

## **WACE Asia Pacific 2010**

### **Realising the vision: Implementing Learning in the Workplace and Community at Victoria University (VU)**

This paper outlines the process of implementing Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) -Victoria University's term for Work Integrated Learning - into all courses offered at VU in Melbourne, Australia.

VU is a multi-sector university offering a wide variety of programs across higher, vocational and further education. It is one of the most culturally diverse universities in the country, within a region which experiences significant social and economic disadvantage in Melbourne. In 2007, VU embarked on a major repositioning which aimed to put students' needs at the centre of all its activity with a focus on student employability. This repositioning has culminated in a Statement of Purpose that reflects 5 key commitments for the university. One of these commitments is the integration of LiWC into all programs, to ensure that our students are job, career, and future ready. In a policy context which is focused on increasing educational opportunities and meeting industry and workforce needs, LiWC offers a way to ensure the relevance of our courses and student engagement with industry and community.

While work integrated learning is widely practised in Australian universities, VU is committed to implementing LiWC across courses and making it explicitly linked to a minimum of 25% of the assessment in each course. Rather than being 'bolted on' to a course, the intention is for LiWC to be appropriately embedded within the structure of the course so that students may have the opportunity to learn in, and through, work in a variety of ways. This is prompting the need for a re-design of most courses and the provision of new types of assessment to capture learning in context. Thus, embedding LiWC at VU has proven to be not just a change to student centred teaching methods and curriculum design, but a significant organisational change project.

This paper will detail the key internal and external drivers behind the decision to embed LiWC into VU courses and outline the strategic development of this initiative. Issues discussed will include the implementation of LiWC in the light of: government education policies; the institutional and governance framework of the university; key pedagogical and curriculum strategies; and external and internal engagement systems and processes. Challenges encountered and successes to date will be outlined, including alignment of organisational culture with the strategic vision; resourcing the initiative; and curriculum design including, authentic learning and assessment.

# **Realising the vision: Implementing Learning in the Workplace and Community at Victoria University**

## **Introduction:**

This paper gives an overview of the implementation of a significant program of cultural change at Victoria University (VU), the implementation of the university's commitment to embed Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) across course offerings and for all students. Victoria University is a multi-sector university offering over 700 courses in higher education, vocational education and further education to over 45,000 students based at 11 campuses in the west of Melbourne, Australia. It also offers courses offshore<sup>1</sup>. VU is currently working towards having 25 per cent of assessment in all courses related to LiWC. This is being facilitated as part of a university-wide strategic change program. At VU, LiWC is an umbrella term that encompasses the many models and integrated approaches to teaching, learning and assessment that involve learning in and through the workplace and community. These LiWC models and approaches may include but are not limited to, projects in a workplace, practical, co-operative and clinical placements, fieldwork, simulated learning environments, apprenticeships, traineeships or internships and enterprise initiatives.

This paper outlines the national policy context, institutional environment and pedagogical framework which shape VU's approach to LiWC. It outlines the process followed to embed LiWC into VU courses and a number of key challenges faced in introducing this significant, university-wide process of cultural and pedagogical change.

## **International and national context:**

The change of federal government in Australia in late 2007 has brought about a change in the prominence of higher education within government policy. The new government, led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, has embarked on an "education revolution", with goals outlined in *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System* including:

- "produce graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society and the economy;
- provide opportunities for all capable people from all backgrounds to participate to their full potential and be supported to do so "(Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p7 )

The government has adopted the following targets:

- 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds will have a bachelors level qualification by 2025; and

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<sup>1</sup> LiWC in offshore courses is not fully explored within the scope of this paper, but presents a key challenge to VU.

- By 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at undergraduate level will be people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales, 2008; Gillard, 2009).

The new federal government's education revolution parallels changes to teaching and learning strategies in Australia, which mean that the majority of the nation's universities are now increasing their involvement in Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) or LiWC. The tertiary sector as a whole is placing an increasing focus on producing work-ready graduates. In 2008, Universities Australia published a position paper calling for a National Internship Scheme to assist more university students "to undertake structured work-based learning in industry during their studies" (Universities Australia, 2008). This paper highlighted VU as one of a number of universities making a "substantial commitment" to work-integrated learning (Universities Australia, 1).

