

PROFESSIONAL WORK EXPERIENCES OF RECENT AUSTRALIAN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY GRADUATES

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing expectation amongst students and employers in professional fields such as Information Technology (IT) that university studies will provide sufficient skills to enable graduates to find employment in the industry. However, little research, particularly in the IT field, has been carried out in following graduates into their professional practice. The professional work experiences of recent Australian IT graduates are the focus of this thesis. Professional work experiences are defined in this thesis as the parts of a graduate's work that cover professional or non-technical skills such as communication, teamwork etc. In the IT education literature, there are a number of studies on IT technical skills but few on the non-technical aspects of professional work and those studies focus on the employers' viewpoints. IT graduates' viewpoints on the challenges they face at work, the typical professional skills requirements of their practice and how they acquired or developed them, the elements of their university study that are relevant to their work professional skills requirements and how well their studies prepared them to meet the professional needs of their practice are investigated in this study. An understanding of what the professional work experiences of recent Information Technology graduates in professional practice tell us about their university studies is sought by this thesis. Then the role of universities, employers, professional associations and graduates themselves in the professional preparation of IT graduates are examined.

Some key ideas from grounded theory (theoretical sampling, constant comparison, theoretical saturation, open coding, axial coding and selective coding) are used for data collection and analysis. Interviews and qualitative online surveys are the research methods used to capture recent Australian IT graduates' professional work experiences.

It is shown in this research that IT graduates face a number of challenges when they first enter employment. Major categories of professional skills that IT graduates believe they require for their work are communication, time management, teamwork, working with people, working across cultures, project management, business skills and personal attributes. The study found that graduates' professional skills are developed in multiple ways including academic, social, personal, professional and other work experiences or a combination of these. IT graduates in the study believe the most useful components of their

university studies are work placements and “real life like” projects. The perceived lack of preparation of IT graduates to face new, unfamiliar, unknown or unknowable situations is highlighted by the study. The findings demonstrate the complexity involved in the development of professional skills, how and where they are developed and who (university or employers or graduates) assumes responsibility for their development. Other findings suggest that some professional skills can be developed only outside the university studies.

Accordingly, it is argued in this thesis that the development of professional skills is a distributed responsibility and different players (professional faculties, employers, professional associations and graduates) have different contributions to make to the development of these skills. It is proposed that universities cannot be solely responsible for developing work ready IT graduates. It is suggested that universities take responsibility for preparing graduates to learn how to learn in uncertain situations, assisting with the graduates’ development of knowledge and awareness of work environments and helping in the graduates’ development of initial job expectations. It is argued that IT faculties need frameworks beyond graduate attributes in their degrees for the development and inclusion of specific professional skills for the IT profession; Employers should move away from thinking that adding topics to the IT curriculum would solve all their concerns about the lack of professional work skills in IT graduates and it is suggested that they take responsibility for training graduates when they commence work, facilitating workplace learning, increasing workplace socialisation and working with universities to provide work placement opportunities for students. It is urged that graduates to take personal responsibility for developing their professional skills both within and outside university studies. It is proposed that professional associations take responsibility for increasing IT students’ exposure to the IT industry through scholarships, research and job ready programs.

Given the results of this research and its recommendations, there is a need to raise the issue of the management of expectations of employers, universities and graduates of each other. It is clear that these may need to change before employer and academic concerns about skills of new IT graduates can be addressed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xiii
LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS	xiv
GLOSSARY	xv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Research background	1
1.1 Research on graduate skills.....	2
1.2 Research on relevance of curriculum to industry needs	3
1.3 Focus on graduate perspectives.....	5
1.4 IT stakeholder expectations.....	6
1.5 Research problem.....	7
1.5.1 Research question	7
1.5.2 Research domain.....	8
1.6 Research motivation.....	8
1.7 Significance of this research	10
1.8 Thesis overview.....	11
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	15
2.0 Chapter overview	15
2.1 Introduction	15
2.2 Australian definition of the term <i>Information Technology</i> and key stakeholders for IT education	17
2.3 Definition of Professional Skills and Professional work experiences.....	20
2.4 Historical background to global and Australian IT education and profession.....	22

