FACILITATING THE TRANSITION TO POSTGRADUATE STUDIES: APPLYING THE LESSONS FROM THE FIRST YEAR EXPERIENCE

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MOTIVATION – WHY I’M HERE

• TO SHARE MY EXPERIENCES WORKING AS A LEARNING ADVISOR (LA) ON TWO DIFFERENT MASTER’S LEVEL PROGRAMS.
• TO SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON THE POSTGRADUATE DILEMMA.
• TO INVITE DISCUSSION ON HOW TO ADDRESS COMMON PROBLEMS.
The Postgraduate Experience
BACKGROUND: THE EMERGENT POSTGRADUATE PHENOMENON

• MANY POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES FACE SIMILAR ISSUES TO UNDERGRADUATES WHO ARE JUST BEGINNING THEIR UNIVERSITY JOURNEYS.

• THE EXPANSION OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETS AND NON-STANDARD ENTRY PATHWAYS INTO POSTGRADUATE COURSES HAS RESULTED IN A MUCH GREATER DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS WITH DIFFERENT CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS, EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS.

• AS A RESULT, TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF MASTER’S LEVEL STUDENTS ARE NO LONGER RELEVANT.
Student Diversity
TRANSITION TO POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

• Master’s coursework degrees have mushroomed in recent decades and have become in some cases the proverbial pot of gold.

• In certain disciplines, students are granted entry on the basis of their professional experience in the absence of any undergraduate study.

• This means they have no previous exposure to the academic skills required in the discipline.

• Master’s coursework degrees are often accelerated, taught exclusively online or in blocks to accommodate students who work.

• Reduced teaching time makes it difficult to find the time required to incorporate academic skills into course content.
CASE 1: MASTER OF PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTING 2010 - 2012

- The Master of Professional Accounting (MPA) is a postgraduate coursework degree accredited by the National Accounting Bodies in Australia.
- It is a technical course comprising 12 mandatory units completed over 2 years full-time, 4 years part-time.
- In recent years, favourable visa regulations have made it possible for international students to use the MPA as a conduit to permanent residency.
- This has boosted enrolments of international students significantly; however, many are unable to secure professional employment after graduating (Birrell, 2006; Hancock et al., 2009).
FIRST STEPS

• THE FORMER HEAD OF THE SCHOOL OF ACCOUNTING AT ECU COMMISSIONED A PROJECT TO ADDRESS CONCERNS ABOUT MPA GRADUATE OUTCOMES IN SEMESTER 1, 2010.

• THE LA, WORKING WITH ANOTHER ACADEMIC, CONDUCTED A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE TO IDENTIFY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS WHICH WERE CRITICAL FOR A SUCCESSFUL CAREER IN ACCOUNTING.

• THE KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IDENTIFIED INCLUDED:
  i. ORAL COMMUNICATION
  ii. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION
  iii. CRITICAL APPRAISAL AND PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS AND
  iv. TEAMWORK SKILLS
EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FRAMEWORK (ESF)

- The next step was the development of an Employability Skills Framework (ESF) for the purpose of embedding these employability skills in the MPA (Bunney & Therry, 2013).

- The four key skills were mapped to specific units across the program in a manner which allowed for the scaffolding of learning experiences throughout the program.

- All 12 units in the MPA were required to address two or more employability skills with capstone units incorporating all four skills.

- A fully integrated and contextualised model for teaching skills was adopted in the ESF, based on evidence that generic skills should be integrated into course content rather than taught independently in separate skills-based units (Harris & Ashton, 2010).
## EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FRAMEWORK

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Course Structure</th>
<th>Unit Name</th>
<th>Teamwork</th>
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IMPLEMENTATION

• THE ESF WAS IMPLEMENTED PROGRESSIVELY OVER FOUR SEMESTERS FROM JULY 2010 TO JUNE 2012.

• THE LA WORKED WITH UNIT COORDINATORS TO:
  • REVIEW UNIT LEARNING OUTCOMES TO INCORPORATE THE DESIGNATED EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS
  • DEVISE APPROPRIATE TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES
  • MODIFY ASSESSMENTS AND
  • DEVELOP FEEDBACK AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS TO FACILITATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NOMINATED SKILLS.

