

1-1-2010

Embedding professionally relevant learning in the business curriculum through industry engagement

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Recommended Citation

Zanko, Michael; Papadopoulos, Theo; Fallshaw, Eveline; Taylor, Tracy; Woodley, Clare; and Armatas, Christine: Embedding professionally relevant learning in the business curriculum through industry engagement 2010, 1-16.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/commpapers/2290>

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Abstract

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Keywords

Embedding, professionally, relevant, learning, business, curriculum, through, industry, engagement

Disciplines

Business | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Zanko, M., Papadopoulos, T., Fallshaw, E., Taylor, T., Woodley, C. & Armatas, C. (2010). Embedding professionally relevant learning in the business curriculum through industry engagement. 24th Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference (pp. 1-16). Adelaide: ANZAM.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on preliminary findings from an ALTC funded project on how to build curricula that meet the needs of business students and employers of business graduates. The project grew out of an Australian Business Deans Council Teaching and Learning Network scoping study which identified widespread concern among industry, academic and professional associations about the lack of engagement with real world problems by business graduates. In the paper we discuss the need for industry engagement, define professionally relevant learning, and outline the study objectives and methodology. We present a typology of industry engagement in the curriculum that emerged from our fieldwork, and tools that business faculties can use to embed professional learning. Finally, we suggest directions for future research.

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BACKGROUND

The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), formed in 2002, represents a national network of business faculties (currently 38) from universities throughout Australia. The ABDC Teaching and Learning (T&L) Network was established in 2004. The network seeks to provide Associate Deans who have responsibility for learning and teaching in business higher education with opportunities for professional development as well as knowledge and resource sharing. The network also has a critical leadership role in facilitating a strategic and national approach to change and development in Australian Business faculties. In this regard, the work of the ABDC T&L Network is vitally important in view of its wider constituency in business higher education. A Carrick (now Australian Learning and Teaching Council – ALTC) funded Discipline Based Initiative scoping study titled *Business as Usual? A collaborative and inclusive investigation of existing resources, strengths, gaps and challenges to be addressed for sustainability in learning and teaching in Australian university business faculties* was undertaken by the ABDC T&L Network in 2006-7 ((Freeman, Hancock, Simpson and Sykes, 2008). Three funding proposals from the ALTC for follow-on projects were successfully developed as a result of the findings of the scoping study, one of which is the subject of

this paper – *Engaging Industry: Building professionally relevant learning and industry engagement in the business curriculum*. The project team comprised T&L associate deans from the University of Technology, Sydney, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, the University of Wollongong and the lead institution, Victoria University.

The scoping study and related research indicated that the importance of generic business graduate skills and ‘soft skills’ are increasingly being emphasised by external stakeholders as is the role of the university in their development (Allen Consulting Group, 2006; Australian Industry Group, 2006; Barrie, 2005; Bowden et al., 2002; Business Council of Australia, 2006a, 2006b; CPA Australia, 2005; DEST, 2002, 2005, 2006; Goldsworthy, 2003; Hager, Holland and Beckett, 2002). These skills lead to employability and work readiness and are the skills needed by graduates to become adaptive and productive in the workforce (AAGE 2007; ACER, 2002). DEST’s (2002) definitions of employability skills are closely linked to the notion of career readiness (Clark, Papadopoulos and Rogers, 2006) and preparation for employment through work-based learning (Boud, Cressey and Docherty, 2006; Boud and Solomon, 2001). These include:

- Communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- Teamwork skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- Problem solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- Self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- Planning and organising skills that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- Technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks
- Life-long learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- Initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes (DEST, 2002).

The Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC, 2007) also suggests that “for some there is a perception that employability skills are under-developed” (BIHECC, 2007:2)

and recommended placing greater emphasis upon explicitly identifying employability in all university curriculum, and increasing access to work integrated learning. Research has shown that the development of “authentic learning environments in higher education” (Herrington and Herrington, 2006: 5) engage students in “authentic activities of the kind that reflect ways in which knowledge and skills are used in the real world [and which] offer a bridge between theory and practice” (Bennett, 2006: 121). It has also been shown that constructing “knowledge-building communities” is effective in creating graduates who are more “connected to the real world of their profession” (Kiggins, Cambourne and Ferry, 2005:76). Despite the above, the undergraduate and postgraduate business curriculum in Australian universities focuses on the development of discipline competencies and relatively few curricula incorporate the systematic development of professional competencies and an understanding of the realities of professional life. The challenge is to find sustainable ways to embed professionally relevant learning opportunities in the business curriculum and to engage with external bodies to support this process. Discipline areas such as engineering, nursing and teaching require students to undertake practical experience as a key component of their degree or registration. This is seldom the case across the formal and informal curriculum in business.

