

## **Encouraging and Maintaining Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC): engaging, supporting and rewarding academics**

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### **Abstract**

Since 2007, Victoria University's Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) policy has focused on enhancing the employability of VU graduates. While the Faculty of Business and Law (FoBL) at VU has a long tradition of work-integrated learning alongside a broader focus on developing students' Graduate Capabilities, the LiWC Policy has intensified the need for curriculum that specifically engages industry in assessment tasks. The LiWC policy requires that 25% of assessment in all courses involve learning in and through the workplace and community evidenced through LiWC-compliant assessment tasks.

The university has provided considerable support for the implementation of LiWC. Academics already engaging in LiWC showcased their approaches. Central support staff were available for individual and School consultation. There were opportunities for staff to engage with the Policy and various workshops and online resources were geared to realising LiWC. Teaching and Learning Grants were linked to improving or developing LiWC. The expansive notion of LiWC including diverse teaching approaches was stressed so that it would not be deemed restrictive. LiWC could include live case studies, simulations, student observations of worksites, working on 'real' business cases or role playing business situations with feedback from industry practitioners.

A 2010 report (VU, 2010) evaluating the status of LiWC at VU has identified generally high levels of compliance with the policy in the Faculty of Business and Law and some areas of industry engagement in curriculum that are exemplary. As expected, the report also identified areas needing greater attention. This discussion includes the Faculty of Business and Law's strategies for addressing areas of concern. It will describe the reporting of LiWC compliance in the Faculty, identify key reasons for non-compliance and report on the subsequent progress made in two de-identified teaching areas. The paper underlines the importance of individual and intensive support for academic staff from educational developers who understand both the policy context and the aims of the academics and who can develop creative curriculum that is also LiWC compliant. The discussion will also consider other means of incentivising academic staff to undertake curriculum changes to improve student learning outcomes.

### **Introduction**

In August 2006, Victoria University's Council endorsed an ambitious program of university-wide change entitled *Making VU: A New School of Thought*. From 2007, Victoria University (VU) began implementing this major initiative. *Making VU* aimed to support VU to respond to the changing nature of work, the workplace and the workforce. VU would be repositioned

to strongly connect to industry and the community to enhance students' employability through wide-ranging curriculum reform that would be achieved through a firm commitment to work-integrated learning (WIL) (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden, 2010).

The *Making VU* program anticipates the current and future needs of students, communities and enterprises and is comprised of five key Commitments to those stakeholders. The Commitments are based on: collaboration with industry; a focus on careers; providing students with choices; connecting to enterprises and our communities (VU, 2008: 8). VU's Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) Policy forms an integral part of the broader *Making VU* program. LiWC is VU's term for WIL. LiWC covers numerous educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with practical application in a workplace, profession or future employment. It involves "learning *in* and *through* the workplace and community" (VU, 2011). The LiWC policy requires that work-integrated learning be embedded in all courses and that at least 25% of assessment in a course is LiWC.

The LiWC approach seeks to achieve a number of connected outcomes including increased industry engagement with an enriched curriculum and improved employability for students (Patrick et al, 2008). While the Faculty of Business and Law at VU has a long tradition of WIL alongside a broader focus on developing students' Graduate Capabilities, the LiWC Policy has intensified the need for curriculum that specifically engages industry in assessment tasks. The requirement that 25% of each course includes LiWC-compliant assessment tasks has been especially challenging in a tight time frame. LiWC is a major re-positioning which has made considerable demands on VU's teaching staff (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008). For teaching academics with sometimes competing demands of teaching and contributing to their own discipline area through research, the need to focus on student careers and graduate

