Perceptions of Risk in Co-operative Education

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Abstract

Off-campus university activities, including co-operative education, offer huge rewards but also have the potential to expose students, employers, and universities to significant risks ranging from physical harm and financial loss, to reputational damage. While risk management and risk awareness in university activities worldwide appears to be growing, there is little discussion of the risks inherent in co-operative education in the literature. This qualitative descriptive case study examines co-operative education coordinators' perceptions of legal and ethical risks in co-operative education programs in Canadian universities and offers a first glimpse into how risk is understood, assessed, and managed by university representatives at an operational level. Coordinators' understandings of risk and liability, and the decisions that they make predicated on this knowledge, are influenced by many factors and thus are individualized, idiosyncratic, and inconsistent. Seemingly, university administrators and risk managers are doing little, if anything to participate in risk communication with the great majority of this population of coordinators; hence coordinators rely primarily on their own tacit knowledge and judgement to assess and manage risk rather than relying on expert advice from risk professionals or senior managers. When so much is assumed and so little is explicitly defined, the potential for misunderstanding, conflict, or injury is strong. As a result university managers, coordinators, students, and employers need to collaborate to develop appropriate policies and guidelines for each of the partners involved in co-operative education.

Keywords: Co-operative Education, Duty of Care, Internships, Liability, Risk, Risk Communication, Risk Management, Qualitative Research, University Risk Management, Work Terms

Co-operative education is defined by the unique tripartite relationship between the student, the employer, and the university, each of which has certain legal and ethical rights and responsibilities in that relationship. It is not simply employment any more than it is simply education and thus carries with it the legal and ethical considerations of both. While there is little or no Canadian case law dealing with liability and negligence in co-operative education, there is an increasing awareness in higher education of the legal vulnerabilities of universities.

While risk management and risk awareness in university activities worldwide appears to be growing, there is little discussion of the risks inherent in co-operative education in the literature.

The purpose of this qualitative case study research was to explore co-operative education coordinators' perceptions of risk in co-operative education, to examine how coordinators understood their role in assessing and managing risk, and to determine how coordinators perceived their university's role in preparing and supporting coordinators in risk management. This research sought answers to the following questions: How do coordinators understand risk and institutional liability in general? What do coordinators feel they are personally responsible or liable for? How do universities prepare coordinators to reduce risk? Do coordinators feel they are supported (or not supported) by the policies of their institution?

Literature Review

University risk management. Researchers generally agree that organizations are increasingly concerned with managing their exposure to risk (Brewer & Walker, 2010, p. 19; Katter, 2002; Lupton, 1999, pp.10-11; Mark, 2001, p. 33; McWilliam, 2007, p. 311; Power, 2007; Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009), which is likely spurred on by fear of litigation, financial loss, and loss of reputation. Huber (2010) goes further stating that contemporary social theorists view "the growth of risk to be the distinguishing feature of modernity" (p. 114). Beck (1992), in his seminal publication on risk, also argued that modernity is about the eradication of risk or minimizing exposure to risk. Indeed many researchers argued that risk is emerging as a key organizing concept for regulatory regimes and extended governance systems in a multitude of settings (Beck 1992; Edwards, 2012; Garland, 2003; Moran, 2002; Power et al., 2009; Smith; 2004).

Institutionalized forms of risk management refer to the formal, integrated, strategic, enterprise-wide systems of identifying potential risks, the management of risks in line with the enterprise's level of acceptable risks, and the provision of assurances toward achieving the objectives of the enterprise (Fraser & Simkins, 2010, p. 3). Risk management is founded on the belief that "probability can reduce the uncertainty of the future to known risks and probabilities" (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 34). Risk managers argued that when successfully implemented, risk management involves balancing opportunities, hazards, and uncertainty in order to advance the mission of the institution. Institutions maintain legitimacy by demonstrating that they are applying rational, knowledge-based standards and

risk assessments to their operations, and as such "a 'good' organization is one which manages risk in accordance with established frameworks" (Power et al., 2009, p. 305).

