

From IR to HRM: Thank God for AACSB!

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Abstract

Efforts to achieve accreditation with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) by the Faculty of Business at UTS began in 2001 and corresponded with an increased pressure upon academics in the industrial relations (IR) and employment relations (ER) area at UTS to adopt a stronger and more overt focus on teaching HRM. AACSB requirements exerted a profound influence on the movement from an IR/ER to HRM focus in teaching and not only acted to reduce academic resistance to the movement but moreover resulted in what has been assessed to be a more meaningful teaching and learning experience.

Introduction

Academics in the fields of industrial relations (IR), personnel management (PM), employment relations (ER) and human resource management (HRM) are very much aware of the impact which global, national and local shifts in ideology have exerted upon their disciplines (Kelly 2003). In the 1970s for instance, many students clamoured to study industrial relations and many academics had focussed their careers in this field. At this time, PM was viewed as a separate study from that of IR and as having a more administrative and less academic focus. Throughout the 1980s and 1990's, a fundamental shift occurred in the dynamics of tertiary education and in the nature of the courses sought by students (Airini *et al* 2006; Ziguras 2003; Biggs & Davis 2002; Brand 1999). Reforms to Australian higher education beginning with Dawkins (1987, 1988) and intensified under the 1996 Federal government budget cuts, moved the higher education sector more towards a market of competing institutions (Marginson 1997).

In the process of reform, new processes of government and management were put in place, including "new systems of competitive bidding, performance management and quality assessment (which) have all been used to steer academic work and to install a process of continuous self-transformation along modern neo-liberal lines" (Marginson 1997:63). Universities were required to change from government funded bodies in which academics could pursue the subjects that they thought important and relevant, to bodies which were required to respond to market forces.

"The society we want cannot be achieved without a strong economic base...Our industry is increasingly faced with rapidly changing international markets in which success depends on, among other things, the conceptual, creative and technical skills of the labour force, the ability to innovate and be entrepreneurial." (Dawkins 1988:6)

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“Human capital investment came to be seen as instrumental to economic reform.” (Harman 2003:3)

The needs of business came to dominate the national educational agenda supported by government and this pressure was mainly accepted by university hierarchies with apparently little resistance. Demand for subjects in HRM increased, while those focussed on industrial relations, labour studies and other ‘less relevant’ fields waned or at least stagnated (Kelly 2003; Westcott *et al* 2003). The Australian experience was common to that of many industrialised countries (Dunn 1990; Kelly 2003; Kochan *et al* 1986). Industrial relations in the United States of America, for instance, “suffered a significant decline in intellectual and organizational vitality in the 1980s including a shift in students from IR courses to HR courses” (Kaufman 1993:157).

Academics at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) were traditionally accustomed to delivering courses which recognised the interests of employers, employees and unions. During the 1980s and into the 1990s, for example, the university offered post-graduate programs in ‘Industrial Relations and Personnel Management’ and a typical cohort of students would include individuals from small to large private sector organisations, not-for-profit bodies and trade unions. A variety of socio-economic backgrounds and current work experiences was evident among the students, although women were certainly under-represented and the tide of international students had not then arrived. Both academics and students within the School of Business and Public Administration, now the Faculty of Business, at UTS and its predecessor the NSW Institute of Technology¹, somewhat naturally focussed their attention upon the issues of the day which were greatly influenced by the then high levels of unionisation and collectivism evident in Australian workplaces.

As the level of unionisation fell, so also did demand for courses in IR. Although the figures vary, ILO figures indicate a 29.6% decline in union density in Australia between 1985 and 1995 to 35.2%, with New Zealand experiencing an amazing 55.1% decline during the same period to a 24.3% unionisation rate (ILO 1997). Kelly sees the ‘sharp shock’ to IR academics as occurring around 1990 when “the influences on academic IR came from the sometimes anti-intellectual and overtly managerialist claims of HRM” (2003: 151). Accurate data concerning the fate of IR teaching is difficult to obtain. The titles of university departments, courses and subjects may not provide an accurate indication of the subject matter taught nor are actual numbers of student enrolments for units of study or courses in industrial relations readily available. However, a study conducted by Westcott *et al* (2003) analysed the results of two different surveys conducted in 1990 and 2001 concerning the relative position of IR courses and programs at Australian universities. Although the authors note that ‘the surveys are not directly comparable’, they found that

“...although there has been a substantial increase in the teaching of HRM, IR as a discipline has not been completely eroded and in places has proved to be resilient and adaptable to the challenge posed by HRM, in many instances incorporating and accommodating HRM into IR programs” (Westcott *et al* 2003: 179).

¹ NSWIT became UTS in 1987

They also noted that “a number of the subjects and programs in IR identified in the 1990 survey have disappeared” (Westcott et al, 2003: 181). Although IR as a discipline taught in universities may ‘not been completely eroded’ by 2003, more accurate and contemporary data would surely evidence its significant decline as an area of teaching and learning. In recent years the Department of Industrial Relations at Sydney University, the site of the first Chair of Industrial Relations in Australia, has been renamed the Department of Work and Organisational Studies and the once world recognised Department of Industrial Relations at the University of New South Wales has been renamed the Department of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour.

