Discussion Paper

Engaging Industry in the Business Curriculum in Hong Kong

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Universities in Australia engage with industry to develop creative and current curriculum, provide networking and mentoring opportunities and enhance students' employability skills and their transition into the workforce. Like many Australian universities, Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne encourages industry engagement in business curriculum through accreditation and industry representation on Course Advisory Groups. VU also encourages the involvement of industry experts in the delivery of the business curriculum to enhance the student learning experience. Apart from work placements and internships, typical industry participation in business curriculum involves industry guest speakers, industry representatives providing feedback to students on project briefs or presentations and students attending field trips and tours of businesses. One mandatory unit in VU's Business degrees, *Professional Development 3: Leadership and Challenge* (PD3), has multiple points of engagement with industry over the course of the unit. This is a multi-disciplinary capstone unit that makes extensive use of industry adjunct facilitators and/or external partners to support students working on 'real' business challenges and projects.

Professional Development 3 is also offered in VU's business degrees offshore at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and Sunway University College (Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru). This paper will consider transnational quality issues in the delivery of PD3 in Hong Kong. It will describe the industry engagement achieved in the first delivery of PD3 in Hong Kong in 2010. Teaching staff from CUHK and VU will consider the comparability of the learning experience for VU's students and evaluate industry engagement in the unit based both on their own perceptions and industry feedback.

Introduction

This discussion examines a unit at Victoria University (VU) in the Business Degree.

Professional Development 3: Leadership and Challenge (PD3) aims to develop students'

graduate capabilities through a team-based learning experience that has multiple points of

engagement with industry experts. PD3 is a multi-disciplinary capstone unit that makes

extensive use of industry adjunct facilitators and/or external industry partners to support

students working on 'real' business challenges and projects. PD3 is also delivered offshore

with partners in the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK). The offshore delivery of

PD3 raises several transnational quality issues including the need to contextualise programs

to ensure relevance for the local context whilst simultaneously maintaining comparability with onshore programs in Melbourne. VU's *Principles of Equivalence/ Comparability in Offshore Programs* (2008) stress that VU's teaching and learning policies apply to offshore learning sites and, further, that curriculum at all sites must be "broadly similar" and relevant to the local context. This discussion will examine industry engagement, employability and comparability in the first delivery of PD3 at CUHK.

Employability

Recent research indicates that employers expect graduates to have more than discipline knowledge and technical skills relevant to their discipline: "In a knowledge-based economy, graduates must bring more than technical knowledge to the job" (Poh Yen *et al.*, 2009). Accordingly, universities increasingly emphasise curriculum that fosters skills and qualities in addition to ensuring a sound understanding of subject matter. The demonstration of Graduate Capabilities can distinguish graduates in both the recruitment process and the work place. Most universities in Australia have assumed some responsibility for graduates' employability through developing, assessing or assuring graduate attributes or graduate capabilities. All courses taught at VU must embed VU's six Graduate Capabilities.

As well as technical and field of study-specific knowledge and skills, graduates are able to:

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

Graduate Capabilities should be embedded in a whole-of-course approach so that graduates can, as business expects, 'hit the ground running' (AIG & Deloitte, 2009). In Hong Kong, as

is the case in Australia, students take on business degrees to enhance their employability. The main objective of the VU students at CUHK, is also to enhance their employability.

Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC)

VU's Graduate Capabilities and the Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) Policies are complementary. The main methodology for developing Graduate Capabilities is work-integrated learning (WIL). VU's take on WIL is broader than work placement or internships. LiWC encompasses numerous educational activities that integrate theoretical learning with practical application in a workplace, profession, career or future employment. LiWC involves "learning *in* and *through* the workplace and community" (VU, 2011). LiWC is a broad category but is prescriptive in that it must engage with industry at some level. VU distinguishes between work-related learning, work-referenced learning and LiWC. The first two types of 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 delivered both in Melbourne and offshore.

