MAKING IT WORK FOR BUSINESS: Compulsory work placement in undergraduate Business programs

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to present a case study where the incorporation of practice-based subjects, with work placement as core, has been implemented within undergraduate Business programs. The majority of Business programs in Australian universities encourage students to undertake work placement and internships as part of their course of study but few, if any, have these subjects as compulsory parts of the curriculum. Business employers have long recommended work placements to ensure graduates that are work ready (B-HERT 2002, Andrews & Higson 2008) and Mason et al. (2003) found structured work experience during a degree program had a highly positive influence on employability. It is unclear why formal workplace learning is not typically part of Business programs. Bines and Watson (1992) identified three models of workplace learning or practice education: the apprenticeship, the technocratic and the post-technocratic. Preliminary research shows that Business programs in Australia appear to be ‘stuck’ in the apprenticeship or technocratic models. This paper explores the development of three work placement subjects, which situate the student’s learning and socialisation in their practice communities, as core subjects within the Business curricula at Charles Sturt University from 2012. The aim was to design subjects which largely reflect the post-technocratic ideals of developing through practice and reflection on practice. The filters and hurdles are identified as well as acknowledging the facilitators in getting these subjects to this stage of a curriculum renewal.

Introduction

Practice-based education (PBE) has become a more focused feature of business curricula in universities throughout Australia. Practice-based education can take many forms and the aim is to enhance the link between the formal academic programs and industry through industry placements, industry projects and teaching strategies that emphasise current industry issues.

Structured work experience through PBE and work integrated learning (WIL) during a degree program has been found to have a highly positive influence on employability (Mason et al. 2003). Further research (Precision Consulting, 2007) indicated that WIL programs provide a range of benefits and outcomes including academic benefits (increased motivation to learn); personal benefits (increased development of employability skills); career benefits (greater employment opportunities and salaries); and work skills development (increased competence in technical knowledge and skills). These are strong incentives for Business programs to have WIL in their degree structure.

From 2012 the undergraduate Business programs at Charles Sturt University (CSU) will have three compulsory work place learning subjects, one subject at each level of the degree. This is unique for Business programs in Australia. Desktop research of Business courses indicates
that few, if any universities have compulsory work placements as core subjects. Most
universities have internships, or similar, as electives or optional subjects and these are usually
offered to students in the latter stages of their program.

This paper discusses how Charles Sturt University has addressed this conundrum of industry
recommendations for increased WIL and existing Business curricula that do not have
compulsory WIL subjects.

Background

CSU is a regional university in Australia with multiple campuses situated across a large
geographic area. At the university level there is strong support for work integrated learning.
CSU University Strategy 2011-2015 states that the Course Profile will reflect student demand
and workforce demand needs by providing high quality graduates who meet workforce needs
and will provide high quality graduates who meet professional workforce needs by
embedding workplace learning within the curriculum. CSU is undertaking an undergraduate
curriculum renewal project entitled the CSU Degree. The CSU Degree aims to develop a
design-based approach for curriculum renewal of CSU undergraduate courses that will
inform course reviews and course approval processes. It represents a departure from
‘Graduate Attributes’ and provides a wider vision for what represents a ‘CSU Degree’. At
the centre of this initiative is the integration of CSU’s teaching-research expertise with
innovative teaching and learning strategies to improve the full student learning experience. In
general, the CSU Degree aims to develop and implement course-level mapping tools,
exemplars and reuse content related to the following course design principles and innovations
in teaching and learning. One of the key learning and teaching foci is practice-based
education.

The Business undergraduate program review in 2010-11 was guided by the CSU Degree
design principles and, in particular, embedding workplace learning more explicitly within the
curriculum. The need for a review of the Business programs arose from perceived
weaknesses in the existing structure and constituents of the core subjects. While the design
of the program and of the core subjects had fulfilled the requirements of the Business
programs in the past, it was essential that it was revised to conform to current demands of the
business community, and the needs of students. Other issues that the program was facing
included: declining student numbers, increasing number of competitors, and high attrition
rates.

One of the main outcomes of the program review was the inclusion of three WIL subjects as
compulsory subjects.

What is practice based education, work integrated learning, and workplace learning?