When the pressure mounted during the 1990s to provide courses more attuned to the changing market, post-graduate courses at UTS assumed the nomenclature of ‘Employment Relations’ (ER). These programs focussed upon what is now known as HR but included a substantial treatment of IR issues. Throughout the 1990s, there was a continuing pressure to shift the focus of programs to HRM. By moving from a focus upon IR and PM to that of ER, academics at UTS were able to thwart the pressure for an HRM focus for some time. The resistance to moving to a HRM focus was based upon academic as well as ideological concerns. The subject matter of HRM was viewed as being less academic, more descriptive and a less encompassing study of the employment relationship than offered by subjects in IR and/or ER. There was concern that the teaching of HRM would require a shift from a pluralist to a unitarist perspective. Many of these concerns were expressed in the conference on ‘Ethical Issues in Contemporary Human Resource Management’ held at Imperial College Management School in April 1996 which was jointly sponsored by the British Universities Industrial Relations Association and the European Business Ethics Network, UK (Winstanley, Woodall & Heery 1996). “Running through many of the papers and much of the discussion at the conference was a conviction that key developments in contemporary HRM were threatening employment standards” (Winstanley, Woodall & Heery 1996: 5).

By the turn of the new millennium, it was clear that academic attachments to IR and/or ER for teaching or researching purposes in the context of the Faculty of Business at UTS were a prescription for obsolescence. A senior member of the Faculty floated the concept that there were millions of Indian females who wanted to study HRM and that their preferred country of study was Australia. During the period 2002-3, the pressure to shift the focus of core units and course offerings at the postgraduate level to HRM became irresistible. At the same time, the Faculty commenced the process of achieving accreditation with the Advance Collegiate School of Business (AACSB) and this was to have a significant and beneficial impact upon the focus and content of the HRM subjects taught at UTS². AACSB provided a rationale and a depth for these studies which had not been earlier envisaged. HRM could be taught from the perspective of how it might contribute to good corporate governance with in depth consideration of associated ethical issues.

In this paper, the nature and implications of AACSB accreditation upon the teaching of HRM are examined. The paper begins with an examination of the role of the

² Initial accreditation by the AACSB was granted in December 2006.

AACSB and a discussion as to why its accreditation was pursued by UTS. The assignment of a key learning goal (KLG) to the core HRM post-graduate subject focussed upon good corporate governance is discussed in terms of its implications for teaching and assessment. The implications of this change in focus for how students and staff experienced the teaching and learning of this subject are considered in terms of various quality indicators. The conclusion reached is that although aspects of the quality assurance process were viewed as problematic by many staff, the relevance of the core HRM unit for students and their overall satisfaction with the subject has increased considerably.

What is the AACSB?

The Advance Collegiate School of Business (AACSB) International is a not-for-profit corporation of educational institutions, corporations and other organizations devoted to the promotion and improvement of higher education in business administration and management (Hedin, Barnes & Chen 2005).

AACSB International was founded in 1916 and its aims are to support and encourage excellence in management education worldwide. AACSB International is the premier accrediting agency for bachelor, master and doctoral degree programs in business administration and accounting and it began its accreditation function with the adoption of the first standards in 1919. Its founding members include Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, New York University, University of California at Berkeley and Yale University (www.aacsb.edu). In 1980, additional standards were adopted for accounting programs. Ten years later, AACSB International members approved mission-linked accreditation standards and the peer review process based on the Porter and McKibbin finding (Herdin, Barnes & Chen 2005). In 2003, members approved a revised set of standards that would emphasise 'assurance of learning' (Black & Duhon 2003) which were considered to be relevant and applicable to all business programs globally (Herdin, Barnes & Chen 2005). In addition to its accreditation function, AACSB International also conducts various development programs for faculty and administrators; engages in research and survey projects on topics specific to the field of management education; maintains relationships with disciplinary associations and other groups; interacts with the corporate community on a variety of projects and initiatives; and produces a wide variety of publications and special reports on trends and issues within management education. Furthermore, AACSB International maintains close relationships with its counterpart associations worldwide (www.aacsb.edu).

Reasons for UTS to obtain AACSB accreditation and the process

The higher education sector has become increasingly complex over the course of the past twenty years. Universities are faced with a wide range of new challenges, including demands for higher level of accountability of outputs, a shift in the relative numbers of local and international students, increasing competition for external funding, and an increase in expectation on the part of students. These new expectations create a challenge for universities in that they need to develop strategies to meet them, and to satisfy a diverse group of stakeholders that include business, local community, students, faculty and accrediting bodies (Black & Duhon 2003). The

quest to develop and redefine Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree programs to better fit the needs of business and students is well documented (Simpson, Sturges, Woods & Altman 2005; Emiliani 2004).

As the higher education sector becomes more complex and competitive, many universities are working to refocus their efforts towards meeting these challenges, especially by way of continuous quality improvement and accreditation to internationally recognised standards. The role of the accrediting body is to assure that an institution meets some minimum standards of performance and maintains an acceptable academic program (Harman & Meek 2000).