Huber (2011) identified several sources of risk in university settings including teaching risks, research risks, organizational or delivery risks and external risks, each of which is linked to financial flow and to reputation. Indeed Power et al. (2009) argued that reputational risk is the pervasive logic of organizational attention on risk management in general and that this conceptualization of risk management is strongly influenced by the phenomena of legalization, whereby organizations are increasingly creating internal procedures that follow the principles of due process and the law.

Critics of a risk-based approach to university management argued that when risk is the key organizing feature in higher education, institutions are more risk averse and as a result less innovative and creative (Power et al., 2009; SQW, 2008, p. 57; Tennant, 2008). Risk-focussed management and organizational systems also resulted in undue focus, time, and resources on expensive and lengthy audit trails and the pervasiveness of due process in the texture of organizational life (Power et al., 2009, p. 317).

In England university risk management is mandatory following a decision in 2000 by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) requiring all universities to introduce risk management as a governance tool (Huber, 2011, p. 2). HEFCE argued that:

> *When used well it [risk management] can actively allow an institution to take on activities that have a higher level of risk (and therefore could deliver a greater benefit) because the risks have been identified, are understood and are being well managed and the residual risk is thereby lower. Risk management is not just negative (ensuring that bad things are less likely to happen) but also positive (making it more likely that good things will happen).* (HEFCE, 2001, para. 9)

Australian universities have also recently had a risk-based approach to governance imposed on them by government (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2009). University accreditation and audit processes are risk-based; universities must demonstrate that their functions are underpinned by formal risk assessment at the institutional level (Edwards, 2012, pp. 295-296). A risk-based approach has become the foundation of public policy in Australian higher education.

A cursory review of virtually every Canadian university directory presents a Risk Management Office charged with reducing the university's exposure to risk as part of an integrated, strategic, and enterprise-wide approach to identifying and reducing risk. Clearly risk management has a strong foothold in most, if not all, Canadian universities. This focus on risk may not have penetrated beyond senior administrative levels into the routine operations of staff and faculty members according to a recent survey on work-integrated learning (including co-operative education) in Ontario post-secondary institu-

tions. The survey showed that only "one-quarter of university faculty reported providing training and support for employers/site supervisors on coordinating risk management and insurance details" (Peters, 2012, p. 43), despite the apparent expanding focus in universities on risk management and the exposure to risk that co-operative education programs specifically bring to universities, students, and employers.

Litigation, liability, and duty of care. Litigation is more commonplace in the commercial world than it is in higher education, but it can be argued that as universities become increasingly competitive and operate more and more in line with business principles with neoliberal agendas (Jones, 2004, p. 44; Snowdon, 2005, p. v), students increasingly perceive themselves as clients or consumers of services and are thus more willing to litigate for perceived or actual infractions of the university's duties (Katter, 2002, p. 390). Canada's neighbour, the United States of America, is widely recognized to be a more litigious nation than Canada, but recent events reported in *University Affairs* (Mullens, 2008) and *Macleans On Campus* (Deehas, 2012) suggest this may be changing.

Peak and O'Hara (1999) stated that out of the three parties in the co-operative relationship the student is the least likely to be held primarily liable for the unfavourable outcomes of his or her actions in the workplace (p. 68). Their conclusion was that primary liability rests with the university, the employer, and the faculty supervisor (or by implication the co-operative education coordinator), in that order (p. 68). Middlemiss (2000) arguing from a British context, suggested that universities have a duty of care for students participating in external activities that form part of the student's course of study and which are controlled by university staff (p. 79). Consequently co-operative education coordinators have a duty of care for students before and during their work terms, but how far does that duty of care reach? What is the extent of the co-operative education coordinator's role and responsibility in exercising duty of care for students? This question has yet to be tested in Canadian courts but should be considered by institutions who wish to understand their exposure to risk and liability and possibly pre-empt litigation with potentially great cost, both financially and in terms of reputation.

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Co-operative education and the law in Canada. Hannah's (1998) detailed examination of all Canadian court cases up to 1998 between post-secondary institutions and students, as well as a review of cases beyond that date on the Canadian Legal Information Institute database showed that a serious legal action has never been brought by a student from a co-operative education program against a university in Canada. There is no body of case law or any direct legal precedents to draw from in a discussion of serious legal risks in co-operative education.

