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Title Dare to Change: Realizing the Opportunities of Postgraduate Curriculum Development

Submitter Dr. Cathy Minnett-Smith, Dr. Alexander Kofinas

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Outline

The University of Bedfordshire Business School (UBBS) has a long tradition of offering a range of postgraduate taught (PGT) courses. In recent years, the University increased the number of student intakes in each year to respond to market demand in international student recruitment. Consequently, the portfolio ended up with 11 intakes throughout the year with a relatively healthy recruitment at each point up until 2013.

More recent political changes associated with international students and more stringent UKVI demands have led to a reduction in student numbers. At the same time, increased stringency in visa processes led to an increased number of students arriving late for the start of the courses. Concurrently, the university was also expanding their international partnership delivery to mitigate the impact of political decisions on international recruitment. The combined effect resulted in a decrease of student numbers with courses being delivered to low student numbers and adaptations needed on a regular basis to accommodate late arriving students. Complexity was the inevitable consequence leading to a poor staff and student experience resulting in the portfolio being unsustainable. Concurrently, sector-wide PGT provision was criticised for a lack of attention to employability (Universities UK 2014). Furthermore, the introduction of TEF (with an indication that PGT would be included from phase 4) and postgraduate loans provided an additional impetus to focus on the PGT provision. UBBS adopted a practice-based curriculum in 2013 and were thus in a position to develop this further through innovatively embedding employability in the PGT provision.

This confluence of events meant that UBBS reached a point where the existing PGT portfolio did not fit the pedagogical philosophy of the school, the requirements of multiple stakeholders, the changes in the visa regulations nor the employability needs of the students. Developing the PGT provision was essential in order to provide UBBS with a differential advantage in a highly competitive market place.

In November 2015 the decision was taken to close the existing PGT portfolio and launch a new suite of courses in September 2016 based on a six entry-point block delivery structure whilst at the same time providing a smaller range of focused, standardised thirty credit units with a high level of unit sharing between courses. An ipsative personal development framework is embedded in a four-tier extended induction programme delivered between each block of study that becomes progressively more employability focussed. This common architecture is coupled with a flipped classroom delivery model supported by a blended learning pedagogy (Kurtz, Tsimmerman, & Steiner-Lavi, 2014) to enable class time to be prioritised for active student engagement (Boyinbode, Ng'ambi, & Bagula, 2013; McCarthy, 2010; Stacey & Gerbic, 2007). Rich peer-to-peer learning opportunities are afforded by new students at each entry joining existing students within each unit. All the courses share a

choice of a final capstone unit which can be a traditional dissertation or a work based final project experience. Employability is further embedded in units via the use of live projects and assessments rooted in authentic and practical workplace scenarios. Students study one unit at a time and the introduction of a non-credit bearing unit has enabled the proactive management of late arriving students.

At the time of writing, five intakes of students have been recruited into the courses. The impact of the change is being evaluated, using a mixed methodology approach, to determine staff and student satisfaction with the new courses, the impact on delivery and assessment strategies as well as the impact on student engagement and performance. Data collection is via;

- Staff and student focus groups
- Student satisfaction at a unit level measured through the standard unit surveys.
- Implementation of the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden 1991) to measure students' perceptions of quality at a course level; this is being implemented every 3 blocks providing a longitudinal aspect to the study and enabling a comparison of results between students in various stages of their courses.
- Analysing student performance data at the end of each block of delivery.

To date, course experience questionnaire data is available from 175 students who have completed either one, two or three blocks of study. These data have been analysed using factor analysis to identify the key factors that affect students' perceptions of quality of the redesigned course with MANOVA used to compare students at different stages or with different demographic characteristics. These results have been triangulated with the qualitative information resulting from the unit surveys and focus groups.

Results to date indicate high levels of student satisfaction at both unit and course level. Initial investigations indicate that these are attributable to the style of learning, embedding of employability aspects, and an enhanced relationship with staff.

Staff satisfaction has increased; whilst the intensity of delivery in each block is demanding staff can plan their time more effectively. The reduction in the number of deliveries and increased cohort sizes support more flexible, dynamic learning environments. Furthermore, staff gain immense satisfaction from forming better relationships with students due to the intense nature of the delivery and are reporting improved student engagement.

Student performance has improved significantly against two key performance indicators; the AB grades rate on the unit and the number of academic misconducts. Across the provision the AB rate has risen from around 32% to 45% with external examiners feedback indicating that the new assessments are actually more challenging. Meanwhile, the academic misconduct rate has dropped significantly. The improvements seem attributable to **a.** an improved management of late-arriving students and **b.** the fact that students focus on one piece of assessment at a time.

In conclusion, implementing a wholesale change of this magnitude required careful balancing of multiple stakeholders without compromising the ultimate end goal. So far, the indications are that the dramatic changes in the PGT provision in response to the turbulent context for PGT courses in the UK have been successful and have justified the challenges of radical organisational change.

(975 words)

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