Many terms exist for higher education that is focussed on preparing students for the
workplace. At CSU, the Academic Senate, in September 2010, deemed that practice-based
education refers to grounding education in strategies, content and goals that direct students’
learning towards preparation for practice roles post graduation. Practice-based education
includes curriculum, subject, stream and activity level approaches such as goal setting and curriculum design as well as workplace learning induction and placements. Practice-based education can occur in on-campus, workplace, distance and e-learning components of curricula. Kemmis (in Green 2009, p.22) stated that practice means different things to different people and practice, in a social setting, can involve many features. Kemmis listed fourteen features to describe practice, including: practice always involves values; is always culturally and discursively formed and structured; is linked to theory; is always embodied (situated); is always transformative; always involves ‘practical reasoning’ and is reflexive.

Workplace Learning (WPL), also known as work-integrated learning, is part of practice-based education. The term workplace learning refers to the learning and teaching components of curricula that occur in real world contexts of practice. Such activities ground the learning of students in the realities of their workplaces and communities of practice in preparation for their practice roles and responsibilities and for the expectations of their professions, occupations and workplaces. Workplace learning, practicums and professional practice, professional experience, internships, intra-mural and extra-mural placements, fieldwork and clinical placements, allow students to learn through direct implementation of their professional roles in real workplace settings. Commonly such learning involves supervision to provide safeguards and ensure duty of care towards clients and students (CSU Academic Senate Sept 2010).

The features that WIL and WPL programs share (Precision Consulting, 2007, p.29) are:

• They are based on identified industry needs and expectations of graduates and employees which are integrated into the curriculum
• There is a work component as part of the curriculum design
• There are industry partners who, in addition to providing advice on curriculum design, also provide workplaces for students to gain experience
• There is a formal system which supports the students and provides a framework for organising and assessing the students’ work and experience.

Australian universities and compulsory work placements

While there are several reports on the perceptions of a business qualification by industry and skills and attributes of business graduates expected by industry, the Precision Consultancy report on Graduate Employability Skills prepared for the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (Precision Consulting, 2007) offers a strong account of industry requirements and expectations of business graduates, and reflects much of the research prior to 2007 in this area. One of the more significant findings in the report is that discipline specific expertise is always going to be an important requirement but other graduate attributes, such as communication skills, problem solving skills, teamwork, self-management and attitude are the keys to employability. The BIHECC recommended placing greater emphasis upon explicitly identifying and developing employability skills in all university curricula, and increasing WIL in programs.
The need for graduates to ‘hit the ground running’ and be work-ready has been also well documented. A recent study into professional learning (Papadopoulos et al. 2010, p.4) identified that ‘employability skills feature in all undergraduate programs in Australia and universities are increasingly mindful that graduates’ transition into professions should be supported by a range of preparatory initiatives in the curriculum’. The report outlined an Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded project on professional learning in the business curriculum. The initiative was supported by the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Teaching and Learning Network, and originating from a business discipline scoping study (ABDC, 2008).

The ALTC study found ‘many universities already have relationships with industry groups and businesses and they seek to further these links to create innovative learning experiences for students and a current, relevant and ‘real’ curriculum’ (Papadopoulos et al. 2010, p.15). The stronger the link between universities and businesses, the greater the opportunities will be to integrate and develop employability skills in undergraduates. The Faculty of Business at CSU is hosting business dinners with local employers at each of its main campuses in regional New South Wales, surveying employers to measure satisfaction with graduates, and involving employers and industry leaders on course advisory committees. The introduction of WIL subjects will also establish a stronger dialogue between universities and employers.

