

Qualitative Evaluation of the Implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme (CEP) At EtheKwini Metropolitan Municipality

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of higher education is to provide quality education (theory) and develop or enhance the skills of the students to be ready for the world of work. Government has also realised that job-readiness is not only the responsibility of the academic or higher education institutions, but responsibility of government as well. Government, together with the academic institutions, become responsible for practical implementation of the theory learnt by students from class.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is now internationally acknowledged as a process of developing job-readiness and professional skills so as to improve employability and job-readiness of students. Literature has proven that through WIL a triangular relationship between the students and graduates, the academic institutions and the organisations as the workplace is created. This triangular relationship has benefitted the students and graduates, academic institutions and work-places alike. Whilst there has been a lot of research that has been done on the WIL itself, there is however very little research that has been done on its effectiveness. eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, as part of South African government, has seen the need of embracing the WIL, even though it terms it Cooperative Education Programme (CEP) and has been implementing the CEP for the last five years. It has come to a point where eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality has seen a need to qualitatively evaluate the implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme (CEP).

Keywords: *Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), Cooperative Education Programme (CEP), Academic Institutions, Workplace, Professional Development, Professional Skills, Job-readiness, Evaluation, Implementation, Theory, Students, Graduates.*

INTRODUCTION

The job market continuously requires employees who are graduates but ready to do the job because there is not enough time for companies or organisations to prepare them. It is for this reason that many academic institutions saw a need to have Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) built in qualifications so that students are equipped with authentic learning experience. WIL has a long-established tradition internationally and across many disciplines, especially those with a professional focus (Aprile and Knight, 2020). A lot of disciplines or professions have built-in WIL in their curricular to ensure that there is smooth integration between work-experience and professional development of students. WIL is acknowledged as developing generic and

professional skills and improving the employability and work readiness of students (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto, 2008). Essential to successful WIL experiences is reciprocity or mutual benefits for the student, institution and the workplace host organisation (Fleming, McLachlan and Pretti, 2018). This therefore means all the stakeholders stand to benefit from this triangular relationship. A desire for students to be future and work-ready has brought attention to teaching and learning approaches that enable students to move beyond knowledge accumulation to developing interpersonal and professional capabilities that, along with disciplinary knowledge, can be applied in real-world contexts (Jackson, et.al., 2019). This therefore means the importance of WIL is not only

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limited to work-experience but also develops students professionally. Whilst any WIL programme is appreciated in its promotion of job readiness, a gap has been identified where students complete a qualification (especially university degrees) without any WIL and then find themselves unable to penetrate the job market without work experience. It is for this reason that other organisations such as eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality have developed policies such as the Cooperative Education Policy and embarked on job-readiness programmes specifically for the students who are still studying and those who have already graduated but lack work experience. A term used for this programme is Cooperative Education Programme (cep) which is basically the same as graduates work experience. cep is used interchangeably with WIL because both have the same objective (job readiness) and there are other numerous similar terms used such as work-based learning, in-service training, industry-based learning, workplace learning, experiential learning, vocational learning, vocational training, etc.

There is surprisingly very little research that has been done to evaluate effectiveness of WIL programmes let alone the cep. Now that eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality has introduced this noble idea of introducing the cep, there is a need to evaluate its effectiveness. It is for this reason that this study seeks to qualitatively evaluate the implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme (cep) at eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study is to qualitatively evaluate the implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme (cep) at eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality. The objectives of the study were to:

- Establish if the Cooperative Education Programme is appropriately designed to meet its objectives.
- Establish if the implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme is aligned with its overall objectives.
- Find out if there are challenges faced by mentors, students and graduates during the implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme.
- Determine the experience of students and graduates about the Cooperative Education Programme.

- Find out what recommendations the mentors, students and graduates propose for effective implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) And Cooperative Education

Work-Integrated Learning is a curriculum design in which students spend time in professional work or other practice settings relevant to their degrees of study and to their occupational futures (Smith, 2012). This seeks to integrate academic knowledge and work experience whilst the student is still studying his or her qualification. The term WIL has been broadly used to describe the variety of experiences that engage students in workplace situations (Ferns, Campbell and Zegwaard, 2014).

