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**Improving Outcomes by Improving Student Satisfaction:
A case study of a small accounting program**

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This paper documents the intervention strategies implemented by members of the Accounting Discipline within the School of Business and Informatics at the Australian Catholic University, to improve the status of the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) program by improving student satisfaction during 2003 and 2004. Five areas were targeted with the expectation of improving student satisfaction and through this the status of the program. These were the effective use of sessional staff, the effective allocation of full-time staff, the proactive response to student evaluations, greater commitment by sessional staff and the introduction and use of common subject outlines. It is argued that improvements in these areas lead to improvements in several key performance indicators of teaching and learning displayed in the 2003 and 2004 University Subject Evaluation Program. This resulted in dramatic improvements in the areas of good teaching, generic skills and overall satisfaction, as measured by the Federal Government's Course Experience Questionnaire. Improvements in the accounting program's entry score were also identified, although numerous factors outside the control of the University make it difficult to state with any certainty that a relationship exists.

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Introduction

The Australian Catholic University is a small government funded public university operating six campuses in Eastern Australia, which are located in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. The accounting program, which until semester 1 2005 was only offered in New South Wales, consists of a Bachelor of Business (Accounting) together with a Master of Business Administration (Accounting) which was introduced in 2004. Both programs are accredited for professional membership by CPA Australia and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia.

Due to the success of the accounting programs the undergraduate degree and the postgraduate degree will be expanded in 2005, with Victoria offering both and Queensland offering the undergraduate program only. The undergraduate program is also offered offshore in Hong Kong. The undergraduate program has grown from 60 students in 2001 (usually taught in 2 tutorials of 15 students each) to almost 120 in 2004 (with tutorials of up to 40). Full-time staff remain at the 2001 level of three although the use of sessional staff has increased. The MBA (Accounting), which commenced in 2004, was expected to have 20 to 30 full fee paying international students. At the end of 2004 enrolments stood at approximately 80 full fee paying students and subjects were being repeated each semester to accommodate 2 intakes a year (February and July).

The Conceptual Framework

This project in a theoretical context draws on Intervention Theory (Argyris, 1970). In so doing it sees intervention as a ongoing process that comes between persons or groups for the purpose of assisting them to improve their situation. Throughout the process the three primary tasks identified by Argyris in an intervention process, valid and useful information, free choice, and internal commitment, were maintained

In this case the parameter of validity of information focused on the fact that it could be publicly verified, it can be openly gathered can be tested in other disciplines, and

can be used to effect change. The choice of options were based on those with the highest probability of succeeding within the cost constraints identified, was based on an exploration of options, these identifiable options (or 'tools' available) were voluntary and not based on institutional coercion, and were proactive not reactive. With respect to internal commitment the involvement of all accounting staff and the School's Accounting Advisory Committee provided a high level of ownership and a feeling of responsibility.

The Goal

With the appointment of a new Course Co-ordinator for the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) in late 2002, the vision for the undergraduate program changed. Despite the size of the program and the competition from established institutions such as The University of Sydney and The University of New South Wales, it was agreed between the full-time academic staff that the goal was to develop the best accounting program in New South Wales, challenging the established universities by developing a boutique program providing greater satisfaction to students and prospective employers.

Given the significant investment, in both terms of dedicated resources and commitment to continuous quality improvement needed to achieve this goal, it was agreed to focus on those areas that would result in an improved relationship between students and academics (Hodgson, 1984). The first step was to take an inventory of the 'tools' available within the Accounting Discipline that could be used to enhance student satisfaction without imposing additional cost on the School, Faculty, or Student. The areas identified by the inventory were (i) the effective use of sessional staff; (ii) the effective allocation of full-time staff to primary accounting subjects; (iii) a proactive response to student evaluation feedback; (iv) greater commitment by sessional staff through improved communication and involvement; (v) the development and use of common subject outlines; and (vi) to make these measures visible by using the School's Accounting Advisory Committee as an accountability measure. These mechanisms and their expected outcomes are shown in Table 1

Table 1

Areas Expected to Improve Student Satisfaction		
Priority	Mechanism	Expected Outcome
1	Effective Use of Sessional Staff	Improved academic and professional qualifications
2	Effective Allocation of Full-time Staff	Matching staff to students' needs
3	Proactive Response to Student Evaluations	Active engagement and feedback
4	Greater Commitment by Sessional Staff	Increased concern and respect for students
5	Common Subject Outlines	Clear subject goals and requirements
6	Involvement of the School's Accounting Advisory Committee	Transparency, support and accountability

