Curriculum Responses within Business Programs to meet the needs of Stakeholders in Regional South Australia

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Abstract

The Business and Regional Enterprise Unit of the University of South Australia's Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE) endeavours to be relevant to the needs of stakeholders located in regional South Australia. Although the large majority of firms in the region are small to medium enterprises, it was noted that a gap existed in the provision of degrees with a focus on small business management. This paper outlines the curriculum responses that were undertaken by the CRE to fill this gap and deliver degrees appropriate to the requirements of its communities. An innovative suite of three programs was developed comprising a Bachelor of Business and Enterprise degree and two nested Associate Degrees. The introduction of Associate Degree programs enables greater access to university studies and provides awards perceived to be more achievable by equity groups.

Introduction

Small business is big business in South Australia with 97% of organisations in the State being small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2002). A small business is defined as one having less than 20 employees for non-manufacturing enterprises and less than 100 employees for manufacturing enterprises (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Meredith, 1994, p. 16). SMEs contribute to both national and regional development, driving innovation, exports and jobs growth (Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Resources, 2007). Hence, small businesses are vital to the economy, yet their needs with regard to the education of managerial staff and other professionals are often overlooked.

This article outlines the curriculum responses undertaken by the Business and Regional Enterprise Unit of the University of South Australia's (UniSA's) Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE) in an endeavour to meet the needs of its regional stakeholders by providing undergraduate programs relevant to the operation of SMEs. These stakeholders include: employers, prospective students, industry, professional associations, TAFE, and the regional community in general. These needs include keeping youth in the region and meeting the shortage of professionals in the country.

The presence of professional and skilled people in regional areas is vital to sustaining regional centres. A region that can offer the services supplied by professional and skilled workers supports the people who are living in the community and the businesses operating there, and provides the foundation for attracting new residents and businesses (Sawyer & Evans, 2009, p. 229; Secretariat for the Standing Committee on Regional Development, 2004).

Background

Universities, their regions and stakeholders

Universities have a significant role in the development and sustainability of their regions (Ferns & Ellis, 2007; Garlick, 1998; Harvey, 2004; Winchester, Glenn, Thomas, & Cole, 2002). As well as contributing to the regional economy through salaries and purchasing, by attracting events to the region, and through research and consultancy that have benefits for regional commerce and industry (Centre for International Economics, 1997; Nairn, 1997), regional universities enable people to engage in face-to-face higher education study, increasing the likelihood that regional residents will include university as an option in their career preparation path (Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2009, p. 74). The presence of a nearby university can increase higher education participation if the university is able to maintain a quality relationship with its community (Stevenson, Evans, Maclachlan, Karmel, & Blackers, 2001) and if it provides the programs desired by potential students (Edwards, 2009; Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2009, p. 74).

It has been found that people who are able to achieve tertiary qualifications in a regional area are more likely to stay to work in the regions (Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2009; Penman, Oliver, & Petkov, 2003). Increasing regional higher education participation is seen by the Final Report of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) *Review of Australian Higher Education* (the Bradley Review) as something that must be addressed, recognising that the potential market in areas of lower population, along with other difficulties, calls for new solutions, including perhaps a new higher education institution specifically for regional areas (DEEWR, 2008). However, innovative responses are already in evidence, such as collaboration between universities and TAFEs (as in the Western Riverina example included in the report: DEEWR, 2008, p. 112).

Regional disadvantage is well documented: participation rates are lower and in order to study students often need to move away from home. Retaining young people in regional areas is often difficult. Moving away for employment and/or study, many build new lives in metropolitan areas; attending a metropolitan university is a significant influence on the likelihood of a young person relocating to a major city (Ellis, Watkinson, & Sawyer, 2009; Hillman & Rothman, 2007, p. vi). The attraction and retention of professionals in regional areas is also often difficult, leading to gaps in services.