In response to the challenges already mentioned, the Faculty of Business at UTS began to explore methods to improve its business and education processes. It sought to acquire a world-class accreditation to attract overseas students who have the belief that formal accreditation is an indicator of high standard and high quality programs. AACSB International accreditation assures stakeholders that accredited business schools:

- Manage resources to achieve a vibrant and relevant mission.
- Advance business and management knowledge through faculty scholarship.
- Provide high-calibre teaching of quality and current curricula.
- Cultivate meaningful interaction between students and a qualified faculty.
- Produce graduates who have achieved specified learning goals (www.aacsb.edu/accreditation).

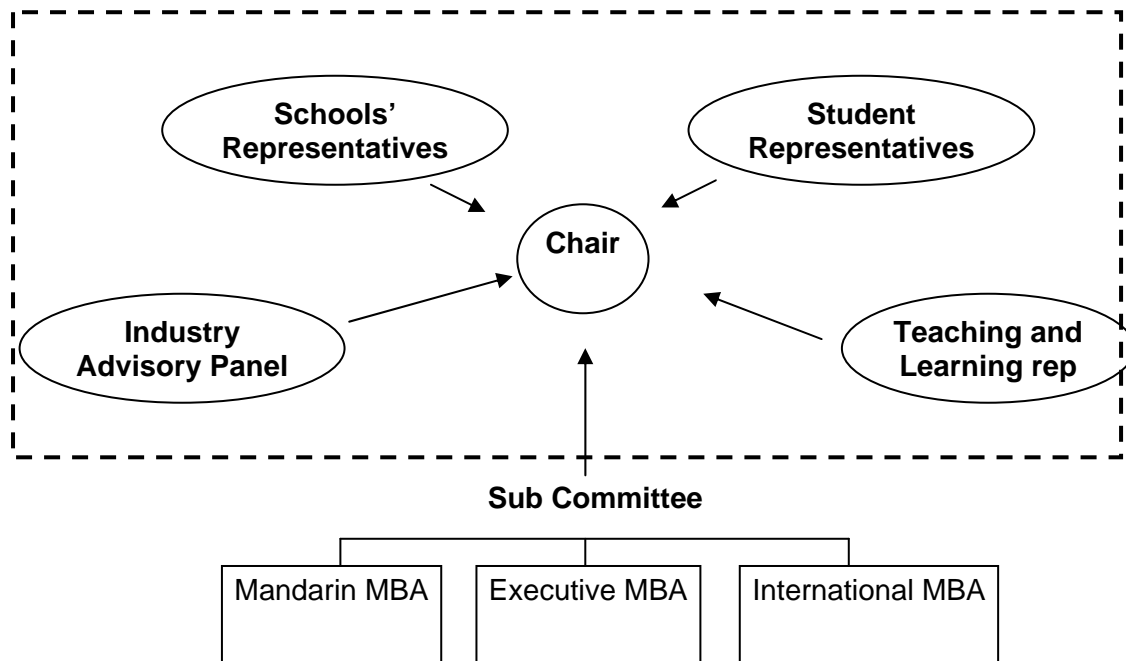
The process of AACSB accreditation begins with the hopeful institution advising the AACSB of their desire to be accredited. The AACSB appoints a Peer Committee of representatives of accredited institutions. Once the committee is assigned and accepted, the institution begins a process of self-evaluation. Over the course of a one year period, data is collected and assembled to demonstrate adherence to a list of twenty-one standards (see Appendix A), and a report is prepared documenting the collection process and the measured outcomes. The Peer Committee then visits the institution to examine the prepared documentation and to interview a number of academic staff, administrative staff and currently enrolled students. Finally, the Committee prepares a report of their findings that will include a recommendation that the institution be granted accreditation or a series of recommendations for improvement necessary for accreditation within an agreed timeline.

In July 2001, the Faculty of Business at UTS was admitted to the AACSB pre-candidacy and a mentor was appointed by the AACSB. However, due to a number of factors, including a new set of standards and procedures being instituted by AACSB, in early 2003 the Faculty re-submitted its eligibility application and was approved under the new system with a new mentor. The Faculty began its involvement in the AACSB accreditation process by conducting a 'self-evaluation report' to assess its readiness to acquire the accreditation and the initial focus at postgraduate level was upon the Faculty's Master of Business Administration (MBA).

Development and assigning of KLGs for core MBA subjects

Diagram 1 shows the structure of the review committee established by the Faculty. The review committee was composed of two representatives from each school, two student representatives, two industry advisors, a representative from and Teaching and Learning Unit and three sub-committees (Mandarin MBA, Executive MBA and International MBA).