employability is perhaps the most challenging aspect of *Making VU*. Many academics have tenuous or dated links with industry; those new to academia from industry are pressured to “do” a PhD, while career planning and developing employability skills might be regarded as specialist discipline areas in themselves (McIlveen et al, 2008; Smith et al, 2009). Certainly, the pressure on academics to publish or perish is real if teaching academics aim to establish, maintain or further a university career. VU’s workload model also rewards those whose publications are prestigious and plentiful. The need for teaching staff to maintain and contribute to their own discipline area, to keep abreast of teaching theories and trends, to be able to embed language and literacy in their curriculum, to be aware of and proficient in at least some of the various technologies available (in a discipline area, for teaching and the administrative aspects of the academic role) and to maintain institutional knowledge of policy requirements and so on means that the time for also establishing, nurturing or extending industry contacts that might be able to assist with LiWC curriculum requirements is limited.

Notwithstanding the many demands on academic teachers and while the LiWC policy was new to VU in 2004, teaching approaches that use the workplace, industry representatives as well as simulated and real business scenarios to enhance student learning were not uncommon in VU’s Faculty of Business and Law (FoBL). Several units in Business degrees include career planning and require students to develop career portfolios. Several units are devoted to discipline-specific career planning and development. Note, however, that these activities may not be LiWC compliant as they could be work-referenced rather than industry engaged. The distinction between work-related learning, work-referenced learning and LiWC is important in relation to LiWC compliance. Work-related and work-referenced learning are not LiWC because students do not actively engage and interact with an industry or community partner. VU’s LiWC Policy seems to physicalise industry to a place or person;

certainly a physical presence is required even via text online. This requirement presents a challenge to programs in Melbourne and offshore as what counts as “authentic engagement” can easily become an existential quandary over what is real.

In addition to work placements offered through the Faculty’s Centre for Work-Integrated Learning, units across the faculty variously feature industry guest speakers; involve industry panels in assorted learning activities including assessment or feedback on student reports or presentations; encourage industry experts to work with students as mentors or advisors on projects, case studies or site visits; and collaborate with industry experts on excursions and field trips that add an especially strong experiential element to the learning (McIlveen et al., 2008). Hospitality students, for example, undertake work and study in VenU, VU’s training restaurant; Law students benefit from the Magistrates’ Court Program which has them on voluntary rosters working in partnership with Victoria Legal Aid in two Victorian Magistrates’ Courts; and the faculty’s employment of industry adjuncts who teach in various programs helps to ensure relevance and connectedness to industry trends. So popular WIL teaching approaches are common in many FoBL degrees and innovative teaching and learning at VU often involves collaboration with industry partners.

### **Central support for LiWC**

The Pro-Vice Chancellor (Students & Learning & Teaching) (PVC SALT) established a small project team, the *Making VU* unit, in 2007 to oversee all of the university-wide five Commitments, including LiWC. The project team collaborated with other central areas and Faculties and were advised by an overarching LiWC committee with Faculty representation. The unit was designed to establish a “critical mass within the institution that would work collaboratively with organisational areas to implement the new initiatives through building

individual and organisational capability” (Schurmanns & O’Connor, 2009). How well this unit connected with teaching staff rather than other central units is a matter that could be reviewed.

The university and the Faculty provided considerable resources for the implementation of LiWC. Academics already engaging in LiWC showcased their approaches. Central support staff were available for individual and School consultation. There were opportunities for staff to engage with the Policy and various workshops and online resources were all geared to implementing LiWC. Teaching and Learning Grants were linked with improving or developing LiWC. The idea that LiWC included diverse teaching approaches was stressed: teaching staff should not have a restrictive notion of LiWC. LiWC could include live case studies, simulations, student observations of worksites, working on ‘real’ business cases or role playing business situations with feedback from practitioners (McIlveen et al. 2008).

