

INFORMATION SYSTEMS EDUCATION JOURNAL

In this issue:

4. **Students' Responses to Ethical Dilemmas in an Academic Setting and in the Work Place**
Faye P. Teer, James Madison University
S. E. Kruck, James Madison University
14. **The Challenges of introducing a Generic Graduate Skills Unit into a Business Degree in Malaysia**
Andrew Stein, Victoria University
Raquel Licciardi, Victoria University
24. **Whatever Happened to Richard Reid's List of First Programming Languages?**
Robert M. Siegfried, Adelphi University
Daniel M. Greco, Adelphi University
Nicholas G. Miceli, Adelphi University
Jason P. Siegfried, Adelphi University
31. **Designing an Introductory CIS Course to Attract and Retain Female (and Male) Students**
Louise Soe, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Ruth Guthrie, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
Elaine Yakura, Michigan State University
Drew Hwang, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
41. **A Case Study: Applying Critical Thinking Skills to Computer Science and Technology**
Li-Jen Shannon, Sam Houston State University
Judith Bennett, Sam Houston State University
49. **Strategies for Ensuring Computer Literacy Among Undergraduate Business Students: A Marketing Survey of AACSB-Accredited Schools**
Bruce C. Hungerford, Dalton State College
Joseph T. Baxter, Dalton State College
Stephen LeMay, University of West Florida
Marilyn M. Helms, Dalton State College
74. **Visual Basic Programming Impact on Cognitive Style of College Students: Need for Prerequisites**
Gary L. White, Texas State University – San Marcos
84. **A Study of the Perceptions of College Students on Cyberbullying**
John C. Molluzzo, Pace University
James P Lawler, Pace University

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The Challenges of introducing a Generic Graduate Skills Unit into a Business Degree in Malaysia

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Abstract

The School of Management and Information Systems at Victoria University Australian resides within the Business Faculty and has a range of Management and Information Systems degrees. In 2008 all degree programs in the Business Faculty introduced a compulsory generic graduate skills unit that focussed on problem-solving, critical thinking, communication and teamwork. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the challenges faced when delivering the generic graduate skills business unit into a Business degree at a Malaysian University College. Cultural, pedagogical, logistical, operational and student perceptions are some of the challenges that must be assuaged when introducing new units. This paper will present preliminary quantitative data to analyse and identify key classroom delivery challenges and facilitator/student qualitative data to provide context and a deeper understanding of the challenges. These challenges include; the need to customise programs into culturally different destinations, the need to find and train facilitators that could deliver the generic graduate skills-based activities, and the adoption of a team-based learning pedagogy with the commensurate difficulty this type of pedagogy engenders in a teaching culture that is heavily reliant upon the individual in its education system. Suggestions for improving learning outcomes are provided and include; the adoption of a team-based learning pedagogy; a focussed student assessment rationale and the development of a student lecturer trust relationship.

Keywords: business education, transnational education, graduate skills, implementation issues.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at the development and delivery of a generic graduate skills unit into a Malaysian University College. Whilst many Universities have incorporated elements of graduate skills into existing units the adoption of a series of units dedicated to these generic graduate skills is unique and the corresponding delivery into overseas destinations even more unique. The background to the development of the graduate skills units is presented as well as

a preliminary analysis and discussion of the initial delivery into Malaysia. The main focus of the paper is the learning/teaching challenges that arise when a generic graduate skills unit is introduced into a Business degree as well as into a culturally diverse educational institution.

Australian Universities have followed the lead from England and the United States in pursuing business/educational partnerships with Universities from Asian regions. All of these programs are discipline based studies that have

eventuated in Australian qualifications being granted to students in overseas locations. While there is increasing demand for programs, the terminology describing the cross-border nature of delivery needs to be clarified. The term transnational Education (TNE) came into general usage about 1995 and Knight (1997) used the term Transnational Education (TNE) to distinguish international students studying overseas from those studying in their home country. Now trans-border education and cross-border education can almost be used interchangeably and these terms cover the whole range of models, policies, practices and programs that deliver higher education across borders. When programs are delivered cross-border many challenges are identified and need to be addressed.

