



## A Case Study Regarding the Implementation of an Innovative Experiential Learning Portfolio in Human Resource Management

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Challenged by the obligation to introduce a work-integrated learning component into the National Diploma in Human Resource Management (HRM), on the one hand, and faced with a restraining national curriculum that does not provide for a credit bearing experiential learning component, on the other hand, called for innovative thinking. Realizing the importance of assisting unemployed students to seek employment prompted the design of the HRM experiential learning guide to start with a personal development plan. This part comprise the compilation of a curriculum vitae; drafting a covering letter; preparing for an interview; completing a basic personality profile; determining own decision-making style; and a diversity exercise. The experiential learning guide further contains outcomes based HRM-specific experiential learning requirements. The program consists of 18 main areas, grouped into four role clusters based on the work of the *Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices*. The experiential learning guidelines further specify the assessment criteria and present the learner with a number of portfolio compilation aids, checklists, employer detail and learner evaluation forms. This article reflects on the assessment of the portfolios of the first three groups of students that completed their experiential learning. The guide has subsequently been refined and the second edition is being implemented. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2004, 5(1), 35 - 44).

*Keywords:* Experiential learning guide; human resource management; personal development plan; outcomes based; role clusters; assessment; employers; innovation.

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In this paper we share with the readers of the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* an implementation of an experiential learning program. Following a contextual background description the specific vocational field context is outlined. Thereafter the development of the experiential learning guide is explained, followed by a discussion of the assessment of the first three sets of portfolios submitted. Firstly, a brief situational sketch.

The higher education sector in South Africa has been undergoing major change since 1994. Traditionally a binary system of universities and technikons existed, the latter known for career-focused education through a cooperative educational strategy. The New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education states in this regard that cooperative education is “used by the technikon sector to describe the integration of ‘productive work’ into a career-focused curriculum” (Department of Education [DoE] 2002, p. 12). Despite this distinction, many university programs have been career-focused, with, for example, clinical training, service learning, an internship

or articles, as an requirement for the conferring of a qualification or for professional registration. On the other hand, a study of the recognized technikon instructional programs (DoE, 2004a, 2004b) reveals that some 40% of the technikon programs do not include any experiential learning at all. As part of the current restructuring of higher education in South Africa a number of technikons are merging with universities to form comprehensive institutions, and the remaining technikons are changing to become universities of technology, individually or subsequent to a merger process. Technikon South Africa, which was the only distance education technikon in the country, has also been subjected to change, and on 1 January 2004 merged with the University of South Africa (Unisa) and the Distance Education Centre of Vista University (Vudec) to form a new comprehensive institution, Unisa (University of South Africa, 2004).

In 2000, following a six-year period of active promotion of cooperative education practices, the Senate of the former Technikon South Africa determined that all the institution’s

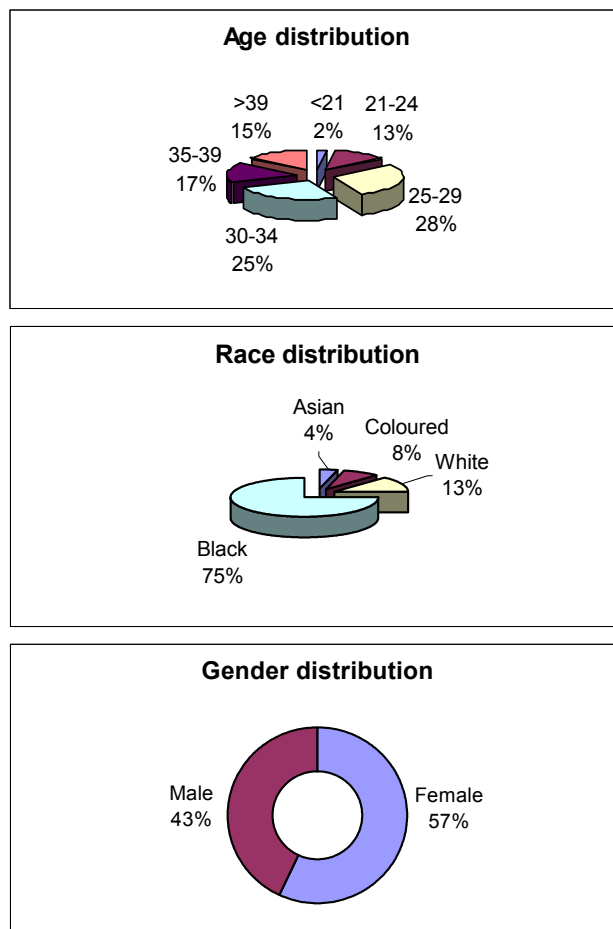
instructional offerings should include some form of experiential learning. This decision reflects the Senate’s intention to embrace the cooperative education character of technikon education. The relevant academic department for the National Diploma in Human Resource Management, the Programme Group: Human Resource Management, therefore decided to introduce an experiential learning component as part of the instructional offering Personnel Management III with effect from the January 2002 registration cycle (Technikon South Africa [TSA], 2004).