2.4.1	IT Syllabi.....	22
2.4.2	IT skills and employment	25
2.5	Some issues in Information Technology education	26
2.5.1	Mismatch in expectations	26
2.5.2	Emerging work practices and the ability of educational institutions to meet the requirements of the industry	32
2.6	Employer perspectives of university graduates	35
2.6.1	Lack of professional skills	36
2.6.2	Some professional (non-technical) skills required.....	37
2.7	University perspectives of teaching and learning in IT.....	42
2.8	Industry relevant university curricula	43
2.9	Professional association perspectives.....	44
2.9.1	Lack of industry training/professional development of current staff	45
2.9.2	IT skills forecast and ACS initiatives.....	45
2.10	General graduate perspectives	48
2.11	IT specific graduate perspectives.....	53
2.12	Transition from education to workplace.....	54
2.13	Related research in other professional areas	55
2.14	The relevance of learning experiences.....	58
2.15	Summary of the focus of this research on professional skills and graduate perspectives	60
2.16	Research Questions	60
2.17	Conclusion.....	61
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY		63
3.0	Chapter overview	63
3.1	Research design considerations.....	63
3.2	Research methodology	63
3.3	Theory and its meaning in the context of this research	70
3.4	Research method	72
3.4.1	Introduction to grounded theory.....	73
3.4.2	Constant comparison technique.....	75
3.4.3	Theoretical comparisons	76
3.4.4	Theoretical sampling	77
3.4.5	Data collection methods	78
3.4.6	Thematic analysis.....	80
3.4.7	Summary of this study's approach	81
3.5	Research procedures	85
3.5.1	Selection and exclusion criteria for participants	85
3.5.2	Recruitment procedures	86
3.5.3	Sampling techniques and size for this study	86

3.5.4	Profile of participants	88
3.5.5	Interview and Online Surveys	91
3.6	Trustworthiness of this research.....	96
3.6.1	Credibility.....	97
3.6.2	Multiple sources of data and triangulation.....	98
3.6.3	Negative case analysis	99
3.6.4	Transferability or applicability	99
3.6.5	Dependability.....	100
3.6.6	Confirmability	101
3.6.7	Limitations of this study	102
3.7	Application of ideas from grounded theory data analysis to this study	102
3.8	Open coding process	104
3.9	Axial coding process.....	106
3.10	Selective coding process.....	107
3.10.1	Theoretical sensitivity	110
3.11	Conclusion.....	111
CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS		112
4.0	Chapter overview	112
4.1	THEME 1- Professional skills IT graduates believe they require at IT Workplaces	113
4.2	Communication skills.....	114
4.2.1	Appropriate use of language for different purposes.....	116
4.2.2	Communication with senior colleagues and people from different cultures.....	119
4.2.3	Communication while working in a group	119
4.2.4	Timing of communication in project work	120
4.3	Time management.....	121
4.3.1	IT Project time management in an international work environment.....	121
4.3.2	Use of appropriate time management strategies	122
4.3.3	Ability to handle time management challenges both as an individual and as a team ...	123
4.4	Teamwork skills	124
4.4.1	Understanding different team structures and composition.....	124
4.4.2	Cultural issues and other strategies that affect teamwork.....	126
4.4.3	Meeting management.....	128
4.5	Working with people.....	128
4.5.1	Managing Expectations	128
4.5.2	Professional Relationships.....	132
4.5.3	Conflict resolution and negotiation.....	134
4.5.4	Human resources (HR)	135
4.5.5	Customer Service.....	135
4.6	Working across cultures	137
4.6.1	Ability to work with people from different cultures	138
4.6.2	Awareness of cultural barriers	139
4.7	Project management	139
4.7.1	Managing processes, constraints and people in IT projects.....	140
4.7.2	Use of creative design skills in product and documentation development	142

