Engaging Industry in Assessment

Abstract

Amid calls from governments, business, alumni and students themselves about the need to develop knowledge, skills and attributes for the 'real' world during undergraduate study, the Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia, has introduced three new subjects into all Business degrees. Graduate capabilities, also known as generic skills, employability skills and professional literacies, feature in all undergraduate programs in Australian universities and the drivers for their current prominence in higher education curriculum come from many quarters. Certainly, universities are increasingly mindful that graduates' transition into the professions or the workplace more broadly should be supported by a range of preparatory initiatives in the curriculum. This paper considers one aspect of a curriculum initiative that emerged in response to a Victorian University survey of business practitioners, academic staff in the Business faculty and VU Business alumni; namely, how to engage industry in the development, delivery and evaluation of business curriculum. The Business Review (2006) recommended the development of specific, mandatory units in the Business degree that would maximize students' employability skills. These units, Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1), Professional Development 2: Analysis and Strategy (PD2) and Professional Development 3: Challenge and Leadership (PD3) are taught sequentially in the undergraduate degree and began delivery in 2008. This paper focuses on the third of these units, PD3, and explains how this unit involves industry in both the development of its "business challenge" assessment task and in the evaluation of student presentations at its Trade Fair day. The paper considers how this unit broadens students' cultural capital through networking opportunities with representatives from industry and how students benefit from individualized feedback on their assessment from the world of business – including from recruitment experts. Professional Development 3 has provided an exciting learning environment for students to demonstrate the skills and knowledge they have developed throughout their degree. The unit has simultaneously provided professional development opportunities for academic staff and industry experts. Many Australian universities are investigating how to nurture collaboration between universities and 'the workplace'. This paper will conclude with some preliminary findings of what the students think of the approach adopted in PD3 as well as initial impressions of our industry representatives after 18 months of engagement.

Key words: employability, business curriculum, engaging industry

Introduction

In 2006, Victoria University (VU) reviewed its Business programs. As part of the review, over 700 business practitioners, HR managers, VU Business alumni and Business academics were surveyed about the professional skills, knowledge and attributes graduates need in the workplace (Papadopoulos et al., 2006). While discipline knowledge was expected, generic skills were ranked as essential. Qualities such as motivation, enthusiasm, initiative and cultural sensitivity were most desirable or essential *personal attributes* in graduates. *Professional skills* such as the ability to work in teams and demonstrate oral communication skills were ranked as essential – these skills seem to be a global employability requirement.

Similarly, *Skilling Business in Tough Times* (AIG & Deloitte, 2009) surveyed CEOs to ask what they looked for when recruiting graduates. Results indicated that employability skills and a positive attitude rank highly (33.1% and 32.6% respectively); while factors like discipline subjects are ranked by less than 10% as important. Most respondents expect that "Graduates need to be able to hit the ground running" (AIG & Deloitte, 2009). A central recommendation of VU's Business Review was the creation of three Professional Development (PD) units in Business degrees to help graduates "hit the ground running".

The Professional Development units were developed after VU's Business Review (Papadopoulos, et al. 2006) proposed three mandatory units to maximise students' employability: Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (PD1); Professional Development 2: Analysis and Strategy (PD2); Professional Development 3: Challenge and Leadership (PD3). These units are just one of many initiatives in the Faculty of Business and Law aimed at enhancing graduates' transition into the workplace. The survey of business practitioners in the Business Review begins what characterises the PD units: the

engagement of industry in the development, delivery and evaluation of curriculum. This paper particularly focuses on how industry engages in assessment in PD3.

Professional Development 3: Challenge and Leadership is usually taught to third year students just prior to graduation. All PD units are designed to introduce, develop and allow students to demonstrate VU's Graduate Capabilities, their own professional skills and personal attributes as well as academic knowledge. PD3 offers a bridge between theory and practice and aims to link third year students with the real world of their discipline. Basically, the PD units aim to enhance student's employability and augment their capacity to have successful work and personal lives. PD3 distinguishes itself from earlier PD units in its extensive and direct engagement with industry.

