

OFFERING GRADUATE COURSES FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS: REFINING TEACHING MODES AND APPROACHES TOWARDS BEST PRACTICES*

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Abstract

This paper is based on the researcher's experiences as a graduate student, a senior academic teaching and auditing graduate classes. He has engaged in teaching and research at 31 universities. In his over 35 years of experience, he has developed some of the most effective graduate courses, attracting students from 30 overseas countries. Courses are offered both on-campus and off-campus. These courses received high student evaluation ratings and appreciations, ranging from 4.0 to 4.9 on a 5 point scale. In 1989, the researcher commenced teaching in a faculty with academics, solely dedicated to graduate level teaching. But by 2005, due to keen competition for graduate students and the need to pay full-fees, he has become the only academic having full-time work, at graduate level, at a School of Education comprising over 80 full-time and part-time academics.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Introduction

This paper is based on the researcher's experiences as a graduate student, visiting lecturer, university tutor, lecturer, senior lecturer, visiting professor, graduate observer, and associate professor. From 1968 to 1988, the researcher gained post-graduate student experience at five universities and a university affiliated tertiary institution; completing a graduate diploma, two and a half master's degrees and a doctoral degree. Fields of studies included: International affairs, economics, political science, management of public

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enterprises, and educational administration. Many other academic disciplines were audited while visiting universities in Australia, Canada, China, Fiji, Japan, Norway, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, The Netherlands, the USA, and UK. For the past 17 years the researcher taught graduate studies, focusing his attention on refining the modes of graduate courses, methodologies, approaches in teaching and has helped hundreds of leaders and managers working in schools, tertiary institutions, health sectors, and the army. He has adopted different experimentation methods based on student evaluations, consultations, and reflection on previous experiences.

In 1989, the researcher joined a faculty with 18 academics, solely dedicated to graduate level teaching. In 2005, he had become the only academic in the School of Education with a full course load, teaching graduate students with over 80 full-time and part-time academics. This was the result of the discontinuance of hundreds of graduate level courses, due to the non-availability of economically viable numbers of enrollments due to the keen competition by other universities.

Aims, Research Design, Methodology and Sample

The major aim of the project was to develop excellence in teaching based on different approaches to teaching on a graduate level. This method would provide the greatest benefits while utilizing the best practices, for current and aspiring educational leaders. Graduate students come from eight Australian school systems and 32 other countries. The researcher has taught on the masters and doctoral level, supervising 13 doctoral and masters' theses completions and currently directing seven other doctoral projects. The courses were offered both on and off campus. Course content, teaching modes, methodologies and approaches were refined to allow students to achieve. At the end of each teaching semester, the students were required to evaluate the courses; each evaluation was kept confidential and anonymous and sent to a central evaluation unit of the University. The data were analyzed and overall evaluation reviews were sent to the professor and the Dean of the Faculty.

Methodology

The methodology included both quantitative and qualitative research methods, in the form of extensive student evaluations, consultations, interviews, documentary analyses, and reflections. This paper draws on these research methods, approaches, and methodologies. Experience was also drawn from publishing five research-based books and over 100 papers published as articles in 45 different international journals and chapters in 16 books. The discussion relates to the development and refinement of courses, a master's degree program design and course material. Assessment tasks and in-class presentations were designed with a practical orientation while avoiding excessive theoretical emphasis. But, theoretical concepts were employed to refine and improve practice. Assignment task often require the application of work-related knowledge. The results of over 20 research projects, seven doctoral and five master's level research projects, and other areas of teaching related research and experiences enriched the discussions. Also included are reflections and reviews of the courses, based on annual student evaluations.

First Phase in Developing Courses in Educational Administration

In 1989, when the researcher joined the University of Newcastle, the Faculty of Education had only 50 % of a course (i.e. 'Curriculum Development and Educational Administration' within the specialization of educational administration. Thereafter, from 1989, 2 year long courses in educational administration were offered. In 1990, as the university switched on to a 2 semester academic year, and four courses were offered in educational administration. The increasing student demand, caused the university to offer these courses at another education centre, organized by the New South Wales Department of School Education. Towards the end of 1990, the university decided to offer another joint master's degree course with the senior officials of the Department of School Education (DSE). Twenty scholarships for current and prospective school leaders and for officials of the DSE were also offered. Thus, by 1991, five courses in the specialization of educational administration were offered. In the meantime, the New South Wales Department of School Education adopted school-based management as a preferred alternative to the bureaucratic model of school management in the state schools. The university had to recruit another academic to meet the increasing student demand.

