

# ALTA Forum 2017

**Preparing accounting students for WIL  
success through a collaborative SME-  
supported model**

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# Background

- Driver - sustained criticism of accounting graduates
  - Weaknesses in technical and generic (professional) skills
  - Firms would rather not employ graduates (and be short-staffed) than risk employing a dud (or offering internships)
    - » In the literature and from personal conversations
- This led to 2 reactions
  - 1) Requests to some small and medium sized accounting firms for specific examples of weaknesses in technical and generic (professional) skills.
    - » This was important – generic complaints are not actionable.
  - 2) Applied for an OLT seed grant to develop a model to address these weaknesses, particularly for internships.
    - » Our review of the literature suggested a form of arrogance or lack of awareness by learning institutions.
      - Students were deemed to be adequately prepared for internships
      - Or – offering internships is a costless activity for firms
    - » Excluding nursing and education – not many institutions considered it important to prepare students for internships
      - This was our opportunity! (A gap in the literature.)

# Aim of the program

- Transformative – change or modify students' behaviour
- Take them from viewing themselves as students to viewing themselves as transitioning to work in a professional services environment
- The major focus was on developing professional skills.
  - Through a range of activities – some focused on technical skills, some on generic skills, and some combined technical and generic skills.

# Overview of the program

- We worked with the local branch of the CAANZ to develop a 3 week program, focusing on technical and professional skills
  - An extended experiential learning activity
- Extra-curricular activity – not a formal unit
  - Much greater ability to mimic a professional services environment
    - » Office attire, minimum of 7.5 hours contact per day, 5 days per week – told not to apply if they could not meet these criteria
- Students were told that internships may be offered at the end of the program, depending on the firms' choices
  - Explicitly told there were no guarantees that all participants would gain a placement.

# Key activity

- Each day started with a short talk by practitioners on (generally) non-technical topics, such as their story from student to professional, or what they wished they known at university, ‘war stories’ etc.
- Followed this with morning tea, where the students networked/ interacted with the presenter – at least 40 minutes or so.
- Academics stayed away from the presenter at this time!
  - Hunted up shy students and encouraged them to develop their confidence interacting with professionals
- This activity did not grow tiresome, as there were fresh presenters each day.
  - Students seemed glad of the opportunity to socialize with professionals

# The group composition and program outcomes

- 30 students applied (UG and PG)
  - All domestic students were UG level
- 13 internships were offered -

|                      | <b>Number in group</b> | <b>Proportion in group</b> | <b>Number of internships</b> | <b>Proportion of internships</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Domestic</b>      | 6                      | 20%                        | 3                            | 23%                              |
| <b>International</b> | 24                     | 80%                        | 10                           | 77%                              |
| <b>Totals</b>        | 30                     | 100%                       | 13                           | 100%                             |

# Outcomes continued

- 8 out of the 13 interns were offered ongoing work
- Some firms offered more interns than they could offer ongoing positions too
  - Helping students
  - Greater pool to select ongoing staff

# Can this sort of program work for ICT students?

- Definitely!
- Most likely to be a success when there is a clearly defined professional identity
  - Accounting, ICT, etc.
- Very helpful if the professional body assists in promoting the program to its members
  - Get specific examples of the sorts of errors graduates often make, or have made – build a sense of authenticity in the activities
- Get practitioners to present to the students on non-technical issues
  - Networking opportunity for the students
- A large number of public spirited volunteers who would love to access these students
  - E.g. Toastmasters – provided 6 hours of presentations and activities. Very well received by students – the professional accountants had strongly emphasized the value of communication with clients. A huge issue for ICT graduates too.



# Program v2 2017

- So far, 46 students have applied to join
  - 30 in 2016
- CAANZ advised they expect 15 firms to express interest in offering internships to students who complete the program
  - Please note, this figure may change. We do not want to overstate the figure.