Defining Professionally Relevant Learning

While professionally relevant learning (PRL) may well include those ‘soft’ skills that have variously been called generic skills, employability skills, or graduate capabilities –it is necessary to be mindful of the distinction between ‘content-free and context-free generic skills’ (Bowden and Marton, 2004) and generic skills that are referenced to particular professions. According to Stephenson (1992) generic skills cannot be taught separately from discipline knowledge. Employers consistently hold that disciplinary expertise is only one of a much larger set of components that determine whether an individual will operate successfully on entering a profession. ““Employers know they are more likely to have difficulties with an employee because of poor employment-related skills rather than an inadequate technical expertise. The skills they value typically involve capabilities universities have also determined are desirable in their graduates, eg communication ability, problem-solving, capacity to work with others, and managing oneself.”” (from Otter, 1997 cited in Bowden et al, 2000).

With the above in mind, we define professionally relevant learning as: *the development of professional capabilities through teaching and learning experiences and activities that integrate academic, discipline-specific and industry-referenced knowledge, skills and attitudes*. Evidence from our fieldwork demonstrates that PRL manifests in a range of teaching and learning activities, assessment practices and innovative programs. Its chief characteristics are: industry-referenced (explicitly linked to industry or professional bodies); curriculum currency (addresses up to date issues and industry practice); integrated curriculum (develops professional capability through linking practice with theory); and, self-directed learning (fosters reflective practice).

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The project has six key objectives related to *curriculum renewal* strategies and improving the quality and relevance of business education for professional preparation through increased emphasis on PRL underpinned by industry engagement.

Current Practice Scoping

Objective 1: Identify current practice related to the facilitation and delivery of professionally relevant learning in business faculties of Australian universities.

Objective 2: Identify good practice principles in the development, delivery and evaluation of professionally relevant learning underpinned by an external engagement strategy.

Development and Embedding of Resources and Case Studies

Objective 3: Achieve greater engagement of staff and students with industry, government and the professions through the incorporation of professionally relevant learning activities in the business curriculum and development of sustainable mutually interdependent partnerships.

Dissemination of Case-Studies and Findings

Objective 4: Provide resources which will increase staff awareness and enable staff to integrate professionally relevant learning experiences while increasing student awareness in order to enable students to build their professional identity and prepare them for professional practice.

Objective 5: Promote and encourage implementation and embedding of policies and strategies that have proven successful in ensuring a professionally relevant perspective in the curriculum.

Objective 6: Disseminate the case-studies and findings of Objectives 1-5 throughout Australian universities in order to facilitate the creation of communities of practice that renew business curriculum and improve students' learning experience and outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

An action research methodology was adopted to provide a participative and reflective approach to the project (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2003). Action research has traditionally been represented in the form of a spiral, involving planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). Focus groups and workshops were held in most States with academics directly involved in the design, development and delivery of PRL at more than half of all Australian Universities in order to address a number of key questions such as: What does PRL mean to them? What is the current range of professionally relevant learning in business higher education? How do educators engage with industry and the professions to inform the development, delivery and evaluation of professionally relevant learning? What are the key enablers and impediments to developing professionally relevant learning activities? What is the institutional setting (mission, policies and procedures) and how does this impact on the prevalence and nature of professionally relevant learning? Is there a set of good practice principles that could inform the development of national benchmarks of good practice?

The twice yearly ABDC T&L network meetings were used to secure input from Associate Deans on these questions (using a pro forma and through discussion groups), to gain referrals to instances of high quality, industry-engaged PRL within their institutions for follow-up and case documentation, and for feedback on progress. Universities were asked to circulate a case study template to their academics and to encourage their participation. These initiatives led to the documentation of more than 70 cases of PRL. Those considered by the team to be exemplars and representative of a particular type (or sub-type) were worked up in much more detail, often with interviews used to garner more

necessary information. This activity is ongoing. Further, a desk audit of the institutional contexts for PRL in universities was also undertaken to review Australian university websites' vision and strategy statements that reference Professionally Relevant Learning (or synonymous term). This data gathering and iterative analysis led to a number of outputs, in particular a typology of PRL in business education, and a range of teaching and learning tools for use in embedding PRL in the curriculum. These are discussed below.