A small number of disputes related to co-operative education students have been before the courts since 2000 on a variety of issues, two of which are noteworthy. One case in-

volved a student enrolled on an engineering work term who died in a car accident when driving home from his workplace (CanLII 48208 [BC WCAT], 2009). The student had worked 96.5 hours over the previous eight days. The employer reneged on the offer for nearby accommodation meaning that the student had a two-hour commute each way to work. His family claimed that his poor working conditions were the cause of the accident. The Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia claimed it was unable to investigate the matter because the crash was offsite. The family did not pursue a case with the university (not named in the court documents). However, this case raises questions about the university's role in ensuring safe working conditions for co-operative education students. What can coordinators reasonably be expected to know and what reasonable action can they be expected to take to protect their students? If the coordinator was aware of the working conditions could the family have claimed the coordinator was negligent in his or her duties?

The second notable case was against an Ontario co-operative education student Suresh Sriskandarajah who was arrested on terrorism-related charges in Toronto in 2006 and extradited to the United States in December 2012 (2012 SCC 70 [CanLII]). Sriskandarajah pleaded guilty in New York in July, 2013 to being part of a terrorist procurement cell securing sophisticated military technology for the Tamil Tigers, including submarine and warship design software, and laundering money. He used students as couriers to smuggle prohibited items into Tamil Tiger-controlled territory in Sri Lanka (Humphries, 2013). As a result of the allegations the university ordered an external audit of the university's Tamil student club (CBC News, 2006). It was later reported in the *National Press* (Bell, 2012) that "the audit of the Tamil student group found no financial irregularities but a review of the university's work placement program recommended closer monitoring by campus and diplomatic officials of students who conduct their co-ops abroad" (para. 6). The recommendation implies that if coordinators had been monitoring him more closely, they may have been able to prevent his alleged involvement with the Tamil Tigers. While the audit is not part of a legal action it does demonstrate that the reviewer finds co-operative education coordinators at least partly responsible for student actions on work terms abroad.

Risk: The researcher's perspective. There is a great divide among risk researchers, some of whom characterized risk as positivistic, acknowledging facts and causality, while others viewed risk subjectively in terms of perception and understanding tempered by beliefs, opinions, and values (Lofstedt & Boholm, 2009, p. 4). This research study focused on perceptions of risk and viewed understandings of risk in idealistic terms rather than strictly realistic terms, following the dominant view in sociology and anthropology that risk is a concept that is constructed in reference to social, historical, and cultural conditions (Arnoldi, 2009, p. 15). A social constructionist approach was taken, that argued that risks are never fully objective but are constituted through an individual's knowledge, experiences, and relationships and are therefore dynamic, contextual, and historical

(Tulloch & Lupton, 2003, p. 12). Perceptions of risk are therefore constantly changed and negotiated through social interaction, understanding, and meaning.

Methodology

The research design used a qualitative approach with case study as the methodology. Case studies represent a bounded unit, a phenomenon, or social group that can be readily seen as a single entity or a unit around which there are clear and defined boundaries (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 289; Creswell, 2008, p. 476; Merriam, 2001, p. 191; Merriam, 2009, p. 40; Stake, 2000, p. 436). More specifically, this research is a descriptive case study, meaning that the end product is a rich and thick description and account of the coordinators' perceptions and experiences with risk that illustrates the complexities of the situations and the differences of opinion and experience of risk in co-operative education.

Coordinators from multiple universities with long standing co-operative education programs in multiple disciplines were invited to take part in this research in order to achieve a rich and thick understanding of how coordinators perceived risk in co-operative education across Canada

Site and population selection. A criterion-based purposeful sampling technique with a quota or maximum variation was used in order to include a roughly representative subset of the given population. Coordinators from multiple universities with long standing co-operative education programs in multiple disciplines were invited to take part in this research in order to achieve a rich and thick understanding of how coordinators perceived risk in co-operative education across Canada. The Canadian Association for Co-operative Education (CAFCE) provided assistance by sending an email to its membership to introduce the research agenda and to provide legitimacy to requests for interviews. This email invited interested coordinators to identify themselves to the researcher directly or to their directors. Once CAFCE members were contacted the researcher followed up by email with the directors of co-operative education programs in select universities. Directors were asked to identify coordinators who might be appropriate research participants, using both reputational and ideal-typical sampling strategies.

