Pursuing the ‘Holy Grail’ of HRM education – enhancing student engagement, academic performance AND industry relevance

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ABSTRACT:

It has been stated that “what a student brings to higher education, or where they study, matters less to their success and development than what they do during their time as a student” (Trowler, 2010, p.2)

This paper describes and explains three separate but related initiatives being undertaken at Meeting Place University (MPU), a mid-sized regional Australian university, to enhance student engagement, improve academic performance and increase the industry relevance of its human resource management (HRM) education at both the undergraduate and the postgraduate level.

These three initiatives cover experimentation in the learning approach (using a new tool for re-envisioning how HRM enables organizational effectiveness by making alignment and integration the focus of the educational conversation), application of a common underlying pedagogy (using project based situated learning in real-world organizations to teach the nuances of HRM practice and strategy) and supporting a strong industry-led contribution (using a panel of industry professionals as advisers) to better enable the MPU to address course accreditation and professional certification processes being undertaken by the Australian Human Resource Institute to ensure the industry relevance of higher education in HRM.

Key words: (innovative approach to teaching and learning).

Project-based situational learning in real-world businesses is often used to teach strategic human resource management (HRM) in university management courses. However, students often struggle to understand the relationship between operational people management, and corporate strategy in a business context. In particular, they struggle to understand the concept of linking the ‘horizontal’ process of HRM at the operational level to the ‘vertical’ process of developing and implementing overall business HRM and corporate strategy. But Coetzer and Sitlington (2014) note there is limited research examining the pedagogy of teaching strategic human resource management (SHRM), that it is important for HRM graduates to have a well-developed understanding of SHRM,
and that for many students SHRM is a field that is difficult to understand. This paper describes a new approach being used to address this gap.

BACKGROUND

HRM education at Meeting Place University (MPU), a mid-sized regional Australian university, is currently undergoing transformation. Through experimentation in learning design, re-orientation of the philosophy of HRM education and other changes, the University aims to make HRM education more industry relevant. This paper reports the first steps in this ongoing process. Three separate but related initiatives are being undertaken at, to enhance student engagement, improve academic performance and increase the industry relevance of its HRM education at both the UG and PG levels.

The first initiative involves experimentation in teaching and learning practice in operationally-oriented HRM units offered at the UG level at MPU. This experimentation was designed to increase student engagement, motivation and inspiration. The second initiative involves the implementation of an evaluation of all HRM units offered by MPU that will progressively lead to a shift in the approach to HRM education across all UP and PG units. The third initiative involves ongoing AHRI course accreditation. This process will be used to ratify a process of linking of all HRM units, at the UG and PG level, via a common learning design that involves project-based, work situated learning from the initial foundation introductory unit to the respective ‘capstone unit’. The ‘capstone unit’ at the PG level will also be progressively refocused to better align it with the recently introduced AHRI professional standards for acquisition of higher level skills in organizational capability analysis.

These initiatives are consistent in the main with the call by Cohen (2015) for consistent practices and a focus on competencies in HRM education albeit that she firmly anchors her perspective to HRM education in the United States of America. These initiatives reflect ongoing experimentation in learning design, and in teaching and learning methods (including re-envisaging the ‘alignment and integration’ of HRM practice and strategy), changes in educational philosophy and a
shift in discipline-based capstone units to reflect the recent introduction of a professional certification programme by the Australian Human Resource Institute (AHRI) and trends in HRM education more generally.

EXPERIMENTATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teaching and learning context

A specialisation in HRM is one of a number of management disciplines that MPU offers in courses at both the UG and PG levels. All HRM courses taught at MPU are accredited every three years by AHRI.

A common approach at MPU to teaching HRM units is to use a three-hour workshop involving a formal lecture component, and interactive exercises to teach specific content (theories and concepts). A project-based assignment (complex tasks based upon real world case study organizations that involve students in problem-solving) is then used to get students to demonstrate problem-based learning (Thomas, 2000). Three changes in this approach were introduced in two of the HRM UG units taught in Semester 2 2015:

1. Greater emphasis placed on peer learning (peer-student interaction) as part of the learning and assessment model to enhance student engagement, model appropriate academic standards of collegiate learning and increase student interaction (Havnes, Christiansen, Bjork and Hessevaagbakke, 2016);

2. Adoption of a partially ‘flipped’ classroom (technology is used to shift direct instruction of knowledge outside the classroom) with the majority of the workshop focused on interactive discussion questions, case studies and reflection pieces. A mini lecture was presented at the end of each workshop to recap on the theory and concepts discussed; and

3. Use of an ‘emergent’ theoretical framework (the framework was developed through discussion with students over the semester and reflected their understanding of the key
concepts being studied). This was entitled the ‘Strategy Alignment and Practice Integration Model’ and was used as a teaching tool and analytical framework.

