

## IEWS ON CURRICULUM CHANGE IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Calls, world-wide, for examination of the cost, effectiveness, quality and relevance of higher education have focused attention on what universities offer and how they design and structure their offerings. In Australia Karpin (1995) called for a great degree of industry based relevance in management education and advocated better links with business to achieve this. In the United States a study conducted by Pearce (1999) called for improved use of technologically assisted teaching, globalisation of course content, improved linkage with business and current business practices, and acknowledgement of the qualities needed to make graduates employable. This exploratory paper seeks to examine the process of curriculum design and change within two institutions, and identifies major issues that currently impact upon curriculum decisions in Australia and the United States.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum change, academic perceptions, comparative study,

### PROLOGUE:

The motivation for the writing of this paper stems from a number of experiences encountered while on study leave in the United States during the first half of 2004. During this time I was based within the Marketing and Management Department of the School of Business Administration at the University of Montana. This paper compares academic staff perceptions of the curriculum change and design process at Charles Sturt University (CSU) and the University of Montana (UM).

However, before discussing the processes and perceptions of curriculum change within these institutions it is necessary to explain some terminological differences and establish the nomenclature that will be used throughout this paper. Whilst the usual features of academic administration exist they use the following terminology: School of Business Administration (UM), Faculty of Commerce (CSU); Marketing and Management Department (UM), School of Commerce, Business, etc (CSU); Faculty (UM), Academic Staff (CSU); Staff (UM), Administrative/General Staff (CSU) and University of Montana Catalog, CSU Handbook. This paper will be written using UM terminology. It is also important to note that the title and role of the Dean are the same in both cases, with the exception of the greater external representation and fund-raising role of Deans within the United States; which does not exist in Australia at this time.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the new millennium the value and economic contribution of education is again under scrutiny. Governments are re-examining their roles and financial contributions (Dawkins, 1988; Karpin, 1995; Industry Commission, 1997; Nelson, 2003). The need to maintain parity with economic competitors has captured the attention of many within the United States (Proenza, 2002:536), and is encouraging both schools and universities to review the structure and content of their educational offerings. The cost of providing quality higher education has drawn considerable attention to issues associated with the quality, availability (i.e. equal access), costs and effectiveness of university programmes (Karpin, 1995; Nelson, 2003). Despite these concerns little attention has been given in the literature to examining the relevance or quality of degree and subject content.

Whilst, within Commonwealth countries such as Australia it is generally accepted, and to some degree expected, that the Faculty, University and Government will provide direction for the design of degree structure and content, within the United States, however, this level of influence would be deemed totally unacceptable. The Faculty members at universities in the United States are perceived to have more independence and freedom in terms of their subject content (i.e. curriculum).

This paper seeks to examine some of the differences between the curriculum design and change processes in Australia and the United States, by examining the approaches used at two institutions: The School of Commerce, part of the Faculty of Commerce, Charles Sturt University and the Department of Management and Marketing, part of the School of Business Administration at The University of Montana. Questionnaires comprised of both quantitative and qualitative questions were used to gather responses on various aspects of curriculum design and change in both institutions. Participant responses have provided some useful insights into the current process of curriculum design and change, and identified major issues that are impacting upon curriculum decisions.

## **2. MAINTAINING A RELEVANT CURRICULUM**

Universities have for years been responsible for producing good citizens, well rounded individuals, and the people with the skills and abilities required for today's and tomorrow's organisations; a role that has attracted increased attention from the OECD, who recognise the importance of education for social and economic growth (Davidson, 1986). However, the ability of universities to meet these requirements effectively has been questioned; particularly in relation to business education (Karpin, 1995; Pelton, 1996; Pearce, 1999). Cox and Cooper (1988, as cited in Barry, 1996:53) argued that "There is no evidence that academic learning changes behaviour or develops practical skills such as those required in management". However, Barry (1996:54) expresses the hope that:

.... the contribution that universities can make is not only to provide training in specific areas, but also to encourage and assist their students to acquire some high level intellectual skills such as independent thought, curiosity, the ability to think logically, the ability to learn and the facility for obtaining and disseminating information.

