

Locating learning advisers in the new university: What should be our role?

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Abstract: *During the past two decades, Australian universities have begun to prioritise generic skills development (James, Lefoe, & Hadi, 2004) in response to pressures created by the diversification of the student body and industry demands for graduates with 'transferable' skills. While some academics still believe that these generic skills, attributes and values should be taught separately from 'content' (Moore, 2004), the current consensus is that they are most effectively developed within disciplinary contexts (Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode, & Kocatepe, 2004; Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004). This shift from a deficit model to a more complex framework for understanding the relationship between knowledge and academic skills development (Lawrence, 2003) effectively requires the development of a new curriculum (DEST, 2002, as cited in Hirst et al., 2004; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000). Hence, it has significant implications for Learning Advisers, who have traditionally provided academic skills programs from centralised Learning Centres (Tiernan, 2001). Because the institutional location of Learning Centres influences the type of work undertaken by the staff within them, location itself has sometimes been the focus of debate among Learning Advisers (Tiernan, 2001). In this paper we contribute to this debate by reflecting on our own experience as newly 'embedded' learning advisers in the Learning Development Unit within the Griffith Business School. We suggest that learning advisers can play a vital role in the development of the new curricula demanded by Universities, employers and students by developing partnerships with disciplinary experts, which are based explicitly on a model of co-production (Gordon & Lee, 1998). Adopting*

this model means that the new curriculum is seen as a third knowledge, which must be constructed through strong and equal working relationships between disciplinary and language/skills specialists.

Key words: *generic skills, curriculum development, learning adviser, higher education, academic literacy*

Introduction

External pressures, from the rise of the knowledge worker to the increasing reliance of universities on both international and national full-fee paying students, have led to a profound shift in the perceived role of Australian universities. Industry demands for graduates with generic skills have occurred alongside a discernable trend towards increasing student diversity, both in terms of ability and cultural background. Together, these changes have had a significant impact on the culture of teaching and learning in Australian Universities, and this trend has serious implications for the role of learning advisers (Tiernan, 2001). Within this context, we argue that learning advisers can play a vital role in the development of the new curricula demanded by universities, employers and students through the development of partnerships with disciplinary experts.

This paper will begin by exploring the challenges faced by the Griffith Business School (GBS) and its Learning Development Unit (LDU) in relation to the broader context of changes in higher education. Next, it will critically examine the current pedagogical debate arising from these changes, between those who focus on deficiencies of the modern student and those who advocate a student-centred pedagogy. It will then outline the GBS response to these changes: a two-pronged approach that places an emphasis on both curricula and staff development as the best means to ensure that Griffith graduates develop the generic skills increasingly required by employers in the professional sphere. We base our role within this process explicitly on the model of co-production (Gordon & Lee, 1998). Ultimately, we argue that the new curriculum for the 'new university' must be constructed through strong and equal relationships between disciplinary and language/skills specialists.

The 'new university'

Australian universities have faced changes that stem from a combination of sources. Firstly, the growing role of intellectual labour in Australian economy has seen an increase in professional knowledge workers (Boreham & Hall, 2001, p. 173). Within this context, universities are increasingly assuming the role of employment training providers (Marginson, 2000, p. 98; Marginson & Consadine, 2000, p. 28). The rise of knowledge workers in western countries, such as Australia, has been driven by a second source of change affecting universities: the growing influence of internationalising markets (Marginson, 2000, pp. 98-99). The increasing influence of international markets has also placed Australian universities in competition, both with each other and with universities from other nations.

