IS FINANCIAL REWARD OVERRIDING GOOD PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES?

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Enrolments by international students in Australian universities have boomed over recent years, especially in postgraduate courses. In many cases these students struggle to meet the standard that their teachers expect. This is often because of poor English combined with a limited understanding of the teachers' cultural expectations. Rather than lamenting their students' inadequacies, the present authors embedded an academic skills segment in one of the introductory units that they teach in a postgraduate MBA program. This resulted in a statistically significant reduction in plagiarism among the students who participated in the unit.

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate business education has become a very important financial stream for most tertiary institutions particularly in the Master of Business Administration (MBA).[1] MBA courses have become a global commodity with universities not only plying their trade overseas and teaching off shore but also marketing the courses in foreign countries to attract international students to come and study at the home campuses of the institutions. In theory this should be a win-win for all concerned in that the universities get the income and the international students get a postgraduate qualification from an overseas university. However, this basic commercial transaction assumes that the international students have the academic competencies necessary to undertake postgraduate studies in an overseas institution where instruction is typically in another language, in this case English.

What is becoming increasingly evident is that this assumption of academic competence is incorrect and that in reality many international students struggle to meet the academic standards and expectations of the overseas universities,[2] as indeed do many local students. For international students this situation is further compounded by the social and cultural shock they experience by moving to another country, with little or no time to acclimatise prior to commencing their studies. So we posed two questions. Firstly, do we start to address the poor academic competencies of international students, or just hope that 'she'll be right' and that learning by osmosis will eventually occur? Secondly, do we continue to promote technology as the way forward and assume that this will also overcome language and cultural barriers? This paper explores current practices in business higher education and offers an alternative educational solution, based on a management theory and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The teacher-student/master-apprentice dyad has been the educational convention used since time immemorial. Historically the teacher/master was the resource. In recent times technology has been used in an attempt to advance learning practices but the real contribution of technology is perhaps overestimated and often the way it is used does not develop deep learning.[3] Traditionally, the teacher found the ability level of each student and worked towards improving that by offering learning challenges and personal experiences to progress the students to the next level. While the amount of information provided might have been less than is currently available to students, the teacher provided depth of learning to the student. This was very much a personal approach to education.

Over time, books and other resources have been introduced into education to allow students to learn more, in different ways, and at their own convenience. Self-directed learning moves the emphasis and responsibility away from the teacher and onto the student. This approach has grown exponentially with the development of technology. Technology has facilitated an increase in available resources. An outcome has been a move away from the personal approach of the teacher to the impersonal approach of cyberspace. Technology has also increased the volume of information available. There is so much information out there but of what quality? Furthermore, how capable are international students of filtering this enormous volume of information to determine what is most relevant and of best fit to advance their learning and academic performance?

As quantity is substituted for quality and the transition from a personal to an impersonal approach has occurred, it has been assumed that students will still be able to achieve deep learning outcomes by availing themselves of all cyber resources. The question is, however, do students know what they need to know and do they make use of all the cyber resources provided to help them develop their academic competencies in the most efficient and effective way? Furthermore, even if they do avail themselves of these cyber resources, do they understand the linkage between knowledge and academic skills development to enable deep learning and successful academic performance? We believe the answer is no. As Bretag states: 'Telling an international EAL [English as an additional language] student who is having difficulty writing an assignment to go to the university website and download a 15-page document on essay writing is clearly not providing meaningful support'.[4]

We hypothesised that students do not use all of the resources made available to them. A possible reason is that they do not know what they do not know and, if the Johari Awareness Model[5] was used, most of these students would fall into the fourth quadrant (that is the unknown quadrant—which reflects behaviours, feelings and motivations known to neither the self or other parties). Because of this they do not know where to start. Also, they have limited understanding of how the different resources fit together to support and develop those academic skills that can enhance academic performance. This results in a lose-lose situation for everyone. In this environment students can and do get frustrated and, as a result, staff may bear the brunt of the student's ire in unit evaluations.

What seems to have been the case to date is that the problem of the poor academic skills of international students is seen as an educational/linguistics/learning style issue,[6] therefore solutions are sought in the educational/linguistics/learning literature. This is clearly a factor but we believe an even more fundamental factor is the quantity and quality of academic assistance given. We propose looking at this problem from a work performance perspective using management literature as the lens rather than purely an educational/linguistics/learning perspective.

