

# KEY ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH POST GRADUATE COURSE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

**GREG WHATELEY**

*Centre for Applied Education  
Griffith University, Gold Coast*

**ABSTRACT** *This paper provides a discussion of some of the key issues associated with the rethink about post graduate subject and course offerings. It provides some insight into developments at Griffith University's Gold Coast campus with the education and film and television music areas which are developing provisions on campus, off campus and off shore as a result of a range of flexible delivery mechanisms and modes.*

Considerable time, effort and energy is going into the reshaping and rethinking of post graduate offerings locally and nationally. In Australia, given the significant shift at post graduate level to fee paying initiatives, designers are viewing awards and courses as commodities that are available in the market place and therefore need to take into account the needs and wants of the consumer- in this case the post graduate student. "The single most important switch of focus in higher education policy-making is from demand to supply" (Schuller, 1991, p. 4). That is a shift from provider demands to consumer supply and satisfaction. Accordingly, designers and providers are considering issues related to provision, quality assurance, fee paying ramifications, executive designs, the use of technology, client evaluations and options other than campus based activities.

Four key conditions are necessary in future provision and design. These conditions include flexible delivery, technology, changing role of the presenter, and award design and structure. Each is considered in turn. These conditions are essentially stand alone but also intersect making post graduate initiatives both marketable and transportable.

## **FLEXIBLE DELIVERY**

Flexible delivery is becoming quite an item across the spectrum of courses and offerings. There is a steady move towards a range of flexible delivery modes that are challenging the more traditional view that effective teaching is essentially a 14-16 week activity with students and staff engaging for 3-4 hours each week in a mix of lectures and tutorials. Schuller (1991) rejects this design when he comments: the notion that there is a fixed quantum of time below which higher education cannot properly be delivered is quite simply implausible. (Schuller, 1991, p. 12)

The actual delivery mechanism and mode will be determined largely by the client base, the content of the subject or course, and the nature of the teaching and learning which best suits the area or topic. Flexible delivery then is about

matching best teaching with most effective learning. The 1992 TAFE Queensland Flexible Delivery Working party viewed flexible delivery in terms of:

An approach to vocational education and training which allows for the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variations in learning opportunities. (Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992, p. 47)

Flexible delivery is characterised in this context in terms of flexible entry, flexible program components, flexible modes of learning and flexible points of exit; greater learner control over issues of content, sequence, time, place and learning methods; the provision of suitable learner support systems; the appropriate application of learning technologies; improved access to learning resources; and the use of flexible assessment processes.

Flexible learning finds its expression in the utilisation of a variety of learning locations including the workplace, the community, and the home; the utilisation of resource based learning with appropriate tutorial support; the application of technology to enhance delivery and access; and the further extension of educational opportunities access.

Deakin University, Victoria (Joughlin 1995, p. 5-6) also has articulated concise statements of their view on flexible teaching and learning. It considers flexibility to be a means of supporting student learning; catering to diverse backgrounds and learning styles; viewing education as a lifelong process; developing an inclusive concept of 'campus' that includes a range of learning environments; using appropriate communications technologies; valuing the scholarship of teaching; and developing an integrated and cooperative organisational structure.

Flexible delivery encompasses a wide range of approaches to teaching and learning. What it is largely about is providing alternatives to students in an effort to maximise the quality of the teaching and learning process and create greater accessibility for a range of student types. This is reflected, for example, in a move to weekend seminars and conferences which provide access to timeslots that students with full time employment would otherwise find difficult to schedule. There is a significant shift within my own faculty away from evening classes for post graduate education students to intensive mode delivery designs scheduled during school holiday periods. This shift has considerable client support and demand.

Within my own faculty considerable success has been achieved with regard to flexible delivery of post graduate subjects and awards. Worth mention are the Graduate Certificate in TESOL; the Graduate Certificate in Special Needs Education; the Graduate Certificate in Applied Education; the Graduate Certificate in Film and Television Music; the Graduate Diploma in Film and Television Music; the Master of Education Studies; and the Master of Arts. All awards have combined a flexible approach to the delivery, organisation, and maintaining of complete courses and subjects within the courses.

Considerable effort has been spent on evaluating the flexible designs and in turn analysing the feedback from clients. Jones and Bell (1994) in a report on the

implications of intensive mode delivery for post graduate education students conclude:

Above all, students have responded in a very positive way to the concentrated delivery of the Winter/Spring programmes. For most of these students the intensive mode of delivery has created a continuity and a high level focus on topics and issues associated with each programme. In addition the absences of work pressures and the reduction of demands from everyday problems during the study period, has enabled students to approach their studies in a more relaxed frame of mind. (Jones & Bell, 1994, p. 19)

The feedback and evaluation of the intensive mode delivery exercises on the Gold Coast in 1994 demonstrated a strong client preference for this approach. It is described best in an unsolicited student response that stated:

I think all in-service courses should be intensive for one week. It is totally unnecessary to turn up week after week - it is too disjointed and no real gains are made. This course recognised that teachers are professionals. (Jones & Bell, 1994, p. 17)

The response to new and innovative designs related to flexible delivery of post graduate studies has been overwhelmingly positive. With both Education and Film and Television Music clients the feedback has been clear - the preference is for a range of executive style provisions with intensive mode as the favourite of the designs with post graduate education students.