DIAGRAM 1: Structure of the AACSB Accreditation Review Committee

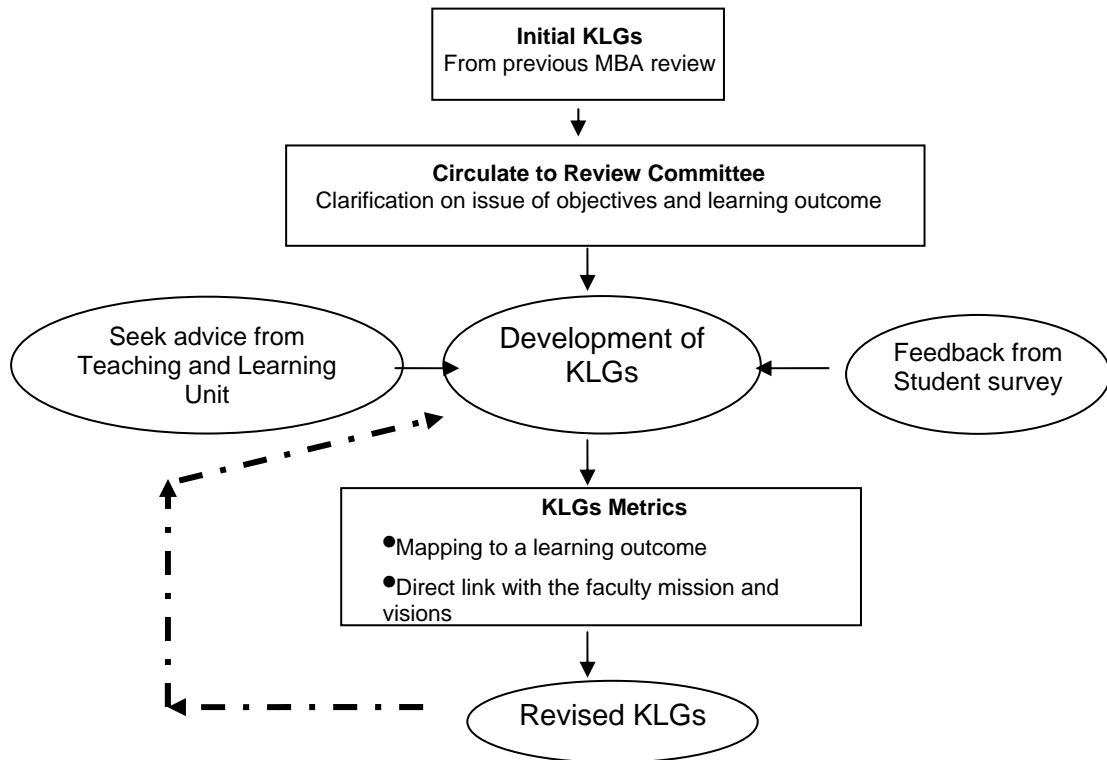


An extended process of compiling detailed documentation of all MBA subjects and examination of key learning goals was conducted at UTS as shown in Diagram 2.

The MBA program is comprised of 96 credit points made up of eight compulsory core subjects and eight elective subjects, all of six credit point value. Electives can be taken to achieve a major, two sub-majors, or a sub-major plus four discrete electives. A core subject in the MBA is HRM and students may undertake a series of subjects to achieve a HRM major or sub-major. One of the agreed key requirements for the UTS MBA program is the delivery of an ‘integrating experience’ across the program. A series of consultative meetings with key academic staff, MBA-core subject coordinators and administrative staff led to the compilation of a set of consistent and complimentary learning goals for the entire program, consistent with the mission statement of the Faculty of Business:

“A vibrant, city-based Faculty in a culturally diverse University. We create and disseminate leading-edge knowledge and deliver industry-relevant courses which produce *forward-thinking, work-ready graduates*. We provide higher education, professional services and research in ways that engage with, and strengthen our constituent communities.”

DIAGRAM 2: Development of Key Learning Goals Flowchart



As shown in Table 1, nine MBA Learning Goals were identified and subject coordinators identified the specific core subjects best suited to the attainment of particular goals, each seen to contribute to a tenth and integrating KLG based upon the Faculty’s mission to produce students who are forward thinking and work-ready.

TABLE 1: Assessment of Learning Goals		
	Learning Goal	Assessed in
1	To apply core business skills to problem analysis and decision-making.	21715 Strategic Management
2	To enhance work-ready expertise in a selected area of specialisation.	Specialised majors and sub-majors
3	To be able to communicate in a variety of forms across culturally diverse business environments.	24734 Marketing Management (and 24746*)
4	To develop strategic responses to current and future issues facing Australian and global business environments.	21715 Strategic Management
5	To be able to use information and business support systems to monitor issues, problems and opportunities affecting business.	22747 Accounting for Managerial Decisions (and 22784*)
6	To be able to reflectively apply leading-edge business theory to practical problem solving options and strategies	21718 Organisation Analysis and Design (and 21865*)
7	To develop an awareness of the principles of ethics and corporate governance in a variety of settings.	21720 Human Resource Management (and 21866*)

8	To develop the capacity to take a leadership role in business situations.	21813 Managing People (and 21867*)
9	To access and critically interpret business statistics and apply them in changing business environments.	25706 Economics for Management (and 25745*)

*MBA students with limited work experience (LWE) are required to undertake LWE versions of each of the core MBA subjects.

ER to HRM: “Thank God for AACSB”

In contemporary times, few fields of academic endeavour have experienced the extent of relentless attack witnessed by those in the fields of IR. Through an historical perspective, it may be surmised that the study of IR will be seen as an area of academic inquiry dependent upon the existence of a critical mass of unionism, beginning with the seminal work of Dunlop (1958) and declining with the birth of economic rationalism in about the 1980s and dying but not dead by the turn of the new millennium. Although Kelly (2003) provides considerable insights to the impact of the rising star of HRM upon the teaching of IR, the nature of the battle, pressures for the change, implications for not only what was taught and learnt but moreover for the role of academic institutions and their relationship with key stakeholders have not been fully documented. The salient fact is that a focus on IR has been replaced by a focus on HRM in most Australian and New Zealand educational institutions.