Similarly, in the vocational education (VE) sector, WIL and industry engagement are important priorities, with a recent NCVET paper identifying work-based learning and the related concept of authentic learning tasks as key trends in teaching and learning in today's VE sector (Figgis, 2008). This paper concluded that "it would be difficult to find a policy document or report about skills and vocational education and training in Australia that does *not* point to the importance of the vocational education sector engaging with industry" (27).

Thus, as a recent article in the *Australian Financial Review* highlighted, Australia's tertiary sector is engaging in "an unprecedented level of WIL-based assessment to better prepare students for professional careers" (Lebihan, 2009). This is a development that is understood and endorsed by government, as the Federal Minister for Employment Participation, Brendan O'Connor, outlined in a speech to the World Association of Cooperative Education Conference in Sydney last year, when he highlighted the "immeasurable value of integrating real world experience into academic programs" (O'Connor, 2008).

### **Learning in the Workplace and Community at VU:**

While many Australian universities are offering students greater access to Work Integrated Learning, Victoria University's LiWC Policy differs from that implemented by the majority of other universities in a number of key ways. The first is that it applies to all students and all courses, with LiWC constituting 25 per cent of the assessment of a course (short, preparatory or research only courses are exempt from the 25% assessment requirement, but the intent of the Policy applies). This therefore broadens the application of LiWC approaches into generalist courses, such as arts or

science courses, and expands the number of students who will experience LiWC throughout their studies compared to other Australian universities.

Secondly, a key focus of VU's initiative is a shift from a more limited model of placement, which emphasises learning *about* and *for* work, to using the workplace as a context where students can learn *in* and *through* work. Assessment designed to encourage and evaluate student learning while undertaking LiWC is the focus of the Policy, not the model or amount of time involved. This means that VU's approach is more comprehensive and flexible than traditional WIL programs, encompassing activities such as projects, learning and assessment in simulated environments, and industry and community engaged research.

### **The VU Context:**

The LiWC agenda at VU is part of a wider institutional strategic change program being implemented across the university. In 2007 a strategic program was established at VU - entitled "Making VU: A New School of Thought" - designed to support the implementation of VU's future as a distinctive institution. The program was tasked with facilitating the implementation of five commitments that VU has made to students, enterprises and communities, of which LiWC is one (VU, 2008):

#### **Commitment 1: Collaboration**

To focus on 11 industry and community clusters in which VU has strengths, with input from roundtables chaired by prominent industry and community leaders.

#### **Commitment 2: Career**

To make at least 25 per cent of assessment in courses based on LiWC.

#### **Commitment 3: Choices**

To provide students with the ability to customise their learning experience around course choice and learning support.

#### **Commitment 4: Connected**

To reshape VU vocational and workplace education for greater benefits for students and enterprises.

#### **Commitment 5: Community**

To resource three initiatives for a better life for Melbourne's western suburbs, sharing this knowledge with other communities in Australia and overseas face similar challenges, (see VU Statement of Purpose, 2008, 8).

A program structure was implemented with focused project teams dedicated to each commitment and co-ordinated by an overarching Making VU Program Director. These teams operated over the two years of the Making VU project until the end of 2009 when all activities were mainstreamed into University operations from January 2010.

This is a major process of institutional and cultural change as Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (forthcoming 2010) suggest:

“This whole of institution initiative is in its early stages and not without challenges and challengers. Its progress, however, is worthy of close observation because it represents one of the clearest, most comprehensive conceptions of an enterprise approach to engagement with community and industry, and deep commitment by, and day to day engagement of, the senior level institutional leaders”.