The Effective Use of Sessional Staff

The use of sessional, or part-time-academic staff has been a mechanism used for the management of high demand and specialist subjects for decades, in the teaching of accounting and other related discipline areas. The advantages of relevant industry and professional experience together with the acknowledged disadvantages of lack of student contact and supervision problems have been well documented (Churchman, 2002). Within the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) program there are ten dedicated accounting units (including two specialist electives) and three full-time accounting academics. The three full-time staff also teach introductory and specialist accounting subjects within the Master of Business Administration (Accounting) program.

From the above it can be seen that a substantial number of sessional accounting staff had to be used. Prior to 2002, the appointment of sessional staff was essentially based on grace and favour with limited attention to academic and professional qualifications or industry/commercial and teaching experience. Primarily this was due to the competition for sessional staff between the three major universities, The University of Sydney, The University of New South Wales, and the University of Technology, Sydney.

In late 2002 a new Course Co-ordinator for the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) was appointed, and together with the Assistant Head of School responsible for the

employment of sessional staff, began rebuilding the academic profile of the sessional accounting academics. Immediate priorities were seen as obtaining staff with relevant industry and professional experience together with demonstrated teaching experience in higher education. To achieve this, current full time accounting staff were asked to provide a short list of three or four academic colleagues they felt they could work with and who would add value to the course. Essentially the sessional accounting staff for 2003 was 'head-hunted'.

For 2004 the priority focused on improvements to academic and professional qualifications. While the 2003 sessional staff all had an undergraduate qualification in accounting, it was felt that a postgraduate degree, together with membership of one of the two Australian professional accounting bodies would add a new dimension to the quality aspect of the task. To assist with this, advertisements were placed calling for expressions of interest and the short listed applicants were interviewed informally by at least one of the three full time staff members. Thus the starting point to improve the satisfaction of students and through this the accounting program, was the improved academic quality of sessional accounting staff together with a balance of teaching and industry experience that would prove relevant to accounting students

Effective Allocation of Full-time Staff

Prior to 2003, accounting academic staff, to some degree, were allowed to select the subjects and teaching times that suited their interests and personal preferences. It had become apparent that this self-selection had, on some occasions, resulted in a misallocation of abilities and teaching styles. The primary task was to identify the academic best suited to teach the first year fundamental accounting subject. This was an acknowledgement of the need for students to be engaged with the content of learning tasks in a way that is likely to enable them to reach understanding (Ramsden, 1992). Also, as the first year of the degree is common year for all students, prior to selecting their major, it was a strategy designed to encourage students to undertake an accounting major.

Further, past practice had full-time staff teaching up to three subjects from different accounting sub-disciplines. This had resulted in staff teaching in areas outside their discipline specialisation. While this did not result in the poor level of teaching

suggested by some academic researchers (see Feldman, 1976; Eble, 1988; Entwistle and Tatt, 1990), it was reflected in both staff and student dissatisfaction. Staff found that the time needed to prepare for subjects outside their specialisation reduced their time available for research and resulted in a less than adequate presentation to the students. Students reported that some teaching staff appeared less than interested and lacked the depth of knowledge to engage in a meaningful discussion. This reduced student satisfaction was reflected in the student evaluation reports.

The decision from 2003 was that full-time accounting academics would teach in no more than two specialist subjects, one consistent with the staff member's specialisation and the other chosen by the staff member. This resulted in higher levels of staff satisfaction and a belief they were improving the quality of student learning. It also impacted on the employment of sessional staff, as some were now required to take on the task of Lecturer in Charge of a subject in their discipline area. From the students' perspective the evaluation reports indicated that several key principles of effective teaching had been encapsulated in this decision. These included improved interest and explanation; intellectual challenge and independence; active engagement; and, understanding (for greater detail of these and other key principles of effective teaching see Whitehead, 1967; Brown, 1978; Johnson *et al*, 1981; Tang, 1990; Ramsden, 1992).

Proactive Response to Student Evaluations

The Australian Catholic University, like almost every university in Australia uses student evaluation surveys as part of its strategy to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the late 1990s, the School of Business and Informatics adopted a cluster of twenty compulsory statements that would be included in each evaluation to gauge specific attributes considered appropriate to the mission of the School. All teaching staff, full-time and sessional, were requested to subject themselves to evaluation, although this was not mandatory.