However, some (Bostock, 2002; Lowe, 2004) would argue that, by implementing a corporate governance model, government policy has played a more definitive role in shaping changes to higher education over the past twenty years. This corporate model was seen by government as a way of ensuring economic accountability, and took the private sector as the ideal role model (Coaldrake, 2000, p. 9). From this perspective, universities are expected to behave more like business, competing for educational markets both here and abroad. The Hawke-Keating Government introduced this competitive, corporate model for universities; a model it also prescribed for the rest of the public sector. This model has continued to be promoted under the Howard Coalition Government, most recently in its policy paper, *Backing Australia's Future* (Clark, 2004, pp. 12-15; Marginson & Considine, 2000, pp. 28-29). Although the corporate model has continued to find favour with governments, it has not been as well received at an institutional level. As Bryant, Scoufis, and Cheers (1999, p. 4) explain: 'It is seen by many in the university community as both radical and inappropriate'. A corporate model that reconceptualises students as 'clients' places pressure on academic staff to deliver on expectations: a trend that is exacerbated by what some refer to as the 'massification' of teaching (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 5).

In addition to government policy, changes in the Australian labour market have also seen students attending universities in increasing numbers. As a consequence, universities can now be more accurately described as sites of mass, rather than elite, education (Bryant et al., 1999; Marginson, 2000). The enrolment of increasing numbers of students has been accompanied by a shift in government policy, which has seen a significant withdrawal of government funding (Marginson, 2000, p. 99). As a result of this funding shortfall, increasing numbers of international full-fee paying students have been recruited from Asia, Europe, America and elsewhere. According to Schapper and Mayson (2004, p. 191), 'Australia is currently the third largest provider of education for overseas students after the United States and the United Kingdom and overseas students represent 18% of total enrolment of students in Australia'.

Student literacy: From crisis to competency

These changes have placed unprecedented pressures on academic staff within the 'new Anglo university' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). One response has been to define the current situation as a 'crisis' in tertiary literacy, within 'a discourse of language deficiency [and] remediation' (Collins, as cited in Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 73). In 1996, Postle et al. (as cited in Lawrence, 2003, p. 4) found that the Australian academics they interviewed did not perceive students' difficulties as a reflection of their teaching practices; instead they were more likely to frame the problem as a remedial one requiring intervention from support staff. More recently, McInnis (2000, p. 24) found that 'high proportions of academics' in fifteen Australian universities reported negative attitudes about the abilities of their students. Moreover, they felt that 'too many students' with 'too wide a range of abilities' created a 'problem'.

Despite an academic discourse focused on student deficiency, the new role of universities, both as institutions of mass education and as sites of education export, has resulted in a convergence of government policy and business expectation in relation to learning outcomes and teaching quality (Coaldrake, 2000, pp. 11, 13). Seen from this perspective, universities must provide students with the skills and knowledge necessary for their

professional formation. Providing reliable learning outcomes becomes particularly pressing if one considers the increasing number of international and local students paying up-front fees. It is the pedagogical response to these imperatives that drives the paradigm shift in the teaching and learning culture in the modern university; a shift which has effectively called the 'deficit model' into question (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 4).

Educational theorists have variously defined this shift as a movement from teacher-centred to learning- or student-centred pedagogy (e.g., Prosser & Trigwell, 1999); from content-based to process-driven curricula (e.g., Biggs, 2003), and from the separation of research and teaching to the recognition that teaching can be a scholarly activity in itself (e.g., Shulman, as cited in Catterall, 2003, p. 37). Within this context, an alternative and more complex relationship between language and learning has emerged. The way this relationship is conceived is based on the premise that literacy is a socio-cultural practice, which is 'evolving, developing and contextual' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). This alternative, discursive approach suggests that the university, like any other institution, is a dynamic culture, with 'a multiplicity of subcultures, each imbued with their own discourses, literacies and practices' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 5). Knowledge and literacy need to be seen as inextricably linked - one cannot know one's discipline without being literate in it and vice versa (San Miguel, 1996, p. 31). Being literate, then, means attaining the full spectrum of graduate skills, or attributes. These include critical thinking, information literacy, problem solving et cetera, as well as written and oral communication, within a disciplinary context. Literacy is 'about being able to participate in appropriate ways in the discourse of one's chosen discipline, to enquire, interpret, hypothesise and challenge – in short to negotiate meaning' (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 74). Within this framework, every student's transition to university is seen as a cross-cultural experience that demands the development of cultural competencies, rather than a deficit requiring 'fix-it remediation [from] support staff' (Lawrence, 2003, p. 7; Tapper, as cited in Aitchison, 2000, p. 2).