Until December 2003, the former technikon sector made use of a convenor technikon system. A technikon had been appointed as ‘convenor’ for a particular national qualification. All the technikons that offered the particular program formed a committee. Any requests for changes to the subject composition of a diploma had to be agreed to by all the technikons. The convenor technikon would then apply to the Department of Education to change and publish the new subject composition of the particular diploma. Although a few technikons included an experiential learning component in the National Diploma in Human Resource Management, the majority did not, and for this reason experiential learning does not represent a credit-bearing component of this diploma (DoE, 2004a).

From a perusal of the registration statistics of Technikon SA it appears that students seldom enroll for all the subjects at a particular year-level simultaneously. They tend instead to spread the subjects at a particular year-level over two to three calendar years or registration periods, taking an average of 2.3 subjects per year or registration period. Since 1998 Technikon South Africa offered three registration cycles annually ( the “academic year” duration: January to November, April to February, and October to June). In 2003, the institution reverted to two registrations, at the beginning and middle of the year respectively.

Departmental statistics reveals that for a number of years the average number of students enrolled for subjects offered by the Programme Group: Human Resource Management exceeds 5,000 students. The average age, gender and race distributions, according to the 2002/3 statistics, are presented in Figure 1. Registration records for 2002-2003 further reflect that 81% of students enrolled for this diploma are employed. The Programme Group: Human Resource Management therefore realized that the experiential learning program had to cater for both a majority of employed students, who probably had some work experience, and about 20% unemployed students.

The instructional offerings for Personnel Management I and II are service or subsidiary subjects for several other diplomas, such as the National Diplomas: Administrative Management; and Office Management and Technology. Personnel Management III further serves as second major for the National Diploma: Correctional Services Management. The majors for the National Diploma: Human Resource Management, are Personnel Management III and Business Economics III. The latter instructional offering is offered by another academic department. The sub-majors are Training Management II and Industrial Relations II. It was therefore decided to link the proposed experiential learning component to Personnel Management III, for only



**Figure 1** Age, gender and race distribution of the students of an average registration for the National Diploma: Human Resource Management at Unisa, Florida, South Africa

those students registered for the National Diploma: Human Resource Management.

The first section of this article provides the background for the case study. A cursory sketch of the changing higher education sector in South Africa is followed by the reason for innovation required regarding the introduction of an experiential learning component into a program. Practical constraints were briefly outlined. The next section provides the reader with an understanding of the scope of human resource management, and outlines the process of setting education and training standards.

### The Scope of Human Resource Management

A standards generating process for human resources management and practices commenced in April 1998, with a plenary of stakeholders (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004a). At the second plenary of the education, training and development stakeholders in the sub-field of HRM held on 13 August 1998, a steering committee was established to generate education and training standards, according to the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA) process and

requirements. The steering committee concluded that HRM is a sub-field of Business, Commerce and Management Studies, which falls under National Standards Body (NSB) No 3. The steering committee adopted an eight-component model (see Figure 2) based on the standard-setting methodology developed by the Education, Training and Development Practices (ETDP) project.

The components of the standard-setting cycle illustrated in Figure 2 follow cyclically, returning to the first component. However, the components also run in parallel once the process has begun; for instance, the first component (establishing the political and technical processes to undertake standard setting) is present throughout the cycle. Also, components 5 and 6 (determining the standards required and writing the standards) at times precede or run in parallel with work on components 3 and 4 (developing the qualification structure and developing progression paths).

The steering committee realized the impact of the changing environment on the scope, systems and roles of HRM (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004b). Whereas HRM (and other organizational functions such as production and finance) is found within a ‘silo’ in more traditional organizations (see Figure 3), more advanced organizations are adopting multi-disciplinary project teams with the HRM practitioner as member of or consultant to teams (see figure 4). Moreover, line managers are increasingly performing roles and functions traditionally performed by HRM practitioners, with the latter serving as consultants to line management.

A third plenary of the standards generating process for human resources management and practices was held on 23 March 1999 and a fourth on 14 February 2000. SAQA further accepted the steering committee as the SGB for HRM (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004a). A series of events followed, including the approval of a document entitled “A Framework for Qualifications for Professionals and Practitioners in People Management Processes” at the eighth SGB meeting on 19 June 2001 (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2001).