**TABLE 1: Examples of WPL Placements in CSU Faculties**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSU FACULTY</th>
<th>Program with compulsory WIL</th>
<th>Length of placement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Arts</td>
<td>Bachelor of Communication (Advertising)</td>
<td>Minimum 4 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Science</td>
<td>Bachelor of Occupational Therapy</td>
<td>Approx 28 weeks (1000 hours) 25% of program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor of Oral Health</td>
<td>60% of 3 year program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Primary)</td>
<td>22 weeks over 4 year program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor of Exercise Science</td>
<td>Approx 6 weeks (220 hours)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty of Business (prior to 2010)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

British research has shown that relevant work experience during the degree program has a highly positive influence on employability as does employer involvement in course design and delivery (Precision Consulting, 2007, p.3; Andrews & Higson, 2008). The Accounting, Finance and Insurance specialisations of the Bachelor of Business at CSU are accredited by relevant professional bodies and thus the programs must meet prescribed standards within the
curriculum and for program delivery. The professional bodies and the university staff work together to identify, promote, teach, and assess employability skills that would produce better graduates.

At CSU, traditionally, compulsory work placements have been an accepted and integral component of other faculties’ programs such as education, engineering, nursing, physiotherapy, veterinary science, exercise science, social work etc (see Table 1). The list of programs is extensive. However, it has not been the norm in the Faculty of Business. This is not to say that Business has been ignoring work place needs or have not been preparing students for the workplace. The trend has been to embed the development of employability skills within the existing curriculum using such teaching strategies as case studies, industry projects, guest speakers, business simulations, problem-based learning, mentoring programs, assessment design, virtual reality, and industry projects (see Table 2 for an example).

**TABLE 2: Embedding Employability Skills within the Curriculum (an example from a CSU subject)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CSU Subject</th>
<th>Assessment detail</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MKT235 Brand Management</td>
<td>Students complete assessment tasks that simulate workplace activities. Assessment 1 involves identifying and establishing brand positioning and values and examining their role from both a managerial and a consumer perspective. Assessment 2 requires students to present a consumer report to management based on secondary and primary sources of research about Red Bull.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Bines and Watson (1992), there are three different models of practice-based education:

Apprenticeship (pre-technocratic) – which involves training on the job, cookbook knowledge, tips and techniques; and instruction provided by experienced practitioners.

Technocratic – the development and transmission of body of knowledge; interpretation and application of knowledge to practice; and supervised practice in selected placements.

Post-technocratic – developed through practice and reflection on practice; and supported by skilled practitioners as coaches and mentors. For example, a highly successful internship program at University of Canberra that is designed to enhance the professional experience through facilitated mentoring and reflective learning (Alderman & Milne, 2005).

A review of Business programs in Australian universities, from their online course information pages, indicated that they appear to have relied upon the apprenticeship and technocratic models more so than the post-technocratic. Almost all universities encouraged
students to undertake WIL but only as an elective or optional subject. Business programs are still heavily reliant on embedding employability skills through their formal academic programs and not venturing into compulsory formalised WIL placements.

There are many reasons to explain this. The ALTC project (Papadopoulos et al. 2010) found that as there can be difficulties in locating employers who are willing to take WIL students, there has been a move in some universities to establish simulated environments which mirror work settings and work situations (see Table 3 for comprehensive outline of enablers and impediments). The study gave the example: at RMIT the School of Economics and Finance has established a Treasury Training Facility. This facility consists of ten syndicate rooms and a control room, linked by sophisticated computer, telephone and financial information networks. The facility is used by students during the Bachelor of Business to simulate trading in the money and foreign exchange markets. Use is made of live on-line market data from Telerate, Australia, Sydney Futures Exchange (SFE) and Australian Stock Exchange (ASX)(Papadopoulos et al. 2010, p.72).

In some universities the WIL courses are only available to selected students and are often offered on a competitive basis. For example, The University of Wollongong has an internship program for selected students in their final year, operating through an elective undergraduate subject. Students work for 16 days over eight weeks on a two day a week basis in a pre-selected organisation. Students are selected on the basis of their grades and a resume. Short-listed students are interviewed by academic staff and the industry partner that ultimately becomes the industry mentor during the internship period (Papadopoulos et al. 2010, p.80). This is a successful initiative for the university. However, the question needs to be asked: does this set up an inequality in learning opportunities for students that do not gain a work placement? The literature suggests that even the less academic may benefit from WIL. Andrews and Higson (2008, p.420) found that ‘work experience... constituted an important consideration for employers when recruiting graduates’.

Other impediments to implementing WIL included: organising and monitoring effective WIL programs is time consuming for universities and employers; concerns over insurance or conflicting advice about what insurances need to be in place; and that some workplace supervisors do not have well developed skills to engage with and support students.