Engagement by universities with employers, employer organisations and regional development bodies has many and multidirectional benefits. Universities depend on these stakeholders for knowledge to inform the development of courses that will respond to their needs and hence provide graduates ready to make a contribution, enhanced by their experiential learning during workplace practica. Such engagement has been described "as forming a key pillar of the student experience and employability … and as integral to research, offering access to research sites,

funding, dissemination, knowledge transfer … and impact" (Bolden, Hirsh, Connor, Petrov, & Duquemin, 2010, p. 3). The stakeholders can benefit from research conducted by universities, often with themselves as partners who will help them in pursuing their goals (e.g., Sawyer & Evans, 2009a, 2009b on corporate social responsibility, increasingly seen as a competitive plus, as well as a moral imperative). Mutual benefits through "Academic Enterprise" are achieved as universities and business and community partners together share and co-create knowledge (Powell, 2008). Ways of incorporating SMEs, along with TAFE, higher education and government facilities as partners in one campus have been described (Shoemaker et al., 2000).

The context

The University of South Australia is a modern, progressive, flexible institution. Its mission is stated as:

> UniSA educates professionals and citizens to the highest standards; creates and disseminates knowledge; and engages with our communities to address the major issues of our time. (UniSA, 2009c, p.1)

It upholds the values of scholarship, engagement, social justice, sustainability, innovation, and openness (UniSA, 2009c).

UniSA's Centre for Regional Engagement (CRE) is based at Whyalla, 400 kilometres north-west of Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. The CRE has responsibility for UniSA's regional activities. As well as the Whyalla Campus, it oversees the Mount Gambier Regional Centre (MGRC) located in the south-east of the state. The MGRC was established in 2005 using a model for course delivery whereby lectures are generally provided simultaneously at both sites using modern video-conferencing facilities, supported by face-to-face tutorials in each location. The University's Northern Areas Partnerships program (UNAP) is also under the CRE umbrella, along with management on behalf of UniSA of Open University Australia programs, and the hosting of the National Disability Coordination officers. It also houses the Centre for Rural Health and Community Development, a UniSA-funded research centre and partnership of the CRE and the Spencer Gulf Rural Health School (a joint initiative of the University of South Australia and The University of Adelaide) and the Regional Sustainability Centre of the Institute for Sustainable Systems and Technologies (ISST) – the regional node having been "established to provide integrated sustainable solutions that support the regional community of the Upper Spencer Gulf" (UniSA, 2008, p. 13).

The CRE has 45 full-time equivalent staff and approximately 520 students. Degree programs in Business and Enterprise, Nursing and Rural Health, Social Work and Rural Practice, and a Foundation Studies (a pre-tertiary alternative pathway) program, are offered at both Whyalla and Mount Gambier; at Whyalla there is also a two-year engineering associate degree available. Currently a proposal for an associate degree in education is being considered. The Whyalla campus provides on-campus student accommodation in modern villa-style units for 88 students. This reduces the costs of studying away from home for regional students and provides suitable accommodation for visiting students taking advantage of the various intensive courses offered throughout the year.

The response to regional needs

In 2006, an innovative suite of three new programs was introduced specifically to meet the needs of the regional market. The development of the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise and the nested Associate Degree in Accounting and Associate Degree in Business Ventures was the result of extensive consultation between regional stakeholders, Whyalla campus staff, the Pro-Vice Chancellor, and Heads of School in the Division of Business (UniSA, 2005).

These programs replaced a broader, generic Bachelor of Business degree that contained a major in accounting and sufficient elective courses to enable study of the professional accounting minor or another minor of choice. A major issue for this Bachelor of Business degree was the decline in student demand over the previous five years, despite a lower tertiary entrance rank (TER) than similar programs offered through UniSA's Division of Business. It was believed that the lower TER led to a view by prospective students and division-based academic staff that the "Whyalla" program was of low quality and facilitated a "back door" entry into the business division. In actuality, the lower TER for the Bachelor of Business was associated with a regional market demographic where there was a higher proportion of low socio-economic status and equity students than in the metropolitan area (UniSA, 2005).