This paper will look at the delivery of a new generic graduate skills based business unit and then present the challenges encountered when delivered into two Malaysian destinations.

2. DRIVERS AND MODELS OF TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION

A British study (Doorbar, 2005) detailed the drivers encouraging students to take up TNE in their home country. The primary motivator being career enhancement, a common global theme, others include:

- Inability to gain entry into local universities, certainly for many undergraduates,
- Financial inability to travel overseas for education,
- Desire to continue to work while they study,
- Taking a unit in a remote location,
- Hard working, motivated, aggressive, eager to learn, and,
- Strong desire to improve English communications skills. (Doorbar, 2005)

A further driver is the strong pull of a foreign degree program with its associated kudos (Zimitat, 2008).

Just as there are many off-shore programs there are also many models that can be followed in developing a program. Several authors have described the various forms that transnational education can take in relation to the delivery of the program. The final delivery model can take

one of several forms (Ziguras, 1999; Patrick, 1997) these include:

- Distance - learning with interaction by fax, phone or email (Ziguras, 1999),
- On-line - learning with heavy utilization of the Web, (Ziguras, 1999)
- Sandwich - where students commence a degree in home locale and finish in overseas destination, (Miliszewsk, 2008)
- Postgraduate - students do coursework overseas but return home to complete dissertation (Patrick, 1997),
- Off-shore - delivered all in local destination whether in local or English language, and, (Xu, 2004)
- Off-shore blended - both visiting and local lecturers deliver course content often supported by Web on-line learning (Stein, 2009).

Helms (2008), identifies 6 models for how educational relationships can be emulated in transnational education:

- Branch Campus-satellite campus developed issuing degrees,
- Independent Institution- developed stand-alone,
- Acquisition/Merger-Foreign provider purchases part/whole local institution,
- Study Centre-collaborative centre linked with local provider,
- Affiliation-plethora of public/private relationships between foreign and local institutions, and,
- Virtual-only distance education with no face-to-face contact.

The business program at Victoria University is delivered into several off-shore destinations; Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, Hong Kong, Singapore, Beijing and Liaoning. The model that is followed by the University is based upon the affiliation model described above in Helms (2008). The relationship between the University and the different offshore locations differs between countries and even between institutions within countries. All units have different structures with the visiting lecturer delivering between 12 and 20 hours out of the total 36 hours. All course materials are in English as are assessments. A major section of the assessment is graded by the visiting lecturer but internal assessment is normally split between the visiting lecturer and the local lecturer, with

moderation done by the visiting lecturer. A teaching visit can last 3-7 days with the classes running mostly at night. On-line support is provided with Blackboard providing the online learning tool platform.

Graduate Skills Education in the Faculty of Business at VU

The question of teaching graduate skills at University and the role of Universities has been at the centre of debate in Australia (Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). The growth in participation rates at University has shifted the role of the university (DEWR, 2006) from its more traditional historical role to a role that controversially encompasses vocation and internationalisation as espoused by Star and Hammer (2008). The increasing number of students attending universities also has placed an emphasis on the range of skills that universities are expected to deliver and the need to undertake enhanced graduate skills education (Green, Star & Hammer, 2009). These skills are discussed in many government and industry reports including one by the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC, 2007; Freudenburg et al, 2009). The BIHECC (2007) report has called for critical thinking, teamwork, sustainability, ethical practice and life-long learning as expected outcomes from a university business education.

A 2009 ALTC report by Rigby (2009) presented four broad graduate skills as being important in the development of the graduates at modern Australian universities; critical thinking, teamwork, ethical practice and sustainability.