WIL therefore becomes an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate the theory of learning with the practice of work (Atkinson, 2016). There has been a number of terms that have been used by literature to refer to WIL. Examples of WIL include apprenticeships, internships, in-service learning, in-service training, etc.

Cooperative education is a method of education for individuals who, through written cooperative arrangements between academic institutions and employers, receive instruction, including required rigorous and challenging academic courses and related career and technical education instruction, by alternation of study with a job in any occupational field (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF WIL

WIL is attributed to Dewey (1938) who was the first educational theorist who held the view that people learn by doing. His emphasis was on the notion that genuine education is achieved through experience.

In academic terms experience means students should experience real-life work experience whilst they are still learning or studying. Dewey's (1938) theory evolved into experiential learning in the early 80's. Kolb (1984) pointed out that experiential learning is a dialectic and cyclical process consisting of four stages which are: experience, observation and reflection, abstract reconceptualization and experimentation.

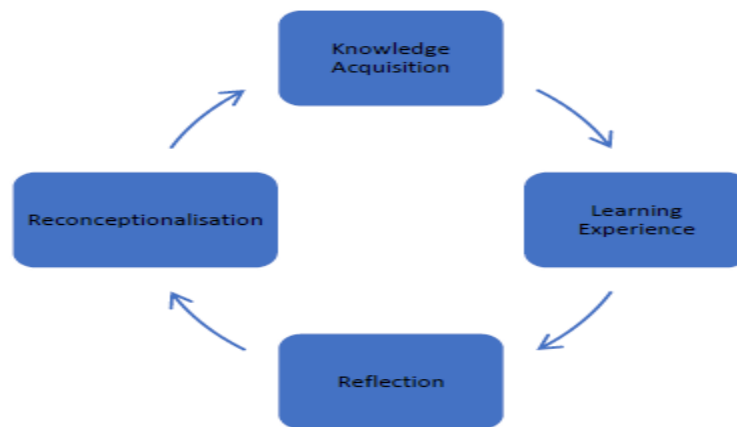


FIGURE1. *Experiential Learning Cycle*

Learning begins by acquiring knowledge which becomes learning experience, the learner or student has to reflect on what he or she has learnt. Reflection is usually followed by abstract reconceptualization of the learning experience where the learner or student tries to integrate the learning and work experience through imagination. It is at this stage of active experimentation where the learner or student integrates what he or she has learnt with work experience. Maseko (2018) asserts that for learning to occur, students need to observe and reflect on experience, develop concepts to make sense of the experience, and then apply and test these concepts through new experiences.

Objectives of the Wil

There are various objectives of the WIL and include the following:

- The main objective of the WIL is to improve the employability of graduates by providing practical experiences directly related to university courses, as well as facilitating transition from the university to the workplace (Brimble and Freuderberg, 2010).
- WIL is focused on producing a highly skilled workforce that can meet industry and community needs (Reddan, 2016).
- Professional development and discipline are also enhanced through the WIL.
- WIL also helps students to contextualize their learning experiences with work relevant experience.
- The programme also exposes students to a realistic world at the same time providing them with the wealth of knowledge as part of their career development.
- Participants in a WIL course derive several benefits including career direction, insight

of what practice was outside university environment and motivation for possibly undertaking higher degree research (Zegwaard and McCurdy 2014).

DIMENSIONS OF WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Smith (2012) developed and tested the five dimensions of WIL that have been operationalized in a measurement model. These key dimensions include authenticity; integrated learning supports; alignment of teaching and learning activities and assessments with integrated learning outcomes; supervisor access and induction or preparatory process.

Authenticity

According to Smith (2012) authenticity is at the heart of all workplace-situated learning and as a result, curricular should aim to provide students with a real work environment (physical authenticity) doing real-world work as well as cognitive authenticity where students encounter, engage and/or participate in personally meaningful and relevant learning without particular disciplinary process.