The process leading up to the approval included consideration of a study commissioned by the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations (Brewster, Farndale, & Van Ommeren, 2000). This study about international human resource competencies and professional standards, incorporated inputs from 22 countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States of America and Venezuela. The approved framework document described the scope of HRM and practices in terms of four role clusters, illustrated in Table 1, that are related to people management processes (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2001, pp. 3–4):

Figure 5 indicates the workflow links between the core processes of the four HRM role clusters. The strategic HRM planning (role cluster 1) has to be aligned and

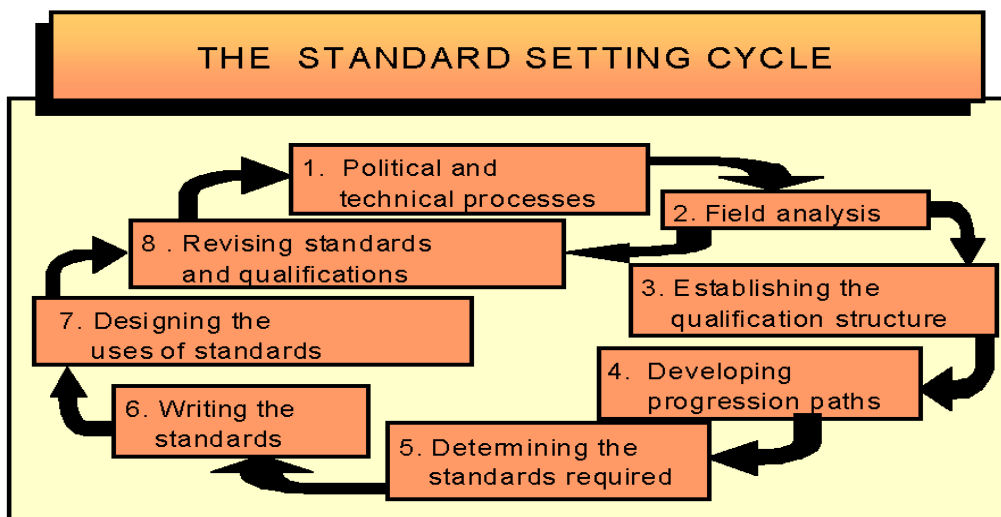
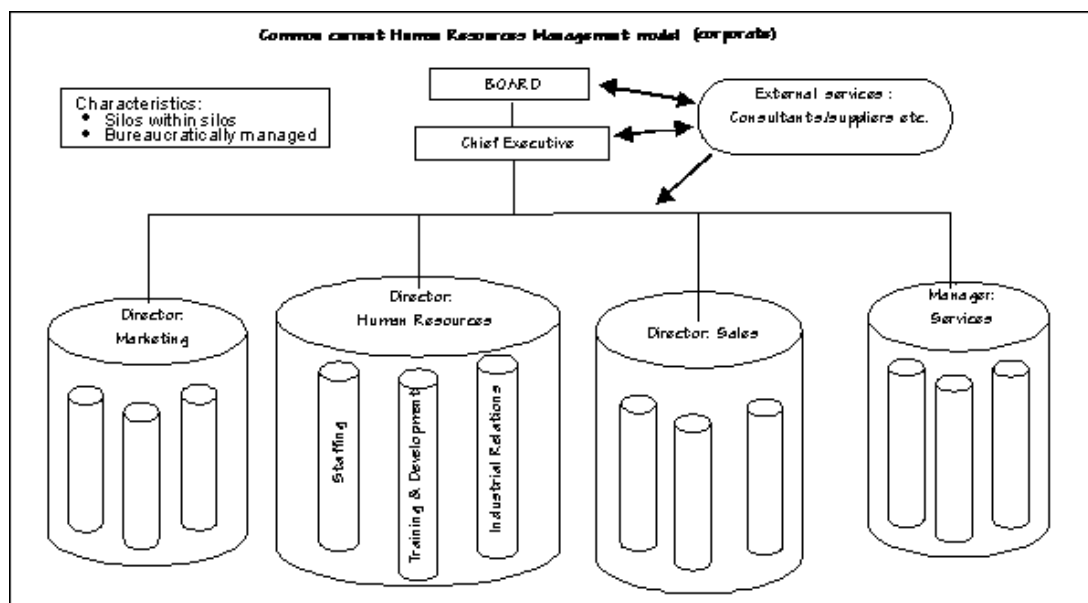


Figure 2

The standard-setting cycle (Source: Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004b).



**Figure 3**

The more traditional functional organisational setting (Source: Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004b)

integrated with the overall organizational strategy, which gives rise to policies and preferred practices for the organization. These policies are then operationalized (role cluster 2) by means of delivery processes to acquire, develop and utilize people. Next, the labor and employee relations (role cluster 3) need to be established, maintained and improved in accordance with legal requirements. Finally, administrative processes and systems (role cluster 4) support all the aforementioned.

A number of supportive generic competencies, outside the ‘pure’ HRM and practices field, were further identified (Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2001, p. 4). These generic competencies also are presented in Table 1.

The academic department concerned carefully considered these developments and decided to supplement the existing National Diploma: Human Resource Management curriculum together with an experiential learning component covering the four role clusters mentioned in this section. The development and content of the experiential learning component is outlined in the next section.

### The Development and Content of the Experiential Learning Guide for Human Resource Management

The experiential learning guide (TSA, 2003f) was designed to consist of two parts, namely a personal development plan (PDP) and a career focused component. The latter, which entails the compilation of a portfolio of evidence, consists of two options, discussed hereafter (TSA, Unisa, 2003a).

