

Curriculum and pedagogic bases  
for effectively integrating practice  
based experiences within higher education

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## **Title of project**

BUS2011 Work Based Business Learning – Murdoch Business School

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## **Abstract**

The WIL project in the Murdoch Business School was a one-off special topic unit in first semester 2010: fourteen students completed the semester. Students were required to already be in a work placement as a precondition in the unit enrolment process. The learning outcomes were focused on students evaluating and reflecting on the 'authenticity' and relevance of their University based learning when mapped against their current 'real world' work experiences. The students were being asked to assess, question and integrate their individual (and collective) work-based experiences and acquired real-life knowledge with their business-based university learning.

The students completed a number of individual and team based learning tasks including a reflective learning log; an individual reflective essay on a personally selected topic; in-class team based tests; and, a team based business relocation assignment. There was no final exam in the unit, which for a number of students was an initial attraction in the early enrolment numbers.

The students reported a universally positive assessments of this WIL unit in their teaching evaluations and in the two focus group interviews conducted at the end of the semester. All students rated this particular unit as one of the best learning experiences they had encountered to date at the undergraduate level within their MBS business programs. They also concluded that the learning topics within the unit had provided them with critical and personally useful insights into their own and the wider work environment. It also led to a deeper questioning of the university learning that they had received to date within their Business majors.

## **Brief description of academic area**

Murdoch Business School (MBS) has over fifty full-time academics and over three thousand equivalent full time students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate offerings.

## **Particular Purpose**

The particular goal for work-integrated learning in MBS will be as part of curriculum renewal and a rethinking of the current pedagogical approach used across the school. It is intended to move away from the over-focus on individual learning with some group based learning (which is used in a number of the discipline-based units at first, second and third-year levels) towards an enhanced combination of individual and team based learning approaches with deeper engagement in the learning process by the students themselves.

This project aimed to develop an innovative work experience unit which enhances the preparation of business students in both understanding and performing to expectations (their own and their future employers) in their chosen career paths.

There has been increasing emphasis across the professional areas within business to promote generic learning skills and learning outcomes that are not limited to the acquisition and mastery of pedagogical content or the professional body of knowledge. In particular, the professional accounting bodies, as well as other professional business associations, have placed increasing importance on generic skills such as communication; problem solving; innovative thinking; team-based skills; and, the ability to think creatively and laterally. The result is they are looking to recruit well-rounded individuals capable of both operating independently and collaboratively within teams to further the tactical and strategic goals of the organisations for whom they work. In addition, they are looking for graduates who are also work ready and capable within a short time of joining the organisation.

Currently there are no specific work integrated elements in the Murdoch business curriculum that are specifically focussed on developing student skills in preparation for working within organisations across the private, public and non-profit sectors. The aim of this special topic unit is to utilise students existing experiences in the workplace while they are still studying full-time or part-time in their undergraduate programs. The intention is to enable students to embed and reflect on the applicability of their work experiences back to the curriculum content within their business programs.

This was a one-semester unit offering in semester one, 2010 that was made available to second or third-year students. It was planned to integrate students learning experience(s) in the workplace with their learning in the academic curriculum at University. The aim was to enhance vocational outcomes by integrating student expectations with organisational expectations of work readiness and professional expertise.

A key element of this initiative is that there was no need to provide students with either internship or work placement processes because they were already working in a part-time or full-time mode. Currently a significant majority of students in the higher education sector are working (often more than twelve hours a week) whilst they are pursuing their further higher education studies. The resource implications for the University are minimal in this respect. The necessity to find work placement positions for students is a barrier that this initiative is not required to overcome.

### **Process for enacting WIL**

The unit was one that used students existing work placements (existing part-time or full time jobs). Students were required to reflect on the synthesis between their workplace experiences and learnings and integrate those with their Murdoch Business School based formal in-class learning in their respective Business majors. There were twelve three-hour seminars during the semester with learning activities that included a reflective learning journal; a major individual essay assignment; and, a major teamwork based assignment. There was no final exam.