Engaging Industry in Curriculum

To improve the relevance of university study and to better prepare graduates for the world of work, many Australian universities engage industry in the development, delivery and evaluation of their curriculum. Not only does industry encompass business, government and the professions (Hanlon, et al 2008) but in PD3 it also includes not-for-profits and other community groups. Universities are linked with industry in various ways. Many university qualifications are explicitly linked to industry and professional bodies through accreditation processes. Most universities provide students with opportunities to undertake industry placements or work on industry projects. Many units encourage students to visit workplaces and, conversely, also invite guest speakers to attend lectures to enthuse students with tales from the "real" world of work. Some universities deliberately hire sessional teaching staff who concurrently work in particular industries in an attempt to embed work-world credibility into the curriculum via teaching personnel. Some lecturers gain access to "live data" – for example, a "real" database or a "live" case study – to make assessment tasks and learning

activities "more real" to students. Efforts to engage industry with curriculum – including students – are increasingly various, often time consuming and frequently dependent upon relationships established and maintained by one person. So what does "engaging" with industry entail? When does a brush with industry move to the more embroiled level of true engagement? And what approaches have been adopted in PD3?

Australian Universities' engagement with the wider community is encouraged by the Federal Government and endorsed by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) which recognises "the concept of engagement as the third arm of the integrated tripartite mission of universities" (AVCC, 2005: 3). Engagement activity can be: "the generation, use, application, and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments" (Molas-Gallart et al, 2002); yet this seems a fairly one-way engagement. In PD3, "engagement" involves a more collaborative and a more reciprocal idea of engagement that is still in the throes of developing. Engagement itself can be characterised quantitatively in the curriculum – *number* of industry speakers, *duration* of time spent on an industry task, *frequency* of industry-based activities, *intensity* of industry interaction and levels of reciprocity – but it can best be depicted qualitatively. A definition from the world of marketing is useful: engagement is symptomatic of interactive, multifaceted collaboration between university academics, students and industry representatives: Engagement indicates a "level of authentic involvement, intensity, contribution and ownership" (Owyang, 2007). Industry engagement in PD3 curriculum manifests itself in the learning activities, resources developed and the evaluation process: industry is a physical, textual and interactive presence in the unit. The idea of a continuum underpins engagement as does a constructivist rather than a transmissionist approach to curriculum. A guest speaker, for example, represents a transmissionist approach – a one-way information flow to students – although Q&A might add some interactivity. An industry panel develops assessment tasks with academics and

helps in the delivery of aligned learning activities to students. The panel provides feedback to everyone. More engaging than a guest speaker? Ostensibly, yes.

Why should industry engage with universities? An Australian Industry Group (AIG) report succinctly notes: "Employers put a priority on work readiness and expect universities to do the same" (AIG & Deloitte, 2009); employers also expect to engage with universities. Quite simply, engagement between the stakeholder groups in PD3 "delivers mutual benefits" (Hanlon, et al, 2008) with "transformative potential" (AVCC, 2005). Students' learning outcomes are enhanced through relevant and current learning activities, networking opportunities and other chances to work with industry representatives. VU teachers are exposed to relevant contemporary issues. This benefits PD3 as well as other subject areas.

Methodology

This paper draws on a number of data collection methods used to collect both student and industry comment on PD3. Anonymous written student evaluations were collected after each of the 4 block mode days of the semester. Students were asked to rank various teaching and learning activities, were asked open-ended questions about the day and were provided with spaces to explain their responses. Students were asked for general comments in an open-ended question about the worth of each day. These surveys provide specific feedback on those 4 days. Further anonymous whole-of-unit student evaluations provide overall feedback on the unit and the teaching in the unit. In addition to print-based evaluations, a focus group was conducted by an educational developer where 10 students were asked about assessment tasks, learning activities, industry engagement and group work. In addition to student perspectives, anonymous written evaluations completed by industry partners at the end of each of the 4 block mode days provide an industry perspective on the unit. Most student and industry responses represented in this paper have been summarised and paraphrased. Where responses are cited verbatim, they appear in quotation marks and in italics.

Professional Development 3 Case Study

PD3 provides a case study examining how VU encourages industry to play a role in student learning. VU has six Graduate Capabilities. Students are expected to be able to:

- problem solve in a range of settings
- locate, critically evaluate, manage and use written, numerical and electronic information
- communicate in a variety of contexts and modes
- work both autonomously and collaboratively
- work in an environmentally, socially and culturally responsible manner
- manage learning and career development opportunities (VU, 2008).

PD3 has been designed as a capstone unit so that students can demonstrate these Graduate Capabilities, professional skills, personal attributes and academic knowledge in a leadership and challenge context to industry representatives.