At this stage, the school leaders were eager to obtain a specialist qualification rather than a generic title, such as Master of Educational Studies, 63 students submitted an appeal urging the introduction of a

specialist degree program (Gamage, 1992). One year later, a survey conducted by the Dean of Education supported this new development. At this stage there were already six semester courses offered in this specialization. This approach was strongly supported by the New South Wales Department of School Education. A top level meeting between the Regional Assistant Director General of Education (RADGE) and the Vice-Chancellor was held to expedite the process (University Newcastle, 1994/95). In 1995, on a proposal made by the researcher and endorsed by the faculty board, a program team comprised of representatives from the Faculties of Education, Economics and Commerce, Department of School Education, Secondary Principals' and Primary Principals' Councils, Catholic Education Office and The Independent Schools Organization was established. Deans of the two university faculties, RADGE and all relevant stakeholder groups were convened to finalize the proposal in a short period of time. The Program Team considered two discussion papers one by the Interim Director (Gamage, 1995a) and another by the Department of School Education (DSE, 1995). The consideration of the two discussion papers led to another discussion paper (Gamage, 1995b) resulting in consensus within the Program Team. Thus, by the end of 1995, the degree title and the structure of the program for the Master of Leadership and Management in Education (MLMED) received the university's academic senate and council approval. The structure of the program comprised of courses that were not usually offered by the other education faculties.

Second Phase in Developing Courses in Educational Administration

Following the approval from the university, course teams were established. The teams consisted of Department of School Education officials and two faculties; together they developed course contents and pedagogical approaches for courses both on and off-campus. The program team used general principles and a flexible approach to develop course material. The guidelines prepared by the program team required that each course cover around 10 broad topics and provide comprehensive lecture notes, two or more directly relevant book-chapters and/or journal articles and a prescribed text as mandatory readings. In addition, a course should include a list of recommended readings under each broad topic area to facilitate comprehensive coverage. Students were required to submit three written assignments, which included two type-written, 1350-1500 word, journal article type papers and a major 1800-2000 word paper. The assignment tasks were expected to have practical relevance to the students' working environments. On-campus students were also required to attend classes and make seminar presentations and participate in group discussions based on extensive research.

The courses are offered flexibly on and off campus. The course material used helps facilitate student learning. On-line courses with black-board facilities are also provided. Both on and off-campus students were provided with university email addresses to provide easy and expeditious communication with academic and non-academic staff. Off-campus students have access to their lecturers through email communications, telecommunication or on-campus appointments. The lecturers are required to provide adequate feedback on students' assignments, which would allow the students to efficiently refine and improve their future submissions. There were instances where the feedback from faculty enabled MLMEd students to improve their assignment tasks and have them accepted for publication in professional and refereed journals.

Success Achieved in a Highly Competitive Environment

In 1998, the introduction of full tuition fees for graduate level courses had a negative effect on enrolments. But since 2000, both local and overseas enrolments started to gradually improve. Overseas students started to take the place of significant numbers of Australian students. At this stage, the Graduate School of Business introduced a Master of Applied Management (MAM) program which posed a threat for the Master of Leadership and Management in Education (MLMED) program and became its direct competitor. Unlike the MLMEd, the MAM had the vast resources of the Graduate School of Business to market its program both locally and overseas. Another adverse effect on the program was the competition coming from the Master of Educational Studies (MEDStud) program. This program was the foundation of the Faculty of Education for over two decades. The MLMEd program overcame these challenges using course quality, the appeal of its program structure and the program title to the prospective students. Hence, the University of Newcastle was the very first university to place high emphasis on leadership and name its program, the Master of Leadership and Management in Education (MLMED).

In a short of period of time, the courses in the MLMEd program attracted a significant number of

students from all Australian school systems, tertiary institutions, the health sector and industry trainers, with the determined and dedicated efforts of program director and program team. These numbers were complemented by increasing numbers of international students from over 20 countries. The high quality of the MLMED program made it difficult for the newly established MAM program to attract economically viable student numbers; until 2003 it had not reached two digit enrolments. The MEdStud program was also running into high enrolment dilemmas. Consequently, the MLMED program became stronger, attracting students both internationally and locally. By 2003, according to an evaluation by the Pro Vice-Chancellor of the Faculty of Education and Arts, the MLMED program has become one of the five most viable master's degree programs in the whole university under the full-fee paying regime (Lovat, 2003).