A feature of VU’s approach to education, explicitly articulated in Commitment 5, but embodied throughout the whole university, is a strong connection with the local community of the western suburbs of Melbourne. Reflecting the population of the western region it serves, VU has a very diverse student cohort, “more than half of all students at Victoria University speak a language other than English at home and have a father born outside Australia” (Messinis, Sheehan and Miholcic, 2008, 1). In addition, the local population influences the fact that VU is one of only a handful of Australian universities that already meets the government target of low socio-economic students amongst its student population. In 2006, 24 per cent of VU students were from low socio-economic backgrounds, the highest proportion of any university in the state of Victoria. (ibid, 1). Nationally, 16 per cent of university students are from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley et al, 2008, 30). VU’s success reflects the institutional commitment to increasing access to tertiary education to students from these backgrounds.

However, VU’s student population offers a number of challenges and opportunities when implementing LiWC. Existing high rates of workforce participation amongst VU students (Messinis, Sheehan and Miholcic, 2008, 1) raises a challenge. Hence, LiWC approaches must be extremely flexible to accommodate VU students workforce participation, as well as offering additional opportunities for students to engage in LiWC. For some VU students, particularly those from migrant backgrounds or international students, LiWC offers a chance to experience Australian workplaces, broaden networks, and develop knowledge of Australian workplace culture which often presents barriers to the students in obtaining graduate employment.

**University Policy:**

An initial key driver of change was the review of the University's LiWC Policy. This process involved rolling consultation across the university, including all campuses, through face to face and web based forums. A comprehensive discussion paper was prepared and distributed that outlined the key elements of the policy and definitions prompting wide ranging debate and feedback. The broad range of courses offered at VU (700 +), ranging from entry level further education programs, vocational programs to undergraduate and post-graduate level, is a key challenge in implementing LiWC.

The LiWC Policy has been designed to address teaching and learning approaches across a broad spectrum of disciplines and student cohorts. Key issues debated included the inclusion of simulated contexts, the definition of community, inclusion of preparatory and shorter courses, issues relating to implementation in off-shore programs and the quantification of the 25% assessment in the course. After a 12-month process, the LiWC Policy was approved by the University Education and Research Board (ERB) in November 2008. A series of information sessions across all campuses provided information to the University community regarding the Policy. The LiWC Team was also strongly involved in other related teaching and learning policies, including Graduate Capabilities and Internationalising the curriculum. The integration of these policies into the curriculum in a coherent and coordinated way remains an ongoing and substantial challenge to the VU community.

The LiWC Policy outlines the broad policy framework and is underpinned by systems and mechanisms to support this major policy implementation. The LiWC Operational Guidelines accompany the Policy and provide more detailed operational advice to assist faculties in areas such as designing, managing and reviewing LiWC activities. The Guidelines also include resources to support relationship building and risk management. There is also a register of LiWC risks, accompanied by treatment actions to mitigate risks and help support the success of the project. The Guidelines are regularly updated and the Policy reviewed in line with the university policy review framework, which operates on a two year cycle. More frequent revision is anticipated, as the roll out of LiWC across Faculties continues into 2010 and greater detail and clarification is required.

Additional systems to underpin the LiWC rollout include the replacement of multiple LiWC management systems in schools and faculties, such as paper-based systems, spreadsheets and databases, with a single system to achieve greater coordination. An evaluation framework is also being developed to inform and provide consistency and capacity for data collection across the diverse systems currently in operation. Relationship management guidelines are being further

developed to support staff engagement with industry and community partners, and to deal with the complexities of relationships that may take place with multiple staff and across Faculties. The development of these systems has commenced, but again challenges need to be faced in terms of meeting diverse needs across disciplines and sectors, as well as securing the resources required to achieve the outcomes. Another key initiative of 2009 has been a detailed scoping study undertaken by Price Waterhouse Coopers identifying the resources and services required to implement LiWC across the university at school, faculty and at a university wide level. The findings of this study is currently being utilised to plan for the continued implementation of the initiative. Identifying sufficient resources within the financial constraints of higher education context in Australia however presents an ongoing challenge.

