

# OPEN COMMUNICATION BUILDS SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS

THIS EXEMPLAR IS DESIGNED BY THE GOOD PRACTICE PROJECT WITH DR JOSEPHINE PRYCE, A SENIOR LECTURER IN THE DISCIPLINE OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING WITHIN THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

JCU's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy adopts nine Core Principles, each of which describes our commitment to high quality student learning and teaching experiences. The fourth and the eighth core principle, respectively state that 'students will be provided with learning experiences that develop graduate attributes' and that 'open communication builds shared understandings.' Further to this, JCU's graduate attributes advocate that students will 'develop the personal and professional capabilities to effectively manage career and work life'. This exemplar highlights teaching and learning practice by which these goals are fulfilled. It describes Dr Josephine Pryce's approach to teaching and learning wherein students feel inspired to comfortably share their ideas openly with others, are empowered to promote their learning through active participation, and are exposed to authentic learning experiences which develop graduate attributes, build vocational capacity and foster professional aptitude. The focus of this exemplar is on the third year Bachelor of Business Human Resource Management (HRM) program, particularly as it relates to the capstone subject which brings all of the HRM studies together. In particular, evidence of student engagement in the JCU HR Managers Panel Forum, an integrated activity collaboratively presented by JCU Careers and Employment with the School of Business, is presented as an exemplar of such practice. The value of the experience gained from this event is evidenced by responses to a related survey, which shows a high level of student participation and student satisfaction. For example, with the latter, responses to the statement 'the industry panel provided opportunities to network with employers' showed 73% of students rated this as 'very good' or 'excellent, with all respondents indicating 'good' or better (Survey Monkey, 2011).

Dr Josephine Pryce is a Senior Lecturer in the Discipline of Management and Marketing with the School of Business in Cairns, and is a Certified Professional member with the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI). Her approach to teaching and learning is outlined in her 2010 Faculty Citation 'For sustained and enthusiastic teaching that creates a positive learning environment and involves, empowers and transforms students through their learning of management theories and practice'. Josephine's citation contends that business education involves 'a holistic approach to teaching and learning that enhances core skills and challenges students to think about their role as managers, including best practice in business.' In 2010 Josephine received a national award in recognition of her Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). A key aspect in Josephine's approach to teaching is the idea that authentic experiences can have a transformative influence on a part of the students' life's journey, and so 'I want to help students develop the skills to make professionals of themselves in the business world.' To achieve this goal, Josephine attempts to bring the real world into the classroom and she does so by drawing on contacts created with local businesses, and her involvement with the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) regional chapter, and by working with JCU Careers and Employment. [View Video]

The Bachelor of Business Human Resources Management (HRM) course is designed, as are all majors in the Bachelor of Business, with two second year subjects and four third year subjects. The two second year subjects; *Strategic Human Resource Management and Business Negotiations* provide opportunities for students to access real world scenarios and situations, to network with industry professionals and to begin to think about their role as future HR professionals. Both subjects are designed to provide a strong foundation for students in learning about HRM practices and activities and in developing strategies for managing people. Essential communication skills are developed throughout the program, although the *Business Negotiations* subject in particular helps promote effective and respectful dialogue between individuals and teams. The four third year subjects build on the skills, knowledge and understandings developed in second year and provide continued exposure to learning experiences integrated with the workplace and assist in consolidation of personal and professional capabilities. Three of these subjects focus on a specific aspect of HRM and afford students opportunities to extend their knowledge and understanding in these key areas: *Employee Relations, Cross-Cultural Management, and Personnel Economics*. The fourth subject, *Contemporary Issues in Human Resources Management* is the capstone subject, which is designed to bring all of the HRM studies together as students critically analyse contemporary HRM issues. The subject examines key emerging areas of HRM theory and practice which are currently affecting organisations, such as virtual workplaces, war on talent, offshoring, service work, the voice of workers, working life, and monitoring and surveillance in the workplace - helping students develop an awareness, appreciation and awareness of the role of human resource professionals and the ability to become a reflective practitioner who can influence policy and practice relating to employment. In this way, the journey for students undertaking the HRM major at JCU is a progressive, scaffolded engagement with curriculum that builds and consolidates knowledge, skills and understanding that connect theory and practice through real world experiences. This journey is encapsulated in Diagram 1 and further elaborated on herein.

## DEVELOPING INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The *Business Negotiations* subject, which is generally scheduled as an intensive, is designed to encourage students to demonstrate skills and abilities that are required to engage successfully in negotiations in a variety of business environments. This subject allows for a theoretical and practical insight into negotiations, with a strong emphasis on the processes of developing negotiation skills and self-reflection which promotes personal growth. Students focus on integrative negotiation, both in their own personal lives and within the business context, by engaging in a number of practical exercises, role plays and case studies, which are scaffolded in complexity and thus requiring incrementally advanced analytical skills as students learn about the art of negotiation.

