Making it Quantitative: Report on the 2006 Teaching and Learning Forum in Economics, Commerce and Business Disciplines

By Martin Davies

In February 2005, a Forum entitled *Quantitative Analysis of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Economics, Commerce and Business* was held at the University of Melbourne. Around 80 academics attended from the Economics, Accounting, Finance and Management disciplines, along with tertiary learning skills advisors, and other professional educators. The success of this Forum led to a second Forum on February 10th, 2006. This time 110 academics attended representing more than 36 Australian and New Zealand tertiary institutions. This report will outline the tone and content of the day's proceedings. [1]

The "Melbourne Forum" provides an avenue where dedicated, *empirical* research into teaching and learning in Economics and Commerce-related disciplines can be heard and debated. As such, it represents (as one delegate put it): 'a wonderful asset to teaching and learning for business education in Australia'. In time—and funding permitting—the Forum may become an annual event. If this transpires, it will become an important item on the teaching and learning calendar for those working in these disciplines; a place in which quantitative work can be presented to a discerning audience of like-minded peers.

Professor Peter McPhee, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) of the University of Melbourne opened the Forum by emphasising the increasing importance of teaching and learning in the tertiary environment (the newly-formed Carrick Institute being one example of this), and noting that there was a need for high quality empirical research into the area. Economics and Commerce Faculties are generally very large in Australia. At Melbourne, for example, the Faculty of Economics and Commerce educates more than 13 percent of the total student cohort intake at Melbourne University at undergraduate level (10 Percent at postgraduate level). Approximately 48 percent of all students in the Faculty at postgraduate level are full-fee paying international students. In response to the clear need for good quality teaching, and research into teaching, the Faculty set up its own Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) in 1998, the first of its kind in Australia, and one of the few truly Faculty-embedded units anywhere in the world. This Unit now houses 10 staff, including four academics, who conduct research into teaching and learning issues in Economics and Commerce-related disciplines. The Forum was organised by the TLU in collaboration with an organising committee of academics representing every discipline in the Faculty. All papers were doubled refereed and published in the Forum Proceedings.

The day's papers were divided into three themes: 1. Student Characteristics and Student Performance, 2. Online Learning and Technology in Higher Education, and 3. Student and Staff Perceptions of Learning: Strategic Issues. Under these themes a number of empirically rigorous papers were presented.

Birch and Miller (UWA) presented findings concerning the characteristics of "Gap year" students and their tertiary academic outcomes. Often the subject of qualitative studies, a "gap year" was defined adopting Krause et al (2005) and Lamb's (2001) definitions respectively: 1) students who begin university a year after completing secondary school, and 2) students who enter the labour force for a period before attending university. Birch and Miller's paper was significant in that few

[1] The impetus for the 2005 event was a grant from the Faculty of Economics and Commerce at Melbourne into empirical research on the quality of teaching instrument (known commonly as the QOT or SET survey) now used routinely in most tertiary institutions. The Forum organisers gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance from the Faculty at the University of Melbourne.

studies attempt a quantitative analysis of this issue. Using a probit model they found that the main determinants of taking a gap year were prior academic achievement, English language background, age and home location. They noted a negative correlation with students' TER scores, their age when completing high school and if they spoke a language other than English at home, and a positive correlation with the residential address being outside capital cities. They also noted that the gap year does have a positive impact on the academic performance of students, especially those who have lower TER scores or who are at the low end of marks distribution.

Hutcheson and Tse (University of Technology, Sydney) addressed the important issue of the role tutorial attendance in academic performance. Using both a quantitative methodology and a qualitative survey they investigated the impact of tutorials on grades and students' perceptions of attending tutorials. They found empirical evidence for higher marks if students attend more than half of their tutorials. The results found were especially significant for international students. Of special significance was the result that around a third of those surveyed indicated that they learned more studying on their own and not at tutorials! Implications of these findings were discussed. The study might have controlled for the unobserved variable of student motivation, which can increase both attendance and marks.