4.7.3	Understanding the big picture and complexity of IT projects.....	142
4.7.4	Risk Management.....	142
4.7.5	Adherence to standards.....	144
4.7.6	Problem solving.....	144
4.8	Business skills	147
4.8.1	Knowledge of organisational procedures.....	147
4.8.2	Understanding business needs	147
4.8.3	Marketing skills	149
4.8.4	Leadership skills	150
4.8.5	Information Management	150
4.9	Personal attributes	151
4.9.1	Adaptability.....	151
4.9.2	Self-assessment.....	152
4.9.3	Self-confidence.....	152
4.9.4	Work enthusiasm and ethics	153
4.9.5	Ability to learn from mistakes	153
4.10	Relationships across professional skill categories.....	154
4.10.1	Relationship between communication skills and other professional skills.....	155
4.10.2	Relationship between time management and other professional skills.....	155
4.10.3	Relationship between teamwork skills and other professional skills.....	156
4.10.4	Relationship between working with people and other professional skills	156
4.10.5	Relationship between working across cultures and other professional skills	158
4.10.6	Relationship between project management and other professional skills.....	158
4.10.7	Relationship between business skills and other professional skills	158
4.11	Summary	158
CHAPTER 5 THE RELEVANCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES TO PROFESSIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.....		160
5.0	Chapter overview	160
5.1	THEME 2 - Sources of Professional Skills for IT Graduates.....	160
5.1.1	Academic sources	162
5.1.2	Social sources	162
5.1.3	Work experience.....	163
5.1.4	Personal experiences.....	163
5.2	THEME 3 - Most useful aspects of University studies that IT graduates believe contribute towards professional skills development.....	165
5.2.1	Some recommendations from graduates for improvement of university IT courses	169
5.3	Multiple relationships between the most useful aspects of University studies and the major professional skills IT graduates believe they need for work	170
5.4	THEME 4 - Challenges IT graduates believe they face at workplaces.....	171
5.5	THEME 5 - Graduate perceptions of differences between university and the workplace in the application of professional skills.....	176
5.6	Graduate reaction to University's preparation for the workforce.....	179
5.7	Primary concern of IT graduates in this study	181
5.8	Key findings from data analysis.....	186
5.8.1	Micro level key findings	186

5.8.2	Meso level key findings.....	188
5.9	Implications of findings	188
5.10	Conclusion.....	192
CHAPTER 6 THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT PLAYERS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL SKILLS OF IT GRADUATES.....		193
6.0	Chapter overview	193
6.1	Preparation of IT graduates for a supercomplex world	196
6.2	Universities cannot be solely responsible for developing work ready IT graduates.....	199
6.2.1	Foci of university studies.....	199
6.2.2	IT graduates have a personal responsibility to develop their professional skills both within and outside University studies	200
6.2.3	What universities could be responsible for.....	201
6.3	IT faculties need frameworks beyond graduate attributes in their degrees for the development and inclusion of specific professional skills for the IT profession	226
6.3.1	Generic graduate attributes should not be an add-on to existing courses	232
6.3.2	Cultural awareness and ability to work with cultures is a skill needed in IT but is often absent from graduate attributes.....	233
6.4	Employers should move from thinking that adding topics to the IT curriculum would solve their concerns about the lack of professional work skills in IT graduates.....	234
6.4.1	Curriculum changes alone cannot address the work readiness of IT graduates.....	235
6.4.2	Development of some professional skills takes time and new IT graduates are learners in workplaces.....	238
6.4.3	What employers could be responsible for.....	243
6.5	Certain IT work skills are difficult to develop except on real world sites	251
6.5.1	Work placement and experience opportunities offer opportunities for the development of professional skills.....	252
6.5.2	The role of professional associations in the professional skills development of IT graduates	257
6.6	Enhancing IT student learning and learning outcomes	264
6.7	Conclusion.....	266
CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION		269
7.0	Chapter overview	269
7.1	Achievement of the research aims	270
7.1.1	Answer to the main research question	270
7.2	Contributions to Body of Knowledge	274
7.2.1	Contribution to IT education and higher education literature	274
7.2.2	Implications for Practice.....	275
7.3	Limitations of this research.....	276
7.4	Future Research Opportunities	277
7.4.1	Holistic view of IT skills (technical and professional skills).....	277