A TYPOLOGY OF PRL

The following eight main types of professionally relevant learning were identified through the project as being commonly implemented in business faculties:

1. Industry Case Study
2. Industry Simulations
3. Industry Practitioner-Led Content
4. Industry Mentoring
5. Industry Field Trip/ Study Tour
6. Industry Placement
7. Industry Competition
8. Industry Project

This systematic classification allowed us to bring order to a wide range of PRL practices, preparatory to creating a suite of teaching and learning tools and approaches for embedding PRL in the business curriculum. Each type is briefly described and evidenced with examples sourced from the project.

Industry Case Study

The industry case study is a common PRL approach. This includes a range of case studies and a diversity of teaching methods and assessment tasks; for example, student writing of business cases or analyzing cases they have been provided with. Case studies can be used to encourage students to put

theory into practice, especially if learning is driven by challenging, open-ended problems through the use of appropriately selected case studies. Examples include cases drawn from textbooks, newspapers. Of particular interest are 'live' cases used by Murdoch and University of South Australia respectively in business and enterprise, and marketing subjects. These cases focus on contemporaneous and real issues faced by organizations in the community.

Industry Simulations

Simulations provide students with a chance to behave in ways that are consistent with a real workplace or project but within the safety of the educational setting. Simulations identified in our study include: creating online simulations of whole workplaces (for example, a Securities Dealing Room at QUT; an HRM Assessment Centre at Victoria University; the Financial Markets Trading Simulator at RMIT), simulations in the form of role play (such as the negotiation and dispute resolution exercise at RMIT), virtual simulations such as CAPSIM, where students manage their own virtual business.

Industry Practitioner-Led Delivered Content

A significant way that industry engages with students in the business curriculum is through the use of guest speakers in various settings – from formal lectures that are consistently part of the curriculum and linked to assessment, to seminar series that are run during semester– to less formal networking opportunities like business breakfast seminars and lunch time speeches. Student groups also run events that often feature speakers from industry. Case examples of industry-led practitioner content include: guest lectures (in Notre Dame University public relations units; in Griffith University's Introduction to Real Estate and Property Development subject); seminar series (University of New South Wales Meet the CEO); guest speakers (University of Melbourne-based student organisation Student Entrepreneurs/ Agents of Change events as part of their goal to create and cultivate communities of entrepreneurship in Australian universities); public lectures (University of Western Australia's mix of disciplinary and professional speakers).

Industry Mentoring

Mentoring is typically offered as part of practice-based projects. Industry mentoring is usually offered as part of professional development programs to high achieving students. Thus, many of the high profile cases of mentoring identified by this project have involved industry input. Examples include the gender specific NSW Government initiative LUCY Mentoring program, which operates at the University of Western Sydney, the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales, the University of Newcastle, the University of Wollongong and the University of New England. The program seeks to provide female students with the advice, networks and experience necessary to take on leadership and senior roles through a mix of workplace mentoring and project-based teaching.

Industry Field Trip/ Study Tour

There are numerous forms of professional learning that involve visiting a place, ranging from a two-hour trip to a nearby workplace to a lengthy study tour of companies in different industries in different countries in a different hemisphere. There are examples of learning experiences that involve industry experts travelling with students and interacting with them during activities, examples where industry visits involve multiple different sites over a few weeks as well as overviews to a business with a tour of a building. Cases from the project include European Study tours for sustainable leadership (Macquarie Graduate School of Management) and a Global Passport (RMIT), World Financial Markets Study Tour (Edith Cowan University) and nature-based tourism (Victoria University).

Industry Placement

Placement involves a student being located in a workplace for a period of time, making it, in effect, the principal place of learning. Clearly, a field trip which may require a student being in a workplace, or an in situ interview with a manager, or a task that requires students to observe work practices to analyse management theory may all involve being in a workplace but none of these constitute placement as the principal site of learning is not the workplace. Placement includes internships, sandwich years, work experience, service learning, practicum and cooperative education. Evidence

suggests there may be some equity and equivalence issues around placements. Some universities do not offer placements to all students – in some instances only high achieving students may be offered placements and at others they specify that participants must be Australian citizens or permanent residents. In some universities, students need to find their own placements and this also may create access issues. Examples of industry placement from the study include: the internship program at the University of Wollongong; the personal and professional placement units at the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne); the fully sponsored industry co-op program in the Bachelor of Accounting degree at UTS (through industry scholarships to all students) and internship placements at the University of New South Wales' Australian School of Business.