Focus of the new programs

The views of individuals in regional business, community and government organisations were gathered on the concept and direction of a new degree. The aim presented was the need to develop a regionally relevant degree to replace the existing Bachelor of Business program that had decreasing enrolments. A comprehensive market research analysis was completed by the Marketing and Alumni officer at the Whyalla campus. This research explored and sought to confirm the conceptual direction of the new degree, including content, teaching and learning approaches, graduate qualities, and structure. The process included meetings and discussions with various small business organisations in Whyalla and Mount Gambier; the Human Resources Manager, OneSteel; the Whyalla Campus Advisory Committee; UniSA Student Association; Whyalla and Limestone Coast economic development boards; Upper Spencer Gulf Common Purpose Group; Mount Gambier University Steering Committee; Limestone Coast SA Works Coordinator; Local Governments; High School Principals; Regional Managers of TAFE SA; and current business degree students. The need for a new degree to replace the Bachelor of Business was not contested by any of the stakeholders. It was generally considered that the Bachelor of Business was too generic in name; had a TER that was too low in relation to comparable business programs; was not financially viable; and was not regionally focused. There was a strong minority view that the Bachelor of Business program should be replaced by a Bachelor of Commerce degree enabling students to achieve entry to the professional accounting bodies, but this view was not supported by the majority of stakeholders (UniSA, 2005).

The contribution of small business in regional areas was suggested as a focus. Small business comprised 1,122,000 separate businesses in Australia in 2001 and accounted for 96% of all business enterprises; 80,000 of these small businesses were in South Australia (ABS, 2002). Over 47% of all employment in Australia in 2001 (3,259,100 people) was small business related (employees and owner-

operators). In South Australia small business related employment in 2001 was similar at 46% and accounted for 158,300 persons (ABS, 2002).

In terms of content for the new degree, ABS aggregated data (ABS 2002) provided a useful indicator of the causes of small business failures in Australia. While "economic conditions" (33.8%) were the main causes, other reasons that featured included "personal reasons" (17%), "lack of capital" (13%) and "lack of business ability" (10%). In addition, there were also a range of financially related causes: "failure to keep proper books" (2%), "excessive interest" (5%), "inability to collect debts" (4%), "excessive drawings" (5%) and "gambling and speculation" (4%). These failure causes indicated that accounting and financial skills coupled with small business management ability were key factors underpinning the potential for business success (UniSA, 2005). Hence, it was identified that there was a need for graduates with accounting skills and the expertise to operate within a small business environment. However, while the majority of regional firms were SMEs, very few, if any, universities offered programs focusing on small business management. This included the wide range of programs available from the Division of Business within the University of South Australia. This gap in undergraduate offerings provided the opportunity for the CRE to provide a unique, boutique program that was region-centric and focused on the skills and attributes for the development and operation of successful SMEs (UniSA, 2005).

The programs

In response, a three-year Bachelor of Business and Enterprise degree and two, two-year "nested" Associate Degrees were developed to fill this gap and ease the demand for business professionals. These degrees were to be owned by the School of Management within UniSA's Division of Business, but offered only internally at UniSA's Centre for Regional Engagement. The TER for the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise was to be set at a comparable level to other Division of Business programs, with the associate degrees having a lower TER to provide equity access for students not achieving the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise TER. Upon successfully completing either of the associate degrees, students could make internal application for entry into the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise or other Division of Business degrees. To maintain program viability electives would be limited and offered bi-annually. The programs could be studied on a full-time (3 or 4 courses) or part-time basis (1 or 2 courses), on-campus or mixed-mode. Mid-year entry would be available to increase flexibility. It was anticipated that the student demand profile would reflect a mix of Year 12, TAFE SA and mature age students seeking to study a relevant business degree near their regional domicile ("Path introduced", 2006).