Engaging Industry in Curriculum

The challenge of how to develop and assess employability skills has been partly responsible for a major shift in teaching approaches in higher education in many universities in Australia. Alongside a pedagogical shift to more active learning approaches, there has been a move to include more direct industry involvement in teaching. Industry engagement involves a diverse range of interactions between universities and industry but recently the focus has been on teaching and learning. Teaching and learning collaborations include industry participation on course advisory committees, accreditation and auditing processes, through scholarships and

academic prizes, guest lecturers, offering internships and providing student projects. Universities engage with industry to develop creative curriculum, provide mentoring and networking opportunities and, ultimately, to enhance student transition into the workforce.

Australia is not alone in suggesting that industry ought to have a greater role in the development of curriculum. The need for university graduates who are work-ready, who can work with complex, ill-defined problems and who have the skills required by workers in a knowledge economy is the focus of many universities. Usually, industry engagement with students is not systematically achieved through a degree program but is rather idiosyncratic and dependent upon the personal motivations and professional networks of the teaching staff. Oftentimes, the effort required of academic staff to establish and maintain industry connections and arrange industry and student interaction is large and often such engagement relies on invisible goodwill on the part of both the academic and industry representatives.

Transnational Quality Strategy

Australian Education International's Transnational Quality Strategy (2005) emphasises that all educational programs "delivered within Australia and transnationally should be **equivalent** in the standard of delivery and outcomes of the course, as determined under nationally recognised quality assurance arrangements" (AEI, 2005). The equivalence of the PD3 student experience is difficult to ensure even onshore as different facilitators and different approaches to projects as well as substantial amounts of team-based learning challenge any sense of sameness. The focus must be on the *comparability* of the learning outcome. VU seeks comparability rather than equivalence which allows for some differences such as workplace legislation and workplace cultures. Comparability allows for greater cultural differences than does equivalence and invites partner input to encourage more

appropriate programs. Partner staff undertook the contextualisation of PD3 for offshore delivery. The *Good Practice Guide in Offshore Delivery* is clear: Offshore programs must be contextualised in collaboration with local teaching staff: "it is the learning outcomes, not necessarily the teaching inputs, which should be 'equivalent" (DEEWR: 2008: 69).

However, what can be changed while ensuring comparability needs to be determined. The demands of ensuring comparability teaching PD offshore is exacerbated by the fact that, onshore, curriculum was developed to suit the capabilities of purpose-built collaborative learning spaces that encourage students to research, talk, present, and generate ideas. The rooms in Melbourne are costly. So, there are three elements of PD that need to be accommodated offshore: the teaching space, the teaching approaches and the requirement for industry engagement. All of this required considerable extra effort on the part of partner institutions and the teaching staff. Running a unit that requires industry engagement and industry-sourced projects in Hong Kong raises a number of issues concerning LiWC offshore. How well equipped in terms of personal networks and institutional support are partner institutes to engage industry representatives in the PD3 curriculum? How comparable is the student experience at the various sites of PD3 delivery? Interestingly, as is the case in Melbourne, it was down to teachers of the unit to source industry people from personal networks to be involved in the program. In that respect, there was much equivalence.

PD3 in Melbourne

In Melbourne, students have sustained and diverse exposure to industry representation. In PD3 in Melbourne, students are involved in an Assessment Centre Day run in collaboration with industry HR experts. They do mock interviews and undertake the sorts of team and individual activities typical of Assessment Centre Days. Each semester, approximately 300

students form around 50 teams. Each team can opt to complete one of four types of projects: Industry Project, Bendigo Bank Challenge, Business Start-up or Business Challenge.

All of these projects see students work with industry partners in a range of actual industry scenarios. Industry engagement levels in PD3 might be indicated by:

Contact during development, delivery and/or evaluation of the curriculum of industry
The amount of time industry spends with academics, individual students or student teams
The immediacy of the activity: is it 'real' or simulated?

In PD3, engagement is collaborative and reciprocal, interactive and multifaceted. Academics, students and industry representatives are all involved in the development, delivery and assessment of several learning activities and assessment tasks.

