

## **DISCUSSION PAPER**

Industry professional engagement program: Using current practitioners to assist business students to develop professional skills.

### **Abstract**

A major challenge in business education is balancing theoretical understanding with awareness and experience of the real world of work. The Industry Professional Engagement Program in the Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University aims to achieve this balance by bringing industry practitioners into the classroom to encourage and inspire undergraduate business students. Industry practitioners are involved in a range of activities, including facilitating professional development units taught in the Bachelor of Business, conducting workshops, and reviewing student presentations, reports and project work. The units that these industry practitioners are involved with are designed to develop students' professional knowledge, skills and capabilities, incorporating key themes of critical thinking and problem solving, business analysis and strategy and leadership and innovation. Industry practitioners provide students with valuable practical insight into the workplace and exposure to professional models from the workplace. For industry practitioners, being involved in this program allows them to experience what it is like to teach undergraduate business students, gaining valuable experience in managing team learning situations and business problem solving. They are also able to develop a greater understanding of students and how they work, as well as benefitting from the opportunity for talent-scouting to identify potential employees. Feedback from students suggests that the involvement of industry practitioners in various roles is very valuable. The industry practitioners report gaining considerable satisfaction from providing students with role models they might otherwise not be exposed to. They also believe that this is a way of giving something back to their profession and see value in students being given the opportunity to interact with practitioners who can inform

them about current issues, trends and practices. Given the positive evaluation of the pilot program, it is planned to explore opportunities for further involvement of industry practitioners across the undergraduate curriculum.

#### Keywords

Professional skills, industry practitioners, employment experience

## **Industry Practitioner Delivery**

Calls for the higher education sector to address the perception that students' employability skills are underdeveloped (BIHECC, 2007) have resulted in increased recognition of the need to integrate contextualised learning activities that focus on work-readiness and employability skills into the undergraduate curriculum (Litchfield, Frawley & Nettleton, 2010). Consequently, in recent years Australian universities have given high priority to teaching employability skills (Woodley & Armatas, 2010), which include skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving and technology skills (DEST, 2002). These skills are considered as essential for employability across a range of disciplines including business, information technology, nursing, engineering and law (Litchfield et al., 2010), which is why they are also referred to as generic skills.

Curriculum activities designed to put students in touch with industry can take many forms, with common approaches being for industry practitioners to deliver specialised lectures, be presenters in a seminar series, conduct professional development workshops or participate in assessment of student projects and presentations. Industry practitioner engagement is also commonplace during cyclical curriculum reviews via program advisory or external review committees. The rationale for this practice is that industry practitioners provide a link to the professional world (Kamoun & Selim, 2007) and provide credibility that helps to reinforce key messages and concepts delivered in the course (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009).

While the approaches described above are a frequent enough occurrence, the integration of industry practitioners into curriculum delivery is relatively underdeveloped in Australia. In the USA, the employment of "industry adjuncts" has traditionally been utilised to complement the theoretical curriculum delivered by academic faculty with a practice-based real world perspective. In Australia, the practice of embedding industry practitioners to

supplement and complement academic teaching staff extends beyond the more traditional fields of medicine and law, as we increasingly see the appointment of *adjuncts* (or *fellows*) employed in business faculties and schools. These appointments usually aim to strengthen university connections to industry, government and the community. Industry adjuncts contribute in a range of ways to business faculty activities, including delivering specialised lectures or seminars, supervising research students, developing case studies or business problem solving challenges, undertaking collaborative research, enhancing industry, government and community networks and providing strategic advice to university management.

The intensity of the industry-university relationship can range from a one-off or ad hoc guest lecture by a business practitioner to the more formal and long-term relationship embodied in fellowships and adjunct appointments. Industry practitioners are sometimes employed as sessional or casual staff and they contribute to the educational program for the whole designated teaching period. However, this is not without its challenges (Sonner, 2000). Other forms of engaging industry experts, however, might involve them delivering a one-off lecture or participating in a panel discussion. A challenge in engaging industry practitioners on a regular basis, however, is balancing the ongoing commitment to their primary position with the demands of teaching and managing the institutional requirements of another workplace. A more systematic approach to embedding practitioners into business education may require collaboration at an organisational level where universities or faculties enter collaborative partnerships for the design, delivery and evaluation of business curriculum.