7.4.2 Causal relationships between graduates' academic experiences and success in their graduate work experiences	277
7.4.3 Assessment of 'generic skills' or 'graduate attributes'	278
7.4.4 Generalisability of the study results.....	279
7.4.5 Development of ideas for curriculum design.....	280
7.5 Conclusion.....	280
REFERENCES	283
PUBLICATIONS ARISING FROM THIS RESEARCH	297
APPENDICES.....	298
Appendix A Consent Form.....	299
Appendix B Information Letter	300
Appendix C Illustrative Interview Questions.....	301
Appendix D Survey Questions.....	302
Appendix E Major categories, low level 1 and low level 2 categories for Theme 1 Professional Skills IT graduates believe are required for their work	310
Appendix F Relationship mapping from selective coding process	314
Appendix G Examples of open code and axial code development.....	321

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 Primary focus of discipline areas described in Computing Curricula 2005.....	24
Table 2.2 Overview of Australia’s ICT industry	26
Table 2.3 Employer expectations	30
Table 2.4 Skills believed to be required or lacking in graduates	38
Table 2.5 Some International research following graduates after graduation	50
Table 2.6 Evers and Rush model of four bases of competence for skill development during transition from university to work	56
Table 2.7 Aspects of knowledge for work.....	57
Table 3.1 Qualitative research characteristics and their applicability for this study.....	66
Table 3.2 Comparison of possible methodological approaches.....	66
Table 3.3 Philosophical views taken by this research	69
Table 3.4 Comparison of the Glaserian, Strauss and Corbin and my study’s approach	82
Table 3.5 (a) Profile of participants:Education, Experience and Responsibilities.....	89
Table 3.5 (b) Profile of the interviewed participants:Gender and Organisation Characteristics.....	90
Table 3.6 ACS IT Occupational Classifications	90
Table 3.7 Overview of the major data analysis steps	95
Table 3.8 Trustworthiness of this research	97
Table 3.9 Detailed task list for each coding stage	103
Table 3.10 Sample open codes	104
Table 3.11 Sample codes to illustrate transformation from concepts to different levels of categories.	105
Table 3.12 Major category and its associated low level categories	106
Table 3.13 Sample memo to describe the relationship between two categories	107
Table 4.1 Relationship between Themes and research questions	113
Table 4.2 Professional skill requirements IT graduates believe they need for their work.....	114
Table 4.3 Major categories and low level 1 categories for Theme 1- Professional Skills IT graduates believe are required for their work	115
Table 4.4 Meeting management skills IT graduates require for their work.....	129
Table 4.5 Project management skills IT graduates require for their work.....	141
Table 5.1 Factors that contributed to the development of graduates’ professional skills	161
Table 5.2 Most useful aspects of university courses	166
Table 5.3 Areas of challenges for IT graduates at workplaces and related professional skills.....	171
Table 5.4 Graduate responses to university preparation for the workforce	180
Table 6.1 Road map for Chapter 6 listing topics for main Sections and subsections	195
Table 6.2 Cross-disciplinary application of IT	221
Table 6.3 Dreyfus’ s model of skills acquisition	239
Table 6.4 Link between speed and mode of cognition	240
Table 6.5 SFIA levels of autonomy and responsibility	260
Table 6.6 ACS Framework for ICT program design as described in ACS (2008i)	263
Table 6.7 ALTC Learning and Teaching Academic Standards Project 2010 Threshold Learning Outcomes for Engineering and ICT disciplines.....	268
Table 7.1 (a) Answers to research sub questions 1, 2, 3 and 4	271
Table 7.1 (b) Answer to research sub question 5.....	272