In the case of the Accounting Discipline within the School, it was agreed that all staff would participate and within the discipline the evaluations would be analysed and discussed. Adopting the view that the main focus of evaluation was identifying and resolving problems rather than proving something works, the discipline agreed on four

major approaches relating to student feedback. First, if any of the evaluation statements scored greater than 10% in the categories disagree/strongly disagree the specific category would be investigated, and second, all written comments would be given the highest priority for investigation and correction. Third, additional feedback would be provided to the students through a report presented and discussed in the first tutorial of the particular subject in the incoming semester. Further a yearly comparison, by subject, would be provided to the Accounting Advisory Committee.

While the Faculty had agreed on a common set of twenty statements, the Accounting Discipline agreed to focus its efforts on statements which, if proved to be an issue of concern for students, could be remedied with little consumption of additional resources. The nine statements singled out, related specifically to teaching and learning and focused on expected outcomes, organisation, presentation, content, assessment, lecturer's characteristics and ethical behaviour. The statements are shown as Table 2.

Table 2

Statements Relating Specifically to Teaching and Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My experience in this subject has contributed to my development as an independent learner. • My experience in this subject has enhanced my ability to solve problems. • The tutorials, workshops, seminars contributed constructively to my learning in this subject. • The material presented in each class was conveyed clearly and logically. • Completing subject activities was a useful learning strategy for me. • I believe that the content presented in this subject reflected the declared outcomes/objectives. • Completing assessment tasks contributed to my learning in this subject. • The knowledge and teaching style of the lecturer promoted interest and learning in this subject • This subject has contributed to my understanding of ethical issues relevant to the subject area.

Formal and informal feedback from students, suggest that the openness of the discipline staff together with information provided by them during their first tutorial on action that had taken to address their concerns, was appreciated by the student body. Also, it has allowed them to evaluate the importance placed by teaching staff on

student issues or dissatisfaction, has improved their level of satisfaction knowing that their concerns are taken seriously.

Greater Commitment by Sessional Staff

Following the review of the effective use of sessional staff, which included an evaluation of both academic and professional qualifications and teaching experience, some were appointed as Lecture in Charge of main stream specialist accounting subjects. In order to avoid problems encountered in the past, and at other universities, relating to an ongoing commitment to students, it was decided to encourage sessional staff to be more proactive by involving them in School activities where they could help identify and resolve specific issues. This was achieved by modifying the function of the School's Accounting and Finance Research Group.

The Accounting and Finance Research Group had been introduced in 2003 by the Course Co-ordinator of the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) degree as an informal vehicle to encourage the research output by the accounting academics, and where appropriate cross discipline research. Because of its informal nature, matters other than research were often discussed, including teaching methods and strategies, lectures, tutorials, and various aspects of academic administration.

It was decided that sessional staff, particularly those appointed as Lecturer in Charge, be invited to attend. This resulted in a positive reaction from sessional staff with regular attendance at meetings. It also provided a non-threatening environment where controversial issues such as the Course Co-ordinators expectations relating to student consultation times, involvement in student evaluation, student discipline, examination preparation, marking, the input of student results, and other administrative tasks could be discussed. In addition it provided sessional staff that desired full-time academic positions to involve themselves in various research projects.

The outcome of these informal meetings was sessional staff involvement in student evaluation exercises, where previously this was voluntary and few had participated. Also, there was agreement that the feedback would be discussed and the aggregate made public within the Accounting Discipline.

Common Subject Outlines

For some time prior to 2003, the design and content of subject outlines was a matter of choice by the Lecturer-in-Charge. However, from 2003 it was agreed that a common format be adopted that would provide students with clear goals, details of appropriate assessment, and an undertaking of timely and constructive feedback. Previously academic staff had expressed disquiet about inconsistencies with respect to assessment tasks, including the excessive use of multiple choice and assessment based on attendance. It was agreed that a common format would provide consistency across a number of properties that have been identified with good teaching. These included the use of valid assessment methods, a requirement for giving timely and quality feedback on student work, and a commitment to making it absolutely clear what has to be understood and why (Ramsden, 1992). In addition, subject outlines for subjects where the Lecturer in Charge was sessional, needed to be reviewed by the Course Co-ordinator. This approach proved quite successful, and from 2005 has been adopted by Faculty for subject outlines across all disciplines.