One authentic learning exercise requires students to work in pairs, negotiating for prunes. The first participant seeks to secure the prunes for commercial purposes and the other, for humanitarian purposes. Josephine explains that 'if students are skilled negotiators they will come to the realisation that each participant wants different parts of the prune,

one the pip and the other the flesh.' One of the assessment items for this subject is a Group Negotiation. Students are provided with a nominated negotiation scenario with one team negotiating against another in scenarios such as the development of a hotel property on an island of cultural and environmental significance. Each student is assessed on their participation and contribution to their team leading up to and during the negotiation; students also submit an individual 'Reflection on Negotiation' in which they critically examine the negotiation, review the negotiation process and their role within that process.

The significance of this subject in the learning process is that it exposes students to the nature of negotiations using a number of scenarios from local and global business environments and contexts. This helps to provide students with skills in interpersonal communication while targeting more specific negotiation skills such as communicating issues effectively; active listening; understanding perceptions, power, culture and ethics; and demonstrating effort to work toward solutions that meet the needs and objectives of both parties. These skills are useful in all occupations but are particularly relevant and necessary for business professionals.

## MOTIVATING STUDENTS THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The cornerstone of Josephine's pedagogical stance is to create positive learning environments that allow students to comfortably share their ideas openly with others – something which she considers to be the driver of the process through which reflection, learning and professional skills develop. The capstone HRM subject is one example of such a learning environment. It recognises that students have prior knowledge and understanding which they can draw from and effectively contribute to the shared learning experience. This assists in developing and sharpening critical and lateral thinking, so students can learn to reflect on contemporary issues, critically evaluate them and engage in intelligent and informed dialogue. The intention is to stimulate different styles of thinking and learning such that students consider alternative perspectives, share their ideas and so enhance their personal and professional capabilities to effectively manage themselves and others and become worthy HR professionals.

The program promotes seminar style active participation within the learning process and makes use of a variety of activities and assessment tools such as role-playing, debating, oral presentations, training simulations, collaboration on projects in the local community and attendance at relevant functions and events. Given that there is an emphasis on contemporary issues, learning is driven by a focus on reflective practice. The aim is to challenge students, both individually and collaboratively, to stimulate and encourage deep learning processes and self-reflection, and to become innovative, creative and inspirational future leaders in their profession. Teaching involves engaging students in a number of structured opportunities to reflect on experiences, evaluate these and develop new understandings, knowledge and skills – which include life-long learning skills. Assessment items include critical essays, student-led seminars, reflective journals, blog reviews, training simulations and attendance at the JCU HR Managers Panel Forum. These not only help extend and consolidate learning, but facilitate in the development of critical generic skills and personal and professional qualities, such as teamwork, problem-solving, communication, resourcefulness, self-efficacy and professionalism.

With a focus on work integrated learning and management of career and work life, students are provided opportunities to engage in the real world workforce, enabling them to develop work-ready skills, connect with graduates and professionals working in the human resources profession, and build networks and prospects for future employment. Authentic activities include a student-led seminar which is designed to provide opportunity for students to practice a key activity in HRM, more specifically, the development and presentation of training programs.

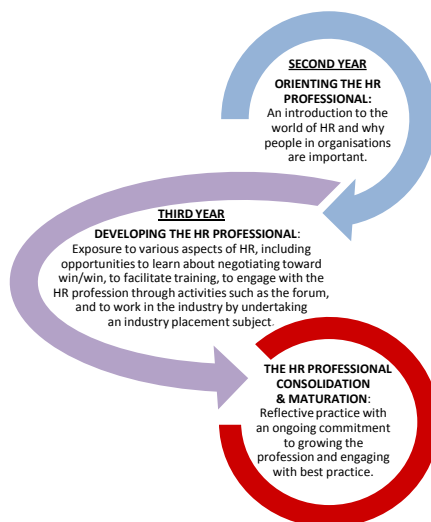


Diagram 1: The HRM major @ JCU. Linking theory and practice through work-integrated-learning curriculum.