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Research domain and area of analysis.....	9
Figure 1.2 The V model of the structure of this thesis	12
Figure 2.1 Scope of Information Technology	17
Figure 2.2 Key stakeholders for IT education	19
Figure 2.3 Model of Expectations of employers, universities and graduates of each other.....	27
Figure 2.4 Gaps in Expectations and Gaps in Skills.....	28
Figure 2.5 The many and varied elements of Professional Practice	33
Figure 2.6 Dahlgren et al.'s (2008) model for understanding professional learning	57
Figure 3.1 Evolution of grounded theory	74
Figure 3.2 The grounded theory 'data dance'	76
Figure 3.3 The grounded theory analytic process.....	78
Figure 3.4 Theoretical sampling process flowchart.....	84
Figure 3.5 Research Design (Methodological Map).....	84
Figure 3.6 Interview Design	92
Figure 3.7 Coding process used for data analysis in this study	103
Figure 3.8 Relationship between themes in the axial coding stage	108
Figure 3.9 Using a diagram to develop the core category	110
Figure 4.1 Relationship diagram for Professional Skills	157
Figure 5.1 Relationships between sources of professional skills and professional skills	164
Figure 5.2 Multiple relationships between the most useful aspects of university studies and the major professional skills identified in this study.....	170
Figure 5.3 Application of data analysis coding techniques	182
Figure 5.4 Relationship between themes in axial coding stage	183
Figure 5.5 Relationship between themes and core category or primary concern for all IT graduates..	185
Figure 5.6 Strategies for being prepared for work challenges	189
Figure 5.7 Implications of study findings.....	191
Figure 5.8 Shared responsibilities for the development of professional skills of IT graduates	192
Figure 6.1 Conceptual model of graduate attributes showing career management and self-management skills.....	215
Figure 6.2 The USEM account of employability.....	215
Figure 6.3 Forces that impact curriculum change.....	236
Figure 6.4 Dubin's model of technical updating	246
Figure 6.5 SFIA Framework.....	263

LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council
ABET	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (USA)
ACDICT	Australian Council of Deans for Information and Communication Technology
ACM	Association of Computing Machinery
ACS	Australian Computer Society
ACS CPEP	Australian Computer Society Computer Profession Education Program
ACS F	Australian Computer Society Foundation
AIIA	Australian Information Industry Association
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AUTC	Australian Universities Teaching Committee
CBOK	Core Body of Knowledge
CC1991	Computing Curricula 1991
CC2001	Computing Curricula 2001
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DETYA	Department of Training and Youth Affairs
HECS	Higher Education Contributory Scheme
GSA	Graduate Skills Assessment
GPS	Graduate Pathways Survey
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ICT-Ed	ICT Education
IEEE	Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
IEEE-CS	Computer Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers
IT	Information Technology
IS	Information Systems
MIS	Management Information Systems
NBN	National Broadband Network
SFIA	Skills Framework for Information Age
SIGITE	Special Interest Group for Information Technology Education
SME	Small to Medium Enterprises
SWOT	Strengths Weakness Opportunities and Threats
WWW	World Wide Web

GLOSSARY

Some terms commonly used in this thesis are defined in this Section.

Axial coding: Crosscutting (series of interlinking) or relating concepts to each other. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Categories: High-level concepts under which analysts group lower level concepts according to shared properties (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In this research, a *major category* is comprised of one or more *low level 1 categories*. A *Low level 1 category* is comprised of one or more *low level 2 categories*.

