

A social initiative aimed at challenging and extending the top students in a large first-year business course

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Aligning with our experiences as educators, studies show that the most gifted and talented students benefit from program enrichment beyond the traditional classroom. This paper discusses the proposed extension to the large and complex first-year team-based learning program at The University of Auckland Business School. Our proposal is to select the top 30 of approximately 1700 first-year students to participate in a project that integrates academic content and high performance teamwork in a real-world context. This is not normally experienced by students until final year studies if at all. Given the scale of the program, this unique study contributes to the literature by furthering our understanding of gifted and talented students performing in teams while completing a highly challenging task. An extension of this project will be to monitor this cohort of students throughout their studies and into future job opportunities.

Background/context of the initiative and why it is being undertaken

BUSINESS 101 and 102 are a large-scale delivery of a two-course sequence of core first-year courses jointly run by the Departments of Management and Marketing at the Business School. Their flipped-classroom design is a pedagogical model where lectures and assigned homework responsibilities are reversed (Bishop & Verleger, 2013, Milman, 2012). Prior to class the students engage with key learning material via an online learning program. They then apply this knowledge in a series of applied exercises in a workshop setting. Students are organized into permanent teams of seven individuals. Each week the teams undertake a group assessment task and a final presentation that make up 20% of their final grade. Other assessments include individual weekly tests, a mid-term individual test or assignment, and a final exam.

BUSINESS 101 and 102 have been operating since 2011. As a research group we have presented our work at several conferences, including at STARS in 2015, and in the Journal of Strategic Marketing (Carrie, Mulla, Patterson, Kilkolly-Proffit, Brookes, Sima & Agee, 2017). Our version of the flipped classroom is a variation of the Team-Based Learning model (TBL) for large classes that has many benefits (Wallace, Walker, Braseby & Sweet, 2014), particularly in preparing business students for future careers where the ability to function as a valuable member of a team for problem solving and critical thinking is paramount (Haidet, Kubitz & McCormack, 2014). Michaelsen, Davidson & Major (2014) show that TBL can increase student engagement, particularly in their first year and when the conventional lecture approach

is competing with social media in the classroom, and at home. Carrie et al. (2017) show that TBL, taken to a new level of engagement *adds value* to the undergraduate experience, a finding similar to other researchers (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Krause, & Coates, 2008). Carini et al. (2006) also found that lower ability students benefit more from engagement and working in teams while stronger students are challenged to achieve more by competing with other teams.

Omar and Ahmad (2014) found that team climate, in particular, affected team's effectiveness. Students thus understand that good teamwork and good team marks are crucial to achieving high marks overall. We recognize that teamwork may not adequately address the needs of the top performing students. Teamwork can put dual pressures on individuals: they may want to achieve high individual scores wherever possible, but they may also be concerned that poor team results can inhibit their gaining high overall grades.

We will extend the most able students by taking them out of the classroom environment and testing their capabilities in a real-world one. This experience does not normally occur until later years of study in capstone courses. However it is consistent with studies in the literature.

Literature upon which the initiative is based

Taylor et al. (2011) argue that educational institutions might consider adopting approaches to education delivery which focus on 'value co-creation' by providing students with challenges over and above the pre-set parameters and requirements. This might thereby also improve their engagement with their courses and subjects. Weidman's (2006) model of socialization of students in higher education is very appropriate in showing how the 'best' students might also be influenced through new learning process that involves interacting with faculty members, team members, and their participating organization.

As teams become "the basic building blocks of organizations" (Team Spirit, 2016, p.62) organizations are starting to require new recruits to demonstrate abilities to work in a team, communicate, solve problems and have commercial awareness. These arguments are supported by Agnew (2016). This issue is impacting on how Business Schools might implement the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International's eligibility procedures and accreditation standards for business accreditation (updated version January 31, 2016). Standard 13 (Student Academic and Professional Engagement) is particularly relevant to this project.

Kift (2002) says that practicing professionals can *add practical value* through projects. Roberson and Franchini (2014) discuss extending student's learning through engaging in projects and mentoring future participants. Groves, Sellars, Smith, and Barber (2015) examine six engagements lenses for improving student engagement outcomes. We propose a seventh: *Transactional engagement* (students engage with an external organizations).

Reis (2003) and Borland (2003) call for reconsidering regular curriculum for high achieving students and gifted underachievers. While significant research has been conducted in the area of how to teach gifted students, there are few studies investigating how to challenge and extend top students in large classes, particularly in their first-year business studies. Millward, Wardman and Rubie-Davies (2016), researchers from the Faculty of Education at The University of Auckland, concur that this is also the situation in the New Zealand tertiary sector.