Data collection methods. A total of 14 guided-semistructured one-on-one interviews were held with Co-operative Education Coordinators from a total of 10 universities across Canada. The participants represented coordinators from a range of co-operative education programs from a number of different disciplines. Three interviews took place over the phone while 11 interviews were held in person. Interviews ranged in duration from 20 minutes to approximately 1 hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Data analysis. Preliminary data analysis began during the data collection phase, although early interpretations were free-formed hunches and educated guesses. These speculations and hunches informed the next interview, and so on. An intensive analysis stage followed data collection, in order to construct the categories and themes that be-

came the research findings. The transcribed data was read and re-read in order to make meaning from the data or to code the data resulting in the identification of the themes presented in the following section. To protect the anonymity of the participants, they have been assigned the following pseudonyms: Alice, Amanda, Clare, David, James, Julia, Nancy, Natalie, Paul, Patricia, Rachel, Sarah, Susan, and Tanya.

Results

All coordinators were asked to qualify their understanding of the risks associated with co-operative education as strong, weak, or any other qualifier that they were comfortable using. The responses were varied, with half identifying themselves as having a moderate understanding of risks associated with co-operative education and the other half evenly divided between a strong and a weak understanding of risk. Coordinators' self-assessment of their understanding of the risks associated with co-operative education was not necessarily correlated with their length of service in co-operative education, with some seasoned coordinators identifying themselves as having a weak understanding of the risks. The coordinators who assessed their understanding of the risks as strong had all worked as co-operative education coordinators for 12 years or longer.

Coordinators were also asked to assess their understanding of institutional liability and institutional risk, again qualifying their understanding as strong, weak or another qualifier they were comfortable using. The responses were very evenly distributed between strong, moderate and weak understandings of institutional liability and risk, and were not necessarily reflective of the seniority of the individual in a coordinator role.

All coordinators were asked the following question: Given that students on work terms are employees and adults, what is the extent of your responsibility in risk assessment and risk management? In general coordinators felt that risk assessment and risk management was part of their role as a Co-operative Education Coordinator; however, the extent of that responsibility and their perceptions of the boundaries of their responsibility varied considerably.

Clare, Tanya, David, Sarah, and Rachel felt a strong sense of responsibility for assessing and minimizing risks, expressed clearly in the following statement by Clare:

> *I think the keyword is that they're still students. And while they're adults and employees, they are students of our university. And I have been put in a position whereby I'm expected to take a great deal of responsibility, I think, in assessing risk and managing it, as much as possible. So I think my responsibility is huge.*

Conversely Susan and Paul did not feel a strong sense of responsibility for assessing and minimizing risks. "I don't feel that we have that much responsibility [in risk assessment and risk management] because the moment the student goes to a work term it becomes the responsibility of the employer" (Paul).

Natalie, Alice, Nancy, and Patricia expressed how their understanding of their responsibility in risk assessment and risk management was not clear to them. Natalie in particular noted that the boundaries of her responsibilities were not well articulated to her by her employer in her initial training. Alice discussed this topic at length. She expressed the uncertainty she felt about the extent of her responsibility in risk assessment and risk management in terms of a balance between supporting and helping her students, but not taking on too much responsibility and undermining their ability to develop decision making skills:

> *I am not sure honestly how far to go. I hope that that helps with your research because I think that that's an honest answer. Part of me believes that students are adults and they have to learn how to act like adults by acting like adults and suffering consequences if they have made bad decisions. . . . If you are trying to make all the decisions for the students, if we go to extremes, you're kind of undermining their ability to develop those skills for themselves. So I try to balance that.*

Alice also connected the extent of her responsibility in risk assessment and risk management to questions of her own liability, "what if I don't catch something? How much am I liable if something happens to a student? The other part of me thinks how much can we cover off? Where is that boundary where our role can stop?"