Coding: Deriving and developing concepts from data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Concepts: Words that stand for groups or classes of objects, events and actions that share some major common property(ies) though the property(ies) can vary dimensionally (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Constant comparison: The analytic process of comparing different pieces of data for similarities and differences (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Core category: A representation of the main theme of the research. It is the concept all other concepts will be related to. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Data analysis: The examination of a substance (or system) and its components in order to determine their properties and functions, then the use of the acquired knowledge to make inferences about the whole. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Deductive analysis: An analytic approach that uses a framework created and decided before the investigation (Reid, 2006)

Diagrams: Visual devices that depict relationships between analytic concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Dimensions: Variations within properties that give specificity and range to concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Employability Skills: Skills required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions (Business Council of Australia (BCA) and Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), 2002)

Forcing: Act of forcing pre-existing or pre conceived ideas on the data by looking for evidence to support established ideas (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Generic skills: Non-technical skills such as communication skills, time management skills, teamwork skills, etc.. Also referred to as soft skills or non-technical skills, graduate attributes.

Grounded theory: A specific methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the purpose of building theory from data. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Grounded theory (as defined by Glaser) "*Grounded theory* data analysis is the "generation of emergent conceptualisations into integrated patterns, which are denoted by categories and their properties woven together by the constant comparison process which is designed to generate concepts from all the data" (Glaser, 2002 p. 1)

Grounded theory (as defined by Strauss and Corbin) ".....inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other." (Strauss and Corbin, 1990)

Inductive analysis: An analytic approach where theory is generated from observations (Reid, 2006)

Memos: Written records of analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Open coding: The breaking apart of data and then the delineation of concepts to stand for (or represent) blocks of raw data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Phenomena: Ideas that emerge from data that answer the question “What is going on here?” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Professional skills: Professional skills refer to skills such as communication, teamwork, etc., i.e. non-technical skills.

Professional work experiences: Professional work experiences are non-technical work experiences that include all parts of graduates’ work that does not involve specific Information Technology activities. Experiences directly linked with Information Technology work activities may include tasks such as programming, database administration, computer security, systems analysis and design, etc. A non-technical experience includes tasks such as communicating ideas and information, working with others and in teams, etc.

Properties: Characteristics that define and describe concepts (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Sandwich courses: Sandwich degree courses offer six months or a year of work placement (with an employer in the relevant field of study).

Saturation: Saturation occurs when no new data are emerging from analysis. It also denotes the development of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions, including variation, and, if theory building, the delineating of relationships between concepts. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Selective coding: The process of establishing links between the core category and other categories, integrating categories along the dimensional level to form a theory and validating the statements of relationship among concepts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

Theme: The common meaning or an idea that runs through most of the data or a minority idea that captures a particular emotion or factual idea.

Theoretical coding: The process of conceptualising how categories and properties may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory (Glaser, 1978)

Theoretical sampling: Data collection based on concepts that appear to be relevant to the evolving story line or sampling based on the basis of concepts derived from data (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Theoretical saturation: The point in analysis when all categories are well developed in terms of properties, dimensions and variations. Further data gathering and analysis adds little new to the conceptualisation, though variations can always be discovered. (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Theoretical sensitivity: The ability to pick up on subtle nuances and cues in the data that infer or point to something (Corbin and Strauss, 2008)

Work integrated learning: According to Patrick et al. (2009), work integrated learning includes a “range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum”. The ACDICT and ACS industry forum (2010) states that the main purpose of work integrated learning is to include professional experience, employability and job ready skills for all ICT students using a combination of external models (industry-based work experiences such as placements and internships) and internal models (university-based experiences such as project work, case studies and simulated or virtual opportunities).

Work ready skills: Work ready skills include communication, ethics and professionalism, global and local perspectives, information literacy and management, initiative, enterprise and creativity, planning and organising, problem solving and critical thinking, research, self-management and life-long learning, teamwork and leadership and technology literacy (Litchfield and Nettleton, 2008)