At UTS, and at many other academic institutions, the pressure to move from an IR focus to one which more adequately recognised the importance of HRM was resisted for a multiplicity of reasons. ‘Self-interest’ has been often cited within university contexts as a major cause of the resistance to change and it is somewhat self-evident that individuals who have invested their academic careers in a particular field will be reluctant to see it abolished. Academic self-interest, however, cannot alone explain this resistance because IR is a multi-disciplinary field of study and, has in fact been demonstrated, IR academics may move fairly easily into other areas including organisational studies and HRM; (eg Tipples *et al*, 2005) and their important work concerning Dairy Farm Employment in New Zealand. The resistance by IR academics was, of course, their contribution to a battle which they could see was being waged between the forces of collectivism versus individualism, between the recognition of workers’ rights and the needs of the organisation, between a pluralistic versus unitarist view of the working world and, ultimately, between a role of the university as an institution for the generation and promotion of knowledge *vis a vis* one focused upon producing managers for industry.

Academic research interests were a further reason for resistance to change in teaching commitments. Academics generally teach and research within the same field and certainly academic promotion requires research output which is within the same disciplinary area as that taught. Although Hattie and Marsh (1996) argue, on the basis of their research, that the relationship between research and teaching in universities is zero, most research active academics are in fact focussed upon issues relevant to those their general teaching commitments although research may often be upon particular issues not specifically taught in classes. It is generally viewed that research should inform teaching and that, indeed, such a relationship is an important characteristic of a university. For industrial relations academics, a requirement to focus their teaching on

HRM, represented an additional threat in the form of the implications for their research.

The pressure to move from the teaching of IR to HRM subjects arose during the 1980's and 1990's, was expressed within multiple layers of university administration and culminated at UTS, and many other institutions, in the adoption an employment relations (ER) nomenclature and focus. ER was essentially a half-way house, with its increased focus on HRM aspects and a reduced focus on what was traditionally seen as IR subjects, although many academics argued that it was indeed more than this, being a focus on what was actually occurring at the workplace level through a multi-disciplinary perspective (Spooner & Haidar 2006; Mortimer & Leece 2002). Whether a legitimate new academic area inquiry or not, ER at UTS would not survive for long. It simply did not satisfy the market requirements for courses in HRM. Growing numbers of international students had no interest in learning about antiquated Australian models of industrial relations and this was clearly where the future UTS market lay. The percentage of local students actually working in business was declining and even among these, interest in IR was quickly waning. Surveys of students demonstrated clearly that they sought subjects which would equip them to obtain jobs in organisations and that they saw subjects in HRM as being relevant to their needs.

It was difficult, no doubt, for dinosaurs to recognise that the environment could no longer support them. Their resistance to change was mirrored at many levels of Australian and New Zealand society. As the unemployed became underemployed, as workers became sole traders, as the working class assumed the identity of middle class with credit card debts, as the café latté society grew, as 'can do' and 'no problems' came to replace dissidence and opposition, IR and ER fell into the detestable trough of yesterday's conflict and dissidence (consider Hamilton & Maddison, 2007). Out of the ashes arose HRM, the study of how business can best manage human beings to achieve the greatest efficiency and profit from them, and, even more strategic in its focus and purpose, the study of Strategic HRM.

Through an historical perspective, it may be difficult to imagine why academics in the field of IR/ER would resist the enticements of the new HRM paradigm, but they did. Self-interest aside, there was considerable concern among UTS academics, and many others, that the shift to teaching HRM subjects would result in their acting as clones of businesses, that they would be required to sacrifice their theoretical knowledge and focus on administrative aspects of 'how to do' HRM. Notwithstanding the focus on 'strategic' HRM, it was difficult for many academics of the IR/ER persuasion, with their backgrounds often deeply rooted in law, sociology and history, to see HRM as much more than a crudely constructed and rather simplistic study of how business should manage the human beings that work for them.

It was in this context that IR/ER academics in the Faculty Business at UTS found themselves by 2001 confronted with the imperative to move to an HRM paradigm in teaching postgraduate subjects. Then, along came AACSB. The first ray of light suggesting that the teaching of HRM might have depth and real meaning beyond that of a captured tool of business interests came at the meeting of subject co-ordinators focused upon the KLGs set out in Table 1 above. At that meeting, the postgraduate HRM subject achieved the KLG: To develop an awareness of the principles of ethics

and corporate governance in a variety of settings. The adoption of this KLG was immediately and enthusiastically embraced because of its potential to lift the teaching of HRM from a managerial, unitarist frame of reference to one which considered pluralist interests in the context of ethics and good corporate governance.

Quality assurance requirements for the teaching and learning of HRM

Once the learning goals were defined and assigned to specific core subjects, academic co-ordinators were required to develop or modify subject content including particular assessment items which, when completed by students, demonstrated their attainment of the goals. The importance of ethics, as a curriculum topic, is widely recognised and a study by Schoenfeldt, McDonald and Youngblood (1991) found that even then, ethics received significant coverage at over 90 percent of the institutions surveyed. Although ethical considerations had formed a part of the content of IR/ER/HRM subjects taught at UTS, they had not previously been a central focus of the subject.