The balance of who is responsible was reiterated by a number of coordinators. Julia, Nancy, James, and Sarah all noted that responsibility for risk assessment and risk management is to some extent shared between the three partners: the university or coordinator, the employer, and the student, although each interpreted the balance in a different way. Julia acknowledged the unique status of the co-operative education student as both a student and an employee in her response:

> *I like the question because in many ways it implies that it's not just our responsibility, right and it's true. They, co-op students, are kind of straddling two spheres at the same time, they are a student. . . . but they're also employees of the organization.*

James and Sarah's sentiments were very similar in this regard, and both perceived the employer to be the party primarily responsible for risk assessment and risk management, although they both acknowledged that as the coordinator, they also had an important role in this.

The great majority of coordinators felt that their university had prepared them poorly or had not prepared them at all to assess and minimize risk.

The great majority of coordinators felt that their university had prepared them poorly or had not prepared them at all to assess and minimize risk. The following comments illustrate the general accord that coordinators presented in response to the question of how their institution prepared them to assess and minimize risky situations. "They don't" (Patricia). "Poorly. I don't know, we haven't had any training on this" (Paul). "I don't think it does a great job" (Nancy). "I don't think there's any preparation at all" (David). "I would say minimal preparation" (Alice). "To be honest not a whole lot. . . . my institution

really doesn't do a lot to prepare me" (Amanda). "I don't know, I think we've done it pretty organically to be honest. . . . I wouldn't say that we've had, we have not had formal training on risk management or risk assessment in any capacity" (Julia). "I really don't feel like I have a good amount of training in the area" (Natalie). "I think the institution can do a lot more in terms of preparing co-op advisors or internship advisors. I just don't know exactly how" (Rachel). "I don't think they've done anything to prepare us" (Sarah). "I'm not sure that I have been prepared. Not by the university" (Clare).

Tanya stressed the availability of the risk management office at her university as a resource as well as the clear guidelines established for coordinators in her unit, but noted her concern regarding the availability of time to be diligent in assessing situations for risk and reiterated the question heard from many coordinators: What is due diligence and how much is enough? James also commented that his institution prepared him to assess and minimize risk through its policies. He noted that anything not covered by those policies was to be passed up the management line.

Despite the majority of the coordinators noting that their institution does little, if anything, to prepare them to assess and minimize risk, they mostly identified that they felt supported by the policies of their institution. Rachel noted she felt supported, but elaborated on the importance of collaboration in developing and evaluating university policy:

> *I feel supported. I think there can be more done in terms of support networks so while the policies and the procedures exist, I think it's important also to make sure that the people within the institution are discussing policies and procedures and monitoring them and evaluating them to make sure that it works.*

Despite the majority of the coordinators noting that their institution does little, if anything, to prepare them to assess and minimize risk, they mostly identified that they felt supported by the policies of their institution.

Similarly, Susan wondered whether a more collaborative approach to developing policy related to risk management would be beneficial to her unit.

Natalie felt strong support from policies within her division and from the leadership in her group. James made similar comments, "we have some really good policies that are tried, tested, and true. We're always updating them." Julia also replied that she feels supported by the policies of her university and qualified that by stating that the policies support her because they were developed collaboratively from a bottom-up approach rather than being imposed in a top-down approach. Susan and Clare both stated that they felt supported by their institution and that they felt the institution supported the decisions that they made. Nancy had mixed feelings about whether she felt supported or not supported by the policies of her institution.

Paul, David, and Sarah all commented that policies at their institutions were either unclear or that they did not know them. "I must say I am not aware of the policies, if they

exist in regards to the co-op work terms" (Paul). "I don't know what they are. Nobody's ever told me what they are. So I wouldn't know how to answer the question. Scary isn't it?" (Sarah). "I think the policies are unclear" (David). Patricia implied that her understanding of the policies was not strong "of what I know of them I feel supported. Clearly I need to know more."

Three coordinators noted the general lack of guidelines or procedures laid out for coordinators in terms of risk assessment and the extent of their responsibilities. Alice stated that the lack of guidelines leads to a lack of consistency between what coordinators do to assess and minimize risk. Nancy and Natalie also expressed a need for more clarity and written procedures to provide guidance.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to understand qualitatively how Co-operative Education Coordinators perceive risk in co-operative education in Canada. It seeks to fill an important gap in the existing literature related to risk in co-operative education as well as to contribute to the existing discourse on risk in general.