The new subjects

The overarching objectives for introducing the WPL subjects into the Business programs at CSU were multi-faceted, i.e. to improve retention rates; make the learning more contextualised; situated learning; build links with industry; make learning more relevant for students; attract students to the program; and to graduate professionals that may stay in rural and regional areas.

From 2012, students will have an opportunity to undertake a work placement in each year of their degree. It is expected that students will progressively develop professional knowledge and an understanding of professional practice; employability skills such as communication, team work, and problem solving; and reflective practice skills enabling them to reflect on and
evaluate their own work practices while linking the theory of the classroom to practice in the workplace. This developmental aspect to the WPL subjects was described by Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) as moving from novice to expert.

BUS110 Professional Practice is the first of the WPL subjects. It will focus on providing the student with an orientation to work in a business environment. Students will be introduced to the study of business as an integrated whole, thus gaining an understanding of how core business disciplines that will be studied in their degree inform business practice. It has a particular focus on building professional knowledge of working in a business environment, as well as developing employability skills. After completing the placement (35 hours), the student will be required to reflect upon their experience (Schon 1983). Reflection plays a key role in each of the subjects as Bines and Wilson (1992) highlight reflection as a key component of post-technocratic approaches to PBE.

In subsequent work WPL subjects, the student will undertake progressively longer placements (70 hours in BUS220 Business Placement and 120 hours in BUS370 Business Internship). When students do take part in a business placement it would be expected that the student will make a meaningful contribution to the business that will be of benefit to the organisation as well as to the development of the employability skills of the student. Lave and Wenger (1991) stress that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice. Therefore, it is important to situate the student’s learning and socialisation in their practice communities, i.e. the work place.

The purpose of BUS220 Business Placement is to give students an opportunity to gain practical experience and apply their academic learning in a professional setting. The learning objectives for this subject are focused on students demonstrating their ability to analyse and apply theoretical concepts in the workplace. The engagement in the workplace is designed to develop students’ employability skills, understanding of professional practice and industry knowledge. In addition, the subject is also aimed at developing students’ self reflection and self monitoring skills to help build their efficacy and confidence in the work place.

BUS 370 Business Internship provides students with an opportunity to expand on skills and knowledge gained from BUS 110 and BUS 220 by focusing on critical reflection, evaluation and appraisal skills associated with professional knowledge and work practice. The learning outcomes of this subject include gaining proficiency in reflective learning and research application; development of detailed professional knowledge of discipline specific theories/concepts; closer integration of university learning with workplace practice; and gaining an understanding of personal development in work preparation and professional practice skills.

Enablers and Impediments to Embedding WPL in the Business Curriculum

Although the literature supports the use of WPL in the curriculum, there are factors that impede the successful implementation that must be considered. Fanghanel (2007) recognised that factors that inhibit the introduction of WPL subjects can be at three levels:
Meso – discipline, department/School; accreditation requirements

Micro – pedagogic beliefs and conceptions. Value of WIL subjects. Taking content space in degrees – perception that they may ‘weaken’ the degree. Close relationships with other courses that have WIL subjects. Cross university committees.

Macro – external(stakeholders, invisible pedagogical college, quality monitoring, networking), institution (regulations, feedback, stance on research and teaching), academic labour (workload, invisibility of much academic labour), research teaching nexus.

Business academics, interviewed in the ALTC project (Papadopoulos et al. 2010) identified several enablers for and impediments to developing and delivering professional learning or WPL curriculum in their own professional context. These have been categorised and summarised in the table below.