In developing the revised HRM core subject, it was found that although a number of internationally recognised texts did provide some treatment of the subject from an ethics and corporate governance perspective, none provided an integrated and thorough study. It was decided that although an HRM text would be used, the actual teaching of the subject would commence with a consideration of the Australian Stock Exchange (ASX) Principles of Good Corporate Governance and Best Practice Recommendations (www.asx.com.au) and that students would be challenged to consider each aspect of the functioning of HRM in terms of these principles. Further guidance in the development of required readings was obtained from a variety of sources including the review of published sources by Trezise (1996).

In practice, this resulted in the teaching of HRM along the lines set out by the major prescribed texts (Dessler 2004; Stone 2005) with the injection of 'ethical' and 'good corporate governance' considerations at every stage. In the first lecture, students were required to consider the range of ethical dilemmas and time was spent in exploring these. The purpose, of course, was to lay the foundations for an understanding of the role of HRM within a dynamic multiple stakeholder context with responsibilities to the whole of society. 'Strategic HRM' is presented within the Beer et al (1984) model and students are invited to consider the varying interests of different stakeholders, to consider the different possible methods for achieving outcomes. When considering, for instance, recruitment, students are required to identify the ethical dilemmas. For example, is it ethical to advertise a position externally when it is known that the person specification is designed for someone already within the organisation? Similarly, is it ethical to spend huge amounts of money advertising a position externally, attracting individuals from outside organisations, when the organisation has a favoured candidate? Such ethical considerations and dilemmas are introduced to each as element of the teaching and learning of HRM and, upon discussion, are rarely found to present a clear 'correct' answer. The purpose is to expose students to the complexity of decision making within the HRM paradigm and to assist them in developing their analytical skills and awareness of ethical concerns.

Students are also exposed to the importance of the role of HRM for ‘good corporate governance’. Each step of HRM practice is explored in these terms. For instance, students are required to consider the role of job descriptions, remuneration policy and performance management processes in contributing to good corporate governance. Thus, a strong focus of attention in the teaching and learning of all aspects of HRM is upon the ethical issues associated with policies, processes and their implementation as well as the role which each element of HRM can play in supporting good corporate governance.

Subject curriculum was developed which provided that the attainment of this KLG would be assessed through a report worth 40% of the total grade for the subject: “Students are required to individually develop and submit a strategic HR plan for an organisation. The plan must outline the key HRM objectives and how they will contribute to the overall business plan. Critical awareness of the ethical implications of the plan must be evident as well as a clear understanding of how the plan will contribute to improve corporate governance. Relevant literature should be used and cited.”

Two specific quality assurance measurements were developed to assess both the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning experience as well as the assurance of KLGs. First, a Student Feedback Survey (SFS) provides the basis for a system of teaching evaluation and is viewed as a key quantitative quality measurement instrument at UTS. A SFS is conducted toward the end of each teaching semester. Secondly, subject coordinators are required to report to the Faculty the results achieved by all students in the assessment task aimed at testing their achievement of the subject’s KLG. Hence, in addition to reporting students’ results for a subject overall, a separate report detailing the results of the KLG assessment task is required.

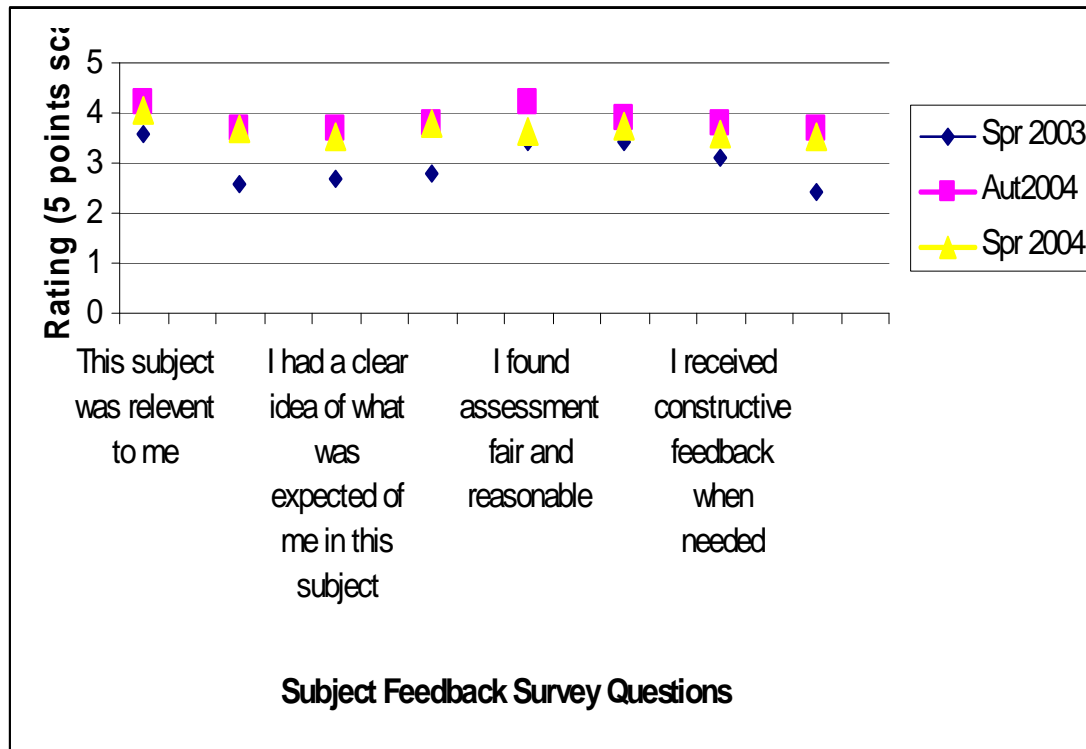
Evaluating the implications of AACSB for the teaching and learning of HRM