The many pathways into the programs include entry from Year 12 or the UniSA Foundation Studies program, transfer from other university studies, or via TAFE and the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT). Even though classes would contain students at degree and associate degree level working together on the same material, it was believed that the small class sizes, easy accessibility to lecturers and strong staff commitment at the CRE would allow success, and this has been the situation. As part of the articulation arrangements with TAFE, students who have completed an award at Certificate IV level and above are able to receive credit for courses within the programs.

When asked what attributes they expect to see demonstrated by graduates, employers indicated they are looking for interpersonal and communication skills,

planning and organisational skills, problem-solving ability, academic technical expertise, drive and motivation, leadership skills, and an international perspective. This information was taken into consideration when developing UniSA's seven graduate qualities:

> A graduate of the University of South Australia operates effectively with and upon a body of knowledge of sufficient depth to begin professional practice; is prepared for lifelong learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice; is an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical and creative thinking to a range of problems; can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a professional; is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and citizen; communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community; and demonstrates international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen. (UniSA, 2009a, p.1)

In accordance with these graduate qualities, the programs are delivered with a strong practical emphasis with students required to work in groups, give oral presentations, and apply themselves to challenging case studies and team problem-solving activities.

All three programs have common first year courses, incorporating core courses that provide a broad, foundation knowledge of key business discipline areas. Having a common first year increases flexibility and makes it easier to transfer between programs. All the degrees are suitable for Year 12 school leavers and mature age entrants mainly in regional South Australia or from other regional and/or metropolitan areas who want or need to study in a regional tertiary environment; applicants who may already have experience in working in small to medium enterprises and/or those who have a desire to develop the requisite skills and knowledge to manage and/or to begin and build their own business enterprises (UniSA, 2005). Future postgraduate options include an Honours program and Master's Degree, both providing a pathway into PhD studies available through the CRE.

These degrees open a wide variety of career opportunities for students: all the industries – agriculture and mining, manufacturing, and the range of tertiary industries (such as accounting, advertising and marketing, human resources management, politics, retail, tourism, hospitality, property, para-legal) require people with the skills and abilities that the programs can provide.

The Bachelor of Business and Enterprise

The Bachelor of Business and Enterprise is a unique program currently offered in two regional centres by on-campus equivalent mode to small cohorts of students, who otherwise would not get the opportunity or benefit of tertiary study. It is the only program within UniSA that focuses on developing both finance and management skills particularly related to SMEs. The degree includes two specialisations, rather than the usual eight-course major contained in a Bachelor program: an accounting sequence and a small to medium enterprise sequence, each comprising seven courses. The aim of the program is to

> provide graduates with a fundamental understanding of the skills, knowledge and attributes to successfully plan, operate and manage small to medium enterprises and/or to begin and to build their own business enterprises in productive, yet socially responsible ways. (UniSA, 2005, p.18)

It comprises 24 courses of 4.5 unit value, a total of 108 units and is usually studied over three years full-time – eight courses each year, four in study periods 2 and 5 – or six years part-time. UniSA offers seven study periods throughout the year and

together with intensive courses offered in summer and winter schools, this provides the opportunity for students to catch-up on missed courses and/or accelerate through their programs.

The first year of the program includes core courses common to all degrees in the Division of Business and introduces students to the key areas of accounting, communication, computing, law, economics, quantitative methods and marketing. Together with a core course in management principles studied in the second year, these provide the foundation for the further study. The second and third years introduce the courses in the two specialisation sequences. Flexibility is provided by having the courses Financial Accounting 2 and Financial Accounting 3 in the second year as electives so that the company accounting courses can be avoided by those students not wishing to study accounting to such a high level.

