board of Management of a small primary school in Rockcorry, Co Monaghan. They are currently in the process of building a new school and adjoining hall. I have no doubt that a student from our Quantity Surveying course would be embraced on that project to carry out basic site measures and source cost information where required, along with many other tasks. I have approached the professional consultants who are employed on the contract, and they were emphatic that they would encourage this type of structure. The restrictions of limited fees on these projects result in limitations on the amount of time they can allocate to site operations. They would benefit from having students based on site to carry out certain tasks, and the students in turn would benefit from their expert advice and experience first hand how these consultants operate. There are also the benefits of personal satisfaction arising from the knowledge that the community has benefited from your contribution. Arthur (2005) does not underestimate the value of social responsibility gained by undergraduate students through volunteering

DIT Policy , National & International Policy & Community Based Learning

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The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 published in January 2011, <http://www.heai.ie/en/strategy-for-higher-education>, lays out a roadmap for policy in higher education going forward. It notes that “higher education institutions will have a strong engagement with individual students, communities, society and enterprise”. It also reinforces a commitment to future community based learning with its recommendation that structures and procedures should be put in place that welcome and encourage the involvement of the wider community in a range of activities including programme design and development. There has been welcoming comment from IBEC, whose head of education policy, Tony Donohue endorsed sections of the report with particular regard to the statement that “greater emphasis in the undergraduate curriculum on generic skills that are required in the workplace and for active citizenship” Donohue (2011), www.ibec.ie/newsroom. This reflects the importance of work placement and links of community involvement going forward.

Dublin Institute of Technology has a strong history of community involvement, initiatives including its community based learning programme (CLP), and more recently the Students Learning with Communities programme. In DIT, in 2001, a service learning approach was first applied in the Faculty of Tourism and Food. Two pilot projects were developed in chemistry in 2006 and launched in 2007. The academics involved were impressed by student’s effort and commitment. They found that students were motivated by “real life” context and teamwork of the module, and that interaction with students less fraught as there was a common goal. The DIT programme for Community links which includes the Students Learning with Communities (SLWC) section which supports staff and students engaged in community based learning and research and builds links with communities, www.communitylinks.ie/community-learning-programme/. DIT’s policy is clearly defined on the SLWC website where their vision is summarized as the aspiration to be a vibrant, professional hub connecting DIT students and staff to local, national and international communities, by linking learning with real life application for mutual benefit. The expected benefits of this policy are broadly in line with those found in the literature review dealing with experiences with service learning across the world. They endeavour to encourage, support and develop the practice of CBL and research in this area on programmes across the DIT; hence the introduction of a CBL module on

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certain Quantity Surveying courses would be within DIT policy guidelines. SLWC would aspire to producing socially conscious graduates with applied and transferrable professional skills; these are mirrored by the skills sought after by the RICS. Furthermore the SLWC hope to build sustainable relationships with community and voluntary organizations, create appropriate links with industry in support of cbl, and to collaborate with national and international educational institutions to advance best practice in the area. www.communitylinks.ie/community-learning-programme . The various desired qualities above are very encouraging as they mirror the qualities which should be inherent in a competent Quantity Surveyor, and make this form of learning an attractive option.

The Community links programme webpage on the DIT also gives examples of where students were involved in specific community projects and how everyone involved assessed their experiences. One such project involved a group of 2nd year students taking the B Arch in Architecture focused on designing new premises for St. Brigids nursery in Mountjoy Square. During and on completion of the design process the students were required to present their work to nursery staff. The students were very positive about their opportunity to work on a real life design project, and carry out a piece of design according to the clients specific needs. www.communitylinks.ie/slwc/projects/architect-students-design-a-new-nursery.ie

There is substantial evidence of positive government policy towards the concept of service learning / community based learning in many countries across the world. In the UK, the government has committed to CBL by establishing a “Higher Education Active Community Fund” which has provided funding for the establishment of community service programmes based on effective community partnerships in all English universities, Arthur (2005) .In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) which have identified knowledge based community service as a key component for accreditation, Bender (2006). In USA where service learning is well established, grant programs such as “Learn and Serve America” funded by the Corporation for National Service and “Integrating Service with Academic Study” funded by Campus Contact have

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been directed at recruiting faculty, students, and community partners to develop and implement service learning courses, Bringle and Hatcher (2000). This is just a small sample of the commitment to CBL internationally, and a flavour of international policy in this area.

Conclusion

The lack of activity in the construction industry does not have to be a mortal blow to organizing work placement modules for students. Work placement modules have been highlighted at meetings on the Bologna Process where an aspiration of improving employability through work placements embedded in study programmes has been supported, McMahon (2010). This paper has explored the possibility of using hybrid models of Community Based Learning as a possible solution to designing a work placement module on a Quantity Surveying course in the context of a devastated construction industry. The total construction industry output in 2010 was less than one third of its output at the peak in 2006. It is likely that future output will be lower still. The Society of Chartered Surveyors tender price index also shows that tenders are back at 1998 levels, Stafford (2011). We cannot ignore this data, and an innovative approach must be instigated going forward.

I have explored higher education policy relating to Community Based Learning from both a national and international perspective with positive results. Indeed there is unprecedented growth in this area in the USA where its usage is widespread. “After a heady decade of growth, the service learning movement appears ideally situated within higher education. It is used by a substantial number of faculty across an increasingly diverse range of academic courses.” (Butin, 2010 p.24), which sums up attitudes in the USA. Although this area is a relatively new concept in an Irish context, the DIT have showed a strong commitment to CBL with its community links programme and SLWC programme both of which have produced positive results over the last five years. Although the boom years were a time of affluence in the Construction Industry, there are many negative aspects with many examples of greed and irresponsibility. The scars of

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this greed are visible in the form of irrational planning, ghost estates and over development. It can be argued that many communities have suffered as a result of these excesses. With that in mind, a CBL module within courses related to the construction industry would be a fitting vehicle to redress this situation. Hurd (2006) argues that effective community based learning classes are those that use service and civic engagement to integrate and enhance academic learning, not to take the place of it. In my opinion, graduates from Quantity Surveying courses equipped with strong senses of civic responsibility can only bode well for the construction industry in the future.

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