PD3 is delivered in a block mode and seminar format. The block mode consists of 4 days, with separate themes, that allow students to demonstrate Graduate Attributes in a business context[1]. For example, the theme of the second day is "Challenges for Leadership". Teams of students are presented with a "live" case study and allocated a time frame to solve a challenge that has been developed in collaboration with industry. Teams present their solution to a panel of industry experts and lecturers. Students are expected to demonstrate the ability to

- work individually and collaboratively with others to solve complex business problems;
- communicate using oral and written skills through presentations on a complex range of business issues.

Whilst initial industry engagement in PD3 was limited to developing assessment tasks and guest appearances, this year industry engagement has intensified to a multi-faceted approach infiltrating all stages of curriculum development, delivery and evaluation. Industry engagement in PD3 is a continuum whereby various components of the unit are developed by, delivered by and evaluated by industry representatives in collaboration with academics. Colleagues from industry have been involved in the professional development of academic

---

[1] Day 1: Getting Started, Day 2: Challenges for Leadership; Day 3: Assessment for leadership, Day 4: Trade Fair Exhibition

staff, the recruitment of other participants and some industry colleagues are employed

sessionally to teach in the unit. Figure 1 highlights the continuum of industry engagement

within PD3. The continuum stresses that PD3 sits in a business curriculum context and that

there are five points of university engagement with industry: development, delivery and

evaluation of curriculum, reciprocal professional development of academic staff and industry

partners and recruitment of teaching staff from industry. Placing the student in the diagram
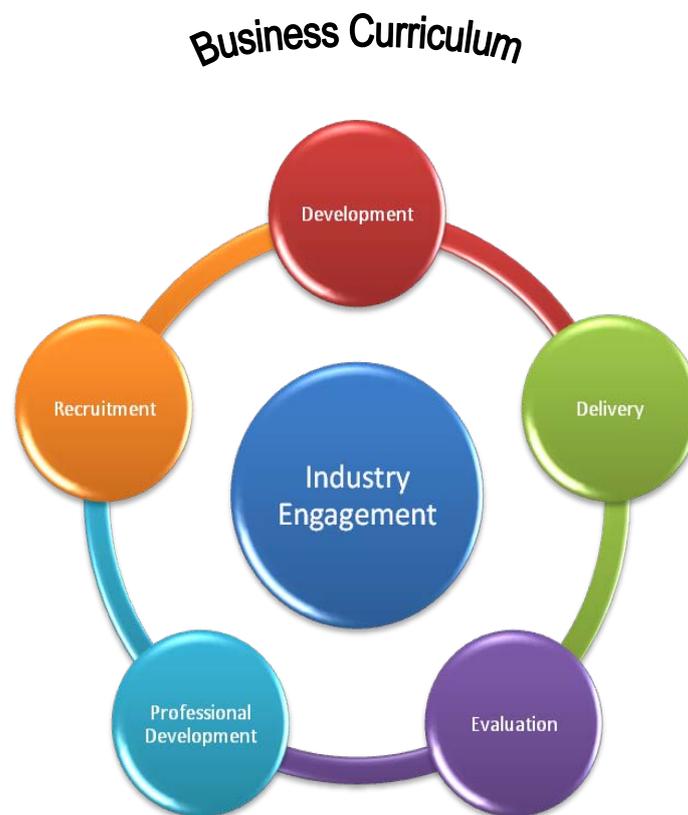
adds further points of engagement.

Business Curriculum

Development

Delivery

Industry
Engagement

Recruitment

Evaluation

Professional
Development

Figure 1: PD3 Industry Engagement Continuum

Development of curriculum PD3 industry partners provide the University with business

challenges for students' projects. Challenges are from either professional practice (private or

public sector) or the not-for-profit or the community sectors. Challenges in 2009 include:

1. Smith and Co.[2], a not-for-profit organisation, specialises in the management of mental
   health, including the mental health of employees at the workplace. With the current
   economic situation, redundancies, longer work hours, occupational health and safety,

---

[2] All organisations are "real" and students investigate them but for this paper, organisation names have been changed.

liability litigation, Smith and Co. believe employers should be putting more effort into safeguarding employee mental health. How can Smith and Co effectively promote and organise this? (VU, 2009a)

2. Jones's is a retail business currently operating out of two brand outlet shopping centres: Brand Junction (Bundoora) and Brand Smart (Nunawading). The stores sell a range of accessories, including sunglasses, watches and jewellery. Stephen Jones (owner/operator) aims to open another store in the next 18 months. A market survey must be conducted to locate a suitable location for the third store. Additionally, a communications/marketing strategy to inform potential customers of both the brand and the new outlet will be required.