A range of support has been available to teaching and support staff to implement, evaluate and improve LiWC in FoBL courses. In some respects, simply having the LiWC Policy encourages academics to undertake industry-engaged curriculum. Senior management support for LiWC from the Vice-Chancellor, PVC SALT and Faculty Executive Deans actively acclaims the value of LiWC for students. In 2008 and 2009, VU and Price Waterhouse Coopers completed a project aimed at estimating the cost implications of designing, implementing and sustaining LiWC activities in all courses. Schools estimated numerous ongoing and one-off costs associated with curriculum renewal, establishing and maintaining relationships with host organisations, academic and administrative costs and other process related costs. Considerable funding was required at central and faculty levels to enable and support quality LiWC. Faculties had access to project funding which also included centrally provided expertise in curriculum, LiWC and e-Learning.

Over the last two years, over AU\$2.5M has been made available specifically for LiWC curriculum-related projects. In addition, many Teaching and Learning grants have been awarded to LiWC projects to reconceptualise or redesign curriculum. More project funding will be available for LiWC curriculum initiatives in 2011. Central funds were also provided to support LiWC research and attendance at conferences such as Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and World Association for Cooperative Education (WACE). These funds help to highlight the attraction of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as an often-overlooked research stream that is rewarded in an academic workload and which is valuable in terms of career progression.

Alongside the possible attraction of a new research area, key drivers for academics to undertake LiWC in their programs include the LiWC Policy, the self-evaluation undertaken by the Schools as well as ongoing course review processes. The Courses and Pathways Review and Approvals process requires new and reviewed courses to document LiWC assessment activities embedded throughout the course. Along with other Teaching and Learning policy requirements such as Graduate Capabilities, LiWC information is recorded in the university's Course Approval and Management System (CAMS). Recently developed Annual Course Monitoring reports will provide yearly information on LiWC implementation. These internal quality assurance processes will enable schools to track and report on their progress in developing and delivering quality LiWC programs.

Some support, then, for LiWC has been provided in the central Teaching and Learning Support and administrative areas of the university and some support has been faculty-based. It was evident from early on in the project that the implementation of LiWC represented a

considerable organisational change and that the change needed to happen and would impact significantly on, not just central areas, but educational programs and teaching staff.

A key feature of the Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) in practice has been industry engagement which highlights the policy aim “to deepen students’ knowledge of practice in realistic contexts” (VU, 2011: 3). Some practice previously regarded as WIL may not include direct industry engagement. Furthermore, the extent to which LiWC was in 25% of all courses in FoBL was unknown as a whole-of-course approach to this teaching approach had not been well documented. Finally, while VU’s take on work-integrated learning is broader than work placement or internships and includes projects in a workplace, fieldwork, simulated learning environments and enterprise initiatives (VU, 2011), it is also more demanding and stringent in that all LiWC must have some industry engagement: that is, students need to interact with industry people as well as places, artifacts and simulations. In 2010, FoBL undertook a survey to find out, in a higher education context of increasing regulatory rigour, how well is VU actually doing LiWC?

### **The LiWC Status report**

The *LiWC Status Report* (VU, 2010) identifies generally high levels of compliance with the LiWC Policy in FoBL. Indeed, some areas of industry engagement in FoBL curriculum are exemplary. As expected, the report also identified areas needing more attention. The report is based on self-reporting by all teaching areas. Across the university, Schools self-reported that 86% of their courses either do or will (by 2011) meet LiWC requirements. FoBL reported that 61% of courses met with LiWC requirements. This figure is an improvement on the 2009 estimate of 51% compliance (VU, 2010). Given that the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) has an audit of VU planned for 2012, this reported improvement in LiWC

needs to be real. More importantly, the report (VU, 2010) also identified areas in FoBL that must be seriously tackled. More support was provided to targeted areas in the last few months of 2010. What the staff needed was intensive support from both educational developers and e-learning experts which was provided through an extra round of Teaching and Learning funding targeting these areas.