Collaborative partnerships between universities and business have been suggested as an effective way of addressing staff shortages in disciplines such as accounting (Geary, Kutcher & Porco, 2010). Weisberg (2009) suggests universities look to adjuncts as a source of teaching innovation, drawing on their vast experience in the world of business together

with their competence in both leading technologies and methodologies to make a rich contribution to academia. However, there have been calls by some for universities to develop strategies to better induct and support adjunct faculty (Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2010; Sonner, 2000) including mentoring, providing appropriate professional development and induction, supplemented with effective communication and interaction with faculty.

The evaluation of the Partner Teaches Program (PTP) conducted at 12 business schools of varying sizes in the US (Geary et al., 2010), provides evidence of the benefits for students, staff and faculty of partnering with industry in teaching undergraduates. A formal collaboration with a public accounting firm forms the basis of the PTP, which includes formal responsibility for a subject given to a practicing industry adjunct from the partner firm. Students responded positively to having a practitioner teaching them, agreeing that they stimulated interest in the subject, were effective as mentors and were someone that they would seek advice about their professional plans from. Importantly, the 271 students who completed the evaluation survey for the PTP agreed that the adjunct was knowledgeable about a range of areas relating to professional practice and could draw on personal experience and provide real world examples that the students could relate to. These students also agreed that the adjunct added value by bringing materials and resources from the business world to the classroom. The adjunct partners reported that they gained satisfaction through being able to give back to the profession by raising awareness of professional opportunities in accounting. Many also noted how this type of program could assist in helping to produce higher quality, better equipped graduates.

In the context of the field of public administration, Posner (2009) strongly argues the case for revisiting the important relationship between academics and practitioners and the bridging role that the “pracademic” can play in helping to improve the synergy between theory and research, addressing misunderstandings between the two worlds and creating

mutually beneficial relationships. The PTP program evaluation strongly suggests that students and the industry partner benefit from the initiative, particularly with regard to ensuring classes have industry currency and in making connections with ‘the real world’. The Industry Professional Engagement Program (IPE Program) in the Faculty of Business and Law at Victoria University (VU) has adopted a similar approach to that used in the PTP. However, the differences between the two programs include embedding in the classroom current industry practitioners from a range of business areas, not just one specific discipline, and giving them responsibility for teaching a generic, as opposed to specialist, subject designed to develop students’ employability skills.

### **Industry Adjuncts in “Professional Development 3” at Victoria University**

A major review of the core subjects taught in the undergraduate business curriculum in the Faculty of Business and Law at VU conducted in 2006 resulted in the establishment of a vertical stream of three professional development (PD) subjects explicitly designed to develop students’ graduate capabilities and employability skills. This PD stream addresses the issues identified in the review relating to the need to develop teaching approaches that build students’ capacity for professional practice beyond their discipline-specific knowledge (Papadopoulos, 2010). Together these units cover the broad areas of business knowledge, personal attributes and professional skills. *Professional Development 3 Challenge and Leadership* (PD3) is the last of the three units in this stream. Assessment in this capstone unit is based on a business project designed to demonstrate students’ acquisition of skills and knowledge needed for professional practice. Students can tailor their project to their future career aspirations: those wishing to pursue post-graduate study can undertake an applied research project, while budding entrepreneurs can do a business start-up or, students can undertake a business project based on their specialisation or course of study. Projects can be

in a workplace, community setting or on-site and as part of the assessment students are required to reflect on their experiences in the context of their future after graduation.

The IPE Program, which runs as part of the PD stream, was designed to strengthen the Faculty of Business and Law's collaborative teaching with the aim of enhancing the student learning experience. Through this program it was also hoped to strengthen interactions between academics (as *content* experts) and industry adjuncts (as *context* experts). The program was conceived in response to the University's strategic goals, which include learning that engages students and which provides a professional and industry context to their learning experiences. Objectives for the Industry Adjunct program include conducting and evaluating a pilot that embeds industry adjuncts as a formal part of curriculum development and teaching in selected units of study, seeking feedback from students, academics and industry on the outcomes. This project is designed to promote collaboration with industry and the professions to create curriculum and teaching approaches that contextualise academic and discipline knowledge with current professional practice and emerging trends in industry. In doing so, strategies for utilising sessional academic teaching load to embed industry adjuncts as a formal part of the teaching program were developed.