(Smith, et.al., 2019) further contend that the provision of meaningful and authentic learning experiences, usually off-campus and in workplace settings, is the cornerstone of the WIL.

Curricular that rely solely on simulation as a form of workplace experience are criticised for lack of authenticity. Whilst simulation is encouraged especially during the advent of the 4th Industrial Revolution, it should not be used as a substitute for the real work environment. Organisations that provide the workplace for students should avoid giving menial jobs for students and should ensure that they provide realistic experience relevant to their

qualifications and future jobs. Students should also be exposed to professional development and general professional demands relevant to their professions. In developing the WIL scale, Smith (2012) noted that authenticity involves more than just an absence of menial tasks but also includes the perception of the student as to whether the work was relevant to the organization's goals, required or allowed to work autonomously, and that the work was important and consequential.

Alignment of Teaching and Learning Activities and Assessment with Integrative Learning Objectives

Smith (2012) developed the evaluation framework alignment and used a notion of constructive alignment of learning objectives with teaching and learning activities and assessments. This seeks to answer the question whether the students are able to apply theories that they have learnt in class. Integrative training therefore links theory and practice so that students are able to apply the acquired knowledge at the workplace. For the success of integrative learning, desired learning outcomes and activities should aim at developing students' professional identity and abilities (Smith, 2012).

Integrated Learning Supports

Students are exposed to a lot of support for the WIL which starts with the academic institution itself and then the kind of support they received in the workplace or organizations they are placed in. Many universities have WIL Coordinators who are responsible for ensuring that students get the workplace where they are placed. Many organisations also have Coordinators of WIL and this function is usually placed within the Skills Development Departments. The main role of the Workplace Coordinators is to prepare the workplace and mentors for students. The integration of both support from the academic institutions and workplaces has always had its own coordination challenges.

To this effect, Smith (2012) recommends that the WIL curricular design should consider the integration of support services both at the students' university and within the workplace, which may help to improve the learning process.

Maertz, Jr, Stoebel and Marks (2014) identified three stages of support to students and these are before the placement (pre-internship), during the placement (internship) and after the placement

(post-internship). The pre-internship support involves activities such as classroom theory, workshops and seminars that prepare students for the workplace. During the internship organizations (workplace) assign students to mentors and mentorship programmes are drawn and agreed upon with students which then becomes the basis and the guide for the engagements of students during the placement period. The post-internship support includes feedback sessions between university coordinators and students.

Supervisor and Mentor Access

Supervisors are designated by universities or academic institutions to provide ongoing emotional and academic support to students whilst they are placed within organizations. The supervisor provides feedback on learning, supporting students throughout their learning and work-placement experience. They are also allowed to observe students during their work experience at the workplace. At the workplace students are placed under the care of supervisors and mentors during the internship or placement period. The role of the mentor is to guide the student as he or she goes through the work learning experience in the organization. This guidance is done through a well-developed and structured learning programme for the duration of the work placement period.

Induction and Preparation Processes

There is a lot of induction and preparation of students and this includes even psychological preparation of the students for the tasks ahead. It also includes preparing the workplace for students so that, when they arrive at the workplace, they get the work-stations ready for them. Part of this preparation includes the availability of mentors who should be introduced to the students on the same day.

WIL BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

There are measurable benefits for students, the employer and educators (McLennan and Keating, 2008), however for purposes of this study only the benefits to students will be discussed. When students learn from real-life experiences that generally adds value and builds character on students to fit in the world of work. Students also attain skills such as communication, professionalism, punctuality, leadership, writing, observation, career development, meeting deadlines, etc. They also develop a range of personal attributes such as

crafting their career development prospects, coping with stressful jobs, developing interactive skills, coping with the rapid and ever-changing world of work, etc. Students also change at the personal level once they have experienced the workplace and they also demonstrate increased job knowledge and skills. WIL also contributes positively towards students' learning in general because they begin to grasp concepts (theory) better when they apply them to practice. When students interact together in the same workplace, that encourages team spirit, develops cooperation thus improving collective decision-making processes and they find themselves able to resolve work-related problems. Without a doubt the WIL also contributes financially to students who get stipends and many students use this money prudently.