#### Personal Development Plan (PDP)

The compulsory Personal Development Plan (TSA, Unisa, 2003b), provides students with valuable information on how to go about finding employment, and guides them to self-knowledge. Students must complete the PDP before beginning with the career-focused component. The PDP component covers:

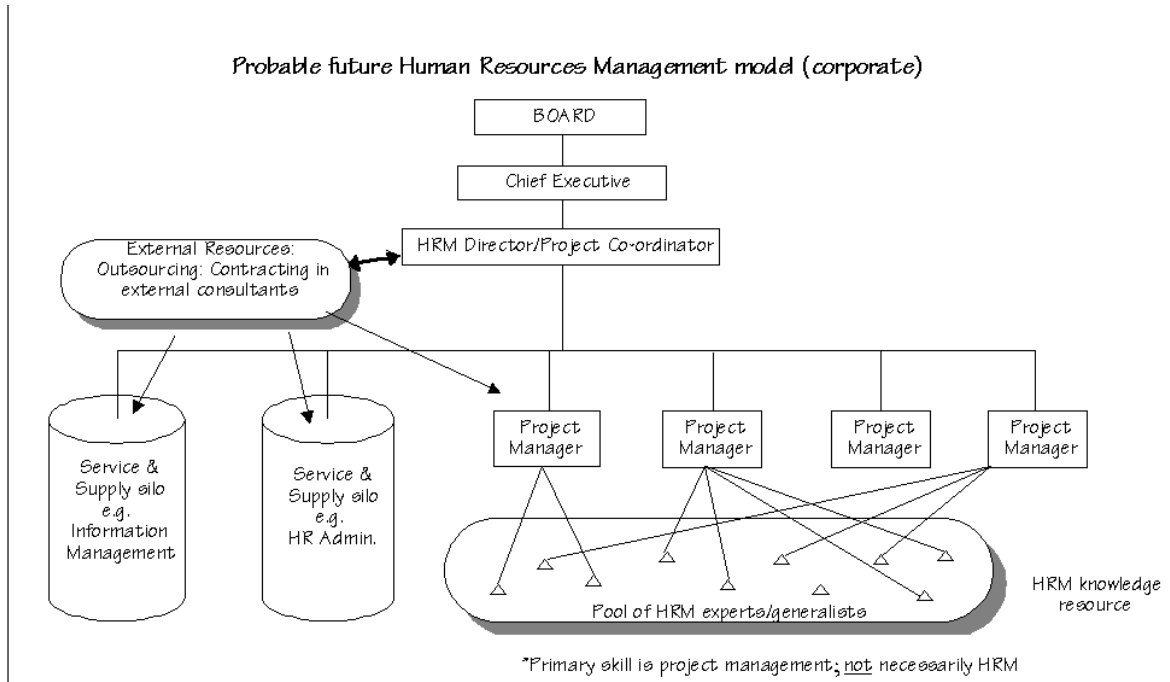
- Compiling a curriculum vitae
- Selecting a job advertisement to which to respond and writing an appropriate covering letter for this advertisement
- Obtaining the relevant application form and completing it
- Preparing for the selection interview
- Reflecting on the student’s own personality profile, as well as that of a person with whom the student has had difficulty getting along
- Determining own decision-making style, and
- Raising diversity awareness by means of a dedicated exercise.