Comparability and Contextualisation: employability skills in Hong Kong

The question of the relevance of VU's Graduate Capabilities to students' professional aspirations in Hong Kong must be considered. More broadly, how relevant are Australian employability skill to workplaces in Asia? There have been calls for graduates to have skills that meet employers' demands from Chinese human resources experts, repeated concerns about the numbers of China's graduates who are unemployed as well as recommendations for higher education authorities to reform curriculum (Reuters, 2010). The need for Chinese graduates, including those in Hong Kong, to be able to demonstrate employability is strong. Liu and Deng (2010) argue that China needs to establish its own sense of what employability entails and how to measure it. A broad translation of employability, 'ke gu yong xing' (Partridge & Keng, nd), combines the characteristics, personality, knowledge and skills employees should possess. How might these skills and attributes be embedded into curriculum in China? And are these skills transferable to the SAR of Hong Kong? Hodgson (2010) makes an important point which highlights a difference between many VU students in

partner programs in Hong Kong and VU students in China: "Students in Hong Kong commonly have some form of part-time work." How relevant is VU's LiWC agenda for them? Interestingly, students in Hodgson's focus groups agreed that LiWC is beneficial even if students are working. (Hodgson, 2010). The LiWC, however, was not an imported model but was based in workplaces in Hong Kong.

Just as the Australian Government monitors the employability of graduates, China's Ministry of Education (MoE) links university study with the world of work. The *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (1998) stresses that an undergraduate degree includes theory and discipline knowledge and that graduates have "basic skills, techniques and related know-how necessary for…practical work". Many commentators, however, point to a mismatch between the skills required and the teaching approaches adopted to develop problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, team work and such. This is, in part, why the PD units were developed at VU: the move from lecture/tutorial to 3-hours seminar in purpose-built collaborative learning spaces required a major pedagogical shift for many lecturers in Melbourne from lecturing to facilitating learning. It required a shift for lecturers and students in Hong Kong, too.

Traditional teaching methods generally are challenged by the need to develop graduates with "global thinking", "cross-cultural communication skills" and "the 'savvy' to do business with foreign counterparts" (Guo & van der Heijden, 2008: 290). Armatas and Lam (2010) present students' views of the shift in teaching between PD and other units at CUHK. One student complained that he had to "actively participate in PD1 classes... "*To be honest, less sleep in PD1. You know, traditional teaching learning, we used to sleep in class as we are very tired*

after daytime work but PD1 does not allow us to do so'" (Armatas & Lam, 2010). Industry engagement offers even more incentive for students to look likely and participate.

A recent *WACE* Conference in Hong Kong (2010) showcased a number of Hong Kong universities offering work-integrated learning through placements or internships. CUHK, VU's partner, is no stranger to involving industry in the life of the university. The required industry links in PD3 align with the aims of CUHK's "Knowledge for Society, Engaging the Community" agenda which forms part of its Knowledge Transfer Unit (KTU) and CUHK's Vice-Chancellor's Cup of Student Entrepreneurship "promotes interactions between academics and business communities [and] offers a good opportunity for students to present their business plans to venture capitalists and entrepreneurs" (CUHK, 2010). Industry engagement is not unusual for CUHK. It was, however, a new obligation in the VU degree. Major changes in curriculum content, in teaching approaches and teaching spaces were required – including industry connections – and there was little support available offshore.

PD3 in Hong Kong

VU's programs in Hong Kong rely on the goodwill, professionalism and networking ability of academic staff in Hong Kong to achieve any industry engagement. Local academics are vital to providing relevant industry contacts although international VU alumni offer another source of industry contacts that the PD team is currently liaising with. With each learning site, changes need to be made to accommodate local providers and students – from rooms, to timetables to content. First deliveries of *Professional Development 1: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving* (PD1) in Malaysia and Hong Kong saw several changes to topics and readings. PD1 is largely work-referenced and is relatively easy to customise. What proves to be slightly more challenging is to create a comparable student learning experience when the

student numbers, demographics and discipline areas are so different and when the unit must meet the industry engagement requirements of LiWC without comparable resources or the incentives on offer in Melbourne. PD3 students in Hong Kong differ from the Melbourne cohort in ways which mean that ensuring the comparability of the student experience is challenging. There were just 14 students in Hong Kong in semester 2, 2010. These part-time students are all working in different sectors such as banking and IT. These students are not studying for entry into an industry; they just want to survive or progress in a competitive job market. These students are completing the Bachelor of Business (Computer Systems Management). In Melbourne, the hundreds of PD3 students are from every discipline in Business and Law and learning activities are designed for multidisciplinary teams of students.