By 2005, the courses offered towards the MLMED degree program had attracted students from all eight Australian school systems (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, South Australia, Australian Capital Territory, and Northern Territory) and overseas. The international students were from countries such as: Armenia, Bhutan, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, China, East Timor, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauricious, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, Taiwan, UK, USA, Vietnam, Western Samoa, and Zambia.

Student Evaluations and their Opinions

Since the development of educational administration and leadership courses at Newcastle in 1989, many student evaluations have been conducted and almost all evaluations have been positive. Students have expressed that, the courses have improved their knowledge and understanding and allowed them to refine and improve their practice. The University of Newcastle's MLMED website which includes, program structure, course contents, flexibility of offerings and the degree title was an effective means of increasing both overseas and local enrolments. The students have indicated that when they are offered an opportunity to pursue their post-graduate studies for professional development in any university of their choice, they would first visit university websites to select the particular program.

Student evaluation comments and words of appreciation are quoted below to express their gratitude for the usefulness and practical nature of the courses and MLMED program. A student who completed the course, 'Introduction to Educational Administration', in the first semester of 2001, has stated, "I personally enjoyed assignments for direct relation to my work. Overall, I found the course to be very useful and it broadened my levels of knowledge and understanding."

Two off-campus students who completed the course, 'Educational Administration: Theory and Practice', in the second semester of 2001, the first has stated, "Fantastic subject, that contributed to my professional role significantly, very enjoyable and thought provoking. I enjoyed the assignments and found the overall course structure easy to follow and well set out. Thank you very much."

The other has commented:

At first, I thought the course was 'dry' but really got interested in the first module. I found the assignments extremely useful as a teaching/learning tool – especially, the Assignment two on the 'Effective leader'. I appreciated the fact that the lecturer provided notes, which gave good examples to follow in the assignments. I was extremely pleased with the prompt marking and return of assignments, and the encouraging and informative comments. Thank you, I have really enjoyed this subject.

A student, who completed the course, 'Administrative Behaviour and Educational Management', during the first semester of, 2001, has commented:

I thoroughly enjoyed this subject. I know, I spent too much time on this subject but it is my area of expertise and I love working as an administrator. Overall, readings provided were very helpful, and I enjoyed research and readings.

An off-campus student, who completed the course, 'Introduction to Educational Administration, during the first semester of 2004, has given the highest ratings to all aspects of the course on a 5-point scale evaluation, has added:

I believe that this is an excellent subject and the tasks require the students to demonstrate an understanding of the content in relation to their own personal context. I firmly believe that this subject has improved my capacity to be an effective educational leader in my school. The readings and lecturer knowledge are

outstanding.

Another off-campus student, who completed the course, ‘Organizational Behaviour and Managing People’, during the second semester of 2004, also gave the highest rating to all aspects of the course on a 5- point scale, and has commented, “Thank you for your input and advice at the beginning as I thoroughly enjoyed all the readings and obviously got ‘right approach’ by the end. Great course! Very relevant.”

Another student who completed the course, ‘Leadership and Strategic Management’, has stated:

This is an outstanding subject in preparing aspiring leaders for their future leadership roles. My school community is grateful for the practical nature of the subject and it has provided a long term benefit (a strategic plan and a planning framework) to the school. My only concern was assignment two on [module two]. However, that is only a minor problem. I have enjoyed completing this subject.

An off-campus student with 30 years of teaching experience has sent an email in mid-June 2005 which stated:

I have thoroughly enjoyed all your subjects. . . . I sometimes wish I was not working full-time and could absorb more information. . . . I would also like to say I love the way you have constructed our papers and I am very enthused by your writings. I really thought at one stage I was too idealistic; however, you seem to create practical pathways to find direction in the field and to develop our own concepts and ideals. Thank you for reinspiring me in my 30th year of teaching.

In the first semester of 2005, 130 students enrolled, including 34 overseas, in leadership and strategic management; Introduction to educational administration, administrative behaviour and educational management, which were considered significantly high numbers at the masters degree level. In a survey of 34 on-campus students conducted in April and May 2005, almost all the students had expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the courses and the program. A number of them had added comments such as, “The course is very comprehensive and very well structured for someone like me preparing myself into a leadership and management role.” “Well structured course which is relevant to practising teachers and potential managers.” “It is a very good and practical course.”

In a data analysis of the survey conducted of all students attending these on-campus classes, leadership and strategic management, introduction to educational administration and administrative behaviour and educational management; when evaluating the courses on a 5 point scale, five being strongly agree and one being strongly disagree, the results yielded high course ratings.