#### Practical Options and a Portfolio of Evidence

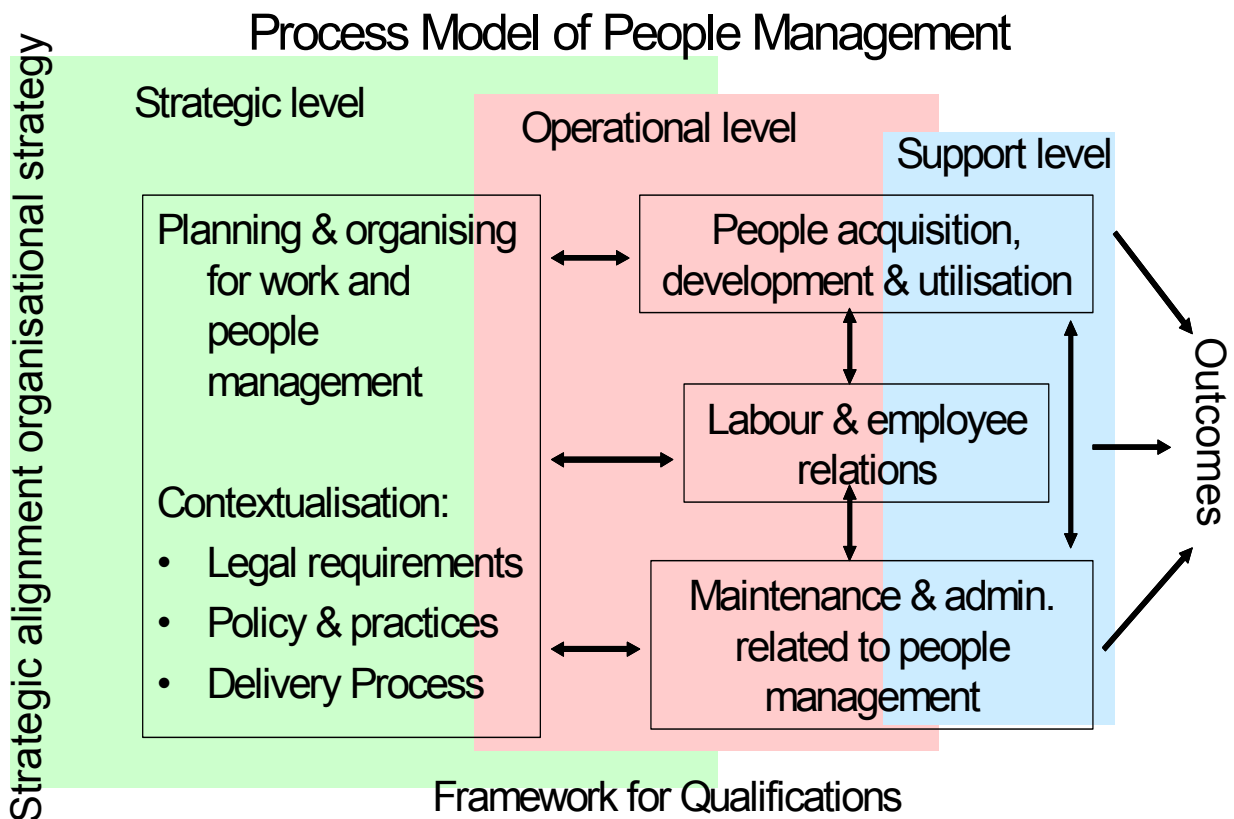
Because job opportunities are scarce and many organizations are reluctant to employ people who have no work experience, the experiential learning had to cater for both employed students who probably had some work experience and unemployed students. For this reason, two options were included.

**Table 1**  
Role clusters of human resource management and practices

<i>Roles</i>	<i>Practices</i>
1. Planning and organising for work and people management	Strategic planning (including employment equity planning) Organisational design Formulating policies Developing systems and procedures (information, compensation, administration)
2. People acquisition, development and utilisation	Staffing the organisation Motivating and leading employees Employee training and development Career management Performance management Utilising and managing diversity Managing organisational change, transformation and development
3. Establishing and improving labour and employee relations	Maintaining and improving conditions of service Communicating and interacting with employees and their representatives Interacting and negotiating with trade unions and employee representatives Drafting and implementing collective agreements Managing conflict, co-operation and industrial democracy (including disciplinary and grievance matters, dispute resolution, industrial action, employee participation and union/management collaboration in maintaining fairness and employment equity)
4. Maintenance and administration related to people management	Compensation management Managing information Administering pay and benefit systems Managing budgets and finances related to human resources management and practices Reporting on human resources management and practices issues and processes Evaluating the quality and value added by human resources management and practices Research related to human resources management and practices
<i>Generic Competencies</i>	Project management Consulting competencies Entrepreneurship Self management Communication competencies Facilitation competencies Presentation competencies Competencies for transforming groups into self-directed, mutually controlled, high-performing work teams Trans-cultural competencies Mediation and arbitration competencies Financial competencies Problem-solving Diagnostic competencies



**Figure 4**  
The Emerging multi-disciplinary organizational setting (source, Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices, 2004b)



**Figure 5**  
Workflow links between the core processes of the four human resource management role clusters (source Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management and Practices, 2001, p. 6)

#### *Option 1 (Technikon South Africa, Unisa, 2003c)*

To assist students to secure the necessary experiential learning opportunity or opportunities, a letter of introduction as well as a suggested experiential learning program are included. These can be presented to the organization at which the student will be conducting her/his experiential learning. Ideally, the best choice of organization would be one that affords the student experience in the Human Resource Department, the Training Department, as well as the Labour Relations Department because the experiential learning covers all these functional areas.

#### *Option 2 (Technikon South Africa, Unisa, 2003d)*

Students who are unemployed and/or unable to find employment may select option 2. For this option, a student needs to contact any organization/institution and ask to observe a certain aspect of the organization's operations, such as the induction program, or ask for a copy of their application form to evaluate as part of the experiential learning. Students who select this option may approach a number of organizations to observe as many aspects of the human resource field as possible.

#### *Portfolio of Evidence*

For both options 1 and 2, the student needs to submit a portfolio containing evidence of her/his day-to-day work at the organization and/or exposure to the various aspects of the organization's human resource function. The portfolio is a collection of different types of evidence that relate to work being assessed. It therefore indicates the areas of exposure, and reveals the application of human resource practices in the organization(s) concerned. It provides documentary proof that the student has been exposed to certain human resource aspects or that s/he has obtained certain skills/experience.