### **What we learnt**

One of the obvious lessons learnt from this evaluation was that self-reporting does not necessarily result in accurate reporting. Interestingly, one teaching area reporting low LiWC compliance actually was using a range of industry-engaged teaching approaches but had not identified it as LiWC. Conversely, some areas that reported high LiWC compliance were really engaged in work-referenced learning: these were the units that required the most attention. The “shared vision” requisite to change (O’Brien, 2002: 150) was not entirely shared. Further, the panel reviewing the report noted that much of the technically compliant LiWC assessment may not offer optimum LiWC learning for students as it did not encourage deep nor complex learning. To be fair to academics, this requirement for depth and complexity is not in the policy and can really only be achieved by undertaking a thorough audit of all assessment in the faculty – well beyond what the unit outline and assessment criteria state and to what students actually do. Students may need to build up to “deep” and “complex” approaches to learning and sometimes “shallow” and “surface” approaches are a good place to start as per VU’s requirement for developmental, formative assessment (Biggs, 2003). The status report also served to highlight the need for curriculum to be aligned: many learning activities or assessment tasks were either not aligned to each other or learning outcomes. So LiWC creates an opportunity for curriculum renewal and improvement more broadly. Another important lesson was that the fact that not every unit needed to have LiWC must be more clearly communicated: it is not 25% of each unit that must be LiWC but each

course. A whole-of-course approach to LiWC, and curriculum design generally, is crucial.

The key resources and approaches for addressing areas of concern are basic but relatively rare. What academics need access to, beyond workshops, online resources and money for projects, is a faculty-based Educational Developer who is an academic, understands the academic workload and who can work with academics to meet the learning objectives of their unit in a creative way. E-learning expertise is often required at this point, too. Industry engagement, the common sticking point for compliance, can be achieved remotely through Elluminte, through comments on student work uploaded in PebblePad and through online discussion in Blackboard. This engagement needs to be meaningfully aligned to assessment. Another consideration is that, for FoBL, all too often this LiWC compliant assessment needs to be offered in other cultural, legal and educational contexts offshore.

The importance of individual and intensive support for academic staff from educational developers who understand both the policy context and the aims of the academics and who can develop creative curriculum that is also LiWC compliant cannot be overstated. While central units may see this as labour intensive, the reality is that one academic and one piece of assessment could affect hundreds of students in a given semester.

### **Challenges for the FoBL**

The challenges of implementing LiWC consistently and systematically through every course in the FoBL have been and will continue to be challenging. The frustration of the ambiguous and contested university environment with differing organisational structures and cultures between management and academic staff poses problems for the implementation of change (Petrov, Bolden & Gosling 2006). Academics expect to be involved in decision making and whilst this is a unique aspect of universities it can leave the leadership frustrated with the

apparent lack of advancement particularly when progressing key university objectives such as LiWC within designated timeframes. Add to the participatory nature of universities the academic pursuits of independent thought, creativity and autonomy and a complex environment for managing objectives is apparent.

The profile of the academic workforce in the Faculty and specifically the degree of interest in teaching and the change in most aspects of the workplace have contributed to a degree of inertia and resistance amongst some staff in implementing LiWC. In addressing these issues a range of assistance, incentives, professional development and compliance initiatives were, and will continue to be, used:

- Assistance: one-on-one support to align LiWC activities.
- Incentives: grant funding to enhance the engagement of industry and students.
- Professional development: school-based professional development in LiWC curriculum and supportive educational technologies.
- Compliance: audit of programs to both encourage and ensure compliance.
- Targeted support to areas identified in audits.

Overall, the participative and collegial approach adopted by the Faculty in articulating a clear vision based on University values and communicating high performance expectations proved to be an effective and productive method of engaging staff and putting into practice the LiWC policy (Williams & McWilliams, 2010). The “over-crowded curriculum” Loomas discussed in 1939 is getting ever busier. VU’s teaching and learning policy context requires a curriculum responsive to individual learner’s needs, supported by educational technologies, scaffolded with literacy, numeracy and learning support activities, internationalised and engaged with industry. Discipline expertise also needs to fit somewhere. But the support offered to LiWC implementation has created a more general support for aligned curriculum

initiatives: many academics have revisited their discipline and have been encouraged to consider internationalising, educational technologies and academic literacy alongside LiWC.