**Teaching and Learning Design**

Project-based learning is a core element of the learning approach adopted at MPU for teaching HRM. The research literature on project-based learning clearly indicates that there is a lack of a universally accepted model of project-based learning and that the idea of assigning projects to students to enhance engagement and stimulate their learning is not a new one (Thomas, 2000).

However, early research on project-based learning suggested that it had a high potential to enhance student motivation provided that the curriculum was properly designed and the embedded projects were appropriately supported (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial and Palinscar, 1991). Researchers have found that students with a high propensity for self-directed learning tend to do well in learning situations where there are fewer learning activities and more self-directed learning assignments (Stewart, 2007). Other researchers have found that there is a need to focus the project-based learning curriculum on only a few learning objectives, rather than expect students to master a wide range of subject matter, in addition to the application of knowledge, critical thinking skills and communication skills (Helle, Tynjala and Olkinuora, 2006). One of the key features of effective project-based learning has been a ‘driving question relating to the assignment’ that helps students encounter and struggle with complex concepts and ideas throughout the learning process (Thomas, 2000, p. 6). The research on project-based learning has informed the approach taken at the MPU in relation to HRM education.

**Re-envisioning strategy alignment and practice integration**

As noted above, a novel part of the experimentation was the development and use of a new ‘Strategy Alignment and Practice Integration Model’. The way that the alignment of HRM strategy is often portrayed in scholarly texts is illustrated in Figure 1 using a modified version of the framework taken from one scholarly source (Nankervis, Baird, Coffey and Shields, 2014) while the Model we have developed is shown in Figure 2.
Project-based situational learning in real-world businesses is often used to teach strategic HRM in university management courses. There is a rich research literature on the theory of strategic human resource management that emphasises the horizontal and vertical fit of HRM strategy to organizational strategy stemming from the work of Baird and Meshoulam (1988) and others. This relationship is illustrated in numerous university textbooks in one dimension as a horizontal linear relationship (Dowling, Festing and Engles, 2013; Nankervis, Baird, Coffey and Shields, 2013; Tarique, Briscoe and Schuler, 2014).

However, students often struggle to understand the relationship between HRM and corporate strategy in a business context. In particular, students struggle to understand the concept of linking the ‘horizontal’ process of HRM at the operational level to the ‘vertical’ process of developing and implementing overall HRM, business unit and corporate strategy. The ‘Strategy Alignment and Practice Integration Model’ has been developed to integrate these two dimensions. This model has been tested with UG HRM students in two units using this innovative approach. The engagement, learning and satisfaction of these students have been compared with UG HRM students who have not utilised this model. Results show that the new model has the potential to facilitate a better understanding of these issues and increase student engagement at the same time.

The Model helps students’ learning in a number of ways. Firstly, by illustrating the dual importance of integration both within and between individual HR practices (Ueno, 2014) as well as the importance of alignment between HRM practices, HRM strategy and business unit and corporate strategy (Liu et al., 2007). Secondly, it provides a useful analytical framework to guide research and the write-up of a project-based assignment. Thirdly, the model provides a framework for
consolidating student learning at the end of the semester. Finally, it allows for incorporating discussion of issues relating to the external and the internal environment of a firm (which is important given that such issues can exert significant influence over how particular firms and industry sectors use their workforce to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage). Work is continuing on expanding the use of this model within UG and PG HRM units by embedded the model in the specification for project-based assignments, in the approach to teaching SHRM concepts and issues, as a diagnostic tool in the write-up of the project-based assignment and as part of the summative learning process designed to help link the knowledge acquired by students from the theory-practice aspects of the project-based assignment.

**FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

A qualitative thematically based evaluation of two UG HRM units involved in the changes in learning design and delivery described above was undertaken using student feedback via an online survey during the mid-semester break, and a hardcopy structured survey completed by some 70 participating students at the end of the semester. Four themes were discernible from this feedback: autonomy, flexibility, choice and support that are illustrated in Figure 3.