How do coordinators understand risk and institutional liability in general?

Coordinators' understanding of risk and liability is important because it is this knowledge plus situation specific information that forms the basis on which coordinators make decisions on behalf of their students. Their understanding of risk and liability forms the context in which they make decisions.

Coordinators self-identified as having a range of understandings of risk and institutional liability in general, with good representation across the scale of weak to strong. The variability in understandings of risk and liability is linked to coordinators' questions about the extent of their responsibility. More than half of all coordinators expressed that they were not clear where the boundaries of their responsibilities lay and that they often used their own judgment to determine what they were and what they were not responsible for rather than being guided by institutional policy. It is likely that the subjectivity in coordinator responsibility and the variability in understandings of risk and liability result from unclear or poorly articulated formal policies and procedures in many cases.

More than half of all coordinators expressed that they were not clear where the boundaries of their responsibilities lay and that they often used their own judgment to determine what they were and what they were not responsible for rather than being guided by institutional policy.

Interestingly, coordinators self-assessed understandings of risk and liability in co-operative education were not necessarily connected with their length of service as a coordinator or other work experience, suggesting that personality or other external factors were strong influences on their understandings of risk and institutional liability and thus on decision-making. Factors involved in decision-making and risk assessment is the subject of much research, which articulates that cognition, emotion, intuition, and mood all play a role (Böhm & Brun, 2008; De Vries, Holland, & Wit-

teman, 2008; Khatri & Ng, 2000). Coordinators' understandings of risk and liability and the decisions that they make predicated on this knowledge are influenced by many factors and thus are idiosyncratic and likely inconsistent.

What do coordinators feel they are personally responsible or liable for?

Coordinators' opinions varied considerably when asked about the extent of their responsibility in assessing and minimizing risk. Generally coordinators understood risk assessment and risk management to be part of their role but the extent to which they were responsible (more so than the student or the employer) was variable.

Giddens' (1999) discussion of the relationship between risk and responsibility made explicit the link between decision-making and risk:

> *The relation between risk and responsibility can be easily stated, at least on an abstract level. Risks only exist when there are decisions to be taken, for reasons given earlier. The idea of responsibility also presumes decisions. What brings into play the notion of responsibility is that someone takes a decision having discernible consequences.* (p. 8)

Hence the decision-maker is responsible for consequences. In the case of co-operative education, decisions are made by all of the partners and therefore they all have the opportunity to expose one another (and themselves) to risk. The difference between the decisions that these players make is that students and employers are making decisions for themselves while coordinators are making decisions on behalf of others. Recent research (Charness & Jackson, 2009) set out to determine how feelings of responsibility influence decisions to take on risk in a strategic environment. Charness and Jackson's experiment found that a sense of responsibility for the welfare of others has an effect on decision-making; participants were more likely to choose a risky option when choosing for themselves only and less likely to choose a risky option when making decisions for a group. Reynolds, Joseph, and Sherwood (2009) also found that people are more risk averse when making decisions that affect others, especially in large publically owned firms. The influence of feelings of responsibility on risk-taking and decision-making suggests that coordinators, who routinely make decisions on behalf of employers and students as part of their work, are the most cautious decision-makers in the partnership and likely to be more cautious and less risky in making decisions on behalf of their students and the participating employers.

Most coordinators did, however, agree that responsibility for minimizing risk should be shared between the coordinator, the employer, and the student, but the balance of who was more and who was less responsible varied considerably. How the coordinators interpret their responsibilities is in many cases a personal decision rather than an institutional one. In other words the institutions are in many cases not properly defining the coordinators' responsibilities in terms of risk management and assessment. The result is that coordinators are deciding for themselves what they are responsible for and acting

according to their own understandings of risk and liability, which in a lot of cases as demonstrated in this research, is not a strong understanding. The potential for misunderstanding, conflict, or injury is strong in situations where so much is assumed and so little is properly defined.

How do universities prepare co-operative education coordinators to reduce risk and do coordinators feel they are supported (or not supported) by the policies of their institution?