### **Pedagogy and key challenges:**

VU's commitment to LiWC recognises that powerful learning can occur in workplaces and community settings. When this intentional learning is well organised, it has the potential to provide a rich, active experience for students. To do this, VU staff need to have a sophisticated understanding of the pedagogy of LiWC in order to develop innovative and effective practices. A major challenge for some VU staff is to gain a more inclusive conception of LiWC in order to accommodate the changes it demands. Theoretical learning and practice learning can be complementary parts of a whole, each elaborating, extending and challenging the other. (Orrell, 2009, 4). VU's approach is based on a holistic approach to blending theoretical and experiential learning. Rather than 25 per cent of LiWC assessment to be 'bolted on' to a course, the intention is for LiWC to be appropriately embedded within the structure of the course so that students may have the opportunity to learn in, and through, work in a variety of ways.

This integrated approach to embedding LiWC into VU courses, designed to bring about a strong connection between theoretical and practical knowledge, has prompted the need for a re-design of many learning and assessment strategies, and in some cases a re-design of the whole course. Curricula review processes have provided opportunities to also explicitly embed graduate capabilities into learning activities aimed at developing students' skills in critical reflection and self-directed learning with the intention of preparing students to capitalise on their future LiWC experiences. Equally, there are new demands for assessment of students' learning that is more holistic, active and in context.

*The WIL report – A National Scoping Study*, suggests that if WIL curriculum is to achieve its desired educational outcomes and build a bridge of learning between the University and the

workplace, then the sector has to extend its current range of WIL approaches and assessment strategies (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto, 2009, 39). VU's LiWC models vary substantially in terms of their pedagogical traditions and practices. This requires considerable effort in determining the timing, scaffolding and mix of approaches that are to be embedded within a course. For many discipline areas across the University, the LiWC initiative has required significant changes in learning and assessment strategies and purposefully designed curriculum. This has proven to be a considerably more complex issue than first anticipated, underpinned by a need to build staff capability in LiWC curriculum development. It was identified that many staff had limited experience and knowledge in designing LiWC learning outcomes and assessment strategies. Consequently, there is a need to professionally develop staff and provide assistance with developing new approaches to curriculum design that incorporate a range of LiWC approaches spread throughout the whole course.

Providing coordinated support from educational developers to work collaboratively with course teams to effectively map current LiWC practices and review teaching and learning approaches has also proved complex due to resource constraints. Where teams have worked together, the resulting approach to 'whole of course' review has reaped benefits beyond LiWC integration, as course staff have gained a greater understanding of the linkages and constructive alignment of units of study that make up a course.

The LiWC initiative is underpinned by the requirement to formally assess LiWC learning activities. As noted in *The WIL Report* (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher and Pretto, 2009, 42), LiWC assessment is integral to effective curriculum design and the assessment approaches adopted must be constructively aligned with LiWC learning experiences. The report identifies this as a major issue in the Australian higher education context. This focus on designing authentic learning and assessment for LiWC has proved to be also a considerable cultural shift for many VU staff and getting 'buy-in' has proved challenging in recent times. The sharing of good practice and lessons learned across disciplines and sectors continues to add to the wealth of knowledge and experience throughout all teaching areas.

### **Leadership, supporting structures and engagement:**

An important aspect of supporting LiWC implementation is leadership. The Vice-Chancellor established the Making VU Project Team and has provided the strategic leadership for the Making VU Program. An institutional-wide advisory mechanism and policy framework was also

implemented to guide LiWC and engage the broader VU community, providing a structure for the successful implementation of LiWC.

A senior management team member was appointed as the champion for each of the five Making VU Commitments. Commitment leaders provide oversight and leadership to each Commitment, the Commitment team and the project plan, advocate for the Commitment and forge and enable links to the broader Making VU and University strategic initiatives. The Commitment champion reports through the Vice-Chancellor to the University Council on progress and oversees engagement with the VU community through chairing a Project Advisory Group (PAG). For LiWC, the designated champion is the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), the academic leader of the university. The LiWC Project Advisory Group (PAG) membership included representatives of all VU Faculties and other key units supporting LiWC. This group provided the central advisory and feedback mechanism on the progress of implementation. Meeting monthly over two years, the PAG provided the key forum for input into all LiWC projects and developments prior to and during implementation across the university. As the process to mainstream the activities of the LiWC team into existing VU structures commenced in 2009, it signalled a shift from the strategic to more the operational elements of the program and an additional committee was formed: the LiWC committee. This committee operated in tandem with the PAG over the final 4 months of the LiWC project in late 2009. From 2010 the LiWC committee will be the overarching mechanism for implementing LiWC across the university and take carriage of a number of projects as they are implemented in 2010 and beyond.