Industry Competition

The distinctive features of industry competition are the motivating factors: money, prizes or certificates; winning; industry attention – and more general public attention. While competitions might be fun, the consequences of winning and the costs and effort of entering competitions, including in some cases special training, usually mean they taken very seriously. Often team-based industry competitions create memorable experiences for students, a visible example of industry engagement with universities and a great incentive to students. A team of commerce students from The University of Queensland was placed third in an international trading competition held in Canada by the University of Toronto (2010). The teams traded shares, corporate bonds, gas futures contracts and index futures contracts in five separate heats. Over the last few years, several teams of marketing students from RMIT have travelled to Paris to represent Australia at the international final of Brandstorm – a commercially sponsored competition run by L'Oreal. L'Oréal Brandstorm has been running for nearly 20 years internationally and for six years in Australia. UNSW and Monash University also participate.

The Google Online Marketing Challenge is the largest marketing student competition in the world. Participating in the Challenge enables students to run a 3-week search advertising campaign for a real business, using the techniques and tools of real advertisers. Originating in Australia, the Challenge is a collaborative effort with Google and universities around the world. In 2009, Australian participants

included Deakin University, Victoria University, Edith Cowan University, and the University of Western Australia.

Industry Project

This broad category covers a range of teaching and assessment approaches. A project in business is typically underpinned by budgetary and time considerations – and many university projects either have a real or hypothetical budget that students need to work to. Projects are undertaken as part of study to develop project management skills – including evaluation skills, to develop discipline knowledge and further develop graduate qualities. Projects may be comprised of multidisciplinary teams with students not only developing their own discipline knowledge through practical application but also learning how to appreciate other disciplinary perspectives. A student-run enterprise programme from Victoria University, Potential Unlimited, is a record label created for and managed by music industry students to gain practical experience in operating a publishing and recording business as part of the unit Music Recording and Publishing in the Bachelor of Business (Music Industry).

Over 30 Australian universities participate in the extra-curricular Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE). Students in Free Enterprise participate in ‘service learning’. Teams or chapters of students together with an academic member of university staff and an advisory group of business people work together to use their skills and knowledge to teach others something that will benefit them in an outreach project. The Graduate School of Business and Economics and the Department of Management and Marketing at University of Melbourne offer the intensive subject: The Global Business Practicum. This subject provides an in-country study experience. Students experience culture, society and business practices at first hand whilst applying their business and management skills. In 2009, over 80 students successfully completed the subject. Destination cities were Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Beijing. Projects included a feasibility study, marketing project, customer analysis and market research in a range of companies including multinational banks, accounting firms, insurance firms and not-for-profit organizations.

RESOURCES AND TOOLS FOR EMBEDDING PRL

A number of resources and tools have been under preparation for business education teachers seeking to integrate professionally relevant learning experiences into business curricula. The key vehicle through which business faculties can gain access to the above resources and tools is through a comprehensive, practitioner-focused e manual that will be made openly available through the ALTC website. The intended tools and resources are outlined in Table 1. Prominent among these are: the enunciation of good practice principles (distilled from the study) linked to examples in the PRL cases; and a dynamic means of ascertaining which PRL skills may be acquired from which type.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

This project points to the need for future research in PRL in business. Of particular significance is the need for benchmarking and self-review of PRL as well developing student/industry surveys to measure effectiveness against a range of intended outcomes and good practice principles. There is potential for the use of semantic differentials in such evaluations.

This project has mapped current practice in business schools. However, we are acutely conscious of the way in which business education delivery modes are rapidly changing to better engage the next generation of learners. Improved technology and business platforms are shaping the future of work and along with social media initiatives these new technologies are increasingly finding their way into educational delivery. There are several exciting examples of this in action. At Stanford University the use of games in business is played out through The Media X Partners Program which involves industry partnerships at the intersection of information technology and human sciences. Games and virtual environments, and their potential for learning, training, and productivity, are active areas of ‘psychological responses to avatars, scalable computer architectures for virtual worlds, the pragmatics of conversations in games, and the legal regimes that develop in virtual communities’ (Reeves and Read, 2009, p. 12). Innovations such as these, together with changing requirements for tomorrow’s business professionals will no doubt spur new developments within Australian business education and lead to new types of professional learning that we can only dream about today.

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Table 1: E Manual (Resources and Tools for Embedding PRL) : A Blueprint