Situating the Griffith Business School

Within this context, the Griffith Business School (GBS) faces two related issues: first, the impact of internationalisation on teaching and learning within the School, and second, to remain internationally competitive, the need for the school to seek accreditation from both American and European business accreditation bodies. To achieve accreditation, the GBS will need to demonstrate, among other things, its capacity to develop generic skills in its graduates. This is in line with wider university policy, and also with government (DEST, 2002), and industry (ACCI, 2004; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Kelly, 2003; Gush, 1996) expectations.

Decreased financial support from successive federal governments has led Griffith University, amongst many others, to become increasingly dependent on the higher fees paid by international students. For the GBS, which receives the majority of international enrolments, increasing numbers of international students have presented new challenges for teaching and learning. Coming from a variety of educational backgrounds, international students often experience difficulties in adjusting to the learning environment at Australian universities (Sinclair, 2003; Briguglio, 2004; Tiong & Yong, 2004; Chalmers & Volet, 1997). For their part, until recently, Australian academic staff have been inclined to take for granted that the Anglo-Saxon model of tertiary education was universally used and sufficiently

transparent for students to understand what it requires of them (Vandermensbrugge, 2003, p. 3). For this reason, learning difficulties faced by international students are often assumed to be largely a consequence of insufficient language skills (Sinclair, 2003, p. 304; Vandermensbrugge, 2003, p. 1). While language proficiency undoubtedly has an effect on students, recent research suggests:

Many international students are confused by differences in teaching styles, lecturer expectations of their role in their own learning, what is required of them in terms of assignments, by the emphasis placed upon learner independence, and by their relationship with academic staff. (Sinclair, 2003, p. 304)

The desire to circumvent such confusion was one significant factor leading to the establishment of the GBS' three member Learning Development Unit (LDU). The LDU was established to develop a program for embedding graduate skills such as critical thinking, information literacy, written and oral communication within the business curriculum. By making these generic skills an explicit goal of undergraduate teaching, it also aims to make expectations of lecturing staff, and the western tertiary education model, more transparent to international and national students alike (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 91; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004, p. 81). Where possible, it will also include the means for developing intercultural skills for both international and national students, through a process of making broader cultural norms and values explicit to all students (e.g., Barker & Woods, 2003). Such an approach not only treats international students as a valuable resource, rather than a necessary evil, it also acknowledges a growing consensus on the value of intercultural communication skills for business graduates (Edwards, Crosling, Petrovic-Lazarovic, & O'Neill, 2003; Schapper & Mayson, 2004; Cheney, 2001).

Another factor leading to the development of the LDU was the GBS' plan to attain international accreditation. The LDU is responsible for establishing a program to bring both curriculum development and teaching practice within the Business School in line with the expectations of these accreditation bodies. Generic skills, such as those mentioned above, are increasingly seen as a requirement for graduates wishing to obtain employment in the professional sector (ACCI, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002, p. 73). Therefore, the generic skills program developed by the LDU is seen as critical to ensuring successful accreditation for the School. Beyond the requirements for accreditation, there is a growing perception within the Business School, and elsewhere (ACCI, 2004; Kelly, 2003; Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002) that Australian students are graduating without the necessary skills to carry out their professional responsibilities. For example, a recent Australian study found that less than half of the undergraduate students it surveyed appeared to have the important graduate skill of critical thinking (Phillips & Bond, 2004, p. 278). To meet the demand for graduates with the requisite generic skills, university Business Schools need to change the curriculum and how it is taught (de la Harpe et al., 2000). Despite the challenges associated with these aims, the Griffith Business School views the current context as a unique opportunity to make significant changes to its curriculum design and teaching practice.