Involvement of the School's Accounting Advisory Committee

The decision to involve the School's Accounting Advisory Committee was seen as both a proactive and a defensive strategy. The Accounting Advisory Committee's role is to monitor the progress of the accounting programs to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the key stakeholders, including the accounting profession. It is composed of accounting practitioners, representatives from commerce and industry, a representative from the professional accounting bodies, a senior accounting academic from another university and academic staff from the Accounting Discipline.

By involving the Advisory Committee, the Course Co-ordinator and members of the Accounting Discipline publicly set progressive goals and dead lines to achieve the improvements considered necessary to raise the level of the academic programs. It also provided a degree of accountability and introduced a control mechanism should the Accounting Advisory Committee consider the improvement program had overstepped its area of responsibility. It acted as an additional and independent lens to advise and monitor the changes. In addition it provided a vehicle which could pursue politically sensitive issues through the School or Faculty should the need arise. Fortunately no such issue has.

Improved Student Satisfaction

In order to assess the improvement in student satisfaction, two measures were used, (i) changes in the responses by students to the evaluation of specific accounting subjects, and (ii) final year students satisfaction ratings from the graduate Course Experience Questionnaires. The changes in the responses to student evaluations relate to the 2003 and 2004 academic years. As naming of individual subjects could lead to the identification of specific academics the subjects are identified as subjects A, B, and C.

Table 3 shows the percentage of students in final year accounting subjects who agreed/strongly agreed with the nine statements specifically related to teaching and learning. These statements were extracted from the twenty statements used by the Faculty.

Table 3									
Percentage of Students in Final Year Accounting Subjects who Agreed/Strongly Agreed with the Focus Statements:									
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Subject A									
2002	78.3	73.5	69.5	70.4	75.3	76.8	73.4	64.7	56.1
2003	80.9	86.8	83.8	80.9	85.3	78.0	82.3	83.9	61.8
2004	89.7	91.4	88.6	89.5	92.3	88.7	92.4	93.4	78.3
Subject B									
2002	84.8	66.6	65.8	82.6	78.3	73.4	84.8	84.8	58.7
2003	91.8	87.1	93.6	82.3	86.9	87.1	90.4	74.2	69.3
2004	94.7	94.7	84.2	94.7	97.4	86.8	97.3	84.3	76.3
Subject C									
2002	89.5	74.7	67.1	80.0	80.0	68.4	88.3	60.0	68.0
2003	91.2	70.6	70.5	97.1	82.3	73.5	79.5	97.0	76.6
2004	92.3	75.7	81.3	96.2	94.5	89.6	90.1	91.4	81.3

The results from Table 3 suggest that by concentrating on the student concerns about perceived deficiencies in teaching and learning, satisfaction is improved in these areas.

The responses to the majority of statements reflect an improvement during 2003, the year the strategy was introduced, and 2004, from the base year of 2002. It is argued

that this improvement is reflected in the improved outcome in the course experience data, although no direct causal link has been established.

The Course Experience Questionnaire is a composite indicator, collected by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Employment, Science and Training (DEST), and based on student perceptions of teaching quality generalised across a particular academic discipline or field of study. It is represented by an average rating on various aspects of teaching performance and consists of three distinct but related dimensions of teaching performance, specifically, good teaching, generic skills, and overall satisfaction (CDEET, 1991).

Table 4 shows the changes in each of the three areas from 1999 to 2003, including the dramatic improvement in 2003. The Australian Catholic University mean for good teaching increased from 4.6 in 2002 to 34.8 in 2003. Similar improvements in generic skills, 23.8 in 2002 to 46.0 in 2003 and overall satisfaction from 29.0 in 2002 to 54.3 in 2003. Data for 2004 is not yet available, however further increases are expected.