In addition, the students were presented with two program structures, labelled Program A and Program B; the students were asked to rate each of the program structures on a 5 point scale. The students used in the survey were from various countries including: Australia, Bhutan, Botswana, Canada, East Timor, Japan, Pakistan, PNG, Philippines, and Zambia.

Masters Degree Program A’s courses were 1) Instructional leadership, 2) School law, 3) Educational psychology, 4) Curriculum development, 5) Research methods, 6) Teaching and learning, 7) Child adolescent development, 8) School principal-ship, 9) Historical and philosophical foundation in education. These courses are included in more than 80% of American programs (Levine, 2005). Master’s Degree Program B or MLMEd courses were 1) Leadership an strategic management, 2) Organizational behaviour and managing people, 3) Instructional leadership and program evaluations, 4) Information technology and education, 5) Introduction to educational administration, 6) Operational contexts in educational management, 7) Educational administration: Theory and practice, 8) Administrative behaviour and educational management, and 9) Leading educational change.

Table 1

Mean and Standard Deviation of Student Responses to Likert Scale Survey.

Statement	ED6016Mean	SD	ED6032Mean	SD	ED6035Mean	SD
A1. I have found this course interesting and stimulating.	4.4	0.60	4.6	0.69	4.4	0.50
A2. I have learned a lot from this course.	4.3	0.66	4.6	0.50	4.8	0.42
A3. The course has been presented in an interesting and stimulating way.	4.1	0.75	4.3	0.67	4.4	0.50
A4. The work-load in this course is reasonable.	4.3	0.68	4.6	0.50	4.6	0.69
A5. Assessment in this course is fair.	4.3	0.56	4.7	0.47	4.4	0.69
A6. Assessment in this course sets a suitably high standard.	4.6	0.48	4.7	0.47	4.7	0.47
<i>continued on next page</i>						

A7. Sufficient help and advice has been provided whenever I needed it.	4.4	0.48	4.4	0.83	4.8	0.42
A8. Sufficient resources are available to support the teaching of this course.	4.6	0.48	4.6	0.69	4.6	0.50

Table 1

When evaluating the two different master's degree program structures, the on-campus EDUC 6016 students gave Group A program structure a 3.3, however when evaluating the Group B program structure the same group has given a rating of 4.6. EDUC 6032 students rated Group A, 2.7 while Group B once again was rated at a higher score of 4.8. The students in EDUC 6035 rated Group A, at 2.0 with total disagreement, while rating Group B, 4.5. An overseas student enrolled in the program and living on-campus commented:

From the master's degree program brochures that were received from many different Australian universities, I selected the MLME Program as the best one for me on the basis of its structure, type of courses included and title of the degree. I found the courses as very relevant and have a practical orientation to my own job enabling me to improve my own and guide others with better approaches. I have to admit that many of the things that I used to do in my job were not properly understood, but now, I know why, when and how a particular task needs to be done (An interview with the above overseas student on 07.07.2005).

Conclusion

The MLME program was developed to meet the needs of a rapidly changing educational environment. Both university officials and students saw a need for the program. The program planners had the opportunity to examine other programs offered around the world. They became aware of school leader perceptions and the need for more practically oriented programs with less emphasis on theoretical orientation. The program team was comprised of all relevant stakeholders such as the Department of School Education, Catholic Education Office, and Independent Schools Organization, Primary and Secondary Principals' Councils, the Faculty of Education and specializations within the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. Both the title of the program and the structure of the program were organized in a manner which appeals to the prospective candidates. Some courses such as organizational behaviour, finance and planning and statistics and quality management in education, which were not usually taught in schools of education, were also included in the core curriculum.

The course material was designed in a practical, comprehensive and self-sufficient manner, which appealed to both school leaders and prospective educational administrators. The assessment tasks were also designed with a high degree of practical orientation unlike theoretical programs, which usually intimidates possible candidates. The assessment tasks provide students, who are practicing professionals, the opportunity to refine and improve their practice. These features made the MLME a highly successful master's degree program for the professional development of current and prospective leaders and managers in educational settings, within a short period of time. It was important to note that the latest findings of several research projects on reforming professional development programs; one involving 623 principals in seven American states by Salazar (2003) and another involving program coordinators in 47 universities in the USA presented by Gordon (2003) at the Annual Conference of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration

(NCPEA) in August 2003, indicated the need to develop professional development programmes on the lines similar to the foregoing discussions.

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¹<http://www.edschools.org/pdf/final313.pdf>