• THE LA ALSO DEVELOPED TEACHING MATERIALS AND FACILITATED WORKSHOPS/TUTORIALS IN EACH UNIT TARGETING THE RELEVANT EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND THE ASSESSMENTS FOR THE UNIT.
THE IMPACT OF THE ESF WAS EVALUATED AT THE END OF THE TWO YEAR IMPLEMENTATION PHASE IN A THREE PART QUALITATIVE STUDY.

i. STUDENTS COMPLETED A QUESTIONNAIRE ABOUT THEIR LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS TARGETED IN THE ESF.

ii. ACADEMICS ATTENDED A FOCUS GROUP MEETING TO SHARE THEIR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THEIR TEACHING EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF THE ESF ON STUDENTS SKILLS.

iii. RESEARCHERS EXAMINED DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE IN THE FORM OF UNIT PLANS, ASSESSMENTS AND MARKING RUBRICS TO EVALUATE THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE ESF HAD BEEN INTEGRATED IN COURSE MATERIALS.

OVERALL, THE FINDINGS INDICATED THAT:

i. BOTH STUDENTS AND ACADEMICS VIEWED THE ESF AS SUCCESSFUL IN IMPROVING THE FOUR KEY EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS (BUNNEY & THERRY, 2015).

ii. THE USE OF A HOLISTIC, CONTEXTUALISED APPROACH TO TEACHING GENERIC SKILLS IS MORE EFFECTIVE (BUNNEY & THERRY, 2015).
Public Health

Case study 2
CASE 2: MASTER OF PUBLIC HEALTH
2014 - 2015

• The Master of Public Health (MPH) is a postgraduate coursework degree focusing on the development and management of public health policy and programs in an international context.

• It is widely promoted to overseas students, many of whom enrol in an MPH with a view to seeking a better life in Australia.

• It includes nine core units and three elective units studied over 2 years full-time, 4 years part-time
FIRST STEPS

• THE LA WAS APPROACHED BY THE NEW MPH COURSE COORDINATOR CONCERNED ABOUT POOR ACADEMIC SKILLS, COURSE PROGRESSION RATES AND EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS FOR MPH GRADUATES.

• MEETINGS WITH ACADEMICS TEACHING ON THE PROGRAM AND AN INFORMAL ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WORK REVEALED AN URGENT NEED FOR ASSISTANCE WITH ACADEMIC SKILLS.

• HOWEVER, THE OPTION OF A FULLY INTEGRATED MODEL FOR ACADEMIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT ACROSS THE WHOLE PROGRAM WAS NOT AVAILABLE.

• ALL ACADEMIC SKILLS WORKSHOPS/SEMINARS ETC. WERE ADDITIONAL TO SCHEDULED CLASS TIME.
LEARNING ADVISOR INVOLVEMENT

LA INITIATIVES INCLUDED:

• A SERIES OF 90 MINUTE UNIVERSITY ORIENTATION SEMINARS OPEN TO ALL MPH STUDENTS.
• UNIT SPECIFIC WORKSHOPS ‘UNPACKING ASSESSMENTS’ AND TARGETING ACADEMIC SKILLS RUN AS OPTIONAL COURSE ADD-ONS.
• WEEKLY 90 MINUTE DROP-IN SUPPORT SESSIONS WHERE STUDENTS COULD COME FOR ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE.
• INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS ON REQUEST (LIMITED NUMBER).
• ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SUPPORT VIA GRAMMAR WORKSHOPS, DROP-IN SUPPORT SESSIONS AND INDIVIDUAL CONSULTATIONS.
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<th>MANDATORY UNITS (9)</th>
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<td>Leadership and Health Advocacy Skills</td>
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<td>Public Health: Philosophy, Principles and Practice</td>
<td>Public Health Evaluation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epidemiology</td>
<td>Communicable Disease</td>
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<td>Diversity, Culture and Health</td>
<td>Law and Ethical Issues</td>
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<td>Strategic Decision Making and Program Planning</td>
<td>Maternal, Child and Youth Health</td>
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<td>Principles of Environmental Health</td>
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EVALUATION

• NO FORMAL EVALUATION UNDERTAKEN.