Taylor and Milton (2006) say gifted students' ability to learn is facile and speedy and that these students benefit from a program meeting these needs. Robinson (1997) suggests that special effort is needed to identify and provide services for gifted students, and that there is no one definition of who might be a gifted student. She selects the highest achieving 2-5% of students as an initial index for giftedness. Millward et al. (2016), also found that gifted and talented students were ethnically and age diverse. Robinson (1997, p.234) suggests that "enrichment (extension of the curriculum to cover subject matter not otherwise included) can serve to enliven and broaden instruction for students capable of mastering more than the usual fare".

Description of initiative, the method that will be used, and how it extends current practice/knowledge

In our programme, we can expect that some 100 students out of 1700 will achieve an A+ grade for BUSINESS 101 in the first semester. This project will recognise and extend the knowledge and skills of these top students by inviting up to 30 of them to engage in a voluntary extra-curricular activity in BUSINESS 102 the following semester. In teams of six or seven, they will work directly with selected external organisations on projects.

To earn a place in the project, students will be rigorously screened by examining their academic prowess through their final grades in BUSINESS 101, feedback on their team performance in BUSINESS 101, the student's submitted CV and written reflection detailing how they anticipate adding value to their team and the project, and finally, subject to an interview. Early in the second semester delivery of BUSINESS 102, we will then place them in major social service/not-for-profit organizations, for example hospitals/ambulatory services, city missions, animal welfare groups. We have selected these types of organizations for our first iteration and in other years we will target organizations in other types of industries.

For their allocated organisation, the students will consider the relationships between the organization's market/customer or client definition and its offering, business model design, leadership style, and revenue stream initiatives. This will enable them to work on solutions for a management or marketing problem that they will have determined their host organisation is facing. In effect, they will be applying their relevant class-room theory to real-world practice.

Each group will be mentored by one or two of the academic staff leaders (our team) plus an executive from the not-for-profit organization. The students will not receive payment. While this initiative will be linked to the BUSINESS 102 course, it will operate on a voluntary and extra-curricular basis outside of that course. This means that the students will not receive any formal marks to count towards their final grade in BUSINESS 102. This may create challenges for both the design of the project in terms of motivating students who are taking part. We expect the students to invest up to four hours per week, consisting of one hour with their staff mentor and three hours in groupwork. This is inclusive of possible site visits and on-campus meetings with the sponsoring organisations.

Description of expected impact

Each project will align with the Business School and University's strategic focus on developing its entrepreneurial ecosystem, in this case organisations with a strong social focus. At the Departmental level, students will have greater involvement in the academic and research

A social initiative aimed at challenging and extending the top students in a large first-year business course, Emerging Initiatives.

culture at the University. They will also develop skills that will be relevant to their future business careers, and that might inspire them to progress to higher levels of academic study.

This project will culminate in term presentations at a celebratory function attended by staff from the host organization, plus university representatives. In their presentation, each team will firstly explain the management or marketing ‘problem’, then assess three possible courses of action, and then finally explain the most appropriate recommendation on the basis of the evidence they have gathered and the academic principles they have considered. They will also include a cost-benefit analysis. Individually, each student will then complete a written report for assessment.

Originality and practicality of the initiative

This project aims to extend our understanding of tertiary initiatives involving gifted and students outside of traditional honours programs. It is also embedded in a uniquely complex and large-scale first-year business program where only the most able 30 students out of 1700 will be selected on the basis of their academic prowess and prior demonstrate of teamwork abilities. We expect that students who complete this project will mentor in subsequent iterations. In their progression from participant to mentor, those students will be exposed to further types of industries, as we will be examining organisations in different industries every year. The student experience here is expected to assist them in their search for future career choices. As a result, we will monitor this cohort of students throughout their studies and into future job opportunities.

Key questions that will be posed to encourage audience participation

- 1) Does anyone in the audience have experience of running extension programme initiatives for top undergraduate students? We would be particularly interested in hearing more about initiatives that might be aimed at first-year students, and/or about initiatives that involve applied real-world projects.
- 2) Given the resources required to make this type of an applied team project a success, only a small proportion of our first year student body will be able to take part. While this proportion could increase in future deliveries, this will always be an opportunity aimed at perhaps the highest 5% performing students. Is such a programme desirable and sustainable in the longer-term?
- 3) Realistically, what team outputs can we expect from students when this work is not being formally assessed for course credit and when students are therefore opting into this as an extracurricular personal and professional development opportunity?

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A social initiative aimed at challenging and extending the top students in a large first-year business course, Emerging Initiatives.

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