Your proposed solution needs to consider the current retail climate, with a focus on the impacts of the Global Financial Crisis on consumer spending (VU, 2009a)

Students must liaise with appropriate industry partners to solve the challenge. This offers students the chance to further develop their personal attributes and professional skills. Having students work directly with industry partners is not without problems. Shy students may have trouble working outside the relative safety of the classroom. Unaware of how busy industry partners are, a "pushy" student could put the university at risk if they are too demanding. Industry partners, unlikely to have teaching expertise, may be unable to give constructive feedback to the level required. Despite the unpredictability of industry-student interaction, enough positive outcomes prevail to make this aspect of industry engagement very worthwhile.

Industry partners contribute extensively to the block mode delivery days. For example, Day 3, 'Assessment for Leadership', simulates an Assessment Centre day for an Executive Training Program. HR experts help design assessment activities to ensure relevance and currency. Assessment Centres are one of the best ways to predict "successful on-the-job performance as they generate objective, observable data on candidates" (GCA, 2008). Assessment Centre day in PD3 covers tests and exercises, including mock interviews, to simulate a work environment. The day replicates a simulation: but "real" HR experts are involved. The safety of the simulated environment remains central to the learning experience. Students are observed performing exercises typical of a work place. Just as for a "real" Assessment Centre, the point of the day "is to uncover [who has] the most suitable personal

attributes, problem solving skills and general aptitude, and [who] would fit best and excel within the organisation's structure and culture" (GCA, 2008).

Delivery of the Curriculum The Assessment Centre Day provides a vivid example of how industry is engaged with the delivery of curriculum. Students were sent this message:

> All students will be required to undergo a series of assessment centre tests, activities and interviews which are modelled on current industry practice. We are interviewing for mock positions in an Executive Training Program with NAB.[3] Student performance will be monitored throughout the day and we will advise who the successful applicants are at the end of the day. Activities and interviews will be led by recruitment experts (assisted by facilitators). Students are expected to prepare and dress as if they were attending a real interview/assessment centre (VU 2009).

Students undertake a variety of assessment tasks and activities run by recruitment experts and PD3 teaching staff. Feedback is given to students throughout the day by HR experts. The event concludes with an industry panel discussion providing students with "*useful*" feedback.

Evaluation of curriculum Industry teaches in each of the block-mode days. After each day, industry partners complete written surveys to provide feedback about if the aims of the day have been met, if the content of the day could be improved, what "worked", what didn't and how else they could be involved. This feedback regularly results in amended curriculum.

Professional Development of Academic Staff Currency of academic staff in relation to "the workplace" and their discipline in the workplace is difficult to maintain. In relation to currency, VU teaching staff benefit from collaborating with industry. It is also the case that industry partners who assume teaching roles develop new skills and knowledge: they develop teaching skills, learn to use e-Learning tools and to design learning activities also relevant for the workplace. Professional development between university and industry staff is reciprocal.

Recruitment of Industry Partners and teaching staff An unanticipated result of industry engagement in PD3 are the recruitment opportunities. Many industry guests involved in PD3

---

[3] National Australia Bank

are now part of the sessional teaching cohort. 'Engaging' industry as teachers for provides a wonderful opportunity to formalise collaboration and to extend and deepen interactions with VU. It is this recruitment that creates the continuum through ongoing relationships and which is much preferred over a panel guest stint.

What students say

Students view industry engagement very positively. Overall, it encourages "*a feeling of being professional*". Student ideas of how engagement manifests is interesting. Industry engagement includes numerous "behind the scenes" activities like developing challenges and designing questions, but students overwhelmingly regard industry engagement as a physical presence. Students see industry's mere *presence* as offering opportunities and benefits – as well as increasing the formality of the occasion. "Real", "reality" and "actual" recur and students privilege the credibility of industry partners over VU teaching staff as representing a somehow "more real" world. Industry engagement offers "*a reality check for what to expect when you work*". Assessment is "*actual and real*" since "*real industry professionals were present*". The presence of industry people makes students reflect on their presentations. Industry presence "*is good, keeps you on track*", "*it makes you think more logically, consider what is more likely to make sense*". Students believe that industry is more "*critical of what [they] say*" and this makes them "*try and anticipate more*".

