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Getting Down to Business

Jo Smedley¹ & Torben Svane²

Abstract - Business and Information Technology are highly compatible curriculum partners for academic study, providing a multitude of opportunities for enterprise and entrepreneurship. However, training students to successfully operate in today’s international, fast-moving technology world requires more than merely curricula encompassing such topics. Appropriate learning styles involve the application of IT, to improve efficiency and operational styles but technology use must also be seen in a business context. The use of appropriate real-life scenarios such as case studies, role-play and designing and developing websites as well as the use of various information systems are important in the development of entrepreneurial skills such as creativity, dynamism, individuality and team working.

This paper reports on an innovative suite of modules offered to international students, as part of their semester or year-long exchange at Halmstad University, Sweden. Dealing with numerous aspects of Business Information Technology, these modules are delivered through various learning approaches. The overall aim is to provide the students with a wide range of perspectives and analytical skills, while acknowledging diversity in heritage and cultural influences. Modules presented could well be included in a training program for future international entrepreneurs.

Index Terms – international learning, business, technology, theory and practice, real-life aspects

INTRODUCTION

Time spent abroad is certainly a valuable asset in any Curriculum Vitae. Recruiters look for prospective employees who have proven they can quickly adapt and become productive in unfamiliar environments. In an increasingly global workplace, institutions of higher learning work diligently to facilitate a smorgasbord of real-life experiences, to provide a truly realistic springboard for their students and thereby increase their employability. This can include student placement in industry [1] and time spent abroad [2].

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In knowledge-based economies, there is a strong interest in increasing the levels of graduate entrepreneurship [3]. Communities in which entrepreneurship thrive create more jobs and wealth [4]. There is a distinctive role for education and universities in the development of wealth and a knowledge-based society [5]. The role of higher education in this context is crucial in enhancing the motivation and capability of graduates to engage in entrepreneurial activity. However, if the need for increased levels of graduate entrepreneurship is to be met, it is important to develop more innovative and entrepreneurial approaches during studies. Empowering teams of teachers, students and business people to interact in face-to-face and/or electronic relationships, and to facilitate the formation of networked enterprises emerging from spin-off activities are only a few examples.

PLACEMENTS AND WORK EXPERIENCE

The role of study is to prepare students for the world of work. Most students realize that today’s job market is competitive, challenging, and requires substantial effort in order to pursue successfully[6]. Alas, too often students approach this market without experience and find it difficult to enter at an appropriate level reflecting their qualifications and potential. Irrespective of their duration, work placements provide an invaluable opportunity for students to ‘practise’ their developing skills while having less of the ‘risk’ factor. It is ‘real’ experience with ‘real’ responsibility and an invaluable opportunity for students to try out a career path and improve their graduate employment chances while earning some money. Students gain a much better appreciation of the relevance of their academic studies and are better prepared on graduation to embark on careers in their chosen field. Employers also gain from the students' enthusiasm and fresh insights, whilst the educational institution involved benefits from the resultant enhanced links with industry.

The benefits of a student placement can be broadly divided into seven categories[7]:

- to benefit from the integration of University study and work experience in ways which facilitate critical reflection on each;
- to experience the responsibilities, tasks, and relationships involved in managerial work at a level appropriate to a third year undergraduate student;
- where students are specialising in a particular functional or professional area, to gain greater practical understanding of their chosen specialism;
- to gain an understanding of the ways in which their placement organisation operates and how this might relate to other organisations and management processes;
- to build a personal awareness of their own interests, competencies, values and potential;

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to develop the ability to share their work experiences and evaluations with their peers and with academic staff in order to gain more from their final year of study and to assist others to do likewise;

to increase their ability to make informed career choices.

The achievement of a successful placement year requires the active co-operation and collaboration of the student, the employer and the educational institution. Each has a role to play. A placement student differs from a new graduate recruit in that the placement experience is an integrated part of his or her university education. Thus, students are often supervised by both a "Placement Supervisor" from the employing organisation and by a "Placement Tutor", a member of academic staff from the educational organisation. It is essential that the student has a clear understanding at the outset of the placement of the expectations and requirements of each of these parties and, equally, that throughout the placement, the student will find each of these supervisors approachable to discuss relevant issues and problems.