In addition to the mono-disciplinary culture, the cultural and linguistic context in Hong Kong means that the PD3 in CUHK is even more distinctive from Melbourne. Cantonese and English are the respective mother tongue and second language for all CUHK students. While over 40% of VU's onshore students identify as NESB (Non-English Speaking Background), it is different when an entire cohort have the same LOTE as a first language. International NESB students onshore note that team work in PD3 makes them practice English. In Hong Kong, it is a common issue that, while all teaching is in English, students working in teams invariably speak Cantonese. They do not obtain the English language development that international students have valued in the onshore program nor do they acquire the intercultural awareness that accompanies learning in a multilingual team working in English. English and intercultural skills are valuable employability skills for students in Hong Kong.

Despite these differences, comparable levels of industry engagement were achieved in PD3 in Hong Kong in 2010. The central and most visible points of industry engagement for Hong

Kong was the industry guests who helped to assess student presentation and who conducted two Industry Seminars. Industry speakers did not just deliver information in the Industry Seminars; students engaged in a lively Q&A at the end of each industry seminar. Students were active and enthusiastic participants. Typically, students raised questions related more to business practices rather than academic theories. In keeping with LiWC, there was a practical, "real" work focus to students' interactions with industry representatives.

In keeping with Transnational Quality aims, seminars are customised and made relevant to the particular cohort. CUHK's approach to industry engagement in PD3 took account of the much smaller student cohort (14 compared to several hundred in Melbourne) and the fact that all of the students are Information Systems students. This allowed for more relevant, IS industry people to be involved at CUHK. In addition to the team's oral presentation on project progress to an industry panel and the industry seminars, the CUHK students also completed various work-referenced tasks that emulate work processes and documents including a personal and professional plan, a project brief, a peer review of a business project and a project initiation document. These tasks are the same as the Melbourne cohort.

The industry engagement is achieved in PD3 principally through the student presentation to industry and the industry seminars. The unit facilitator drew on his own industry network to invite relevant industry speakers to engage with students. CUHK's PD3 teacher suggested topics closely related to the business start-up or business challenge projects chosen by the students. The topic of industry seminar 1: 'Ready to launch?' was highly relevant to students in the third year of an IS degree. The speaker from Microsoft Hong Kong focussed on practical issues to be addressed before rolling-out of a new business. The topic of industry seminar 2: 'Introduction to Viable System Model and Its Applications', was also highly

practical. The speaker from SEQuence Management Consultants ensured discipline relevance for the cohort and covered how to apply the system model concept to a real business project. Arguably, because of the small PD3 class size at CUHK, industry engagement with students is greater than in Melbourne where students compete for time in any Q&A industry sessions.

Conclusion

In Australia, industry representatives overall are positive about interacting with students. They report that learning activities are fun, they are impressed by students' enthusiasm and are pleased by the chance to "give back". Industry experts involved in the PD3 program in Hong Kong are similarly positive about engaging with students: "*I am honored to be one of the panelists and I also learnt a lot from my fellow panelists and the students*". Students, too, value the opportunity to engage with industry and unit evaluations conducted suggest the industry seminars are generally useful in developing their professional practice.

Overall, student feedback on the industry seminars is "*rather encouraging*". However, the challenges of being able to sustain industry contacts are the same in Hong Kong as in Melbourne. All too often, arrangements for industry to be involved in curriculum are dependent on goodwill and fears that industry contacts will be over utilised and "burnt" if asked repeatedly to work with teaching programs are real. Academics are rewarded for research outputs not industry networks. VU needs to support staff to undertake Scholarship of Teaching activities around LiWC to make industry engagement an advantageous career activity for academics in Melbourne and offshore. VU also needs to more actively support the contextualisation of offshore programs and policies including LiWC.

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