**TABLE 3: Enablers and Impediments to WPL Learning (adapted from Papadopoulos et al. 2010, pp. 29-31)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Enablers/Facilitators</th>
<th>Filters/Impediment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional context</td>
<td>University and Faculty mission and strategy that encourage and facilitate industry-engaged professional learning</td>
<td>Policies/ protocols for external engagement can be cumbersome; Perception of WPL as not being rigorous; Academic resistance to change in work practices; Bureaucratic processes; Insurance requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry engagement</td>
<td>Cooperation of industry partners Commitment alumni Industry-developed learning experiences Industry-university collaboration Leverage off academics' personal networks</td>
<td>Industry value perception; Time and capacity constraint; Quantum of businesses required; Time and effort required to develop external relationship(s); Benefit for industry; Excessive focus on major companies limits opportunities; Variable quality of student/team work may discourage industry participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Customised systems and dedicated resources to support WPL; Dedicated funding; Industry sponsors</td>
<td>The initiative requires significant resources; Inadequate or limited resources; Financial impost on students; Large cohorts of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Dedicated and passionate teachers willing to sacrifice time to improve the student learning</td>
<td>Amount of time required to establish and administer; Academic resistance to change; Time and complexity of managing teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning culture</td>
<td>Student enthusiasm; Students bringing rich knowledge and</td>
<td>Many students display 'satisficing' rather than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
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<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>experiences; Active student associations organising placements</td>
<td>maximising behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Industry-student expectations gap Student with unrealistic expectations of responsibilities Some students are not good ambassadors for their university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition and reward</td>
<td>University promotion policies recognise innovative teaching and evidence-based practice; Student prizes and celebration events</td>
<td>Questionable benefit of teaching innovation and industry engagement for career progression; Perceived relative value of teaching &amp; research for promotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Regular renewal of curriculum to ensure currency and relevance to needs of business</td>
<td>Crowded curriculum, especially regarding discipline content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Client-based assessment tasks</td>
<td>Designing assessment for WPL; Moderation of assessment when using external parties to assess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation of WPL approaches and outcomes are anecdotal or absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability</td>
<td>Academic staff with recent industry experience; Professional networks and understanding of industry expectations; Academic staff experienced in WPL curriculum</td>
<td>Academic staff lack the professional experience and skills to develop WPL curriculum; Pedagogical approach requires different skill set compared with the lecture/tutorial model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Online sites that support professional learning, including simulations, practice firms etc Development of information management systems</td>
<td>ICT systems can be slow and cumbersome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>External accreditation bodies valuing or requiring WPL</td>
<td>Tick box approach to covering accreditation requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td></td>
<td>Regional campuses have limited opportunities for WPL relative to city-based universities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Business programs are becoming more attuned to the needs of industry and as more research becomes available there is a strong likelihood that WPL will become more pronounced in Business programs. Bartkus and Higgs (2011, p.75) recognise that work-education research is progressing and has been assisted by:
First, students’ preference for courses that prepare them for work/practice – they “vote with their feet”, and second the expectations of stakeholders including course accreditation authorities, employers and marketing departments of universities who are likewise interested in work-readiness and broader preparation for society as well.

Bartkus and Higgs also indicate that their book, *International Handbook for Cooperative & Work-Integrated Education*, offers a plan designed to enhance the professional experience through facilitated mentoring and reflective learning, and thus reflecting the post-technocratic model of PBE.

**Conclusion**

The Faculty of Business at Charles Sturt University is significantly extending opportunities for students to undertake work placements as part of their undergraduate business degree. Workplace learning is a means of responding to demands by employers for work-ready graduates, and demands by students for employability skills and knowledge. Strong partnerships between the university and employers will help to facilitate effective learning outcomes for students and enhance employability prospects of graduates. Academics at CSU are aware that the business curriculum needs to be more responsive to the needs of industry. Broadly speaking employers believe that universities are providing students with a strong knowledge base but lack the ability to apply that knowledge in the work place. The employers, approached by CSU, are keen to work with universities in the providing work-related experiences for undergraduates.

Providing authentic learning experiences are crucial for having an impact on the student learning culture. The introduction of the WPL subjects was aimed at achieving positive student experiences and giving students a better idea of possible careers and career pathways. From a university perspective, an improvement in retention rates and decreasing attrition is a worthy outcome for providing relevant and contemporary business curricula. CSU has chosen to move away from the traditional Business education model in Australia because of the clear benefits of WPL formally embedded in the curriculum. The three new subjects will be closely monitored to assess their impact on student learning, retention rates and employability.

**References**

ABDC see Australian Business Deans Council


B-HERT see Business/Higher Education Round Table