The experiential learning program is based on the work of the Standards Generating Body: Human Resources Management & Practices outlined in the previous section. The program consists of 18 main areas (TSA, Unisa, 2003e), grouped into the following four role clusters:

##### *Role Cluster 1*

###### *Planning and Organizing for Work and People*

- Organizational theory and structure
- A human resource, labor relations or training policy.

##### *Role Cluster 2*

###### *People Acquisition, Development and Utilization*

- Orientation
- Job analysis
- Recruitment and selection
- Training and development
- Performance management
- Managing diversity

- Change management
- Motivation, culture and leadership, and
- Career management.

##### *Role Cluster 3*

###### *Labor and Employee Relations*

- Trade union and employee participation in the organization
- Collective bargaining and industrial action
- Conditions of service, and
- Disciplinary and grievance procedures.

##### *Role Cluster 4*

###### *Maintenance and Administration Related to People Management*

- HR information systems
- Compensation management, and
- HR budgets.

Each of the main areas is subdivided into various sub-areas, arriving at 59 in total, and provided students with guidelines regarding their proposed experiential learning. In addition, they supplied 23 examples of the required evidence, documentation or recommended exposure. Students are required to submit reports, supported by relevant documentation, on all 59 sub-areas. Each report should consist of a critical discussion, including strengths and weaknesses identified or observed, as well as conclusions and recommendations. Students are further required to reflect on their learning. In addition, the portfolio must include particulars of the organization(s) where they gained experience, as well as an evaluation by the person who supervised their learning period. Students are provided with the assessment criteria (form) used to assess their portfolios. The assessment form differentiates between adequate and inadequate performance, which is determined by the awarding of ratings on the following grounds: no/little evidence submitted (rating of 1), insufficient evidence submitted (rating of 2), sufficient evidence submitted (rating of 3) and substantial evidence submitted (rating of 4). Descriptors are given for each of the eight areas being assessed, followed by an overall assessment. The experiential learning guide further contains various pro formas and checklists to assist students in compiling their portfolios.

#### **Reflection on the Assessment of the First Three Batches of Portfolios Submitted**

During 2003 a total of 210 portfolios submitted were assessed by the relevant academic staff. The portfolios were submitted by students who registered during the three 2002 registration cycles. Portfolios varied substantially in scope, from a few pages to five lever-arch files. The majority were in excess of 120 pages. The format and content, despite the guidelines and pro forma, varied substantially. Many contained a table of contents with proper dividers and page numbers, while the content of others were haphazardly

arranged. In some portfolios each sub-area was clearly demarcated, with the report appearing first, followed by the supporting documentation. In other cases the reports on sub-areas were grouped together sequentially and contained references to the supporting documentation, which appeared after the last report. In a few cases the 'reports' (cryptic one- or two-liners) were squeezed into the option checklist, accompanied by some relevant documentation. A few portfolios contained supporting documentation only, with no discussion. The PDP was omitted in a few cases, whereas in others only the PDP was submitted. In a few cases students used an inappropriate business-document format and naively repeated this throughout. Some submitted the manual itself, having filled in the questionnaires and answers in the manual, and having supplied no table of contents, introduction, reports, or supporting documentation. Where there was no space to write anything, answers were simply omitted. Names and student numbers were not provided on the cover of the manual, and the assessor had to look at the back of the evaluation form, where the student's name appears, in order to know whose portfolio it was. If the student had not chosen option 1, for which an employer evaluation was required, the assessor would not have known the identity of the learner. Some portfolios were submitted in an assignment cover, but as unbound, loose pages. In some instances, an incorrect student number was supplied.

Generally the sub-area reports tended to be descriptive of practices, with little indication of reflection on learning. Some students clearly highlighted strengths and weaknesses (critical evaluation of application of human resource practices), but many did not. The assessor was required to read the entire portfolio carefully to avoid unfairly penalizing the student, and this proved to be a very tedious and time-consuming exercise. Very few portfolios contained recommendations. However, when recommendations were made they tended to be vague, for example in the case of suggestions regarding corrective action to be taken in response to deviations from the Labour Relations Act and/or the Basic Conditions of Employment Act.

In some cases students were unable to gain exposure to particular sub-areas and improvised. Other just left these sub-areas out. A few students are serving jail sentences, but nevertheless submitted portfolios. They obtained documentation through family members or warders and critically reflected on this.

In terms of presentation, most students submitted their portfolios in a file, some very professionally. A few submitted nothing more than a pile of papers. Most portfolios were typed (as required), but a few were neatly handwritten. A few students made use of technikon assignment stationery. Most copied the proforma provided, although some had torn the pro forma from their experiential learning guides. A few students used both option 1 and 2 checklists, which caused some confusion. Most students, however, made additional copies of the relevant checklists. In a few instances the checklists, which serve as verification by the employer representative (supervisor) of the exposure of the student, were not signed.