As key players in this cultural shift within the School, the three staff members of the new LDU have given considerable attention to the definition of our professional role. Our concerns, which are shared by other Learning and Language Advisers (Percy & Skillen, 2000), are part of a much wider debate about the nature of academic skills development.

Moore (2004) has characterised this debate as bi-polar: at one pole are the 'generalists', who argue that a skill like critical thinking, for example, can be taught in general stand-alone courses, divorced from disciplinary content; at the other pole are the 'specificists', who argue that critical thinking cannot be separated from the discipline in which it is applied. Within this framework, generalists believe that generic skills should be taught prior to, or parallel with content, while specificists understand these generic attributes need to be learnt as an integral part of disciplinary knowledge (Barrie, 2004). Somewhere between these positions, 'relativists' such as Ballard and Clanchy (as cited in Moore, 2004, p. 14) believe that a generic skill, such as critical thinking, needs to be learned contextually, but once learned can be transferred to another disciplinary context. While generalists such as Robert Ennis came to the fore during the 1960s and 70s, and were most influential during the 1980s, evidence suggests that specificist, or at least relativist, approaches have now gained institutional support (Barrie, 2004; Cargill, 1996).

Given the history of many student learning centres in Australian universities, which were established at the height of the generalists' influence on educational policy, the current interest in the legitimate role of learning advisers is not surprising. While the learning support originally tended to be offered 'outside the curriculum', to individual students, or groups of students attending generic skills workshops, many learning advisers in Australian universities now see their work as 'pro-active, systemic and developmental' (Percy & Skillen, 2000, p. 244). Hence in 2003, Catterall found learning advisers were assuming a variety of roles in collaborative teaching projects, including that of a 'sounding board', a 'collaborator', a 'learning expert', and an 'outside expert' (p. 37).

Tiernan (2001) argues that the development of such diversity in the profession can in part be attributed to the range of institutional locations in which language and learning advisers find themselves. Currently, learning advisers operate from a diverse range of locations: in student services, in faculties, in staff development units, or split between two or more different locations within the university (p. 88). Each location will shape learning advisers' relationships with students, their research capacities, the types of services offered, and their ability to influence policy development in the wider institution (Tiernan, 2001, p. 89). While Tiernan suggests that there are legitimate reasons for these different locations, she also points to a number of potential strengths in the faculty-based model (pp. 93-4): it enables learning advisers to take a developmental approach to skill development through greater co-operation with other academic staff; it makes it easier for learning advisers to establish their credibility, and it can help ensure quality research into learning issues.

Tiernan's research echoes an earlier survey (McLean, Surtie, Elphinstone, & Devlin, 1995) of learning advisers in Victorian universities, which pointed to the influence of location on the nature of learning advisers' work. In McLean et al.'s survey, faculty based units were seen to be better placed to integrate learning development with course work and/or seek course accreditation than centrally located units, while units placed within staff development centres had closer links with teaching and research issues (p. 80). McLean et al. (1995, p. 85) concluded that the following principles should inform the development of learning services within universities: the need for a contextualised program, the consequent need to work cooperatively with faculty staff, and the importance of research. These findings informed the GBS' decision to appoint two learning advisers and a learning development manager to form a Learning Development Unit (LDU) within the School itself. They also shaped the LDU's plan for embedding generic skills into Business curricula, which was

based on a two-pronged approach of engaging students through course and program development, and engaging staff through teaching development.

The Learning Development Plan

Engaging Students

By embedding skills development in GBS curricula, the School ensures that students acquire appropriate generic skills currently required by employers (ACCI, 2003), but which also enable students to engage actively with the Australian tertiary learning culture. This strategy is designed to achieve a number of goals. These include improving student retention, demonstrating the School's commitment to the Griffith Academic Plan (O'Connor, 2004), supporting the School's aim of attaining European Quality Insurance System (EQIS) and the Association of American Schools and Colleges of Business (AACSB) accreditation, and finally, targeting the School's operational plan 2004-2007 to improve the quality of student experience through the development of effective program management and student support.