Harris (University of Adelaide) compared the study patterns of three groups of students: a group of Australian students and two groups of international students (one group studying in Australia and the other at a twinning institution in Malaysia). It was found that some of the stereotypical cultural expectations were supported (a Confucian "family" orientation to study habits and groupwork), but it was also found that Australian students and those international students studying in Australia outperformed the international students in Malaysia, despite the students in Malaysia spending more time outside classes engaged in their studies than the other two groups. Issues associated with students' perception of their competence in the English language were also assessed. Implications for tertiary adaptation were considered.

Wilmshurst (University of Tasmania) commenced the segment of the Forum on "flexible learning" in the implementation of a unit in corporate governance. He assessed two models or "hybrids" of flexible delivery: 1) a traditional face-to-face format with technological support in discussions; and 2) a technologically flexible format using WebCT and CD-Rom as the main mode of instruction. The two formats were compared and the implications for teaching and learning discussed. In both formats, the importance of face-to-face discussion was emphasised. **Olaru, Thompson and Button** (UWA) reinforced the importance of "human contact" in teaching with results from a separate study into "blended" learning formats (using WebCT as a flexible delivery model). **Duncan, Uren and MacNamara** (Bond) examined the performance effects of asynchronous and synchronous interaction in virtual courses of study using three groups of students in an introductory Accounting course, in which students were allowed to choose their model of participation. They found effects for both synchronous and synchronous interaction on student performance, but the proposition that the quality of student engagement results in increased performance relative to the quantity of engagement was rejected (in other words, there was no explanatory power for the quality of interaction after controlling for student engagement).

Tan and Wilmshurst (University of Tasmania) began the segment of the Forum on student and staff perceptions of teaching and learning methods. They investigated the student responses to a flexible learning format on a unit of study, noting that students preferred the flexible format for reasons to do with access, but paradoxically, found that they disliked the sense of isolation and loss of motivation for studying that flexible learning engendered. **Audley** (NSW Directorate of Higher Education) presented a paper on an instrument developed to assess the relevance and utility of current and proposed tertiary courses of study. This involves assigning numerical values to courses of study in order to allow comparison and contrast. **Ferreira, Balachandran, Santoso and**

Mudalige (Monash) conducted an empirical investigation of the perceptions of students of the subject of Accounting. They found a correlation between the negative perceptions of the subject of Accounting as “bean counting” and “number crunching” and predictions regarding the student performance in the subject.

Finally, **Davies, Hirschberg, Lye, Johnston and McDonald** (Melbourne) presented findings on a study investigating systemic biases and influences on quality of teaching surveys from students in the Economics department of the University of Melbourne. The paper was interested in establishing whether student ratings were influenced by factors *outside the control of the instructor* (time of day of survey, type of subject studied, gender balance of students, qualifications of instructor, ethnic group of student, and so on). This paper is significant in so far as it is one of the first longitudinal, quantitative studies of QOT scores using Australian data. There are around 2000 studies published on this topic which mainly emanate from the United States. The paper is a corrective to the literature and found, amongst other things, that the type of subject taught, i.e., whether quantitative or qualitative, has little bearing on the evaluation scores (unless the subject was very large or is an upper-level subject). The study also found that evaluation scores of entire departments were important (ratings by your colleagues influenced your own rating). The paper also found evidence of some degree of influence on evaluations by the ethnic group of students (students from Hong Kong and Singapore tend to rate lecturers lower than students from other countries).

In conclusion, the Forum represented the interests and considered academic work of individuals from a range of institutions in Economics and Commerce-related fields. The delegates seemed to enjoy the papers and the hospitality provided by the host institution. It was certainly pleasing to see so many colleagues from around Australasia attend the Forum. We hope that this exchange of views and academic dialogue will continue in the future.

(1498 words)

Bio
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NOTE: Copies of the 2006 Forum Proceedings are available for purchase at cost price. Send a cheque for $20 made out to “University of Melbourne” to Dr Martin Davies, C/- Teaching and Learning Unit, the University of Melbourne, Royal Parade, Parkville, 3010. Abstracts for papers, can also be sent to the above address and email. These will be considered as submissions for the 2007 Forum. Those interested in attending the Forum in 2007 can send an email requesting to be added to the database.