Figure 6 reflects the statistics of the 210 portfolios submitted. Whereas the registration records had reflected an 81% employment rate, only 71% submitted option 1 portfolios. The majority (81%) of the option 1 submissions obtained an overall rating of 'adequate' rating, with only 8% receiving a rating of 4 for 'substantial evidence submitted'. None of the option 2 submissions obtained a rating of 4. Although a smaller percentage, the majority of option 2 submissions (65%) obtained an overall rating of 'adequate'.

The halo effect was quite evident when it came to employer ratings. Outstanding (substantial evidence of behavior) and standard (sufficient evidence of behavior) performance ratings predominated, with hardly any underperformance (insufficient evidence of behavior) or unacceptable performance (no evidence of behavior) ratings. In some cases there was no correlation between the assessor ratings and those of the employer. A few students performed their own assessments.

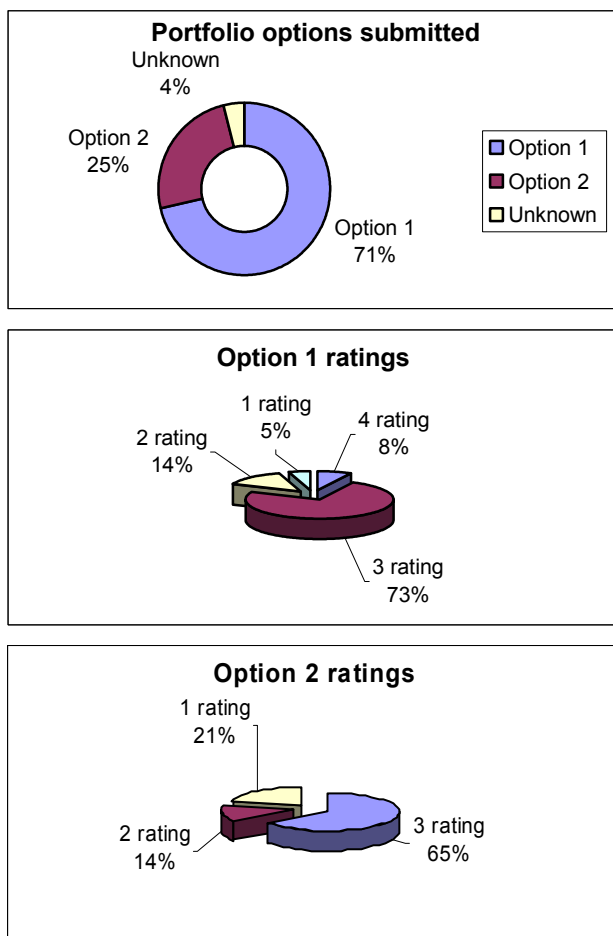
Although Unisa does not directly engage with employers, the following are facilitated by means of the portfolio, in a distance education fashion:

- The student presents the employer with a request and proposed structured experiential learning
- The student requests the employer to fill out an employer particulars form
- The student presents the employer with a pro forma assessment form, and
- The university formally thank the head of department of the student for enabling the experiential learning, simultaneously promoting the practice of cooperative education.

More than 200 employers, see Figure 7, participated in the experiential learning of the 2002-registrations. Herewith some indication of the composition of the percentage breakdown indicated in Figure 7

*Governmental* (14%) includes departments such as Health, Home Affairs, Justice, Labour, Public Works, to mention a few and even The Presidency. *Provincial Government* (6%) includes departments in KwaZulu Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West and Gauteng. *Local Government* (13%) among others include: Buffalo City, New Castle, Oudtshoorn, Ekhurhuleni, etc. *Education* (7%) includes central and provincial educational departments as well as tertiary institutions. *Defense* (5%), *Correctional Services* (2%) and *South Africa Police Services* (13%) are spread throughout the country. *Mining* (6%) includes Anglo, De Beers, Impala Platinum, Kloof and Sasol. *Manufacturing* (9%), *Service* (15%) and *Private* (10%) are broad categories that include organizations ranging from big national providers, such as Eskom & Telkom South Africa (6% of total) to small manufacturers. Some examples are Ford, Gedore Tools, Dulux, Tongaat & Hulett Sugar, Hirsch's Appliances, Illovo Sugar, Deloitte & Touche, Price Waterhouse & Coopers, South Africa Airports Company, Automobile Association of South Africa, Metropolitan Health, Mondi, Pick a Pay, Bulktrans, Nu World, PG Glass, Foschini, and PG Bison Manufacturers.





**Figure 6**  
Statistics of the portfolios assessed during 2003 (N=210)

The majority of portfolios contained comprehensive PDPs. However, several students experienced difficulty in compiling the personality profiles, and appeared not to have understood what was required. Many students did not connect the vertical lines in the personality profile questionnaire or did not know how to fill it in. Some wrote out the whole word instead of making a cross to indicate the appropriate answer.