"The actual set and sub-sets of skills, values, and attributes identified as central to students' achievement by HECA (Higher Education Council of Australia), are consistently found across and within the various conceptualisations of generic skills. Although the terminology may shift from author to author, institution to institution, the content and substance of such is generally consistent and reflects contemporary concerns of a wide range of stakeholders in higher education, particularly in Australia. Of particular importance, to academic staff, industry representatives, employer's and government bodies, are critical thinking and teamwork skills, and sensitivity to sustainability and ethical practices." (Rigby, 2009, p 5)

The Faculty of Business at Victoria University undertook a comprehensive survey of stakeholders in 2007 (VU Business Review, 2008) and implemented a major change to the curriculum offerings that were introduced in 2008. Three core graduate skills units were introduced, one in first, second and third year. These units were termed Professional Development 1, 2 & 3. They replaced three discipline based business units and focussed on graduate skills, namely critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork and communications in the first year unit Professional Development 1 (PD1). These graduate skills units were seen as a way of bringing the incoming cohort through transition, and finally improving their "job readiness" as they graduated in the second and third year units. The graduate skills units also responded to the wide range of student ability that the Australian university system is experiencing as a result of the increased participation rates.

The debate about graduate skills is also evident in the countries where the off-shore partners of Victoria University operate. Quek (2005) and Mohd & Saifuddin (2009) pointed to the need for Malaysian graduates to have graduate skills including leadership, teamwork, innovative skills and well as problem-solving and oral and written communication skills. Quek (2005) further explores the difference in learning styles and the ability to transfer skills from university to the workplace;

"In the Malaysian context tertiary institutions probably need to consider the development of generic competencies in students so as to enable them when they graduate to transfer learning to the changing demands of the workplace". Quek (2005)

Teaching & Learning Issues

Pedagogy and student expectations was mentioned in almost all cases of TNE delivery (Stein, 2009; Knight, 1997; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Stier, 2006) as is team based delivery structure and lecturer/student trust issues (Michealson, 2004; Gurvinder & Sharan Kaur, 2008; Stein, 2009). Cultural customisation or intercultural competence are mentioned in both Australian and Malaysian literature as well as other sources (Ziguras, 2008; Quek, 2005; Cunningham et al, 2000; Freeman et al, 2009; Grey, 2002).

3. RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question of this paper is: What are the main learning/teaching challenges in the delivery of a graduate skills-based unit into an Business degree via TNE? Both qualitative student data and quantitative data will be used to analyse a number of challenges raised in the course delivery.

4. METHODOLOGY

A range of teaching/learning issues associated with TNE were identified from the literature (See Indicative References in Table 1) and then cross-matched with the unit evaluation questionnaire and is presented in Table 1. The cross-matching was guided by the teaching experience of the visiting lecturers and supported by local staff and this allowed modification to the unit evaluation survey to facilitate a quantitative analysis of possible learning /teaching challenges from the graduate skills unit rollout.

A total of 145 students enrolled into the graduate skills unit (PD1) in Sunway University College in semester 1 2009. When invited to complete the unit evaluation 135 completed the form. The qualitative data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) method of arraying data and developing themes. The quantitative data were used to generate simple tables. The modified unit evaluation survey items are in the Review Metrics column in Table 2. (See Appendix)

5. FINDINGS

Unit Effectiveness and Teaching and Learning Challenges

A review of the PD1 Unit in July 2009 yielded quantitative data on student perceptions of the validity and effectiveness of the unit. Table 2 presents the review metrics from the unit evaluation and the corresponding learning & teaching challenges.

The second column from the right gives the average rating for Australian student perceptions from semester 2 2009, this cohort is from the Melbourne campus and gives a comparison between a stable control cohort where the graduate skills unit has been delivered four times as compared to the first time rollout into

Sunway. The last column presents the identified challenges. Looking at the mean value responses of the four learning/teaching challenges we can analyse the effectiveness of the Sunway rollout.

Challenge one (Cultural Customisation) relates to the clarity of the course material. Customisation becomes important here as understanding can be governed by the degree to which the material has been customised to suit local conditions. The results in Table 2 show that student perception in Malaysia of cultural customisation was neutral to good for review metrics 1,2,3 & 4 ($\mu=3.4, 3.4, 3.3$).

Challenge two (Team Based Pedagogy) relates to content delivered and the degree that students perceive the team based delivery as being useful. Teamwork forms the major component of most content and as such any comment here must take team-based work and activities into account. The student perception of the team-based pedagogy was neutral to good for review metrics 4 & 5 ($\mu=3.5, 3.4$).