Despite the many factors influencing management roles and management education the development of higher learning skills, as identified by Barry (1996), is an essential part of the university experience for students studying management and related disciplines. Factors such as economic growth and development, changing managerial needs in the workplace, university policy and structure, business and industry requirements, and in the case of Australia Federal Government policy (Mathews, 1999), have a significant impact but without the higher learning skills students would experience difficulty transferring learning to the workplace.

The many changes that are being experienced by today's businesses make it essential that management qualifications maintain relevancy, in terms of content and delivery, and are seen to be doing so. The two universities considered for this paper adopt different approaches for this, and perceive different factors as having an influence on curriculum design.

## **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

Few research studies have examined how the process of curriculum design and change is undertaken within the academic environment, and what the major influences of that change are. The primary purpose of this research is to redress this omission by gathering, interpreting and analysing academic staff perceptions about the process of curriculum design and change and the major influencing factors. Data were collected from academic staff teaching in the management and marketing areas at both Charles Sturt University (CSU) and the University of Montana (UM). Questionnaires comprised of both quantitative and qualitative questions were used; including a number of open-ended questions.

### **3.1 Questionnaire design**

The questionnaire was designed based on an analysis of the relevant literature and discussion with academic staff at selected institutions; which resulted in a refined questionnaire – including the incorporation of additional issues and the elimination of others. The final form of the questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section I – consisted of ten quantitative questions using a 7 point Likert scale (using anchors of 1=strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree), that sought perceptions on issues associated with curriculum design and change; Section II – consisted of fourteen open-ended qualitative

questions that sought respondents perceptions of the processes involved in degree and subject design; the final section, Section III, requested biographical data from each of the respondents.

### 3.2 Survey Sample and response rate

Questionnaires were sent to 13 academic staff across all levels at three campuses of CSU, and 15 Faculty members at UM; of which 6 and 5 useable questionnaires were returned from each group respectively (a response rate of 46 % for CSU and 33 % for UM). The description of respondents and profiles based on biographical data are presented in Table 1. It was disappointing that in spite of follow-up emails and verbal requests more questionnaires were not returned.

**TABLE 1: BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

<b>Biographical data</b>	<b>Charles Sturt University</b>	<b>University of Montana</b>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	5	2
Female	1	3
<i>Age Range</i>		
25-35		1
36-45	3	
46-55		3
>55	3	1
<i>Years in academic service</i>		
0-5 years	1	1
6-10 years		
11-15 years	2	1
16-20 years	2	1
>21 years	1	2

However, as can be seen from the data presented in Table 1, responses were received from participants that represented different genders, age ranges, and years of employment in academic roles; therefore being representative of those engaged as academic staff on a full-time basis.

## 4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for participant responses to each question, according to institution. A one-tailed t-test was used to calculate the level of significant difference between responses from each group of participants (Cooper and Schindler, 2003). Significant differences were found in responses to six questions: questions 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10. These questions could logically be grouped into two basic categories. Group 1 (questions 4, 5 and 6) sought participant responses on their views about the degree of economic/ financial, or government (State and Federal) influence on curriculum design and change; Group 2 (questions 8, 9 and 10) examined the extent to which academic staff felt that they had control of curriculum decisions or were required to operate within set university structure and guidelines.

These results, whilst preliminary, were not totally unexpected given the differing environments of the two institutions. The difference between the two publicly funded systems is quite pronounced, and has a flow on effect to other aspects of academic operations and procedures. This can be seen in responses to open-ended questions that sought participants'

UM: They do not provide much in the way of guidelines and have very little impact (Respondent 2).

CSU: The main influence of policy has been in the development of a more competitive environment amongst the tertiary institutions. Reduced funding has meant that the institutions seek funds from other sources. Quality of both inputs and outputs becomes a casualty as numbers become more important to provide support for an elaborate fixed cost bureaucracy and the physical assets. Courses are designed to apply to a niche market; especially at the post graduate level; it could be that theory is manipulated so that it appears to have specific relevance to a specific market group (Respondent 2).