The education initiatives within the Faculty of Education and the Arts at the Gold Coast have included intensive delivery of selected subjects (one week and two week designs); full certificate courses run over summer school (four to five weeks duration) with the only additional field work required outside that period; modules (half subjects) running over a 3 day intensive period; and CD Rom based subjects that have been self paced and monitored.

The film and television music initiatives within the faculty have incorporated subjects utilising weekend conferences; full day seminars with occasional tutorial support; modified intensive delivery over a 10 day period; considerable use of internet and e-mail based tutorial support; and the use of CD Rom proficiency enhancement materials.

These designs have in turn made it possible for a number of these courses to be established in a range of off campus and off shore locations. The flexible delivery designs, in fact, have resulted in widening markets and client bases. A selection of tests have been conducted within the undergraduate forum with regard to flexible delivery mechanisms. The response has been significantly positive. Further developments will be evidenced throughout 1996.

## TECHNOLOGY

Fundamental to flexible designs of the future will be the incorporation of a range of technologies including the internet, e-mail, CD Rom and ultimately access to

the so called 'information highway'. Gates (1995) explores the potential use of technology in education when he writes:

Great educators have always known that learning is not something you do only in classrooms, or only under the supervision of teachers. Today it is sometimes difficult for someone who wants to satisfy his curiosity or end his confusion to find the appropriate information. The highway with its associated technologies is going to give us all access to seemingly unlimited information, anytime and any place we care to use it. It's an exhilarating prospect, because putting this technology to use to improve education will lead to downstream benefits in every area of society. (Gates, 1995, p. 184)

The use of a range of technologies available at present and soon to be available will be regular features of flexible delivery designs. The arguments for the use of technology are well supported in the current debate. Bradley (1995) perceives the need to incorporate a range of technology based activities within any given course or programme. This incorporation has led to a revised delivery of university courses and in turn has proven a reconsideration of issues associated with access and entry. He writes:

As the technology for delivering university education has improved, there has been a reduction in the formal requirements for beginning university courses. In many cases, if you think you can do it, you just pay your fee and give it a try. Open learning is open not just in terms of the way it's delivered, but also in the sense that it takes more account of what you actually know, rather than what certificates you may hold. (Bradley, 1995, p. 129)

Issues of greater access are integral to a discussion of heightened use of technology. Students with computer and modem facilities at home are able to access information, subjects and courses at a time and location convenient to them. Morgan (1995) highlights the advantage of internet based subjects in the following way-

One advantage that students have when using computers and taking courses that are available on the internet is that such classes can be very convenient in the respect that the student can get on the computer from home. (Morgan, 1995, p. 3)

The use of certain technologies incorporating distant and diverse settings can create a certain excitement for students best summed up by Ellsworth (1994):

Contacts around the world, in far away places, make any project more dynamic, and more interesting. Often, the internet has the most current information available anywhere. Both teachers and students can be invigorated by the freshness and immediacy of the Net. (Ellsworth, 1994, p. 3)

Technology is capable of enhancing the teaching and learning process. It is capable of providing resources and interactions that would normally not be possible. Technology has the capability of improving access to courses and information, providing flexible and worthwhile options for students of all ages and levels. The technology embraced will in turn bring about significant changes in the role of the teacher in the teaching and learning process. Martin (1995) makes this point clear in his comments:

In terms of teaching and learning the most significant implication is the change in the role of the teacher. The teacher moves from being the content specialist, the deliverer (normally face to face, or print) and assessor to become a member of a production team which develops on-line computer based materials. The materials delivered electronically, used by the student and then the student responses are returned and in some circumstances assessed electronically. The teacher will use a variety of electronic communication tools such as electronic mail and desktop conferencing. (Martin, 1995, p. 5)

Huston and Huston (1995) comment on the real potential of the new found electronic (computer based) resource:

The many electronic libraries available through the internet greatly extend the research capabilities of students and teachers alike. The libraries provide access to information from a wide variety of sources, combining text, pictures, sound and even movies. (Huston and Huston, 1995, p. 3)

Access to the so called information highway will change the way teachers and students approach their work and perceive themselves as professionals. Spring (1995) comments:

A more urgent imperative comes from the impact of the information highway on the nature of the work environment and on every facet of our everyday lives. It is this all pervasive impact which demands that schools need to provide all students with both basic levels of competence and the opportunity for all to attain high standards of achievement in and through the information highway. (Spring, 1995, p. 30)

A number of Universities throughout Australia are already investigating and using extensive technology based projects on and off campus. The major players in the future of flexible delivery in a range of settings will all incorporate technological advances to the advantage of their clients and themselves.