Table 4

Course Experience Questionnaire – Changes 1999-2003						
Component	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
Good Teaching Scale						
• ACU - GTS Mean		34.8	4.6	8.9	4.1	10.0
• ACU - GST SD		32.7	30.6	36.7	35.2	31.2
• National GST Mean		6.1	5.0	1.1	0.9	0.0
• National GST SD		34.9	35.0	36.3	36.5	28.5
Generic Skills Scale						
• ACU – GSS Mean		46.0	23.8	22.4	14.4	32.3
• ACU - GSS SD		32.9	29.3	30.9	31.7	25.8
• National GSS Mean		28.7	28.5	13.4	14.3	26.8
• National GSS SD		32.6	31.8	-	-	-
Overall Satisfaction Scale						
• ACU - OSS Mean		54.3	29.0	35.0	37.3	32.0
• ACU - OSS SD		47.5	29.0	43.2	36.7	40.5
• National OSS Mean		36.1	29.0	37.4	29.0	35.8
• National OSS SD		42.6	29.0	41.0	-	-

Source – ACU Statistics 2004

Improved Student Entry Score

One other measure of improved student satisfaction is the improvement in student entry scores. In New South Wales the entry score is calculated as a UAI (University Admission Index) and is based on the student's performance in terminating secondary education examinations (Year 12). In New South Wales this is the Higher School Certificate. The UAI was introduced in 1999, replacing the TER (Tertiary Education Ranking), which performed a similar function.

The UAI score for the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) for the Australian Catholic University is shown in Table 5. The data shows a steady increase from 2002 to 2004 of a little over 2% per annum.

Table 5

Entry Score and Percentage Change on Previous Year							
	*2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	1999
ACU – UAI	81.44	83.95	82.05	80.05	78.20	80.43	81.55
% increase (decrease) on previous year	(2.51)	2.32	2.49	2.36	(2.77)	(1.34)	
*2005 estimate only							

However, increased satisfaction with a particular university is not the only reason for an increased entry score. A decision by one of the larger and longer established universities to reduce its undergraduate enrolments in its accounting program will result in 'spill over' effect with the entry score of smaller universities being inflated through market demand. Further, conditions of full employment, as is currently the case in Australia, may cause students to defer university enrolment, resulting in a lower entry score in that particular year.

Other 'Satisfaction' Indicators

For some years the Australian Catholic University has had in place a Professional Experience Program for students undertaking the Bachelor of Business program. This involved students in each year of the program undertaking a four week placement with a business organisation nominated by the School. Prior to 2002 no positive effort was made to match degree majors (accounting, financial services, marketing, human resource management) with professional specific organisations. During 2003 an attempt was made by the professional development officer to place discipline specific

majors with discipline specific organisations. This was in part a reaction to the requests of graduated now employed in accounting firms to recruit new staff. This was so successful that by 2003 all accounting majors were placed with accounting firms for their second and third year placement. By the end of 2003 graduates and those nearing the end of their degree were made offers of employment by placement partners. In 2004 representatives from the 'big four' came on campus to interview students. This resulted in a number of offers of employment and several offers to second year students of employment upon completion of their degree in twelve months time.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to document an attempt by members of the Accounting Discipline within the School of Business and Informatics at the Australian Catholic University to improve the status of the Bachelor of Business (Accounting) program by improving student satisfaction during 2003 and 2004. Five areas were targeted with the expectation of improving student satisfaction and through this the standing of the program. It is contended that improvements in the effective use of sessional staff, the effective allocation of full-time staff, the proactive response to student evaluations, greater commitment by sessional staff and the introduction and use of common subject outlines, lead to improvements in several key performance indicators of student satisfaction. Specifically, those related to more active engagement, improved interest, and a greater intellectual challenge.

A constructive research approach was adopted drawing on Intervention Theory which in turn contributed by attempting to solve real-world problems. The use of multiple methods of data collection, internal student feedback, external statical data and employee observations, provides a degree of triangulation. The paper also provides some linkage between the use of intervention theory and the attainment of educational theory outcomes.

The paper argues that improved levels of satisfaction reflected in the Subject Evaluation Program for 2003 and 2004 (Table 3), was driven by improvements in the five areas identified as necessary to improve student satisfaction (Table 1). Further, it is concluded that the dramatic improvements in the three components of the Course

Experience Questionnaire in 2003 (Table 4), good teaching, generic skills, and overall satisfaction, resulted from improvements identified through analysis of the nine statements of teaching and learning (Table 2). The third measure, improvements in student entry scores (Table 5), while consistently positive (until 2005), can be influenced by numerous factors outside the control of the University making it difficult to state with any certainty that a relationship exists. However, it is postulated that a continual increase in student satisfaction, which is made public through a variety of undergraduate university course guides, can, in the long term, only result in a higher entry score through market demand. Finally, the increased offers of employment to students by professional placement partners and the entry of 'big four' accounting firms to campus recurrent appears to suggest an increased level of satisfaction by accounting employers.

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