Although the process of seeking AACSB accreditation began in 2001, the new MBA KLGs were first integrated into the subject content offered to students in 2004. There are three sources of data used in this paper to evaluate the implications of these changes for teaching and learning in the core HRM unit of the MBA. First, student feedback through the subject evaluations conducted through the SFS for 2003-5 are compared. Secondly, HRM teaching staff were asked to evaluate the impact of the KLG upon their teaching experience in HRM. Thirdly, the co-ordinators of core MBA subjects and associated administrators were asked for their views regarding the quality assurance process.

First, the results of Student Feedback Surveys conducted by the Faculty 2003-5 demonstrate a significant improvement in student perceptions of the quality of the core HRM subject. The SFS questionnaire requires students to indicate their agreement on a five point Likert scale. Student agreement on all quality assurance measures rose between Spring semesters 2003-4 including, as illustrated in Figure 1, those assessing the relevance of the subject to the student, clarity of expectations, fairness of assessment and the receiving of constructive feedback. According to the results of the Spring 2005 SFS, HRM was rated one of the top two MBA classic core subjects as assessed by the question: “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this

subject”. The results indicate a significant improvement in student satisfaction with the core HRM subject during the period in which the subject material was refocused to address the ethical dimensions of HRM and the role of HRM in assuring good corporate governance.

FIGURE 1: HRM Subject Feedback Survey results 2003-4



Secondly, in Spring 2005 all postgraduate HRM teaching staff were asked to evaluate the impact of the KLG upon their teaching experience in HRM. A focus group was formed consisting of the six lecturers engaged in the teaching of postgraduate HRM core units (21720 and 21866) and the group was asked to respond to a single open-ended question “what is your experience of teaching in the core HRM unit?” Each of the lecturers had more than five years lecturing experience in postgraduate HRM subjects at UTS, as well as lecturing experience at other universities, and were therefore well placed to provide useful insights to the implications of the changes made to the subject. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive in terms of how they personally experienced teaching in the subject. One respondent summed up quite well the views expressed by others:

“I am very comfortable teaching HRM through an ethics and corporate governance perspective. I really think that it provides the subject with a depth that would otherwise be difficult to find. By adopting this focus in the teaching of all key aspects of HRM, it is possible to teach HRM through a pluralist perspective and not relegate the subject to a coaching of management administrative tools.”

However, members of the focus group were generally more sceptical about the implications for students’ learning, as summarised by one member:

“I think students are enjoying the subject more and believe it is more relevant because we are citing ASX Principles... basically, they are predominantly international students wanting visas and focused on accounting qualifications... they are not really interested in HRM but at least now they think that it might help them.”

Further, all members of the focus group were sceptical regarding the longer term and expressed views along the lines of :

“Ethics and corporate governance are important. So was ‘being internationally focused’, the ‘trade mark’ of the Faculty a few years ago, which was followed by ‘being strategic’, now its ethics and corporate governance. What will be next?”

Thirdly, an interview survey was conducted in Spring 2006 with a sample population comprised of half of the core MBA subject coordinators (N=4) and two members of administrative staff. The interviews were conducted informally with a single open-ended question “what is your experience on the reporting process of assurance of learning goals in relation to your workload”. Interviewees were encouraged to elaborate and extend on any issues or ideas so as to bring forward their own perspectives. The interviews provided useful insights to staff perceptions of their experiences in dealing with the reporting requirements, rather than concrete conclusions. While several respondents questioned the wisdom of the Faculty seeking AACSB accreditation, it was clear from the responses that there was a strong sense of the importance of continuous quality improvement among the core MBA subject coordinators:

“It re-clarifies the teaching objectives in this subject, even though they were known before. Maybe it is one of the reasons that this subject has become more popular.”

Although there was strong support for the adoption of a sharper focus to subjects through the integration of KLGs in subject material, there was also a view that the actual reporting process was tedious and a waste of academic time:

“My experience is that the process is largely an administrative chore - filling out forms that have little to do with the actual running of the subject. It is not really a difficult thing to do but does not add any education value to the subject itself.”

“My view is that the people who decide on what the metrics are should fill in the reports! Often co-ordinators have no information as to how the objectives set for their courses fit with the overall MBA and the AACSB, and on reflection the comments are probably not selling the course, the MBA or the school effectively. I think overall more information should be given by the MBA team.”

