There is now a belief that universities need to think about their role in relation to student satisfaction in order to survive (Finney & Finney, 2010). Universities are beginning to recognise that higher education is a service industry (DeShields, Kara & Kaynak, 2005). Accordingly, it is critical for universities to constantly improve the quality of educational programs and strive for high standards in course content. The student satisfaction approach is now said to be analogous to the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement (Harvey, 1995). We consider a number of variables that contribute to student satisfaction when undertaking a Work Integrated Learning (WIL) program in a marketing degree. The main objective of the study is to compare different formats of WIL to identify the preferred option for improving students’ satisfaction at university. Graduate capabilities, the impact of learning activities and knowledge of professional behaviour for their future careers are considered in this light. Students prefer an off-campus experience where they self-select the organisation and the project. The favourable elements including; established industry partnerships, professional engagement, diversity and equality, may be realised through a combination of both formats where industry partners come to campus to inform and students can then go off site to identify potential projects with companies in alignment with their interests and strengths. Students will not only benefit from this diversity but also have higher levels of satisfaction through the engagement of personally relevant material enhancing graduate capabilities increasing employability, the increased satisfaction aligned to the PACE learning activities and knowledge of professional behaviour that informs students for their future careers.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, higher education, student satisfaction and marketing education

INTRODUCTION

Work Integrated Learning (WIL) has recently been a concept receiving increased attention in Australian universities, with most Australian universities strengthening their commitment to WIL (McLennan & Keating, 2008). This interest is sparked by Government and industry concern for increasing workplace participation and productivity and intensifying international competition (McLennan & Keating, 2008). WIL has long been used as a pathway for work-readiness in professional education and is increasingly positioned as a key opportunity for improving employability skills of all graduates (ACNielsen, 2000; Precision Consultancy, 2007). Previous research has indicated the value of WIL may not be appreciated by business schools even though it is significant in assisting universities with reputation and enrolments (Weible, 2010).

Nevertheless Macquarie University has initiated a Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program, which provides an academic framework through which students engage with the community and industry, undertake work integrated learning activities that require up to 100 hours of community engagement, develop their capabilities and build on the skills that employers value. PACE activities can include traditional internships, field trips, research projects or mentoring. Most undergraduate students are currently required to undertake one of these PACE units, and indeed it is currently compulsory for all marketing students, and these units progressively become an integral part of the Macquarie curriculum. The success of WIL programs occurs when there is a strong relationship between industry partners and the university and involvement in curriculum leading to improved student satisfaction and retention (Choy & Delahaye, 2011). This study focuses on the marketing major in a commerce program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a shift in universities towards a greater emphasis on meeting expectations and the needs of the student. It is critical for universities to constantly improve the quality of educational programs because of the importance of retaining students (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009; Finney & Finney, 2010). Students switching universities is of great concern to higher education institutions, and consequently satisfaction in the context of higher education has progressively become a significant area of study (Barnett, 2010).
The concept of student satisfaction has been the subject of much academic discourse (Banwet & Datta, 2003; Brown et al., 1998; DeShields et al., 2005; Elliot & Shin, 2002; Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, Coulson & Harvey, 2011). Gibson's (2010) study of student satisfaction with business courses identified three significant variables: academic teaching staff, classes and learning activities, and graduate skills in preparation for future employment. Other studies support these variables (Delaney, 2001; Keaveney & Young, 1997; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007). WIL programs are now viewed as the vehicle for merging theory learned at university with skill development, coupled with the acquisition of soft skills that may indeed lead to student satisfaction (Franz, 2007).

There are many different formats in which WIL and associated PACE units can be operationalised, including traditional internships, field trips, research projects or mentoring, however there is little research to guide which activities are more satisfying to students and does this vary between disciplines (Buys & Bursnall, 2007; Woodley et al., 2011; Franz, 2007; Pearce, 1999; van Hoek et al., 2011). In order to gain deeper insight into students’ satisfaction with their major in the marketing discipline, a marketing capstone unit is considered that includes a WIL component. Two formats are compared and an in-depth analysis of the outcomes are considered relating to student satisfaction; particularly graduate capabilities (Mackaway et al., 2001; Woodley et al., 2011; Franz, 2007), the impact of learning activities (Browne et al., 1998; Gibson, 2010; ) and the knowledge of professional behaviour and future careers (Gibson, 2010; Browne et al., 1998; Kara & DeShields, 2004; DeShields et al., 2005).