RISKS FOR STUDENTS UNDERTAKING WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

The fact that the WIL is situated outside the university and is at the work-place and involves several stakeholders, invariably suggests that there could be a lot of inherent risks (Cameron, 2017; Effeney, 2020; Newhook, 2016). These risks can come in different shapes and sizes. The risk management process includes risks identification, measurement, evaluation, mitigation or management. While definitions of risk may vary, it can be broadly defined as "any issues that might affect, either positively or negatively, the achievement of WIL objectives for students, host organizations and the university" (Hay and Flemming, 2021). Cameron, et.al. (2020) highlight that risk can relate to both opportunities and challenges in the WIL context. Hay and Fleming (2021) suggest that from a university staff perspective, the risks for the students engaged in the WIL can be broadly separated into three categories which are the readiness and suitability of the student, the learning environment and safety. Although it might be taken lightly, there is a need for proper reference checks and character screening of students especially in the fields or workplaces that work with children and vulnerable people.

Readiness and Suitability of Student

Many universities do not have a very clear criteria for the selection of students to participate in the WIL, safe to say that participation becomes automatic as per the programme and curricular design and many programmes have the WIL during or in the final

year of the programme. Some programmes, like teaching, do have WIL built-in every year of the programme. Communication (or lack thereof) between the student and the supervisor from the university or academic institution and between the student and the mentor at the work-place needs to be planned carefully. There are further interpersonal capabilities that also contribute to students being unable to complete the WIL programme. Although rare, cultural fit in certain organisations (work-place) can also be a risk for some students. Students' conduct is also a risk to the WIL programme. Some students may find the workplace alien and overwhelming and maybe unsure about what is expected of them around professional conduct or behaviour. They may not be aware of the general Code of Conduct for employees at the work-place. It is possible for example to have students not coming to work or coming late because of the hang-over, they may use inappropriate language or can even violate social media policies or breach confidentiality, etc. There are also health related risks that may occasionally disrupt the smooth running of the WIL programme. For example, students with disabilities may not have the right and accommodative facilities at the workplace.

The Learning Environment

Students should be exposed to the safe learning environment to be able to benefit from the workplace exposure. Quality learning as opposed to incidental learning makes the learning experiences of students valuable and this also largely depends on the workplace mentor that the student is allocated to. Mentors do also add on the list of risks. For example, there could be change of mentors during the placement period for a range of reasons such as change of positions, leave taken, resignations, etc. Mentors should, in addition to understanding their role as mentors, understand the subject or course the student is studying. Some mentors may be very good at work and can mentor the student successfully, however, if the mentor has not studied the same qualification, there is most likely to be a gap in terms of overall and integrated support. There is also a financial risk associated with the WIL programme. In many cases the stipend that is paid to students is seen as a payment or salary in many poor countries such as South Africa where the level of unemployment is very high and many graduates are not employed. The suitability of the workplace can also be a risk,

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for example, there are some workplaces that allegedly exploit students and they are sometimes sent to do personal staff for the employees. In some cases, students find it difficult to refuse to do tasks even if they realise that they are outside their responsibilities and are not adding value to their development. In other instances, students can be reticent to admit if a task is beyond their capability.

Safety

There will always be a risk of potential harm to students either by fellow employees or by any other party. Some student-teachers, for example, are placed in schools that are not safe and in some cases are threatened by learners who abuse drugs. In some schools, criminals rob teachers (including students) of their valuables during the working hours. In South Africa, for example, it is not only schools that are not safe but even government departments where there have been incidents of shooting and killings within the workplace.