• ATTENDANCE WAS MONITORED AND STUDENT GRADES BETWEEN SEMESTERS WERE INFORMALLY COMPARED BUT NO STATISTICAL EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED.

• VERBAL FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED VOLUNTARY SKILLS WORKSHOPS AND DROP-IN LABS WAS POSITIVE.

• ACADEMICS WERE POSITIVE ABOUT LA ASSISTANCE BUT ACKNOWLEDGED THE NEED FOR MORE ONGOING SUPPORT.

• IN SHORT, THE PROBLEM OF LACK OF PREPARATION FOR UNIVERSITY STUDIES AND LOW ACADEMIC SKILLS PERSISTS IN THIS COHORT.

• REGULAR ACADEMIC STAFF TURNOVER IN THE PROGRAM IS INDICATIVE OF THE STRESS THIS PLACES ON TEACHING STAFF.

• THIS DISTRESS IS ALSO APPARENT IN THOSE STUDENTS WHO SEEK INDIVIDUAL HELP FROM THE LA.
MPA & MPH: SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT

• THE TWO COHORTS OF STUDENTS ARE DIFFERENT IN MANY RESPECTS BUT THEY SHARE THE SAME NEEDS FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT.

• HOWEVER, THERE IS A KEY DISTINCTION IN THE APPROACH ADOPTED TO STUDENT SUPPORT WHICH STEMS FROM THE INITIAL MOTIVATION.

• THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ESF WAS DRIVEN BY EXTERNAL MARKET FORCES, AMIDST WIDESPREAD RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS OF GRADUATES.
  ➢ EXTERNAL IMPETUS = OVERALL PROGRAM FULLY EMBEDDED AND CONTEXTUALISED APPROACH
  ➢ FOCUS ON ACHIEVING APPROPRIATE EXIT LEVEL SKILLS AND IMPROVING EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS

• THE REQUEST FOR ACADEMIC SUPPORT FOR MPH STUDENTS WAS INTERNALLY DRIVEN BY ACADEMICS’ CONCERN ABOUT THE LACK OF PREPAREDNESS AND INADEQUATE ACADEMIC SKILLS OF STUDENTS IN THE COURSE.
  ➢ INTERNAL IMPETUS = MORE PIECEMEAL, AD HOC APPROACH USING ADD-ON WORKSHOPS RATHER THAN EMBEDDED SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
  ➢ FOCUS ON POOR, ENTRY LEVEL ACADEMIC SKILLS RATHER THAN EXIT LEVEL SKILLS
REFLECTIONS FROM THE MPA/MPH

i. Embedding generic skills within the course content rather than teaching them in a discrete, skills-based unit is crucial as it is this contextualisation which enables students to acquire those skills and apply them in the workplace (Harris & Ashton, 2010).

ii. A collaborative, program-wide approach is needed in order to integrate generic skills in a structured manner which allows for the scaffolding of learning experiences throughout the program (Willcoxson, Wynder & Laing, 2010).

iii. Innovative and non-traditional teaching strategies including small group learning, cooperative learning and problem-based learning should be adopted as they are more effective for teaching generic skills (Bunney, Sharplin & Howitt, 2013).
Lessons from the First Year Experience
DIVERSITY AND NON-STANDARD ENTRY

• The increasing diversity of commencing university students is a feature of contemporary Australian universities (Nelson, Kift, Humphreys and Harper, 2006).

• First in family, mature age entry, regional and international students may not have access to accurate information about the academic requirements of university study (Nelson et al., 2006).

• This may have a significant impact on their ability to make a successful transition to university studies when combined with the myriad of other adjustments required at that time (Nelson et al., 2006).
FIRST YEAR TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

• KIFT (2009) PROPOSED A FIRST YEAR TRANSITION PEDAGOGY DESIGNED TO ENHANCE THE FIRST YEAR LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES.