According to Lussier, 'three interdependent factors determine the level of performance attained: ability, motivation and resources ... For maximum performance all three factors must be high'.[7] Within an MBA program one expects that the students have the requisite ability, as they will have either passed an undergraduate degree or possess sufficient managerial experience to be credited with recognition of prior learning. The motivation of students in a postgraduate course is evident in that the costs involved usually require a substantial commitment. For international students there is also often additional family pressure. Therefore, if we accept that

the students' academic performance is not optimal, as failure rates appear to be rising in some units, the significant gap according to Lussier's performance model appears to be resources.[8]

The resources offered within higher education to aid learning, and ultimately performance, have changed considerably over time. As previously stated, the change from personal interaction with the teacher/lecturer to self-directed learning using a myriad of online tools appears, from a service provider (university) perspective, to have been viewed as an efficient use of the provider's resources. However, using the first rule of management that efficiency does not equal effectiveness,[9] one must question if the transition from having a real person to guide learning to interacting with a computer monitor better helps students to develop their academic competencies. If not, change is needed to improve current practice.

If an aim within higher education is to achieve deeper learning,[10] then this will require a return to a more personal approach and therefore a revision and redistribution of resources. As with any change, the process needs to be documented and evaluated to see if it has been successful.[11] The next section of this paper outlines a pilot program that was undertaken to test an alternative, more personalised approach to developing international MBA students' academic competencies.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

The issue of poor academic standards has been the elephant in the room for a number of years in universities, especially in business faculties.[12] International students in Australia are predominantly accepted for courses based on their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores, however, it is known that this is not the best method of testing students' academic stan-

dard.[13] Anecdotally, it is known that some students are coached in their home countries to pass this test. Nonetheless, many tertiary institutions continue to accept students with low levels of language proficiency.[14] Therefore it falls to lecturers at the coalface to deal with the poor language skills of many of these students. The consequence of the students' lack of academic competence results in students receiving low marks, barely passing units and over time an overall diminution of academic standards.[15] In an attempt to redress this situation, an academic skills intervention program was developed and tested in one unit of an MBA program using a cohort of international MBA students as the sample.

This particular MBA program consisted of 12 standard units. Students could complete the degree in 18 months by doing four units over three semesters but most international students elect to take three units over four semesters. This is partly because of visa requirements but also because of the perceived heavy workload, particularly in terms of reading and the multiple pieces of assessment. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most new international students struggle with what they perceive as the high volume of reading required. This is compounded by the fact that for the vast majority of students English is not their first language. Even students who perceive their level of English competence to be high, in particular students from the Indian subcontinent, often struggle. Although they can read English extremely well, these students are often not used to the higher literacy standard and most are not capable of writing at the academic standard required. At the postgraduate level, this can even be an issue for students for whom English is their only language. The literacy standards referred to are measured by the ability of students to critically evaluate and be able to write a considered piece of work that states an argument.

As previously stated, MBA programs globally are often considered to be cash cows[16] and enrolments at many universities continue to rise. Moreover, the 2008 global financial crisis had no discernable impact on 2009 enrolments. The number of enrolments in the MBA course at the test university had increased dramatically over three consecutive years (see Table 1). From a financial perspective, this growth highlights the critical importance of recognising poor academic performance and finding viable solutions to ensure the ongoing reputation and consequently the financial success of the program. More importantly, it is vital that the students receive a valued and useful postgraduate qualification that will hold them in good stead for the whole of their career. This should be the ultimate aim of all applied degrees.

Whereas university management was thrilled with the burgeoning MBA student numbers, requests for additional resources were not so enthusiastically received. In semester 1 2009 there were approximately 90 full-fee-paying international students enrolled over three classes in the introductory management unit. Enrolments in the particular unit under review were not just from MBA(I) students, any international student could enrol in the unit and there were a significant number of Master of Professional Accounting students and Master of International Business students. The overall standard of academic competence among the MBA cohort was poor, as evidenced by two tangible and measureable factors. The first factor was the high level

of plagiarism in the students' written work. This translated into the second factor, namely a high failure rate in the unit. As a result a pilot project to embed academic learning skills within this unit was developed for semester 2 2009.

The rationale for embedding the academic skills learning into the weekly seminar schedule for the introductory management unit was twofold. The first was that running study skills workshops prior to the start of semester or having intensive workshops during the semester was ineffectual. Many international students do not arrive in the country before the commencement of semester and so are unavailable to attend the workshops, even if they are made compulsory. The second reason relates to basic adult learning principles; postgraduate students are adults. A key tenet of adult learning principles is that learning is relevant and that existing life related skills can be drawn upon.[17] Students do not see the relevance of academic skills until they have the actual problem to hand, that is, the assignment that they personally have to submit. So with that knowledge the pilot commenced.