The following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: What aspects of the capstone subject enhance student satisfaction in regards to the marketing major?

RQ2: Were off campus research projects preferred to on campus community engagement delivery?

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study collected personal narratives from students to examine the area of student satisfaction. Interviews were conducted in 2012 with 12 students from the 2011 MKTG304 course and 11 students from the 2012 MKTG304 course. Samples were chosen purposively based on their ability to provide in-depth insights into experiences rather than generalising data to a population (Sandelowski, 1986). These 15 to 20 minute interviews were conducted until it was felt that the theoretical saturation had been reached (Mason, 2002).

The two cohorts that were interviewed came from two different modes of delivery. The students in the 2011 cohort undertook a project for an organisation in the field. They identified and secured their own industry partner, and as a result all students had a different topic and different industry partners. The students in the 2012 cohort were all required to work on the same project for the same industry partner on campus. All students worked on the same problem, developing distinctive marketing solutions (Pearce, 1999; van Hoek et al., 2011).

In order to preserve contextuality and obtain deeper meanings, open-ended questions were used during face-to-face interviews (Yin, 2009). Examples of the questions in the semi-structured interview guide are included in Appendix 1. Transcript files were imported into NVivo, which was used to store, index and retrieve data. A preliminary coding scheme based on the literature review was then applied to the analysis of the transcripts (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The dimensions identified in the literature were found to be adequate for analysis and the classification of items.

FINDINGS

Findings consider the relationships between the WIL experience and student satisfaction with the course. The key themes from this study are: comparison of different approaches to industry engagement in light of graduate capabilities, the impact of learning activities and knowledge of professional behaviour and future career.

Graduate capabilities

Regardless of cohort, more than 70% of students agreed that key “soft” skills including time management, teamwork and communication skills were important, as supported by recent research (Mackaway, Winchester-Seeto, Coulson, & Harvey, 2011; Woodley, et al., 2011; Jackson, 2013). Students in the 2011 cohort more commonly commented on the use of analytical skills. This is illustrated by the following quote:
Taught me to look at the big picture with marketing...had to look at every possible aspect because we all had the facts. Most case studies we get given don’t have this. (Respondent 5, 2011 cohort).

Students in the 2012 cohort more regularly commented on the need for teamwork as evidenced in the following quote:

Left to our own devices... I found you had to pull on the strengths of other group members... couldn’t rely on the text book. (Respondent 19, 2012 cohort).

This highlights that the unconventional nature of the tasks necessitated that students develop key skills – like teamwork and analysis of real world problems – representing enhancement of graduate capabilities.

**Impact and strengths of PACE learning activities**

Previous studies demonstrate that learning activities influence satisfaction with a unit of study (Delaney, 2001; Gibson, 2010). Students make judgements about their ability and willingness to apply effort to certain tasks, which ultimately impacts on their satisfaction (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

Several key components of the WIL unit, such as presentations, group work, on-line forums and the final project were all mentioned as worthwhile and fulfilling by the students interviewed. Units which are focused on developing an understanding of the content, improving or developing skills, and which have personal relevance to the students have higher levels of satisfaction (Browne et al., 1998; Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007; Gibson, 2010). There was however, a leading difference between the two cohorts, which revolved around the lecture structure for the unit. Students in the 2011 cohort were strongly of the belief that the lectures and tutorials to support the project were more useful than the students in the 2012 cohort. This is reflected in the following quotes:

Getting all the content ... in first 7 weeks ... allowed you to execute the main assignment once you know everything. Lectures and tutorials ... helped you set out what you really needed to do for the report and what was required ... liked learning from other people’s presentations in tutorials. (Respondent 16, 2011 cohort)

