Assessing for futures:
can professional learning provide a sustainable assessment platform to support learning beyond graduation?

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Recent evidence suggests that assessment in higher education is predominantly focused on certifying learning (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008), and that the assessment methodologies adopted do not necessarily focus on 'driving' learning (Ramsden, 1993; Bransford et al., 2000). The notion that assessment should reach beyond graduation to nurture attitudes, skills and knowledge for life (Boud et al., 2010) requires that it be used to do more than just measure learning objectives. Instead it should be designed to be sustainable, to inform judgment, to encourage reflexive learning and to develop students to become practitioners. This paper is based on an Australian Learning and Teaching Council–funded project entitled 'Engaging industry: embedding professionally relevant learning in the business curriculum'. Through a series of surveys, focus groups and interviews, a framework was developed to categorise professional learning practices within the business curriculum and to provide exemplars of good practice for each category. This framework and the related examples were then used to develop resources to support academics using professional learning in their teaching, including 'enablers and impediments' as well as good practice principles and assessment guidelines. In this paper the guidelines will be discussed alongside examples of good practice from universities across Australia that use professional learning practices to support learning beyond graduation.

Keywords: assessment futures; professional learning; reflection; sustainable
Theme: assessment for sustainable learning within and beyond the course

Introduction

One area increasingly emphasised in many recent studies of business education by stakeholders external to business faculties is the role of universities in the development of generic graduate

skills (Allen Consulting Group, 2006; Australian Industry Group, 2006). The development of generic skills is not limited to the university context, and is related to the informal as well as the formal curriculum. Moreover, such learning may continue after graduation and is part of lifelong learning. In addition, a Carrick-funded Discipline-Based Initiative scoping study undertaken by the Australian Business Deans Council Teaching and Learning Network identified widespread concern among industry, academic and professional associations about the lack of engagement with real-world problems by business graduates. This project aimed to investigate the mechanisms employed to develop these generic skills in a real world context, termed as professional learning.

Professional learning may be defined as the development of professional capabilities through teaching and learning experiences and activities that integrate academic, discipline-specific and industry-referenced knowledge, skills and attitudes. It manifests in a range of teaching and learning activities, assessment practices and innovative programs. The key characteristics of professional learning are:

- industry referencing – it explicitly linked to industry or professional bodies

- curriculum currency – it addresses up-to-date issues and industry practice

- curriculum integration – it develops professional capability through linking practice with theory

- self-directed learning – it fosters reflective practice.

The project identified innovative forms of industry engagement that inform and enhance professional learning to cultivate personal attributes, enhance professional skills and improve graduate employability. It achieved this by identifying innovative practice and good practice principles in the development, delivery and evaluation of professional learning. This led to developing a set of guidelines and examples to support staff in designing assessments.

Methodology

An action research methodology was adopted to provide a participative and reflective approach to the project. Interviews and focus groups with representative stakeholders from academe and from professional and industry associations, as well as students and academic leaders, were undertaken in order to gain insight into the following objectives:

- the promotion, adoption and embedding of policies and procedures that encourage a professionally relevant perspective to business curricula and pedagogy

- the development of a framework or typology within which to categorise professional learning in the business curriculum

- the development of paradigmatic case studies as exemplars of good practice prototypes to showcase innovative curricula, pedagogy and assessment models.

Findings

The project was able to develop a framework to categorise professional learning with more than 70 examples to illustrate the different types of professional learning in the framework. This work enabled the project team to draw a set of good practice principles to guide the implementation of professional learning. In the process of analysing the data it was recognised that assessment matters were highlighted in a number of examples. These examples were used to develop a set of guidelines to support staff in designing professional learning assessments that encourage learning beyond the degree program.

Conclusions and Implications

We propose that many of the assessment elements of professional learning foster the sustainable assessment features that promote learning after graduation. Professional learning can inform judgement and develop the necessary skills of a practitioner by emphasising the critical nature of professional capabilities in authentic settings. The often self-directed nature of this style of learning environment also encourages self-assessment and reflection. This presentation will examine how professional learning supports sustainable assessment, providing examples as to these types of learning can be implemented in practice.

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