### ***The Industry Adjuncts***

The pilot for IPE Program was run over two semesters in 2009 and 2010. In 2009 approximately 160 students completed PD3 with industry adjuncts included as sessional teaching staff for the first time. In 2010 the majority of the 440 students who took PD3 were taught by Industry Adjuncts who were recruited through advertisements, Victoria University's Alumni and staff's personal networks. The first semester that the program ran, Industry Adjuncts were recruited to deliver workshops and guest lectures and to participate in assessment of the student projects. Their role was expanded in the next semester to include industry practitioners facilitating PD3 classes across the semester as part of the sessional

teaching staff for the unit. In Semester 1, 2010 there were 8 industry adjuncts involved in the facilitation of classes. Evaluation of the pilot program included conducting focus groups with the industry adjuncts to ascertain their views about the program. Four industry adjuncts attended a focus group session to provide feedback on the pilot project, while a further two provided feedback via email. Experience teaching PD classes amongst the industry adjuncts ranged from only one or two semesters teaching only PD3 to having taught at all PD levels over several semesters. Each adjunct was working in a business role, with industry adjuncts having jobs in marketing, consultancy and career development.

When asked what their motivation for being involved in teaching was, what they felt they got out of the experience and how their involvement benefitted students, the industry adjuncts responses included: providing authenticity and real world examples which students are interested in and which they find engaging and motivating; returning to their roots; liking that students are impressed with their involvement and interested in what the adjuncts have done in business. There is considerable satisfaction in seeing students learn and grow from this and the adjuncts feel that being able to make a difference to students is important.

One of the biggest contributions adjuncts felt they can make is to help students become aware of the gap between where they think their skill set is and where it actually is. They believe they can help to re-align students' perceptions about what sort of role they can expect to get on graduation, potential income and how much effort is required to realise a given income and career goals. One adjunct gave the example of using the resume and video of a colleague earning a 7-figure sum in a world bank to show students what sort of career path, effort and outcomes they needed to achieve the levels of success that many students unrealistically seem to think is quite easily accessible to them.

Modelling of the behaviours expected in the workplace is another strength the industry adjuncts feel they bring to the role. This can be as simple as how to present

professionally to more sophisticated behaviours such as networking. However, they also expressed frustration at the lack of commitment of many of their students. They discussed disappointments they had had when bringing in someone from their network to facilitate an activity in class and students had seemed disinterested and disengaged. They believe that this is another example of where students lack insight into the gaps in their knowledge and skills. This is particularly disappointing given the emphasis on professionalism and personal attitudes and attributes throughout the professional development stream.

One industry adjunct said that they were “teaching professionalism”. There was a feeling that academics may not know or model the required behaviours for students and so the Industry Adjuncts are always relating things back to what would happen in business so that students understand the consequences. Poor research skills were cited as a major issue amongst the students, who skim the surface and are uncritical in their consumption of information. According to the industry adjuncts, students also do not draw on one another as resources. This is particularly evident in teams, where one member may have information or skills that can assist the other team members, but there is no sharing in the team.

That there are “powerful synergies” between practice and academia facilitated through the IPE Program was noted by one industry adjunct, who also suggested that this is a successful and sustainable model for VU, which could be marketed better to students. A key challenge is for facilitators to adopt the students’ frame of reference and the need for adjuncts to work with multiple-frames of reference. There is some adjustment needed to shift from imposing knowledge to sharing knowledge to facilitating knowledge development. Working as an industry adjunct reinforces personal skills and reminds practitioners about good practice and why things should be done in a particular way. Themes through the discussion included that industry adjuncts feel they are “creating additional meaning” for the students and helping them to bridge the gap between academia and practice, something which Posner (2009)

believes is necessary and important. They also have multiple roles that they shift in and out of in the classroom, such as manager, facilitator, mentor, and assessor. As Gremler and colleagues note, experiential learning such as the PD classes provide, places the responsibility for learning with the learner. However, it also shifts the role of the teacher to coach and mentor (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney & Wright, 2000), something to which these industry adjuncts have responded.

The need for structure to support facilitation was stressed by one industry adjunct, who felt that PD3 had been too “loose” in this regard at times and that this made their job more difficult. It was very important to the industry adjuncts that they understand the desired learning outcomes, which they generally felt they did and they were very happy with the level of resources and support for teaching they received. The evolving curriculum in PD3 was described by one as “exciting”. The project work students undertake for the unit is varied, providing different contexts and challenges between student teams and across semesters. However, there was quite a bit of discussion about the lack of continuity of students’ skills and knowledge application between subjects and across year levels, where students do not appear to apply skills across subjects when this is appropriate and that this lack of integration was an impediment to student learning.