The pilot project was implemented in three MBA classes in which a total of approximately 90 students were enrolled and the outcomes of the intervention were evaluated. Even though the unit selected for the pilot was a foundation unit in the MBA course, it was not a compulsory unit. Thus, students did not necessarily have to take the unit, although all newly enrolled students were strongly encouraged to enrol

Table 1: Changes in the number of full fee paying international enrolments in the MBA(I) program 2005 to 2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
No. of student enrolments	25	19	83	88	116
Per cent change from 2005 base year	n.a.	-24.0	+232.0	+252.0	+364.0

in this unit in their first semester.

A model of co-production[18] was adopted to implement the MBA embedded skills pilot program. The benefit of the co-production model to this study was that it provided a framework showing how to bring together literacy specialists and subject specialists to achieve academic development goals for students. The model was selected so that clear links would be developed by the literacy specialist (in this case the student learning advisor/facilitator) and the subject specialists (in this case the lecturers) that would be relevant to the students[19] and a clear division of the roles of the specialists was apparent to the students. Thus, a team of experienced teaching academics was developed to work collaboratively with a university learning advisor to contextualise the academic skills activities. Two key areas that could be manipulated to assist students were academic support for students and intervention programs. To provide some empirical evidence of the value of both of these, one specific academic task was looked at. This was the students' ability to write an essay on a specific topic using peer reviewed journal articles to support their argument. This task required a variety of academic skills such as scanning, paraphrasing, summarising, concept mapping and referencing. The rationale for the tasks is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Embedded program elements

Intervention task	Activity	Purpose
Scanning	Students given an article to read and asked to ascertain key ideas which they then explained to a partner, the class and the literacy specialist.	Preparation for reading task involved in assignments.
Paraphrasing	Students given specific text to practice paraphrasing and given feedback by the literacy specialist.	Preparation for writing task involved in assignments.
Summarising	Students given specific text to practice summarising and given feedback by the literacy specialist.	Preparation for annotated bibliography writing task involved in assignments.
Concept mapping	Students taught how to develop a concept map to plan their assignment and given feedback by the literacy specialist.	Preparation for ensuring that students stayed on topic and followed a logical sequence in writing assignments and exam essays.
Referencing	Students given examples and taught how to reference correctly and use Endnote and given feedback by the literacy specialist.	Preparation to reduce plagiarism scores in written assignments.

Academic skills activities, additional to the usual standardised generic university wide workshop activities, were conducted in class over a seven-week period as part of the seminar schedule. Students were given optional homework exercises to complete to practice the skills introduced each week and they could submit their homework to the learning advisor for feedback. The students could also make individual or small group appointments with the learning advisor outside class times for further support and a regular pre-class drop-in session was introduced after the fourth week. These personal resources were supplemented by the existing (impersonal) technology-based resources that were already available to all students. The academic team, which included the learning advisor, the two lecturers and the unit coordinator, met weekly to reflect on the class activities and to discuss student reactions and any issues that arose. Changes were then made as deemed appropriate.

To evaluate the impact of the support and intervention offered in the pilot project, we investigated the students' propensity to plagiarise in a writing task assigned for assessment. The level of plagiarism was selected as an appropriate measure of student performance as this was known to be a significant problem amongst international students in previous semesters, as is the case in all tertiary institutions.[20] We hypothesised that the embedded skills intervention program would decrease the students' propensity to plagiarise as the students were learning in class how to read, review and paraphrase. The level of plagiarism was measured using the university's plagiarism detection system: 'Turnitin'.

This is a common software program which gives the percentage of plagiarised material in the assignment submitted by each student. It provides individual plagiarism scores and the quartile distribution of scores. From this data the average, standard deviation and distribution of plagiarism scores for different groups of students can be compared. To test if the embedded skills intervention program was related to a lower level of plagiarism, two statistical tests were conducted. Firstly, we conducted a t-test to see if the mean plagiarism score for the intervention group (that is the Semester 2 2009 student group) was significantly lower than the average plagiarism score for a non-intervention group (that is the Semester 1 2009 student group) who had undertaken the same academic task. While this test examines whether or not the plagiarism scores for the two student groups cluster around the same value, it does not compare differences in the distributions of these scores.