One guest speaker was deemed "*inspirational*": he "*made you realise what you could do*". But not all industry speakers are inspirational and students said that too many speakers were "*boring*". The warning that just because someone is talking doesn't mean anyone's learning comes to mind. Moreover, unless is to be involved in other learning activities, the guest lecture mode is not an effective way of engaging with industry. It encourages a one-way "knowledge transfer" over a more reciprocal "knowledge exchange" (B-HERT, 2007).

In addition to interacting with "real" people from industry, PD3 provides a vital networking opportunity: "*it's who you know*". Networking provides "*an opportunity to make a good impression*" because "*you [are] meeting people who could get you a job*".[4] Overall, students attribute industry engagement in PD3 for them feeling "*better prepared for work*".

What industry says

Industry partners see that their engagement with PD3 benefits students. They recognise that their professional expertise provides "*a challenge and tests [students'] skills and capabilities*". Partners appreciated the "*enthusiasm of students*", enjoyed "*the great atmosphere*" and were impressed that students were "*genuinely engage[d] when answering questions and receiving feedback*". Interestingly, responses are positive about just interacting with students: "*it was great fun*" and a "*great opportunity to be involved*". Most industry partners had not engaged with students since their own student days: "*I really enjoyed it*".

Conclusion

Relationships are crucial to the success of PD3. As a multidisciplinary and compulsory unit for VU Business students, PD3 teachers are drawn from the whole faculty. Relationships are also established and furthered between teaching and industry staff. And in the midst of this industry engagement is VU's commitment to authentic student-centeredness and the need to equip students for a successful transition into the workplace. Students considerably complicate the idea that industry "engagement is a two way street" (Hanlon, et al 2008) as these various stakeholders relate in complex ways. Industry comments point to their continued support and a desire to become more engaged with PD3. That enthusiasm augurs well for a subject dependent on the participation, collaboration and goodwill of industry; however, the efforts of developing and maintaining relationships required for these levels of engagement with industry by a few key people raise concerns about sustainability.

---

[4] Some students have been offered employment as a result of industry interaction in PD3.

References

Australian Industry Group & Deloitte (AIG &Deloitte) (2009). *National CEO Survey: Skilling Business in Tough Times*, Viewed Dec 13th, 2009 at www.aigroup.com.au /portal/binary/com.epicentric.contentmanagement.servlet.ContentDeliveryServlet/LIVE_CONTENT/Publications/Reports/2009/7956_Skilling_business_in_tough_times_FINAL.pdf

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) (2005). *Engagement with Business & Community: enhancing universities' interaction*. Viewed Dec 12th, 2009 at www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/submissions/AVCC-Proposal-UniversityEngagement.pdf

Business/Higher Education Round Table (B-HERT) (2007). *Higher Education Election Manifesto 2007: Closing the Gap.* B-HERT Position Paper No.14. Viewed Dec 12th, 2009 at www.bhert.com/publications/position-papers/B-HERTPositionPaper14.pdf

Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) (2008) *Interviews & Beyond*, Viewed Dec 13th, 2009 at http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/content/view/full/33

Hanlon, M., Blackbourn, L. & Shtayer, N. (2008) Evaluating the Quality of University Engagement with Industry, *Quality & Standards in Higher Education: Making a Difference*, AUQF, Canberra, 9-11 July. Viewed Dec 12th, 2009 at http://www.auqa.edu.au/auqf/pastfora/2008/program/papers/d10.pdf

Molas-Gellart, J., Salter, A., Patel, P., Scott, A. & Duran, X. (2002) *Measuring Third Stream Activities* Viewed Dec 12th, 2009 at www.sussex.ac.uk/spru/documents/final_russell_report.pdf

Owyang, J. (2007), Defining 'Engagement', *Web Strategy*, Viewed Dec 12th, 2009 at www.web-strategist.com/blog/2007/02/01/defining-engagement/

Papadopoulos, T., Clark, C., & Rogers, A. (2006) *Report on the survey component of the Bachelor of Business*. Footscray: Faculty of Business & Law, VU.

VU (2008) *Graduate Capabilities Policy*. Viewed March 15th, 2009 at http://wcf.vu.edu.au/GovernancePolicy/PDF/POA081031000.PDF

VU (2009), *PD3 Announcement*. Viewed Dec. 9th, 2009 at https://ce6.vu.edu.au/webct/entryPageIns.dowebct (password protected)

VU (2009a), *Professional Development 3 Unit of Study Outline, Semester 2*. Viewed December 10 2009 at https://ce6.vu.edu.au/webct/entryPageIns.dowebct (password protected)