Challenge three (Student/Facilitator Trust Relationship) relates to the degree the facilitator understands and can develop a trust relationship with the students. This includes the strong reliance that students assign to assessment and the need for facilitators to elevate the importance of the learning process over the assessment regime. This issue showed neutral to good acceptance by the co-hort for review metrics 6,7,8,9 & 10 ($\mu=3.4, 3.6, 3.5, 3.4, 3.6$).

The last challenge (Facilitator Pedagogy) relates to the facilitator being able to adapt from the lecturer centred pedagogy to a more inclusive student centred facilitator model. This showed a high acceptance by the student respondents for review metric 11 ($\mu=3.8$). Taking these four challenges we can use qualitative student data to further explore the extent they impact the student's experience.

6. DISCUSSION

Cultural Customisation Challenge (Guided by Cultural/Language issues)

The Faculty of Business programs as delivered in off-shore and Australian campuses are mandated to be equivalent in status but not necessarily identical in content or assessment.

This understanding allows for customisation of material for differing locations. The level of customisation in offshore locations is called into doubt by Davis, Olsen and Bohm (2000) when they found that only 28% of some 82 offshore programs had been customised. Apart from the mandating of equivalence at both Australian and offshore locations there is some question as to the level of customisation that occurs.

The dilemma facing Australian educational developers and lecturers is further displayed when we consider the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee comment concerning a model of acculturation (Davis and Olsen 1999 p. 99).

"..international students, to maintain standards of academic excellence, need to adapt to the dominant culture, that is, promote the successful adjustment by international student to life and study at any Australian university, within Australia or overseas". (Davis & Olsen 1999 p. 99)

Against this backdrop of the need to customise but maintain equivalence in educational programs the first of three Graduate Skills units was customised for delivery at Sunway University College in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru. In the case of the two Sunway locations exhaustive month-long reviews of material were carried out. An example of the comprehensive customisation process is given below;

"Suggested to a speech by Malaysia's former Prime Minister The Hon Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Leadership and Management Demands in the 21st century, and the other is an article by Dr Phil McGraw on 'What Shaped You as A Person', which will be helpful in the learning in Week 1. Kindly find these articles attached" Local Lecturer - example of content customisation, December 2008.

A further example shows how the local facilitator participated in amending the content of the Graduate Skills unit;

Assessment 2A: A discrepancy in the duration of the activity. Since this is an initial exercise which might prove to be "Challenging" for students as it is going to move away from the way they have been taught in the past, it might require more time than less - the WebCT states ½ hour whilst

the BFP outline indicates 45 minutes. May I suggest an initial 40 minutes and then a further extension of 5 mins by the visiting facilitator?" Local Facilitator, as an example of process customisation, December 2008

The unit's Blackboard site was modified and then this material was delivered to the co-hort. Some typical changes included replacing some readings with more culturally aware and localised readings as well as including some Malaysian specific business issues. It is important that the local lecturer is confident with the material and that an adequate timeframe is given for the local lecturer to familiarise themselves with the content of the unit prior to the first delivery. Whilst customisation occurs well before delivery, the local lecturer is additionally relied upon to add local context to the theory "on the go". The cultural difference in the operation of Asian to Western business (Ziguras, 2008) is an important consideration. Whilst much effort is made to facilitate the knowledge transfer from visiting lecturer to local lecturer knowledge this relationship still needs management.

Team-based Pedagogy Challenge

Of the four main graduate skills that make up many of the activities and indeed the whole premise for the Graduate Skills initiative at Victoria University teamwork presents the most complex set of problems for the curriculum designers as well as for delivering this unit into overseas destinations. The complexity comes about at many levels; non-familiarity with teamwork learning educational pedagogy by overseas students, uncertainty of teamwork assessment procedures, blurring of the edges between team and individual goals and finally necessity to form multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural teams. The teamwork challenge also raises the issue of student's confidence in being an active member of a good team:

"My English gradually improving; my team members ask, "What do you think?" and I become confident to give my opinion. It took 4 - 5 weeks to get confident in my team." International student commenting upon teamwork from a focus group study conducted December 3rd 2009.