The situation is worse with South African municipalities which are directly affected by political differences which end up affecting employees directly. In other environments students can be exposed to toxic chemicals,

diseases, minor occupational injuries or even unsafe travelling to and from the workplace. There have been quite a number of injuries which result from road accidents and some students and graduates use vehicles as part of their job when they are at the workplace. There is also a risk of emotional harm to students which includes sexual harassment and bullying at work. Some students complain that they are made to do the work that is not directly related to their qualifications and that frustrates them because they do not get the necessary experience. Culture-shock does also become a risk especially in an environment that is alien to students. This usually happens in multicultural organisations that employ high numbers of people who come from different cultural backgrounds. Multi-national companies, for example, are known for employing people from different countries hence the existence of diverse cultures. It is always problematic for students and graduates to be able to grasp different cultures in such a short space of time.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS

Students are the ones who have huge responsibilities in this triangular relationship, therefore, it is important to highlight what their responsibilities are.

RESPONSIBILITY TO SELF	RESPONSIBILITY TO THE UNIVERSITY	RESPONSIBILITY TO THE WORKPLACE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate honesty and integrity • Take reasonable care for own health and safety in the WIL environment • Be self-motivated and actively contribute to own personal and professional learning • Should not engage in any discriminatory or bullying behaviour • Utilize appropriate stress- and time-management skills • Observe professional or disciplinary codes of conduct and ethics • Respect the cultural needs and values of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behave in a manner that upholds the reputation of the university • Demonstrate honesty and integrity when submitting assignments • Communicate appropriately and in a timely manner with the university • Meet university expectations and obligations • Observe university codes of conduct and ethics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat colleagues, clients and others during the WIL experience with respect • Demonstrate ethical behaviour, including confidentiality and privacy • Be courteous towards others and respect property • Engage positively with the host organization and wider community • Meet workplace expectations and obligations • Maintain accurate written work • Appropriately and safely use technology • Comply with legal obligations • Adhere to workplace policies and procedures

EVALUATING THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

Students' feedback can be an influential tool in the ongoing quality assurance processes of higher education institutions (Alderman, Towers and Bannah, 2012; Cathcart, Greer & Neale, 2014; Hammonds, Mariano, Ammons & Chambers, 2017; Harvey, Nair & Mertova, 2011; Palmer, 2012). Many university students are used to evaluating teaching and learning programmes but find it very difficult to evaluate the work-place experience. The evaluation of the student learning experience in the work placement is however typically more complex than evaluation of a standard university unit (von Treuer, et.al., 2011). There is a huge difference between the university classroom and the workplace which can be less controlled than learning institutions. One of the ways in which workplace evaluation can be made effective is to embed it to professional practice curriculum and also to assess it. This has been effective for medical students as an example. This evaluation can also incorporate the evaluation of professional development which then, in a way, forces students to look at their evaluation who listically and integratively.

WIL IN SOUTH AFRICA

The Education White Paper 3: A Programme for Higher Education Transformation (1997) reaffirms the purpose of the Higher Education Institutions with respect to social responsibility. The Higher Education Act (1997) provides for the establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee and also provides criteria for work-place learning as follows:

Learning contracts or agreements by which the student, higher education institution and employer can negotiate, approve and assess the objectives and outcomes of the learning process as well as the roles and responsibilities of the various parties.

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) developed the Work Good Practice Guide in 2011. This guide was produced in the context of the promulgation of the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) which proposed six higher education levels (levels 5-10) which then became the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative in nature and used mixed methods which are the virtual interviews

with the managers of the eThekweni Municipal Academy and questionnaires for students and graduates who were part of the WIL Programme at eThekweni Municipality.

The study covered a period of 3 financial years from 2018 to 2021. A sample of 10 managers who were also mentors were selected and participated in the virtual interviews.

A sample of 100 students were selected and were called telephonically and information elicited was recorded in the questionnaire. Responses were coded according to themes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following themes applied to the questions asked to managers (mentors):

Theme 1: Cooperative Education Programme design

Managers were asked if the Cooperative Education Programme (CEP) was appropriately designed to meet objectives. 100% of the managers confirmed that the CEP is appropriately designed to meet its objectives.