**Table 2: PERCEIVED DRIVERS OF CURRICULUM DESIGN AND CHANGE**

Drivers of curriculum design and change	Charles Sturt University		University of Montana		T-Test	Sig Level
	Mean	Std dev	Mean	Std dev		
1. Curriculum design and change is primarily driven by economic demand	5.5	1.049	4.6	1.517	1.162	NS
2. Curriculum design and change is primarily driven by student demand	4.0	1.549	4.8	1.095	.8271	NS
3. Curriculum design and change is primarily driven by business and industry demands	4.5	1.240	5.6	0.548	1.8278	NS
4. Curriculum design and change is primarily driven by financial concerns	5.8	0.983	3.6	1.342	3.418	0.005**
5. The Federal Government plays a significant role in directing curriculum design and change	6	1.095	2.8	1.643	3.869	0.005**
6. The State Government plays a significant role in directing curriculum design and change	4.6	0.516	2.8	1.826	2.328	0.025*
7. National studies into management skills and the quality of education have a strong impact on the offerings of universities	4.6	1.505	5.0	0.707	.0542	NS
8. The university structure provides strict guidelines within which the Faculty must operate	6	0	4.8	1.789	2.301	0.025*
9. Faculty members are primarily responsible for all curriculum decisions	5.5	0.548	6.6	0.548	3.315	0.005**
10. Faculty members have adequate opportunity for input into curriculum design and change	5.5	0.548	6.6	0.548	3.315	0.005**

\* significant (1-tailed) at  $p > 0.025$ ; \*\* significant (1-tailed) at  $p > 0.005$ .

views on the influence of Government (State and Federal) in providing guidelines for curriculum directions (questions contained in Group1). Typical comments from participants included:

Likewise questions contained in Group 2, which sought responses on the extent of individual academic control and freedom from restrictions were found to have similarly disparate responses. For example questions seeking information on the level of involvement/direction provided by Deans invoked the following responses:

UM: He can make suggestions/recommendations – but the Faculty does not have to accept these. At one time the dean wanted us to deliver a Healthcare MBA, but it was voted down. (Respondent 5).

CSU: The latest change/review of the degree seemed to arise from the Dean's feeling that it had to be done. The main factor seemed to be manoeuvring the schools to maintain student numbers (Respondent 2).

Questions 1, 2, 3 and 7 were found to have no significant difference between the responses of the two groups. These questions sought participants' views on the extent of influence of various factors, including

economic demand, student demand, business and industry demand, and national studies into management skills. Results were inconclusive because participants held similar views about the importance of these factors. A larger sample of respondents might prove more revealing in relation to these questions.

The importance of business and industry links has been stressed by studies examining management education in both Australia (Karpin, 1995) and the United States (Pearce, 1999), and is recognised by academic staff. However, the responses received from participants were mixed in relation to the degree of influence they believed business and industry had over curriculum change with some suggesting that it needs to be increased, as indicated in the following examples:

UM: They do have a strong, but not a decisive influence (Respondent 2).

We do a survey of employers to determine if our students meet their needs/expectations – but this survey is really not used much (Respondent 5).

CSU: Limited. It should be greater, but we have poor mechanisms for industry involvement. There is some influence from professional bodies such as AHRI [Australian Human Resources Institute] especially in our HR programs (Respondent 1).

Notice is taken of the requirements of business in relation to employable graduates; in particular the required generic skills (Respondent 2).

Responses to the other questions in this group solicited a similar degree of disparity, with participants indicating the importance of the factors identified, but also believing that had little real influence on curriculum change at that time.

## 5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Although there are many similarities between American and Australian academic systems, there are also significant differences as well; particularly in relation to the anticipated role of Federal and State Government in relation to curriculum change and these difference are exposed in responses to some questions within this study.

Whilst an exploratory study only, the findings encourage further research in relation to curriculum change and policy implementation. Given the small number of responses in both cases further confirming research is necessary.

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