• THIS TRANSITION PEDAGOGY IS FOUNDED ON SIX GUIDING PRINCIPLES:
  o TRANSITION,
  o DIVERSITY,
  o DESIGN,
  o ENGAGEMENT,
  o ASSESSMENT,
  o EVALUATION AND
  o MONITORING.
POSTGRADUATE TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

TRANSLATING THESE PRINCIPLES INTO CURRICULUM DESIGN REVEALS STRATEGIES WHICH COULD BE EFFECTIVE AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL:

1. MAKING THE TRANSITION PROCESS EXPLICIT BY INFORMING STUDENTS ABOUT THE NATURE AND STANDARD OF ACADEMIC SKILLS REQUIRED AND INCLUDING SELF-EVALUATION TOOLS.

2. RECOGNISING THE DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS AND INCORPORATING A VARIETY OF LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT APPROACHES.

3. DESIGNING CURRICULUM TO INCORPORATE ACADEMIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN STANDARD COURSE MATERIALS AND SCAFFOLD THE LEARNING PROCESS.
POSTGRADUATE TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

4. ENSURING THAT NEW STUDENTS ARE SOCIALLY CONNECTED AND ENGAGED THROUGH ACTIVE, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES.

5. CONDUCTING EARLY FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS AND PROVIDING REGULAR FEEDBACK ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND PROGRESS.

6. MONITORING AND EVALUATING STUDENTS TO ASSESS LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT TO ALLOW FOR TIMELY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION WITH STUDENTS AT RISK.
CHALLENGES

FACTORS COMPLICATING THE ADOPTION OF A TRANSITION PEDAGOGY AT POSTGRADUATE LEVEL INCLUDE:

1. THE PUSH TO ONLINE DELIVERY WHICH IS A MORE CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT FOR THE DELIVERY A TRANSITIONAL CURRICULUM AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT.

2. BUDGETARY RESTRICTIONS WHICH ARE NOT NECESSARILY CONGRUENT WITH THE IDEALS OF GOOD TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICE (LARGER CLASS SIZES, LIMITED CONTACT TIME.)

3. LACK OF CONTINUITY/INCREASING CASUALISATION OF UNIVERSITY TEACHING STAFF WHICH MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO SUSTAIN INTERVENTIONS.

4. THE COMPETING DEMANDS OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH WITH PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES LARGELY DEPENDENT ON RESEARCH OUTPUT.
CONCLUSION

• ONCE UNIVERSITIES HAVE ADMITTED STUDENTS, THEY HAVE AN ETHICAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO “TAKE REASONABLE STEPS TO ENABLE THEM TO BE SUCCESSFUL” (THOMAS, 2012, P. 4).

• THIS RESPONSIBILITY BEGINS RIGHT AT THE POINT OF ENTRY TO THE COURSE.

• AS THE FINANCIAL BURDEN OF HIGHER EDUCATION IS INCREASINGLY SHIFTED TO INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, THERE IS A MANDATE TO “ENHANCE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND MAXIMISE THE SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS” (THOMAS, 2012, P.5).
Maximising Student Success at Postgraduate Level
“Access without support is not opportunity”

(Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, P. 46).
WISH LIST

• THE CONCEPT OF A TRANSITIONAL PEDAGOGY SHOULD BE EXPLORED IN THE POSTGRADUATE CONTEXT WITH A VIEW TO:
  o DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM BASED ON THE PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES PROVEN TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN FIRST YEAR TRANSITION PROGRAMS AND
  o INTEGRATING AND CONTEXTUALISING ACADEMIC SKILLS INTO STANDARD COURSE MATERIALS.

• THIS WILL REQUIRE:
  o A WILLINGNESS TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE TEACHING STRATEGIES IN TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS AT ALL LEVELS IN THE UNIVERSITY.
  o AN INTENSIVE COLLABORATION BETWEEN ACADEMIC LANGUAGE AND LEARNING (ALL) ADVISORS AND ACADEMICS AND
  o ADEQUATE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND APPROPRIATE RESOURCING.
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