Special features of the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise are that it includes an Indigenous cultural awareness course and a capstone practicum course equivalent to two courses (9 units). This course is undertaken in the final year when the student has completed at least 72 units (two years) of study. The students are linked with an organisation within the community to work together on an industry project that will benefit that organisation. The objective is to provide students the opportunity to "learn by doing" through the application of theory to practice. The literature suggests that student learning outcomes are improved by employing engagement pedagogies where students work with community partners in real-world situations (Lee, McGuiggan, & Holland, 2009b). It has been found that most third year students are already employed and complete the project within their own organisation. For those students not employed, it enables them to link with an organisation to work on an issue of importance, increasing their networks and employment opportunities. In both situations, the students are able to gain valuable research and business experience, enabling the university to provide graduates with the theoretical and professional skills required by business (Lee, McGuiggan, & Holland, 2009a).

The Associate Degrees

The Associate Degrees are designed to be studied over two years full-time/four years part-time, and contain 16 courses of 4.5 unit value, a total of 72 units. They provide greater access to university studies, an advantage for equity groups. These shorter programs present as being more manageable to students, particularly mature-age students who often feel daunted by their return to study. They are also useful for students who may not have the financial support to commit to the full degree program (UniSA, 2009). Associate degrees provide the opportunity for people without the entry requirements for a Bachelor degree to commence university studies. For example, those students who have not chosen the correct mix of SACE Stage 2 and approved Higher Education Selection Subjects (HESS) and those with a lower TER score, have the opportunity to move onto university. Owing to the restricted course offerings in regional high schools, rural and regional students often do not achieve the same level of Year 12 results as their metropolitan counterparts, indicating that Associate degree programs provide a critical pathway for rural and regional students seeking tertiary qualifications (UniSA, 2009b). Applicants can enter an associate degree with a Certificate III from TAFE.

Upon successful completion of the associate degree, students can elect to exit with their award or seamlessly transfer internally into a bachelor degree, complete a

final year and exit with a three-year degree. On the other hand, students who for whatever reason are unable or unwilling to complete the Bachelor program may exit with one of these awards if they have met the requirements of the Associate Degree in Accounting or the Associate Degree in Business Ventures.

The Associate Degree in Accounting

To meet the needs of regional accounting firms, the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise was designed with a nested Associated Degree in Accounting. This degree provides graduates with a fundamental understanding of the theory, techniques and practices of accounting and finance, and a pathway into study at the bachelor degree level. It represents the first two years of the Bachelor of Commerce program available from the City West campus located in Adelaide. Students completing the associate degree with a Grade Point Average equal to or greater than four are able to apply through internal application to the Bachelor of Commerce Degree where they can complete the accounting major and the professional minor and gain entrance to the accounting professional bodies, CPA Australia and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (UniSA, 2005). It is important to note however, that students do not need to relocate to the City in order to study the courses in this final year. Of the courses required to complete the accounting major and professional minor sequence, only four need to be studied in the external mode as the remaining four are electives that can be chosen from the courses available internally at the CRE. As most CRE business students are in full-time employment in their third year, studying some courses in the external mode often suits their situation. External study need not be a problem as e-mail provides an easy means of quick communication and each course is supported by an excellent Web site that contains the necessary resources, a discussion board, and often podcasts. Students also have access to the facilities and support available at their local campus. However, there is a marketing challenge to provide this information to the community so that schools, accounting practices and other organisations are aware that it is possible to complete a full accounting degree while living in the region.

The Associate Degree in Business Ventures

The Associate Degree in Business Ventures aims to provide graduates

> with a sound understanding of the skills, knowledge and attributes to successfully plan, operate and manage small to medium enterprises and/or begin and to build their own business enterprises in productive, yet socially responsible ways. (UniSA, 2005, p.23).

It is designed to meet the needs of people who are interested in working within a SME, are already working within a SME, or are planning to set up their own business venture.

The first year of this degree is the same as that of the other programs; the second year extends into courses with a small enterprise focus. Completion of the associate degree provides a pathway into the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise.