This advisory structure experienced several challenges in fulfilling its objectives. The role of the faculty representative on the committees was sometimes not clearly understood particularly in terms of the expectation regarding communication flow and feedback to faculties. Combined with the lack of appropriate faculty-based forums for LiWC in some faculties, this resulted in inconsistent levels of communication and engagement between Faculties and the LiWC Team. As the rollout of LiWC gained momentum, a greater sense of urgency to meet deadlines resulted in increased levels of engagement with both the PAG, LiWC committee and LiWC 2Team. Increased rollout of LiWC across a broader range of courses also resulted in Faculties being confronted by the complexities associated with the implementation process. Consequently, the committee structure is now increasingly seen as a source of information and support to inform Faculties as the project continues to move from the strategic to a more operational stage. It is expected that in 2010, the LiWC Committee will have a full work plan to process the range of projects requiring completion.

This will support the university as the LiWC momentum increases when the full uptake across all courses and year levels is realised in 2010.

**Engagement with staff to support cultural change:**

The implementation of the LiWC project has involved a significant cultural change across the University and a range of strategies have been employed to support that change and affect staff engagement. The VU Diamond database developed by nationally-recognised education experts identified existing good practice across the University (Aitkin and Mitchell, 2008). This database was published, widely distributed and celebrated both within VU and externally to validate existing LiWC expertise in the university and enable staff to innovate through sharing strategies across the university. In addition, VU events such as a LiWC Innovation Showcase which runs each year, has enabled teaching staff and practitioners to present their research and practice. With over 25 presentations at each Showcase, this has been another successful vehicle to engage and build staff capability. Incentives and support to further enable staff to implement fresh LiWC approaches into their curriculum involved targeting VU Teaching and Learning Support grants to LiWC innovation and pedagogy (both onshore and offshore). Additional LiWC curriculum development initiative grants were also made available to Faculties. Other engagement activities have included use of the LiWC Community of Practice, international and national guest speakers, extensive professional development and presentations by the commitment 2 team members at Faculty based forums. The building of staff capability and confidence in the implementation of LiWC in discipline areas remains an ongoing process that will continue to present challenges in this complex initiative.

The Course Review and Approvals Process has been used as the primary mechanism for assessing the quality, viability and sustainability of VU courses and to ensure that courses and groups of courses are aligned with the strategic direction and initiatives of VU, of which LiWC is a key focus. The review process requires course teams to reflect on current LiWC practices, identifying areas for improvement and potential innovation, and propose action plans to move forward. The Course review panels include industry and community representatives who willingly offer their perspectives and insights as to how LiWC activities can be scaffolded into courses. This collaborative engagement between industry and VU staff in the design of 'LiWC infused curricula' reaps considerable benefits for all involved. Teaching practitioners are benefiting from their involvement in LiWC as they collaborate in the development of systematic and effective learning for students in work and community contexts (Orrell, 2009, 8). LiWC requires the establishment of links with industry and community and VU staff are increasingly using these links to collaboratively review their courses with a view to provide mutually beneficial LiWC experiences

for all stakeholders. Developing strategies to build staff skills in industry engagement and leveraging the outcomes industry and community roundtables and other systems to support engagement including the implementation of a client management system and an account management framework for the university is another key challenge for 2010.

**Conclusion:**

Implementing LiWC across the whole of VU is a significant ongoing process of cultural and educational change. As a key element of a wider project to implement institutional change and develop VU as a distinctive university, VU's policy takes a broad view of LiWC, and focuses on making LiWC assessment a core part of VU courses. This paper has outlined the process undertaken to embed LiWC across the university, describing the education policy context, institutional environment, supporting structures implemented, and pedagogical approaches, while also highlighting the challenges faced and the ones that remain to ensure the ultimate success of this complex and wide-ranging project.

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