## DEVELOPING AN APTITUDE COMMENSURATE WITH THE ROLE OF THE HR PROFESSIONAL

The student-led seminar is designed to prepare students for their forthcoming roles as Managers and more specifically, HRM managers and to provide students with an opportunity to explore a current issue in HRM. In this activity students are asked to imagine they are a Manager in one of *Fortune 500*'s top 10 organisations and have been asked to

deliver a training or information session for colleagues and/or staff. They are required to select a topic from the HRM issues identified for the semester and need to lead a session based on the chosen topic. Students can work alone or in pairs. The main requirement for the seminar session is that it is an interactive learning experience for facilitators and participants. As such, it is expected that sessions will run for approximately 40 minutes and that students facilitating the session include some learning activities for participants, which allow participants to engage with and explore the topic to some depth. In preparation, the student facilitators are expected to research the topic, find case studies in the literature or real world to share with participants, and provide a set of five readings for participants who may wish to learn more about this area. Participants in this capstone HR subject also peer assess other participants' sessions. Josephine informs this exemplar that students embrace this activity and deliver some very impressive sessions with some very interesting activities for engaging participants and promoting their learning. Student facilitators are encouraged to be as innovative and creative as they wish and in the past have been known to incorporate activities such as, transforming classrooms into training rooms, inviting guest speakers, and creating films which capture the topic.

A further aspect of this capstone subject is the JCU HR Managers Panel Forum which is presented by JCU Careers and Employment with the School of Business and is designed to help connect students with the business world. The event brings together local HR Professionals and students. Each guest speaker, as part of their role on the 'Industry Panel', talks about how they entered the HR Profession and discusses an issue of current relevance to them in the workplace. Afterwards, students are encouraged to ask questions. An ensuing lunch encourages one-on-one discussion and provides fortuitous opportunities for students to build networks and prospects for future employment. Repeatedly, successful employment endeavours between employers and students have been instigated through this event.

The assessment item is a reflective essay relating to the Industry Panel. Students choose an issue raised during the forum and write a research informed business essay wherein they integrate various sources of contemporary thought with the approaches used in industry. The essay is meant to encourage reflection on the topic, linking theory with commentary from the industry professionals, and considered strategies for dealing with the issue. It is anticipated that reflection will assist in gaining fresh insights and self-awareness and work toward developing professional best practice.

## BEST PRACTICE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

A key graduate attribute is the ability to reflect on and evaluate learning, and this is strongly associated with self-directed and deep learning and promotes 'being a professional'. Josephine has realised that by integrating learning experiences which link theory to practice and to professional contexts, students are motivated and feel inspired to learn and to realise their professional aspirations. The HRM program achieves this by engaging students in authentic experiences with peers and HRM professionals, including JCU graduates now working as HRM professionals, local businesses and services; and, through connecting with professional associations, like the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), the governing professional body of HR professionals. During their study, students are encouraged to become members of AHRI, and membership is free for students.

JCU Careers and Employment has over a number of years organised different events that link students to industry, such as the JCU HR Panel Forum. Although this event has particular significance for third year HRM students, an invitation is extended to all business students as it is realised that attendance is beneficial to many students. JCU Careers and Employment advise that for first year business students who attend this event, it assists in developing their vocational identity. For second year students, attendance at this event builds vocational capacity, motivating students to start getting some practical industry experience, if they haven't already done so. For final year students this event assists their professional transition in the world of management. The value of this experience is further evidenced in the following student comments: 'great opportunity to have an insight of what HR managers do and what they deal with'; 'diversity and quality of the speakers was fantastic'; 'gave me a good insight to the HR industry and different ways to build my career' (Survey Monkey, 2011).

The power of teaching and learning activities as evidenced in the HRM program is apparent through the continued support provided by JCU HRM Graduates to undergraduate business students. For example, these graduates are receptive to conversing with our students through the JCU Careers and Employment Employer connect program. In 2012, four JCU HRM Graduates participated in the JCU HR Industry Panel Forum. This was a significant reflection of the success of HRM graduates in the profession, on their commitment to promoting the profession, and on their willingness to encourage students to enter the profession. Also, JCU has a graduate on the AHRI Committee in Cairns which is a significant achievement. In 2012, the JCU HR Panel Forum was duly sponsored by AHRI, sharing the theme 'HR is everyone's business'. This was an auspicious event as it enabled the regional AHRI chapter to formally showcase its investment in JCU's HRM students and commitment to growing the profession. The JCU HR Panel Forum is hosted once a year and aims to strengthen its affiliation with AHRI.

In the near future, the HRM major is to become accredited with AHRI. Josephine is also keen to set up the JCU HR Alumni, which she anticipates will make a difference by directly linking students and JCU graduates who now work locally in the HR profession.

For further information about any aspect of this exemplar please email [Dr Josephine Pryce](mailto:Dr.Josephine.Pryce@jcu.edu.au) at [josephine.pryce@jcu.edu.au](mailto:josephine.pryce@jcu.edu.au)