When asked about their needs with regard to induction to teaching, the industry adjuncts said that they felt that this was less of a problem for them as they were able to draw on their experience in the workplace and that classroom management was not really an issue. By bringing a business focus into the PD sessions they felt they were able to create a context and environment they were comfortable working in. However, they felt that more support could be given with the administrative aspects of the role, such as using the institutional learning management system, dealing with special consideration applications, entering marks and submitting timesheets. There was also discussion about the need for co-ordinators to be

more aware of the needs of industry adjuncts and to take into account that they are not necessarily going to operate in the same way as sessional teaching staff or permanent staff. This includes expectations about the timeframe in which emails will be read and responded to, as well as availability for meetings during the day.

### **Summary**

The overall impression from the discussion with these industry adjuncts is that they feel valued and believe that they are making a difference for the students. They believe that the PD units run well, although there a couple of areas where some additional support could be provided. Importantly, they felt that the involvement of industry adjuncts in the PD units creates a valuable point of differentiation which has real-world relevance and the potential to significantly impact on students' work-readiness and professional preparation.

It was clear from industry adjuncts' responses that they draw on their current industry experience constantly in their PD3 teaching. They also are aware of how these students learn and the nature of the student cohort and the challenges the students face. The industry practitioners are inducted appropriately into the Faculty and benefit from engaging with Faculty through not just being paid, but having other benefits such as library borrowing rights and opportunities to attend university sponsored professional development. Furthermore, the general feeling from the industry adjuncts is that their relationship with the Faculty is managed quite well, so they are not inundated with requests from either staff or students. The net result of this has been a very positive experience for the industry adjuncts as well as for the students. For the last semester that PD3 ran, more than half of the enrolled students (55.2%) completed the student evaluation of the unit. Of these, over 70% agreed or strongly agreed that overall they were satisfied with the teaching in this unit.

Other factors that contributed to the success of the pilot program are the current industry networks that academic staff involved with the PD units have, which allowed

industry adjuncts to be sourced with different backgrounds and experiences. For those industry adjuncts who had not taught previously, appropriate professional development opportunities, resources and support were available to ensure that they could carry out their roles effectively. It also appears that the curriculum and associated learning activities in PD3 lend themselves well to industry participation, with the industry adjuncts being able to engage with class activities and assessment, giving them scope and opportunity to inject their own experiences to make them relevant and real for students.

However, the pilot was not without its challenges, which include the time it takes to liaise and network with industry to source appropriate industry adjuncts, an observation made by many others in regard to including industry in a range of teaching activities (e.g., Bove & Davies, 2009; Burnthorne Lopez & Gravois Lee, 2005). These relationships need to be carefully managed to ensure time demands are not too burdensome and we do not “burn out” the few industry contacts by too many requests. Although the industry adjuncts who facilitate PD classes are paid, there are also a large number of industry practitioners who participate in other activities for PD classes such as workshops and assessment panels. Being able to appropriately reward these industry people for their efforts is sometimes difficult and makes inviting them for repeat performances difficult. Finally, as some industry adjuncts noted, student behavior can sometimes reflect poorly on the university, with examples being cited of students not turning up to guest lectures, talking during a guest lecture or not participating in workshop activities. When delivering a program such as this, these issues need to be recognized and measures put in place to manage them and mitigate the risks.

### **Looking forward**

As Kennedy and colleagues note “Exposure to the business culture and the expectations of professionals in the workplace can be an education in itself.” (Kennedy, Lawton & Walker, 2001, p. 147). In this regard, by providing students with models, examples

and advice from the real world of work, the industry adjunct program is contributing to these students' education and preparation for future employment. The extent to which PD classes generally, and the inclusion of industry adjuncts in particular, enhance students' employability skills and develop their graduate capabilities is still being evaluated. A better picture of the impact of the PD stream will be available once data from graduates who have completed PD3 as part of their undergraduate studies is collected. What is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the PD stream is a better understanding of how graduates, and their employers, assess their work readiness on graduation and the role that PD had to play in this. According to Smith and Van Doren (2004), reality-based learning must expand the student experience and transfer to other contexts. By having industry adjuncts involved in PD3 the applicability of skills, knowledge and experience to situations outside the classroom is being emphasised and contextualised. It is therefore likely that the experience in PD3 will assist in developing work-ready graduates. The IPE program is another way of smoothing students' transition into employment, which also provides participants with the additional benefits that can result from closer relationships between industry and higher education providers.

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