Theme 2: Implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme

Managers were asked if the Cooperative Education Programme (CEP) was implemented in alignment with the overall programme objectives. All (100%) of the managers indicated that the programme implementation is aligned with overall programme objectives. The main objective being to provide the students and graduates with work experience.

Theme 3: Consistent application of the programme across the municipality

Managers were asked if the Cooperative Education Programme (cep) was applied consistently across various municipal units. 100% of the managers confirmed that the programme was applied consistently.

Theme 4: Efficacy of the Cooperation Education Programme

When asked if the Cooperative Education Programme is effective, 74,7% of managers thought it was effective and 25.3% indicated that it was not effective.

The main reason cited for it being ineffective was that not all students or graduates get employed after the work experience.

Theme 5: Challenges faced by managers (mentors)

Managers were asked if there are any challenges they face about the programme, they cited the following:

- Managers confirmed that there was no consistency in the development of the students and graduates as the programme was not structured and it was up to the manager to determine the level of development.
- There was no follow-up or tracking of the students' and graduates' development by the cooperative education team.
- The two years contractual period is too short.
- It posed a challenge with Units' productivity to constantly train and release students and graduates.
- Managers needed more development for themselves to adequately mentor students and graduates.
- The exit by the students and graduates from the programme disrupted the Units' workflow.

The following themes relate to the questions asked to students:

Theme6: Challenges facing students and graduates

Students and graduates were asked if there are any challenges they face about the programme, they cited the following:

Theme 7: Overall experience of students and graduates about the programme

When asked about their experiences of the Programme:

- 72% confirmed that the environment was conducive for them to perform at their best.
- 84% indicated that managers were motivating and inspiring.
- 93% confirmed that their managers had the necessary skills to manage them.
- 92% indicated that their managers played a pivotal role in their development.
- 97% confirmed that they acquired new skills on the job.
- 93% confirmed that they had resources to perform at their best.
- 80% indicated that the way feedback was given was developmental.

FINDINGS

The following are the findings of the study:

- The Cooperative Education Programme is appropriately designed to meet its objectives.
- The implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme is aligned with its overall objectives.
- The Cooperative Education Programme processes are applied consistently and effectively throughout the municipality.
- There are challenges faced by the students and graduates and mentors in the process of implementation of the Cooperative Education Programme.
- The overall experience of students and graduates about the Cooperative Education Programme is good.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the overall recommendations by respondents about the Programme:

- There should be a clear roadmap for the development of students and graduates.
- A tracking system for the development of students and graduates should be considered.
- More manpower and resources should be allocated to the cooperative education team.
- A more robust communication system among students, graduates, managers and cooperative education team is required.
- The Academy to consider extending the contractual period of the programme.
- The Academy should reduce the number of students and graduates per intake and employ a percentage of a particular intake and increase the stipend.
- There should be consistency in the development of managers/mentors.
- Networking with external organizations is needed to secure future jobs for the students and graduates.
- The Academy to facilitate stronger relationships with the private sector, other government departments and Sector Education and Training Authorities (Setas).

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to qualitatively evaluate the implementation of the Cooperative

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Education Programme (cep) at eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality. Literature review focused on the definition of the WIL, objectives of the WIL, dimensions of the WIL, benefits of the WIL for students, risks for students undertaking the WIL, responsibilities of students, evaluation of students experience and WIL in South Africa. The study used qualitative research design and samples of 10 mentors (managers) and 100 students were selected to participate in the study. Questions focused on 7 themes which are: cep design to meet objectives; implementation of the cep; consistent application of the cep across all municipal units; efficacy of the cep; challenges faced by managers (mentors); challenges facing students and graduates and overall experience of students and graduates about the programme. The study revealed that the cep is appropriately designed to meet its objectives; the implementation of the cep is aligned with its overall projects; the cep processes are applied consistently and effectively throughout the municipality; there are challenges faced by the students and graduates and mentors in the process of implementation of the cep and the overall experience of students and graduates about the cep is good.

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