Demand for the programs

Since the initial year of introduction, the Associate Degree in Accounting has been the program most in demand. Unfortunately few places in the Associate Degree in Business Ventures have been taken up. It was anticipated that this program would attract both school leavers and mature-age entrants interested in developing skills in SME management. In particular, it was planned to attract people already working in businesses and provide them with the opportunity to develop valuable

financial and management expertise. However, this has not eventuated – perhaps the notion that they are too busy operating their business to study is relevant, or again there may be a marketing challenge to increase awareness of the availability and benefits of this program.

The enrolments of new students in these programs since their inception are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *Number of commencing students by program*

Program	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bachelor of Business and Enterprise	15	3	6	6	7
Associate Degree in Accounting	5	16	12	7	12
Associate Degree in Business Ventures	1	0	2	2	0

Discussion and conclusions

Having suitable programs available from a regional university enables people to study locally without the need to leave family, friends and employment, retaining people and skills and addressing the skills shortages being experienced in the region. This has the effect of increasing the participation in higher education of residents of rural and regional areas, as advocated by the Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2008).

Over the years, the campus that is now the headquarters of the CRE has frequently had to adapt to changing needs. Financial constraints facing higher education earlier led to the restructuring of business programs (Sawyer & Martin, 2000). Liaison and relationship-building with local schools and TAFE enabled clear pathways to be developed, giving students choices in how they achieved the goal of a business degree (Sawyer, Zubrinich, & Carter, 2003).

The suite of programs described in this paper were designed as vocational degrees aimed at educating and equipping students with the knowledge, skills and attributes required for successfully establishing, running and managing SMEs in a regional context. This aligns well with the aims and objectives of the Whyalla Economic Development Board, the Upper Spencer Gulf Common Purpose Group and the South East Economic Development Board (UniSA, 2005, the source for much of the following).

While taking a regional focus, the skills, knowledge and attributes developed from these degrees will be transferable and just as relevant in urban and international settings. This aligns with the Centre for Regional Engagement's strategy of attracting students from outside the regions to study in regional Australia. While current international enrolments through the CRE are low, in the past numbers of international students in business programs have appreciated the opportunity to study at a regional campus in smaller classes, with easier access to lecturing and support staff (Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, & Wilson, 2005).

The suite of programs adopts and exposes students to a range of innovative learning and delivery methodologies which enable them to be cost-efficient and provide an effective student learning environment. This aligns well with the Centre for Regional Engagement's need for a financially viable program that can be offered across various regional centres.

Many stakeholders indicated that the program should have a strong accounting and finance component as many small to medium enterprises failures are due to poor financial management. The Bachelor of Business and Enterprise degree comprises a significant accounting and finance stream to equip graduates to deal with the financial vagaries of SME business. The programs are structured to enable students to select courses to complete the first two years of the Bachelor of Commerce degree. Apart from facilitating the opportunity for students to transfer to the Bachelor of Commerce degree to undertake the professional accounting stream after two years, the significant acquisition of accounting and finance vertical knowledge in the Bachelor of Business and Enterprise degree will equip students to cope extremely well in the financial management of SMEs.

Students are also exposed to a significant entrepreneurial and SME creation, development and management stream which will provide them with the capacity for independent decision making coupled with highly developed communication, e-business and information skills. There was strong support from stakeholders for students to gain SME experience. The program includes an experiential capstone component that extends and reinforces graduate qualities appropriate to small to medium enterprise (SME) establishment, development and management. Graduates from these programs will have the skills and knowledge to successfully contribute to the socio-economic development of regional Australia (UniSA, 2005).

These curriculum responses, geared to regional needs, not only meet those needs, but also contribute to increasing the numbers of people with university qualifications in the community. As well as the liaison with employers and other stakeholders necessary for developing these programs, other relationships developed over the years with local education sectors were tapped into in promoting the new structure, which still relied on these pathways for articulation and promotion. Consultation with stakeholders by higher education providers is vital, if higher education offerings are to contribute to building viable, sustainable communities, whether this is implemented through existing university structures or a new arrangement such as a consortium of regional campuses linked into a new regional university, such as suggested by the Bradley Review (DEEWR, 2008).

Acknowledgements

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