In many cases the cultural diversity questionnaire simply reflected a description either of the students or of other people in general, but did not state how they differed from others. Either similarities or differences were provided, but not both. Answers tended to be vague.

For the interview preparation, whereas open-ended questions would have been more suitable, students tended to ask closed questions, such as: Does this organization provide training? Are there any areas you need to brush up on? Is there succession planning? Have you done the best work you are capable of? Do you have any skills? Furthermore, vague or poorly formulated questions were asked, such as: What do you think are my choices to work at this organization? Instead of identifying aspects that are important during the interview, students focused on aspects before the interview, for example the importance of knowing the time and location of the interview. Instead of formulating whole questions to be asked during the

interview, some students provided statements or keywords followed by a question mark, for example, knowledge? skills? Some formulated multiple questions in one question, and one student stated that he had no questions to ask during an interview, having found out about the position beforehand.

In some cases the checklists provided were diligently ticked, as if everything was in order. However, some items were in fact lacking, even though this was not reflected on the checklist. In other cases application forms were included, but not filled in. In a few cases original certificates instead of copies were included in the portfolio.

The deadline for the submission of portfolios of the first registration of 2003 has been on 31 January 2003. Although assessment is well under way, it is too early to draw comparisons yet. The portfolios of students that registered during the second registration of 2003 are due on 31 May 2004. This will be the first group to receive the second edition of the experiential learning guide.

### Lessons, Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper serves to illustrate an innovative introduction of an experiential learning component to an academic program. Both the South African higher educational conditions, as well as the occupational field developments were taken into consideration. The composition of the experiential learning guide is explained and the results of the first batch of portfolios assessed described. This last section shares some lessons, make a few recommendations and draw some conclusions.

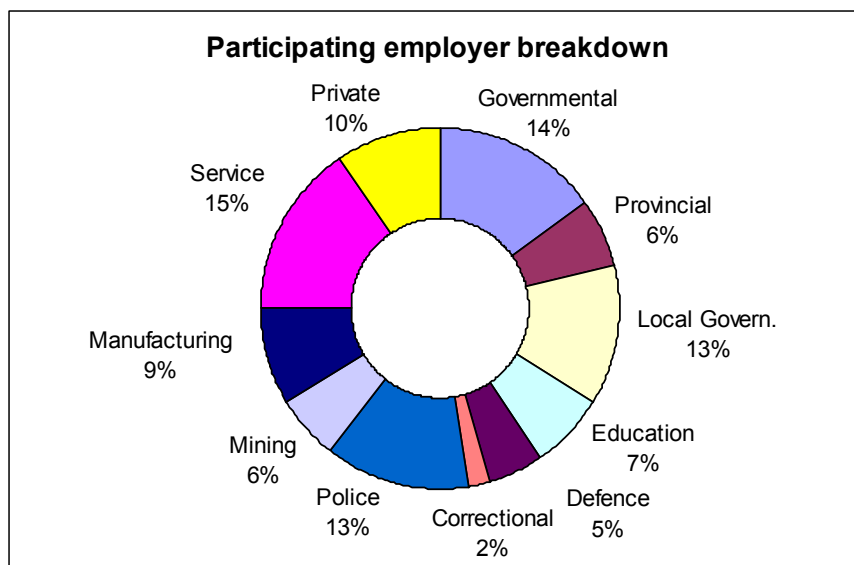
Since the first edition of the experiential learning guide contained only 23 examples of portfolio evidence or recommended exposure, a concerted effort was made to supplement the second edition substantially. The experiential learning guide was further experienced as rather repetitive and confusing. To overcome this, the second edition (TSA, Unisa, 2003f) was extensively cross-referenced.

Because it was found that few portfolios contained a reflection on learning or a critical evaluation of the application of human resource management practices, and because hardly any recommendations were made, the second edition draw the attention of students to these criteria in of the experiential learning guide.

The developmental value of the completion of this experiential learning needs to be researched. It needs to be ascertained whether and to what extent the experiential learning contributes to competence-building in terms of the HRM and practices standards.

Consideration should perhaps be given to appointing registered professionals and practitioners as mentors for students. In addition to guiding the student's competence development, these mentors could possibly also undertake the assessment of the portfolios.

In light of the discontinuation of the convenor technikon system and the merger with Unisa it may be feasible to change the curriculum so as to develop the experiential learning into a credit-bearing component of the diploma. This would, however, present unemployed



**Figure 7**  
Breakdown of participating employers (N=200)

students with major difficulties. It may be feasible to couple the experiential learning component with a learnership, which could assist both unemployed students and employers wishing to engage employees on a developmental program.

The Department of Education’s funding formula for technikon-type education does not make adequate provision for proper facilitation of experiential learning. The funding formula for distance education is a further obstacle to the facilitation of experiential learning. The existing approach to experiential learning in HRM does not make provision for formative assessment. The student gets one opportunity to submit a portfolio and, based on what he/she submits, does or does not obtain a certificate. The volume of assessment does not allow for much feedback.

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