The role of teamwork and critical thinking has been the centre of debate in education in China (Guo & Heijden 2008, Liu 2006) with the recent opening up of China as well as China entering the WTO driving the desire for more employability driven education. Teamwork is also high on the agenda of Malaysian corporations. The following comment from a student from the Malaysian campus on the role of teamwork in the graduate skills unit illustrates the importance of effort and commitment to successful teamwork;

"...Each of us managed our assigned task properly and did try hard to find relevant resources. Communication and team spirit are actually major components to achieve our goals. Absence of these two components may lead to destruction of the group and misunderstand will come across among the group members. I'm lucky to have members who contributed lot of their efforts and also asked for help if they are not sure about the information for their respective bottom lines. As for me, I will put more effort in this project because I know I play an important role as a team member in which to have clear mindset that this project is not only for myself but also involved others in the team to achieve completion of task." Student, PD1 Malaysia, June 2009.

Facilitator Pedagogy Challenge

Much of this paper reflects upon learning undertaken by the students, a major consideration is the teaching pedagogy that forms the underlying theme of the Graduate Skills units and the associated necessity for the facilitators to grasp and feel comfortable with this paradigm. Whilst this has proven to be an issue in delivering the Graduate Skills unit in Australian campuses it has become a major issue when taking the Graduate Skills unit into off-shore destinations. It became necessary to insist that the local facilitator was teacher trained. The facilitator was then given intensive in-service both before and during the teaching visit. Team teaching and video-recording both in Australian classes and overseas classes were additional measures undertaken to prepare the local facilitator for teaching 40, 18-22 years old students in 3 hour blocks. An underlying issue relates to the perceived role of a University lecturer. An intensive Graduate Skills based unit requires intensive class based activities and

interaction with students. The role of the facilitator then becomes an enabler for learning to occur whilst making sure that students are driving the learning themselves in their teams. Not all university lecturers are comfortable with this requirement, indeed one academic commented;

"...no, I was not comfortable without slideshows nor complete control over what is happening, I get it but I cannot facilitate what goes on..." Anonymous Academic, Victoria University, 2008

A further comment from one of the overseas facilitators after two semesters of Graduate Skills teaching;

"Yes, I must agree PD is very taxing but enjoyable, nevertheless." Anonymous Academic, Partner University to Victoria University, 2009.

Student/Facilitator Trust Challenge

The students' trust issue is addressed by making certain that the normal two way communication in the lecture/seminar reaches all students (Stein, 2009). It is very easy for students to attend without ever engaging in the class. This becomes crucial for the Graduate Skills unit. This unit is an intensive 3 hr workshop/seminar where students work together in teams and are expected to produce outcomes in specified timeframes. An example of the intensive skills based activities of the Graduate Skills Unit is the main focus of the following student's reflective writing. The student is commenting on their fears of presenting in public:

"During the explanation, I feel nervous and lack of confident as I seldom give a speech or explanation in front of the classroom. I did not dare to look at the audience, I did not have eye contact to them I put all my attention to my lecturer only. However, if it is present in a team, I might have more confident as the poor performance of mine may result a bad impression to everyone. I realized I cannot continue to be like that. I must improve myself whether in confident as well as when giving a speech or explanation to people. Sooner or later, I will have a group presentation for my final report. I do not want to affect my group's performance due to my bad presentation skill.

In future, I believe when I step into community, society as well as working life, there are lots of presentations waiting for me. Therefore, I must well prepare before I mess up everything"
Student, PD1 Malaysia, June 2009

The perception that Asian educational culture relies heavily on individual testing was evident, furthermore there was a need to introduce students to the concept that teamwork assessment is equally important as individual assessment. Importantly there was not a great difference between Malaysian and Australian students in the teamwork versus individual dialogue. Teamwork problems like "free riding" and the range of problems created by multi-cultural balanced teams could be the focus of further studies.

7. CONCLUSION

The Victoria University Business Faculty undertook a wide ranging review and introduced three new units that not only replaced discipline content based units that focussed on developing generic graduate skills and also introduced a new teaching/learning pedagogy. The two crucial themes that come out of the challenges presented above are relationship and trust building and the need for rapid adaption to the facilitator-led collaborative team-based pedagogy.