## **CHANGING ROLE OF THE PRESENTER**

Flexible delivery provides the opportunity for a new shape and scheduling mechanism. Technology supports the development of alternative ways of

delivering and supporting these new designs. Fundamental to the success of a number of the subjects and courses cited has been the use of highly competent and specialised presenters. Many of these presenters have national and international reputations and profiles. In both education and film and television music circles clients have been highly supportive of the use of quality providers naturally enough. In many ways it has now become a requirement of offerings particularly in the off campus and off shore initiatives. It is a significant marketing tool.

This has meant a reconsideration of staffing policy and the incorporation of a large number of highly specialised sessional and contract staff. In turn the role of the full-time academic staff has undergone some considerable revamping into facilitator, manager of resources and academic supervisor.

The film and television music course, which currently operates on three sites, has only one full time academic staff member attached; the equivalent of two days a week part-time administrative support; and employs approximately fifty specialised staff throughout the year. Sessional staff are based throughout Australia and overseas. In some cases these sessional presenters provide as little as two hours a year input. This design has proven to be highly successful and has been well received and praised by students.

These developments have also proven financially viable in that the film and television music and many of the education initiatives involve fee paying designs that completely finance the projects. The shift to fee paying programmes is a natural progression and will be a feature of most post graduate offerings across Australian Universities with the next five years. There has already been a significant shift in this direction particularly so with executive type courses.

Bradley (1995) supports the notion of self sufficient and self funded programmes and reflects on the proposition that university education is no longer exclusively perceived as a public service but rather a profit centred activity. He writes:

What was once usually referred to as the 'education profession' is now more likely to be described as the 'training industry'. What's in a (change of) name is the reality that education is being seen less as a general public service, to be funded by public revenues, and more as a business which funds all or part of its activities by selling its product. (Bradley, 1995, p. 127)

## **AWARD DESIGN AND STRUCTURE**

The culmination of the flexible delivery mechanisms, the enhanced use of technology and a change in the role of the presenter provides the opportunity for students to shape their own awards and incorporate their own interests and enthusiasms. This is evident in a move towards generic Masters Degrees, for example, where students shape their own majors and in turn design their own research topics accordingly. In many ways this is the most radical aspect of the shift to client based developments.

Fundamental to the development of professional provision for educators and industry clients will be the availability of suitable accreditation and awards.

These awards will need to be clearly structured (transparent) and will be cumulative in their development and progression (articulation).

In the education field the large award component could be, for example, a Master of Education Studies consisting of say 12 subjects that can be accessed by students with suitable prior qualifications and experience. In turn it would be sensible to sub divide the Masters model into smaller awards such as a Graduate Certificate (4 subjects) and Graduate Diploma (8 subjects) which provide clients with a range of possibilities that best suit their needs and interests. Each of these sub divisions could have a focus as determined by the client. A clear articulation between the smaller components is essential. Students would be able to exit the smaller award, and at a later date re-enter the structure, cashing in the award for a larger qualification.

Generic structures (Master of Education Studies for example) will outmode and supersede 'named' specialist awards such as Master of Educational Administration, Master of Special Needs, and the like. Structures will simply require students to complete a stated number of coursework subjects, a research methodology and a research project of some kind. This structural flexibility will provide a wide range of possibilities for clients who are keen to match their own interests with their professional development and qualifications. They will be able to specialise or generalise according to their own interests and career aspirations.

In the film and television music area named Graduate awards will be overcome by generic graduate awards such as Master of Arts in which students will be requested to complete a number of coursework subjects, a research methodology and a research project. The same sub division would be possible using the Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Masters model.

Both initiatives are currently available through the Centre for Applied Education with the faculty of Education and the Arts at the Gold Coast campus (and beyond) of Griffith University.

A further development will be the clear provision of options with regard to coursework and research. In the education forum coursework Masters degrees and Doctorates will gain considerable support and client following. The film and television music arena will maintain significant practical coursework interest with growing developments in research interest.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

It is my view that in order to facilitate the effective transition to a customer centred regime a number of conditions will need to form the backbone of post graduate offerings in the next few years. These qualities will shape the nature of the offerings and temper the actual approach to delivery and design.

Of significance will be customer requirements and demands changing the products, programs, content and methods of delivery; technology, underpinned by global telecommunications networks, will move learning away from the classroom for a considerable percentage of current programs and services; and teachers will not necessarily teach - they will have become managers of learning, marketing managers, content developers or business managers - or a combination of each. This will be coupled with an evident shift away from full-time staffing

arrangements. Further, staff will be located in a range of alternative locations including working from home; there will be increases in alliances with other learning services and training providers; various elements of University will be run and managed as businesses with increasing external revenue streams, partner investment and full commercial accountability; and Continuing Education will play a major role in the provision and delivery of courses and subjects.

These qualities in turn will make possible new initiatives in off campus and off shore arenas. It is quite conceivable that a combination of these elements and qualities will enhance the marketability of the post graduate commodity locally, nationally and internationally.

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