### **Benefits to Academics in the long run**

In the short term, many academics stress that implementing LiWC variously distracts them from research (for which they get rewarded), is largely invisible in terms of work load and is not recognised in terms of career progression. It would be rare, for example, for academics to be granted leave under VU's Special Studies Program in order to gain currency in industry. Teaching approaches that are amenable to LiWC requirements are generally considered to be more difficult and time consuming than traditional modes of teaching: "in many ways, it is easier to set an essay and exam" (Woodley & Fluker, 2010). Academics might acknowledge that students seem to be enthused about the discipline area when they can see it in practice and integrate theory and practice in experiential learning activities and that this may well be reflected in Student Evaluations of units but the pressure to maintain currency in the industry is real, the time needed to network and liaise with industry is considerable and the logistics of connecting industry with students who are increasingly demanding flexibility in their learning can be mindboggling. LiWC is also notoriously difficult to evaluate. We need to answer the question: of all of the learning that occurs, of all of the activities students engage with, how do we know that LiWC makes a positive difference? How do we know that it is engagement with industry that provides an especially rich learning experience? Finally, industry engagement is often idiosyncratically achieved through an academic's personal networks and contacts: if that academic leaves, the relationship is lost.

### **Conclusion**

FoBL is currently exploring how educational technologies might better support and sustain LiWC initiatives. For example

- one area now uses PebblePad for industry experts to provide feedback to students. This product avoids the need for passwords that Blackboard requires.
- another area is using Elluminate and Skype to both engage with industry experts remotely and record those engagements to serve as resources for all students
- another unit has students recording their work on MP3s and uploading them to areas for industry experts to comment.
- one assessment task has students interviewing managers using Skype.

These examples overcome the logistics of industry experts travelling to campuses, academics dealing with time-consuming administrative tasks from parking tickets to campus maps as well as students physically travelling to visit industry partners. The technology used in these examples is not overly innovative or challenging but academics need support to rethink their curriculum and to play with the throng of software and gadgets to see what works for them, their students and industry experts. They also need to know what technology works offshore.

The Faculty is exploring how to support staff to evaluate LiWC with a view to publishing.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is one research area that many academics do not consider – pressured and rewarded as they are to publish in their discipline areas. Still, academics at VU are incentivised in the area of SoTL in workload points, research and promotion. It should be encouraged through professional development. Challenges here include the university's Ethics Approval Process and academics' familiarity with appropriate methodologies for evaluating teaching and learning.

Another incentive to develop LiWC curriculum could be achieved through the university's Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education. "Increasingly programs have become a preferred vehicle for making rapid, complex, enterprise-wide changes required for sustained organisational performance and vitality (Pellegrinelli 2007). This internal qualification has the capacity to model LiWC and induct new teaching staff into the Teaching and Learning culture of the university. It could support new and existing staff to develop curriculum, including assessment tasks, that is supported by appropriate technologies and which

creatively meets the requirements of the LiWC Policy. This qualification could be a significant vehicle for institutional change as well as a means of maintaining quality.

The Faculty supports incentives that encourage and reward academics to develop curriculum that meets LiWC criteria. Central and Faculty level professional development to support building staff capability for LiWC is provided and many workshops have been run featuring visiting national and international WIL academics. Highly accessible web resources pertain to LiWC at VU and several annual LiWC innovative showcases and teaching and learning days all foreground LiWC. One-on-one curriculum advice is available. Finally, FoBL is also introducing an online assessment tool to assist staff to articulate assessment criteria including graduate attributes in a whole-of-course approach that will help to address a range of policy initiatives. All of these strategies support staff to engage in and learn more about LiWC. Even so, beyond the current compliance and energy levels, sustainability will remain an issue.

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