In terms of autonomy, students reflected on the benefits of a project-based learning assignment and the opportunity for them to learn by undertaking research and applying theory in a practical real world organizational situation. This theme was also about students feeling motivated to take responsibility to learn something before coming to class in order to participate in an assessable ‘Weekly Discussion Topic’. It was also about mastery of the subject matter or as one student put it: “the Questions for Review workshop and the Weekly Discussion Topics enabled me to show my understanding of the topic”.

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*Insert Figure 3 about here*
A range of comments were made by students about the perceived flexibility in the teaching and learning approach used. This included the strength of a mixed approach, the informality of the learning associated with small group work on both the ‘Questions for Review’ assignments and the ‘Weekly Discussion Topics’ that were built into the assessment model. Students also commented on how the mind mapping of the ‘Weekly Discussion Topics’ helped consolidate their learning and the use of the partial flipped class room was appreciated or as one student put it: “it enabled me to stay on track and focussed”.

The theme of choice related to students being able to decide which ‘Weekly Discussion Topic’ to participate in and what roles to take in the group work, particularly the group aspect of the project-based assignment. There was also reference to the choice about how much learning was undertaken before coming to class. As one student put it “the research before class in order to participate [in the ‘Weekly Discussion Topic’] was useful to engage them”. Students were also aware that the more effort they invested in class in the group work around the ‘Questions for Review’ assignments meant less work outside of class in their write up of these assignments.

Finally, the theme of support covered a number of aspects. This included the way the ‘Questions for Review’ assignments were perceived to help students to build confidence and gain competence in the subject matter knowledge and the way mind mapping was used to capture the discussion around the ‘Weekly Discussion Topics’. One student commented “that the project-based learning and the use of a theoretical model helped convey the theory” and it helped them “link theory to practice”. Another student spoke positively about being able to demonstrate the application of theory in practice through the project-based learning assignment.

Despite the importance of the four themes discussed above, the most salient, yet unexpected, comments were about the enjoyment of the learning experience. Many students were very positive about the practical nature of the project-based assignment. Other students liked the fact that “everyone got a ‘voice’ and that there was opportunity for a breadth of views to be expressed”.
In addition to the overwhelmingly positive reaction by most students in both units to the flexibility, autonomy, choice and support aspects of the learning design there was also a demonstrable improvement in both academic performance and student satisfaction as indicated in Table 1. The USS is a university-wide online student satisfaction survey that is administered each semester for all units taught at MPU.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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RE-ORIENTATION OF HRM EDUCATION

The second major initiative undertaken to increase the industry relevance of HRM education at the MPU is to change the structure of the HRM specialisation streams at both the UG and PG level. This has involved the introduction of a ‘foundation’ unit and a ‘capstone unit’. The foundation units cover the core elements of most management disciplines, while the ‘capstone unit’ is unique to the HRM specialisation stream. The design of the ‘capstone unit’ is being progressively refined to reflect the findings of research undertaken by the Office of Teaching and Learning on capstone curriculum across disciplines (Lee and Loton, 2015).

At the same time, industry partners are being consulted on a proposal to more clearly distinguish UG and PG HRM Units by having the former predominately operationally focused and the PG units more competency-based and ‘strategically’ focused. The refocusing of the UG and PG HRM units has come about in part based upon a shift detected in contemporary thinking about HRM education identified from research literature and the work of HR professional associations in Australia and overseas. Four of the core ideas that have influenced thinking about HRM education at the MPU are:

1. The way that HRM practice and strategy is now accepted as enabling the achievement of competitive advantage and the transformation of organizations both domestically and internationally (Coetzer and Sitlington, 2014; Lengnick-Hall, ML et al., 2009) that highlights at least in part the importance of the ‘Strategy Alignment and Practice Integration Model’.
2. The way that HRM education reflects both the transformation of the role of HR professionals from technical and administrative roles to a more strategic role (such as having a focus on building human capital and facilitating organizational change), and the need for HRM to transform the way the function enables change in organizations (Truss, Mankin and Kelliher, 2012; Ulrich, Allen, Brockbank, Younger and Nyman, 2009; Wilson, 2010).

3. The linking of theory and praxis, making HRM education more relevant to industry (Cohen, 2015; Coetzer and Sitlington, 2014, Lengnick-Hall, Lengick-Hall, Andrade and Drake, 2009).