The reflective business experience unit focused on learning topics and student experiences around the following eight themes:

- occupational health and safety
- training and professional development regimes
- management theories and supervision roles and practices
- leadership in the workplace
- professional ethics and values
- corporate social responsibility
- change management practices
- sustainable business

The unit was planned to give students the opportunity to consolidate their theoretical knowledge and develop their professional competence in the workplace. The learning experience takes place inside and outside the classroom with students having the opportunity to participate in real world business experiences and integrating those with their formal business studies.

The teaching period (semester one, 2010) started with an initial enrolment during December 2009 and January 2010 of thirty four students who were interested and initially enrolled in the unit. They had been recruited via a series of emails sent out to Business student cohorts over a two-week period at the end of 2009 whilst they were re-enrolling for first semester in 2010. However, the initial teaching period was changed from a Tuesday to a Wednesday evening and a number of students withdrew because of this late change just prior to the start of semester. A number of other students also changed their minds about being involved in a new special topic unit and withdrew. The semester commenced with eighteen students enrolled and a further four withdrew during the semester because they felt (when giving feedback about the reasons they were withdrawing) that the work involved in the learning tasks and assessment was more than they anticipated.

Fourteen students completed the semester and they were placed into three collaborative learning teams at the beginning of semester and stayed within those allocated teams for the entire semester. They were asked to sit with other teams members for each of the twelve weeks of lecture/seminar sessions. This approach worked well and the level of team bonding early on was then sustained and effective and lasted through the entire teaching period. What this also meant that for the team-based learning tasks, as well as the individual learning tasks, they acted as a learning resource for each other in terms of learning support and clarification of the requirements of the different assessment tasks. Effectively, they managed regularly to interact with each other and to 'teach' others in class as the semester progressed.

## **Key Findings**

The teaching topics were selected for this initial offering of the unit because it was expected that all part-time and full-time work based students would be exposed to the work practices of these significant elements of work life and work cycles within their organisations.

The approach taken at each lecture/seminar was to cover the academic material and research findings in each of the topic areas in the first part of each teaching session. The students within each one of their teams then discussed the teaching material and the 'actual' work experiences in each of these areas. Having discussed each area in depth within the teams then there would be an overall whole class (plenary) discussion of the week's allocated topic. The focus each time was a complete reversal of what normally occurs in work integrated learning units. The usual approach is to assess the authenticity of the workplace experiences and the degree of integration between the University based in-class elements of work integrated learning compared to the students' actual experiences in the work placement itself. However, in this unit students were expected to analyse what they had personally experienced in the workplace and whether this could be 'mapped' backwards to what they were learning at university within the respective business majors. What therefore is being questioned and evaluated in this unit is the 'authenticity' of their University learning experiences in Business school majors when compared to their current 'real world' organisational experiences.

The feedback from a teaching evaluation survey, which was completed in week nine of the semester, was very positive. Several student comments were recorded as follows – attached in appendix 2 is the tabulated results from the student teaching evaluation:

### **Student 1**

"David has an affective (sic) way of communicating and illustrating theories and ideas. He relates a lot to everyday life, treats us as intelligent human beings and simplifies things. Examples that are used are very appropriate and encourage better understanding. His enthusiasm and energy encourages me too."

### **Student 2**

"His presentation of a topic is riveting and interesting which assists in learning about this topic. His opinions always add interest and conversation to workshops."

### **Student 3**

"As this unit is work based all of the learning areas are relevant. Examples are current and relate to students of different ages. Class discussions are lively and everyone is encouraged to participate."

### **Student 4**

"And thank you for a good semester, by far the most refreshing unit I've done. I think I can relate it to "in advance of the Corporate Rambo", it's all about the little things that can keep you alive in the wild! But i (sic) wasn't going to put that in my journals."

A human research ethics application was submitted earlier in the year because the project plan had as an objective the conducting of focus group and individual interviews with students who had completed the unit. Individual interviews with students are planned to be held over the next month after completion of the

examination period in Semester One. However, the two focus group interviews were arranged and completed at the end of the semester. An independent research associate undertook the interviews. The University ethics committee stipulated this course of action to avoid any possibility of a conflict of interest (real or perceived) between the students and the unit coordinator. The list of focus group questions that were asked is detailed in Appendix 1.