Thus, a second test, namely, a chi-square goodness-of-fit test, was conducted to determine if the distribution of the plagiarism scores for the intervention group (that is, the Semester 2 2009 student group) was the same as the distribution of plagiarism scores for the same academic task submitted by the Semester 1 2009 student cohort in this unit. Specifically, we wanted to know if there were significantly fewer students with plagiarism scores in the upper quartiles. To conduct the chi-square goodness-of-fit test, the two highest plagiarism quartiles needed to be combined to provide an expected frequency of at least five. Also, as the sample size for the pilot was relatively small ($n = 82$), the hypothesis was tested at a one per cent level of significance. As averages are affected by extreme values, the chi-square test allowed us to determine if the distribution of scores differed significantly.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows the distribution of plagiarism scores on the essay writing task for the student groups in Semester 1 and

Semester 2 2009. For the Semester 2 cohort for whom the embedded academic skills program was piloted, the average plagiarism score was 23.8 per cent with a standard deviation of 10.5. This result compared favourably with the plagiarism scores for the Semester 1 student group. For this non-intervention group the average score was 30.6 per cent and the standard deviation was 15.6. The mean plagiarism scores for the Semester 2 2009 student cohort was significantly lower than the average score for the Semester 1 2009 student cohort at a 99 per cent level of significance ($t = -3.19 < t_{(132df, \alpha=.01)} = -2.36$).

In addition, the chi-square goodness-of-fit test revealed that the distribution of plagiarism scores for the embedded skills intervention program group was significantly different from the distribution encountered for the Semester 1 student group ($\chi^2 = 19.85 > \chi^2_{(2df, \alpha=.01)} = 9.21$). Specifically, there was a significantly larger proportion of Semester 2 students with scores in the lowest quartile. These results support the hypothesis that the embedded skills intervention program appears to have had a significant impact as evidenced by lower levels of plagiarism. It should be noted here that this is a work in progress so we only have the results from the first part of the program. A more complete set of results will be written up after the program has been completed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Providing a quality learning experience and improving the performance of students as they progress in their courses is at the heart of all academic institutions.[21] In recent years a shift in culture and technology has generated a move by many students to seek qualifications abroad and an impersonal approach has become normal practice in helping them to achieve their career goals. These shifts have brought both advantages and disadvantages for the students and the educators. This research has sought to highlight the disadvantage caused by the shift to an impersonal approach to teaching and learning that is clearly problematic for the international students, educators and the institutions.

The research to date has shown that providing a personalised approach, through a professional facilitator, to embed academic skills within a unit has positive results on a measurable academic skill, as evidenced by lower plagiarism scores. These results are similar to those of Baik and Greig who also found that a discipline-specific approach to support based on the content of core subjects was valued within the field of architecture.[22]

Plagiarism is at the core of this research as it is a significant issue that has grown in propensity and is often linked to low levels of English language competence and needs to be addressed by all tertiary

Table 3. Distribution of plagiarism scores for Semester 1 and Semester 2 student groups

Comparison groups	Mean plagiarism Score	Standard deviation	Plagiarism score quartile frequencies			
			0–24%	25–49%	50–74%	75–100%
Semester 1 no intervention (n = 77)	30.6	15.6	32	36	8	1
Semester 2 intervention (n = 82)	23.8	10.5	53	27	1	1

institutions.[23] While Bretag suggests that there is only one response to the effect this has on academic standards—'to raise the English language requirements for entry to all Australian universities'[24]—this paper offers an alternative personalised approach to support international students that had a positive effect, resulting in lowered plagiarism scores by international students.

The use of a co-production model[25] proved useful in developing clear links that were relevant to the students,[26] understood by the teachers and the facilitator and which met the unit requirements. In addition, this approach ensured that the various elements within the academic skill activities were delineated and linked for the students in a way that would assist them to undertake their assignments and would be appropriate to assessment rubrics. This approach should help the students to achieve their goals of passing their assessments in the future and more importantly, will give them lifelong learning skills. At some stage we all have to learn to learn. We posit that too many assumptions have been made about the academic abilities of postgraduate students both international and local. This pilot program took a back to basics approach. The rationale for the workshops was explained to the students as a value add for them, as an additional support that was being given, rather than remedial action to address poor standards. For students who had existing good ability, the opportunity was given to become even more proficient.

It should be possible where there is sufficient will and in cooperation and collaboration with teaching and learning advisors to replicate these positive outcomes in other settings. With a redistribution of resources to where they are really needed, which is in the classroom, rather than into more technology, and a more back to basics approach to learning, students may have the opportunity to become deep learners.

Irrespective of the financial imperative, it is our responsibility as educators to give students the very best opportunities to learn in a safe and encouraging environment. Our role is not about directing students to web pages in the hope that osmosis will occur, our role as teachers is to facilitate learning and hopefully lifelong learning. We have the leaders of tomorrow in our classrooms today and we as educators do them a great disservice by not teaching them how to learn.

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