

# A broader approach to work skills training necessary - Coughlan

Educators are searching for solutions to bridge the gap between tertiary education and employment. Innovative methods have come to fore in developing workplace skills training and helping graduates to find employment.



Dr Felicity Coughlan

In the wake of rising graduate unemployment and a shrinking number of work-based placements for students, career focussed programmes have been introduced to help students develop work-ready skills and connect them with prospective employers for part- and full-time placements.

Dr Felicity Coughlan, the director of the Independent Institute of Education (IIE), which is responsible for the academic leadership and governance of education and training on more than 20 registered higher education campuses throughout the country, says a far wider approach to work skills training is required.

## Practical application of content-related skills

Coughlan says by increasingly incorporating skills such as cooperative learning in groups into educational institutions' assessments, improvements have been made to the whole system of teaching and learning which is already helping to contribute to far better work-ready candidates.

One of the key areas of concern voiced by potential employers is graduates' ability to work in teams that are multi-skilled, multi-aged and even multi-regional.

"Feedback from employers is that some graduates seem to struggle with time management, office etiquette and lack the workplace required communication skills needed for negotiation, presentation and conflict resolution.

"We have sought ways to ensuring our graduates get opportunities during their studies to apply content-related skills to practical situations and have even extended this to helping them with their CV's and preparation for workplace interviews," says Coughlan.

## **Varsity College initiatives**

One example of an initiative to fill the gap between tertiary studies and the workplace is the IIE's eight Varsity College campuses across the country which have established career centres and successfully placed more than 3320 students in part-time work during their studies.

"The campuses have created a partnership between local employers and ambitious students that is hard to beat in the pursuit of successful employment for new graduates.

"By directly addressing what employers are looking for while at the same time exposing students to the entrepreneurial ideas behind many of these employment opportunities, new graduates can leave our institutions with a solid qualification, some work experience and an ability to tackle the opportunities that await them beyond graduation," says Coughlan.

## **Valuable work experience through career centres**

Trish Trompeter, Varsity College's National Career Centre manager says the effort and investment has paid off over the past two years. "The students gain valuable work experiences during their studies and over 300 have entered into permanent positions through the centres." She says employers - which range from event organisers and promotion companies to call centres - work directly with the career centres in their search for students. The students are screened by the career centres for a suitable fit with the position offered.

"The career centres are useful to employers in that they can remove much of the risk for the employers and we can see their satisfaction from their continued support of the centres for their ongoing casual labour requirements.

"We believe the centres provide a win-win solution for both employers and our students. The students benefit especially as they are both able to earn while studying as well as to master workplace skills. Their work experience also allows them to differentiate themselves from others with similar qualifications for future employers," says Trompeter.

She says the value of part-time work extends beyond the money earned in that it allows students to master general skills that future employers want, even if these might not be in the exact environment associated with their studies. The career centres were started two years ago in the wake of the general economic decline which made jobs harder to come by as well as the more complex legal and regulatory business environment.

For more information, go to [www.iie.ac.za](http://www.iie.ac.za).

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