“Compiling the forms should be easy but it isn’t because part-time lecturers persist in submitting results in a form which does not facilitate copying,

pasting and compilation. If admin could deliver the final 'Student Result' forms a few weeks earlier in semester, the whole thing would be much easier to deal with. By the time we receive the final listing, lecturers have already developed their own reporting forms. Compiling these into one document is a real pain!"

Similarly, one member of the administrative staff expressed a view that was generally shared:

"Here it goes again another academic task without system support and it eventually ends up on my desk."

Summary and Conclusions

In this paper, we have outlined the key implications of seeking AACSB accreditation for the core subjects in the UTS MBA program and demonstrated the benefit of using the implication of the AACBS quality assurance to improve one of the core-MBA subjects, that being the HRM subject.

The teaching of HRM at a postgraduate level at UTS was profoundly influenced by the AACSB accreditation process as it occurred at the very time that academic staff were required to shift from an IR/ER to HRM focus. Although AACSB accreditation may be beneficial for UTS, it is not at all apparent at the level of teaching HRM at the actual accreditation makes any difference. However, it is very clear that the process of seeking AACSB accreditation had a profound and positive influence on the teaching and learning of HRM. Deeply held academic staff concerns regarding this change and its implications for the depth, breadth and meaningfulness of subject content were significantly alleviated by the adoption of an appropriate KLG. The fear of teaching HRM through a unitarist perspective, ignoring the interests of multiple stakeholders and focusing upon the 'strategic' role of HRM as a tool for business interests was replaced by the opportunity to focus instead upon the ethical issues confronting HRM in every aspect of its functions and genuinely exploring the challenges to HRM flowing from its multiple constituency and the requirement that it contributes meaningfully, consistently and ethically to the achievement of good corporate governance.

Although it is not possible from this study to state that the AACSB accreditation process resulted in an improved postgraduate HRM subject, the results of student evaluations and staff feedback certainly suggests that this was the case. Whether such improvements might have occurred in the absence of the AACSB accreditation process cannot be known. Student evaluations from 2003-5 clearly illustrate an improvement in quality assurance measures and staff feedback indicates a significant improvement in staff teaching satisfaction.

It would also seem, however, that the additional administrative responsibilities associated with reporting quality assurance measures have not been well received by academic or administrative staff. There was a continuous pressure from senior management to compile and to follow the newly implemented procedural process as part of AACSB accreditation, which has not been accompanied by a shared

commitment among academic staff. This was understandable when some academics perceived it as an administrative task rather than an academic responsibility. A perception that the AACSB was merely the 'Flavour of the Month', was also evident in staff interviews. Some members of academic staff considered that the choice of accreditation was inappropriate and some complained that there was a lack of consultation.

One of the obvious sources of conflict and frustration by academic and administrative staff was the lack of additional administrative and IT support in the new process. A breakdown in understanding between academic and administrative units created an unnecessary increase in workload for academics at the end of each semester. As part of the reporting process, academics are required to enter each assessment result into a Subject Listing Sheet (SLS) in week '17 or 18'. Some subject coordinators are required to enter hundreds of items of data per day due to last minute release of forms, along with demands for immediate returns.

In conclusion, the coordinator of the postgraduate HRM program at UTS offered the following insight:

"I love AACSB and its implications for the teaching of postgraduate HRM at UTS. I do understand that some academics are excited and interested in teaching HRM, particularly through what is termed a 'strategic' perspective. For me, the teaching of HRM represents a sad, diminished and ultimately wasteful use of university resources. Strategic or not, the study of HRM as represented in even the foremost texts is essentially concerned with how people can be best recruited, remunerated and performance managed and, in my view, this would be better taught in technical colleges than in universities, unless we fully accept a much diminished role for universities. The opportunity to teach HRM through an ethics and corporate governance perspective has uplifted the subject area by providing a rationale, accepted and supported within the university hierarchy, for the questioning and serious analysis of the ethical issues confronting HRM as well as the detailed consideration of how HRM should and can contribute to the good corporate governance of organisations as viewed from a multiple stakeholder perspective. It is not clear to me as to whether the actual gaining of AACSB will make any difference at the level of teaching HRM, although it is commonly asserted that accreditation is important to attracting future students. However, the results to date indicate that the journey has been more important than the destination."

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Appendix A – AACSB Standards

Standard 1: Mission Statement

Standard 2: Mission Appropriateness

Standard 3: Student Mission

Standard 4: Continuous Improvement Objectives

Standard 5: Financial Strategies

Standard 6: Student Admission

Standard 7: Student Retention

Standard 8: Support Staff Sufficiency/Student Support

Standard 9: Academic Staff Sufficiency

Standard 10: Academic Staff Qualifications

Standard 11: Academic Staff Management and Support

Standard 12: Aggregate Academic and Support Staff Educational Responsibility

Standard 13: Individual Teaching Staff Educational Responsibility

Standard 14: Individual Students Educational Responsibility

Standard 15: Management of Curricula

Standard 16: Undergraduate Learning Goals

Standard 17: Undergraduate Educational Level

Standard 18: MBA Learning Goals

Standard 19: Specialised Master’s degrees Learning Goals

Standard 20: Master’s Educational Level

Standard 21: Doctoral Learning Goals