The lectures and tutorials could have been used more efficiently (except for industry partner presentations) ... only did group work in tutorials so don’t need to be there. (Respondent 13, 2012 cohort)

Students in the 2011 cohort were able to apply the theories in a more flexible manner to their chosen partners and problems as they selected their own organisation and marketing problem to solve. Additionally, as the groups had different problems on which to work, the tutorials were more interesting and engaging. These students are more likely to be more satisfied. The students in the 2011 cohort appear to be more satisfied with the learning activity as they undertook a self-selected project for an organisation that suited their preferences. The lecturers, delivery and content remained constant between the cohorts (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007).

**Knowledge of professional behaviour and future career**

Regardless of the mode of delivery, this unit assisted them with knowledge about professional behaviour required in their future careers as they witnessed and practised professional behaviour and communication skills when dealing with executives and managers, as well as the way in which they conducted their research projects. However, there were some distinct differences in the strength of the evidence of professional behaviour learned within the unit when comparing the two modes of delivery. This can be summarised by the following quotes:

[You learnt] more personable skills and interactions for what was required for professional behaviour (Respondent 2, 2011 cohort)

You don’t get a chance [to understand professional behaviour] because it doesn’t really make an impact because it’s just like an everyday lectures. The information they [industry partners] provided was not thorough [enough]. (Respondent 15, 2012 cohort)
There were some dissatisfied students in the 2012 cohort who felt that the engagement with partners was too similar to a typical lecture by academics. It was considered by two students in the 2012 cohort to be less helpful than a traditional lecture-tutorial format. Nevertheless, the professional interaction was a key factor for students.

**DISCUSSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

There is evidence to suggest a relationship exists between the classes, student's experiences and their resulting student satisfaction regardless of the mode of delivery. Both cohorts provided evidence that they were satisfied with most elements of the unit, although the preferred mode was where students self-selected the organisation providing variety of experiences to the cohort (Browne, et al., 1998; DeShields, et al., 2005; Keaveney & Young, 1997 ). The emergent themes of this study related to graduate capabilities, the impact of various PACE learning activities and professional interaction. The interaction with industry partners and live research in solving real world problems, resulting in the promotion of graduate capabilities and professional behaviours were the emphasis of students within this study and thus key elements for a WIL unit.

The practicality of this unit is endorsed by 95% of respondents. More than 50% spontaneously labelled this unit as the “most interesting” unit they had ever undertaken, providing evidence that they were satisfied with the unit.

In relation to the two different modes of delivery both formats were well received by both cohorts. The structure of the on-campus guest lecturers appeared to provide stronger and clearer goals than when students sought out their own industry partnerships. However, the 2011 model had a diversity of partners which delivered substantial benefits to all students with a wider breadth of industry examples and exposure to industry partners and contemporary issues. Therefore, this mode of delivery is the preferred model despite some criticisms of inequity of access to industry partners.

Consequently, it may be that in order to gain the benefits from both models, a hybrid model is developed for future use. The favourable elements including; established industry partnerships, professional engagement, diversity and equality, can all be realised through a modified version of the 2012 model. By purely growing the number of industry partnerships within the marketing capstone unit and delivering multiple case studies, students can not only benefit from this diversity but also have higher levels of satisfaction through the engagement of personally relevant material enhancing graduate capabilities increasing employability, the increased satisfaction aligned to the PACE learning activities and knowledge of professional behaviour that informs students for their future careers.

Future research may consider a quantitative study to identify the importance of variables that are antecedents to student satisfaction in a WIL context. These studies can also investigate the strength of these associations in order to determine certain elements that may be of higher importance.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX 1

EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Did this unit help to develop skills that are important for your future? If so, how?
Did this unit help provide you with insight of the types of tasks you might do in your field of work and in first year of professional work?
What were your expectations of this unit? Were they met? Why/why not?
Would you recommend this unit to other students? (Why/why not)
What were the best and worst aspects of the unit?
What is your overall satisfaction of learning in this unit?