Through the LDU, the Business School will promote student engagement by embedding the development of identified sets of skills across the curricula of all degree Programs offered by the School. The LDU's sequential and context specific approach to skill development will commence in 2006 with the first year undergraduate intake; these students will complete one compulsory Primary Skills Development Course each semester. The skills developed through a combination of lectures, additional workshops and tutorials will be practised and improved through assessment in all first year courses. The first proposed Primary Skills Development course, Management Concepts, is being tested in Semester 2, 2005. This approach is based on the premise that a disciplinary context is required to make meaning of generic skills. From this perspective, generic skills are interwoven with the particular disciplinary discourses of departments within the GBS (Barrie, 2004; Moore, 2004). Working from this perspective also means that the LDU and the GBS must ensure that generic skills are developed holistically through a whole-of-program approach.

Consequently, part of the LDU's role is to ensure the application of standards across the GBS and provide a consistent and supportive learning context for first year students. This includes (where possible) the development of common resources, terminology, standards and assessment criteria. The LDU is developing these standards and resources in consultation with relevant university stakeholders, including program convenors/directors, academic staff, Information Services (INS) and the Griffith Institute of Higher Education (GIHE). The process will include a review of degree programs and first year courses to ensure that program objectives, professional accreditation objectives, skill development objectives and assessment are aligned. A common resources bank is also being developed to ensure that students receive consistent messages about standards and skills development in first year. Disciplinary differences can be introduced in second year once students have had a year of consistent guidelines and standards. However, the second stage (2006-2007) of developing graduate skills/attributes into the GBS will be to ensure that it continues to be embedded in the program through second, then third year. This stage is based on research, which shows that even in programs that emphasise skill development in initial stages, if this development is not continued students often revert to

surface learning strategies (Kirkpatrick & Mulligan, 2002; Barrie, 2004). If students are to graduate with the required skills, then they must be thoroughly integrated throughout each discipline within the Business School.

Engaging Staff

Significant changes in teaching and assessment practice in lectures, tutorials and courses will be required in order to enable students to acquire appropriate skills. Teaching staff are the primary source of disciplinary expertise in this process. Consequently, the LDU believes that the Business School must develop, recognise and reward the teaching professionalism of all academic staff. We have argued that it is essential for teaching staff connected with Primary Skill Development courses. To this end, the LDU is developing, in conjunction with GIHE, a *Certificate in Small Group Teaching Practice*, aimed particularly at tutorial teachers within Primary Skill Course teachings teams. Workshops will also be offered for *Teaching and Managing Large Classes*, which are aimed at staff who wish to learn or share practical strategies for engaging students in large classes; they are also aimed at staff who manage large teaching teams. Proposed core workshops and short courses will enable participants to develop student-focused skills and to enhance their cross-cultural teaching practice.

All of this is developed from the perspective of further enabling already-experienced full-time staff, and professionalising and valuing existing sessional staff, who are often the primary point of contact for first year students. As past and present lecturing staff, members of the LDU are keenly attuned to the demands placed on academic staff, who in the current context, face a nearly constant barrage of policy and institution-led reforms. In the face of heavier workloads and greater student numbers, time is a rare and valuable commodity. To accept the importance of embedding graduate skills within their disciplinary context is to acknowledge the centrality of staff with their disciplinary expertise. From this perspective, universities must provide staff with the necessary incentives and support to develop their teaching practice. As higher education scholar Margaret Buckridge asks:

When we invoke the idea of 'student-centred learning', do we acknowledge its correlative of 'staff-centred development'? Do we come to terms, genuinely, with the primacy of the disciplinary or content knowledge, and realise its cognitive and tribal imperatives run deep? (as cited in Scoufis, 2005, n.p.)