The student responses to Questions One and Two were very positive. They reported that the weekly learning process of providing an academic overview of both the mainstream and critical theory literature and research findings in each topic area was a particularly useful insight in their overall learning within the unit. They also expressed a strong preference for the process of within-team discussions following the academic overview and then an overall plenary discussion in-depth of the different positions and arguments that they had encountered in the workplace as well as in the academic university environment. These discussions were often intense and (surprisingly) insightful at times which was a reflection of just how much students had already accumulated useful knowledge in the work environment. Questions Three and Four about what did not work for them as learners elicited little criticism or concern other than a request for additional in-class discussion time on specific topics of personal interest.

Questions Five and Six resulted in students expressing a preference for a continuation of the combination of individual and team based learning approaches. No student wanted an all individual nor all team based learning approaches to be used in future offerings of the unit. Question Seven did not elicit any specific suggestions for changes to the learning approaches adopted in this unit. This might change when the students have had some time to reflect on the unit, which will be the case when the individual interviews are held.

The question about future class sizes led to students arguing quite strongly for class sizes to remain small. A number of comments were made to the effect that they had enjoyed being in a small class size in which they got to know all the other students in the class. This was a rare event in their experience of business school units. They did acknowledge that the class needed to be larger than the fourteen students that completed the first semester. The ideal class size was, in their collective opinion, to be no larger than thirty students. This would maintain what to them was perceived to be the optimum learning environment. Their final input was to assert also strongly that the unit should have an enrolment quota but that it should not be a competitive entry process (only open effectively to elite students) but open to all students on first-come, first-served enrolment process.

### **Issues arising**

- Should this unit be offered again in the Murdoch Business School?
- What should be the balance between individual and team based learning in future offerings of this unit?
- Should additional topics be introduced such as 'budgets' and corporate governance' to provide more accounting and finance content?
- Is there a need for student to receive a pre-semester briefing about the learning expectations in this unit?
- What should be the future enrolment quota for this unit?

## BUS2011 Work Based Business Learning Project

### Focus Group Questions

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#### Assessment of Learning Experiences

1. Please explain what were the positive aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
2. Can you describe what worked best for you as a learner?
3. Please explain what were the negative aspects of this unit from your perspective as a student.
4. Can you describe specifically what did not work for you as a learner?
5. What is your judgment of the value (or otherwise) of using team based learning approaches in a work integrated learning unit such as BUS2011?
6. Would you prefer to have **all** team-based or **all** individual-based learning assessment activities in this unit or a combination of the two approaches?
7. What elements of the learning process would you change, if you could, in the future teaching of this unit?
8. Should the class size on this unit be limited to a large seminar/workshop size (i.e. a maximum of 50 enrolments)?
9. If there is a maximum limit placed on unit enrolments should the unit be offered as a competitive-based entry or as a first-come, first-served enrolment approach?
10. Would you recommend that the unit teaching times be held early in the evening (from 4.30pm onwards) in future offerings of BUS2011?

**Table 1 – Teaching Evaluation Survey**

Appendix 2

**Rankings for each response has a maximum score of 4**

<b>Student Survey of Teaching (Murdoch University standard forms)</b>	<b>Murdoch University Overall Results 2009 Resp. 55%</b>	<b>Murdoch Business School Averages 2009 Resp. 54%</b>	<b>BUS2011 WBBL Semester 1, 2010 n=12/14 Resp. 86%</b>
Q1. Good understanding of concepts covered	3.29	3.27	3.58
Q2. Purpose of class explained	3.32	3.32	3.67
Q3. Well prepared for class	3.53	3.58	3.92
Q4. Classes are well organised	3.44	3.48	3.75
Q5. Communicates effectively with students	3.40	3.36	3.75
Q6. Demonstrates enthusiasm for subject	3.59	3.45	3.83
Q7. Encourages student participation	3.42	3.33	3.67
Q8. Opportunities to apply learning	3.27	3.24	3.42
Q9. Be responsible for own learning	3.37	3.35	3.75
Q10. Sympathetic to student differences	3.31	3.25	3.64
Q11. Helpful when having difficulties	3.37	3.34	3.67
Q12. Clear expectations of learning	3.25	3.27	3.42
Q13. Provision of useful feedback	3.24	3.21	3.75
Q14. Work returned promptly	3.39	3.39	3.75
Q15. Marks assigned work fairly	3.39	3.38	3.83