4. The recognition of HRM as a profession and the universal call for HRM education to be industry-led, university-enabled and work-integrated (Cohen, 2015; Connell and Stanton, 2014; Kramer, 2012; Sheehan and De Cieri, 2012; Sheehan, Holland and De Cieri, 2006).

**INDUSTRY-LED HRM EDUCATION**

The third initiative being undertaken at MPU in relation to HRM education is the forging of a strong, ongoing relationship with the Australian national professional industry body, AHRI, through:

- An ongoing three-yearly accreditation of the management courses offering an HRM specialisation;

- Ongoing support of AHRI HR internships; and

- Plans for the refinement of the HRM ‘capstone unit’ at the PG level to encompass additional requirements to enable our postgraduates to attain full professional certification.

The management courses at MPU offering an HRM specialisation have been accredited by AHRI for three consecutive three-year periods, with reaccreditation due again in 2017. In addition, the recent introduction by AHRI of the long anticipated professional certification programme in February 2015 has led to a rethinking at MPU about the need to reshape the PG HRM ‘capstone unit’ to accommodate the requirements of full professional certification, including an applied project in organisational capability analysis. An option being considered is to include three streams in the HRM
PG capstone unit: a traditional stream with a workshop involving a combination of case studies and a project-based assignment; a stream focused on students undertaking a project in organizational capability analysis in a case study organization where the student is employed and a third stream involving students undertaking a work-integrated learning assignment in a case study organization for a finite period where the focus of the project is on organizational capability analysis. Each of these streams would include modules on consulting, influencing and negotiating, project management and problem solving techniques (AHRI, 2016). In addition, all HRM units at the UG and PG level will have their project-based, work situated learning assignments strengthened to create increasing awareness and understanding of the frameworks available for capability analysis with a particular emphasis given to a firm’s workforce management challenges.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There are numerous challenges facing HRM educators in ensuring our teaching and learning practice reflects contemporary thinking about the tertiary learning experience as well as reflecting how HRM is a dynamic field of study. The three initiatives outlined in this paper reflect some of these influences. The first is the need for continued experimentation in learning design, and teaching and learning practice whilst also enhancing student engagement, motivation and inspiration. The second is the need to continuously re-orient HRM education to reflect changes in the field of study and in thinking about education in HRM. The third is the need for HRM education to be flexible and adaptable to changes in industry requirements, including the recent introduction of professional certification standards by AHRI.

The three initiatives discussed in this paper reflect a plan for re-orienting HRM education at MPU over the next few years. This process will require not only the support of relevant academic staff and management, but also the continued engagement and support of our industry partners and AHRI through its ongoing course accreditation process and MPU’s adoption of the new AHRI professional certification programme.
The new model contributes to teaching and learning practice at MPU, and has the potential to become the focus of learning design and delivery of all HRM units at MPU. The model offers an opportunity for wider research into the use of a theoretical model in HRM education can help increase student engagement, motivation and academic performance. It also has potential to become the focus of research with industry partners that seek to reposition or transform their HRM practices through improved integration and alignment.

Work is continuing to explore and refine the approaches and model described here to further pursuit of the ‘holy grail’ of HRM education – enhancing student engagement, academic performance AND industry relevance.
REFERENCES


**TABLES AND FIGURES**

Table 1: Comparative Academic Performance in Two HRM UG Units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Unit 1 2014</th>
<th>Unit 1 2015</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Unit 2 2014</th>
<th>Unit 2 2015</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Distinction</td>
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<td>4.0%</td>
<td>High Distinction</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinction</td>
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<td>36.7%</td>
<td>Distinction</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Credit</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>24.5%</td>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>10.6%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** USS for Unit 1 went from 88% in 2014 to 93% and for Unit 2 it was sustained at 100%
Figure 1 – A Conventional Model of HRM Strategy & Practice Alignment & Integration

In the context of corporate and business unit strategy, necessary action is taken to achieve goals and increase performance by means of the rational use of resources (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012). HRM strategy is central to this process, enabling the business unit or organization to achieve its goals and increase its performance through effective management of its workforce. The integration within and between HRM practice areas is crucial for aligning strategy and practice effectively. Figure 2 - The Strategy Alignment and Practice Integration Model provides a visual representation of this alignment and integration.
Figure 3: Themes from Student Feedback