In developing and defining our own roles as Learning Advisers in a faculty-based unit, we have particularly drawn on Gordon and Lee's (1988) model of co-production. As Gordon et al. (as cited in Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 6) point out, an holistic, contextual approach to literacy and learning essentially calls for a reconsideration of the relationship between the language specialist and the discipline specialist, 'away from the notion of specialist with their own area towards a situation in which both language specialist and discipline specialist are jointly involved in the work of knowledge construction'.

Such collaboration produces a 'third knowledge', greater than the sum of its parts, which explicates the discursive construction of disciplinary knowledge, 'in terms of genre, textual practice, pedagogy and learning' (Lee cited in Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 6). In Gordon and Lee's case, the authors found that production of this third knowledge was limited by two factors: power/knowledge (or the institutionally supported traditional 'alpha/beta relationship' between faculty and learning support staff) and the degree of social distance

(in their case, an unwillingness to challenge the perception of intimacy based on the fact that all staff involved were women). They concluded that their attempt at co-production had failed because the learning advisers involved did not adequately explain their knowledge (1998, pp. 7, 20). In their view, successful co-production depends on both parties making their hitherto implicit, specialist understandings explicit and open to critical examination (Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 21).

Unlike the situation analysed by Gordon and Lee, our experience at Griffith has so far been positive. We believe this is due to two key differences in our respective environments: first, our role in the Business School's accreditation process has the imprimatur of the Dean and other senior academic staff at Executive level; second, academics within the Business School have been quick to see the potential of the co-production model. While many academics may find the idea of co-production is at odds with the academy's traditional emphasis on individual ownership of knowledge and 'strong boundary maintenance in terms of expertise' (Gordon & Lee, 1998, p. 16), the term has resonance within the disciplinary culture of the Business School, because contemporary management practices favour shared responsibility for production in self-managed teams. Hence, our environment is perhaps more conducive to instituting change in a systemic and proactive manner, than that experienced by Gordon and Lee. However, this is not to understate the complex, developmental nature of our program, nor the likelihood that we will encounter resistance or apathy along the way.

Our experience in the Griffith Business School to date suggests that for co-production to work well, we need to take both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. In our case, the urgency of the accreditation agenda has undoubtedly helped us do both. Our Unit is directly responsible to, and has the full support of the Associate Dean, Teaching and Learning. It is this support which gives the LDU's proposed Learning Development Program both the authority and the resources to implement change. At the same time, we recognise the success of our program depends on the quality of the partnerships we build with individual course convenors and their teaching teams. In developing strong working relations with discipline-based staff, we are guided by the same principles we apply to engagement with students: that quality learning is both constructive and communal. Rather than define our role as 'meta-professional', as some learning developers have suggested (Candy, as cited in Percy & Skillen, 2000, p. 245), we prefer to foster the development of collaborative partnerships based on respect for the expertise that each team member brings. In this and other aspects, our approach resembles Schön's (as cited in Leask, Medlin, & Feast, 1999, p. 1) model of reflective practice. Like Schön, we have found that it is essential to build consensus regarding the nature of the pedagogical 'problem' we are dealing with. Consequently, we spend considerable time questioning assumptions regarding language deficiency and other myths. Constructing a coherent understanding of a problem in any group of teachers within our rapidly evolving context can be difficult. However, we find that explicit acknowledgement of the expertise or 'artistry' (Schön, as cited in Leask et al., 1999, pp. 2-3) of each professional involved fosters an environment that is conducive to co-production.

Conclusion

Employment and policy-based imperatives that drive the new student-centred pedagogy challenge universities to re-conceptualise themselves as centres of teaching and learning, as well as places of research. The current focus on graduate attributes or skills is one particular response to these external imperatives. There is now a consensus that to ensure that university graduates successfully acquire these skills, universities must explicitly teach the cultural competencies required for each discipline. Within this context, the Griffith Business School has chosen a learning development model that emphasises not only the disciplinary context of generic skills development, but also the new relationship of co-production that must exist between what we have referred to as the language specialist and the discipline specialist. For a 'third knowledge' that makes transparent both disciplinary practice and content to emerge, we have argued that learning advisers and academic staff must work as equal partners.

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