Firstly, relationship building is the crucial underpinning necessary to deliver effective units. Relationships need to be developed quickly by the visiting lecturer (3-7 days) with the local institution, the local administrative staff, with the local support staff, the local lecturer and of course with the students. These relationships then need to be nurtured and renewed for every visit. Trust forms an important component of this relationship building. It is difficult to monitor day to day class activities so far from home. Indeed it may be considered an intrusion to delve into the class once the local lecturer takes over, these are shared lectures taken by permanent lecturers not sessional or contract staff.

Secondly, the very nature of the Graduate Skills unit that is the subject of this paper requires an intensive facilitator/student interaction which is based on the learning process rather than learning content. The slideshows delivering

accounting or economic theories are replaced by teams working on complex business problems that have a "real world" focus. Rolling out this pedagogy into a program that has focussed on the lecture/tutorial model requires considerable groundwork to be completed. It is just not possible to "run and gun" a complex unit without adequate infrastructure, both hardware, software and most importantly people. Much of the TNE impetus relies upon the visiting lecturer delivering complex process oriented units from a distance. Extensive relationship building skills are required to deliver the trust required to sustain joint educational partnerships between organizations emanating from disparate cultural and geographic locations.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

A limitation is associated with the level of statistical analysis, further research could include more formal focus group qualitative data gathering and cross-tabulated analysis of the differing co-horts. The challenges that were identified could be further analysed and fine-tuned. An analysis of the graduate skills namely teamwork, problem solving, communications and academic skills and how the student perception of these skills differs in different cultural locations could be further investigated. Another area of research could be an analysis of teamwork problems like "free riding" and the intersection of problems created by gender balanced teams as well as cultural considerations.

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Appendix

Table 1. Unit Evaluation and Challenge Mapping

Modified Unit Evaluation	Mapped Challenge	Indicative Reference
Unit had Clear Objectives	Cultural Localisation	Ziguras, 2008; Quek, 2005; Cunningham et al, 2000, Grey 2002, Freeman et al, 2009
Learning Tasks are Clear	Cultural Localisation	As above
Student Understood Requirements	Cultural Localisation	As Above
Learning Activities are Useful	Team-based Pedagogy	Michealson, 2004; Gurvinder & Sharan Kaur 2008; Stein, 2009
Learning Activities Well Planned	Team-based Pedagogy	As Above
Learning Activities Well Managed	Student/facilitator Trust	Stein, 2009; Kingston & Forland 2008; Stier 2006
Content Up to Date	Student/facilitator Trust	As Above
Assessment Well Planned	Student/facilitator Trust	As Above
Assessment Linked to Outcomes	Student/facilitator Trust	As Above
Assessment Assisted Learning	Student/facilitator Trust	As Above
Satisfied with Teaching	Facilitator Pedagogy	Stein, 2009; Knight, 1997

Table 2. Student Perception of PD1 Unit semester 1 2009 Malaysian co-hort, N=135; Australian co-hort N=155

PD 1 Unit Review Metrics	Mean Sunway Cohort S109 n=135	Mean Aust Cohort S209 N=155	Learning/Teaching Challenge
1. Clear Objectives	3.4	4.2	Cultural Customisation
2. Tasks Clear	3.4	4.2	Cultural Customisation
3. Understood Requirements	3.3	4.1	Cultural Customisation
4. Learning Activities Useful	3.5	3.8	Team-based Pedagogy
5. Learning Activities Well Planned	3.4	4.0	Team-based Pedagogy
6. Learning Activities Well Managed	3.4	4.1	Student/facilitator Trust Rel
7. Content Up to Date	3.6	4.1	Student/facilitator Trust Rel
8. Assessment Well Planned	3.5	4.1	Student/facilitator Trust Rel
9. Assessment Linked to Outcomes	3.4	4.0	Student/facilitator Trust Rel
10. Assessment Assisted Learning	3.6	3.9	Student/facilitator Trust Rel
11. Satisfied with Teaching	3.8	4.4	Facilitator Pedagogy