Coordinators answered almost entirely that their universities had done nothing to prepare them to reduce potential risks in co-operative education and that largely their abilities to do so were learned from colleagues or resulted from common sense and previous work experiences. Coordinators rely, in large part, on their own tacit knowledge to reduce risk rather than relying on expert advice from risk managers. Seemingly university administrators and risk managers are doing little, if anything, to participate in risk communication with the great majority of this population of coordinators. Current concepts of risk communication take for granted that messaging about risk must be an interactive exchange of information and opinions (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seegar, & Littlefield, 2009, p. 5), which evolved from a linear one-way approach to risk communication. Sellnow et al. provide a number of best practices in risk communication including infusing risk communication into policy decisions and understanding that risk communication is a process of communication and dialogue over time, not simply a one-time injection of information in order to produce the desired outcome. Coordinators and university administrators should be collaborating in order to incorporate their respective experiences and expertise into policy development. Unfortunately it is apparent that university administrators are not interacting with the majority of this group of coordinators and are not engaging in effective risk communication.

Surprisingly, however, coordinators largely felt supported by the policies of their institution, although there was a strong sense that coordinators sought clarity or more information on policies related to risk. These positions seem at odds with one another. How can coordinators acknowledge that their institution has done nothing to prepare them to assess and minimize risk but still purport to feel supported by the policies of their institution? Is it possible that coordinators do not see the connection between risk assessment and risk minimization and university policy? It is difficult to explain otherwise. It is likely then that as a result of ineffective risk communication coordinators lack awareness of the relevant policies and are unaware of the connection between risk and university policy.

Implications and Recommendations

As indicated by the literature and this research, coordinators' understanding of risk and their decision-making processes are influenced by many factors. By their own admission most of the coordinators participating in this research perceive that universities have not done anything to prepare coordinators to assess and minimize risks. As a result, *it is*

recommended that university risk managers and policymakers collaborate with co-operative education coordinators to identify and assess risks and develop appropriate policies to minimize risks to students, employers, and the institution. Their collaboration should be dynamic, iterative, and long-term to ensure policies are developed, evaluated and modified effectively with input from all parties.

Many coordinators expressed concern about the extent of their responsibility and through the interviews with coordinators it became clear that there is not a clear or uniform understanding of coordinator responsibilities versus those of the employer and those of the student. In order to make clear what each of the participating partners are responsible for *it is recommended that Co-operative Education Managers, in collaboration with coordinators, employers, and students, establish and distribute clear guidelines delineating the responsibilities of each of the partners.* It is not enough that each individual understands his or her own responsibilities, he or she must also understand the responsibilities of the other parties involved.

CAFCE is the voice for post-secondary co-operative education in Canada and the accrediting body for Canadian co-operative education programs. CAFCE's Accreditation Council "is important in that it establishes criteria which are accepted as standards for programs and their delivery, and in maintaining or adjusting those criteria as the needs and demographics of society, employers and students evolve" (CAFCE, 2006, p. 1). In addition "accreditation criteria may be used as the vehicle to support policies and procedures established for your operation and as a reference point when dealing with student and employer issues" (CAFCE, 2009, para. 1). CAFCE could take a leadership role and incorporate the need for explicit policies related to risk and guidelines that outline the division of responsibilities between the institution, the employer, and the student in their accreditation process.

Further Research

The topic of risk in co-operative education represents new ground in academic research. There is no existing body of literature on this topic, hence areas for further research related to risk and co-operative education are too numerous to list completely. However, now that there is research outlining how coordinators perceive risk, it would be valuable to complement this with research on co-operative education managers' perception of risk, as well as those of students and employers. In addition, this research has exposed issues concerning university policy and risk communication. Further research on risk communication and effective risk policy development in university settings in general as well as in co-operative education specifically would be beneficial to the partners in co-operative education.

Conclusions

This study sought to understand how coordinators perceive the risks in co-operative education in Canadian universities. Coordinators' comments on the sometimes ambiguous nature of their responsibilities are reflective of the dual status of the co-operative education student, both as student and employee at once. As such who is responsible for what is often a question that is answered idiosyncratically by coordinators. University policy-makers should take a leadership role in engaging in risk communication with their employees in co-operative education in order to collaborate on best practices and policies that will guide coordinators and enable them to provide consistent and effective risk management strategies in order to support student learning and development.

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