Through its extensive international partner network, Halmstad encourages and offers its students the opportunity to study abroad as part of their undergraduate programme. This is achieved either through conventional study abroad for a semester or by spending short periods of time undertaking projects. One such course, IT Ekonomi, enables Halmstad students to work abroad on placement using their business and IT skills to work on real-life projects. This provides a valuable opportunity for students to work within an international arena while still being within a ‘learning’ atmosphere, acquiring highly sought after skills which will equip them well for the world of work.

INTERNATIONALIZATION

Universities are increasingly designing and implementing policies that encourage an international and intercultural ethos in their institutions, imbuing teaching and learning with an international dimension [8]. Study abroad programs, overseas work placement and participation in international distance learning using the Internet are only a few activities whereby students may experience an international setting. Other actions aimed at increasing the awareness of differences in studying and teaching styles and in social and academic culture/traditions could include the European Union Socrates incentive [9] that sponsors student as well as faculty and staff mobility among union member countries, prospective member states included.

The realities of globalization and growing international interdependence are prompting educational changes in terms of what is being taught and how. Higher education institutions increasingly need to commit themselves to developing the international dimension of their campuses, curriculum and communities.

An education system that prepares students to live and work in an international and multicultural society is essential to their future in a competitive marketplace. However, the challenges associated with international students are not new.

King Henry III is said to have chastised the citizens of Cambridge for their lack of ‘restraint and moderation’ towards such scholars [10]. Today, difficulties and preoccupations with credit transfer and mutual recognition procedures are often cited obstacles [11]. An open, global academic setting still has many challenges ahead.

Competition in international markets has traditionally been the realm of large companies, with smaller firms tending to remain local or regional. Internationalization was an expansion option of interest to some enterprises, but was seldom a competitive necessity. Many opted to avoid the uncertainties of competing in foreign markets, and simply kept their firms small and local. Traditional internationalization theories therefore focused mainly on large multinational corporations and were less pertinent to smaller firms. However, with the liberalization of trade and the wide-spread acceptance and use of the Internet, domestic forms are threatened by international and virtual competitors who now penetrate previously unreachable markets.

Today, internationalization affects us all, whether we like it or not. In order to survive in a competitive environment, threats and opportunities of internationalization must be addressed [8]. Globalization is transforming the competitive environment of small and large players alike. As a result, internationalization issues will continue to be increasingly important for organizations both in the private and public sectors. Public policy agendas already include programs to help entrepreneurs become successful at internationalization. There is a growing need to understand internationalization in the context of entrepreneurship, for smaller companies as well as for large multinationals.

To date, the number of higher education programs dedicated to internationalization and entrepreneurship appears to be limited. Historically, entrepreneurship and international business have formerly been separate academic subjects but in recent years, cross-fertilization between these fields has become one of the most dynamic areas in economics and management.

HALMSTAD UNIVERSITY - AN INTERNATIONAL GATEWAY

Establishing joint international programs among universities in different countries is not in any way unique [11] but is still not common either. Our impression is however that such activities will increase in the future, to make better use of qualified competencies - spread internationally, but jointly available through such channels as the Internet. Moreover, with increased numbers of the population enrolled in academic endeavour, specialized courses must be offered also at locations where nearby institutions have focused on profiles and competences other than what the prospective student desire.

Increased mobility within and outside of the European Union will in many cases also call for preparation of language skills, in addition to the individual’s native tongue. All taken into consideration, many arguments can be put forth for making new degrees as international as possible in scope. “International” students are in most cases individual students...
or small groups of students, rather than entire courses or programs even though Halmstad University also participates in several degree programs involving two or more countries, in both Business and Engineering (and on undergraduate and graduate levels).

Following the example set by the European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) [12] in possessing an infrastructure including incubators, science parks and other regional entities, Halmstad University has a long tradition in the areas of entrepreneurship and innovation. Being one of the founding members of the Scandinavian Institute for Research in Entrepreneurship (SIRE), entrepreneurship research in Halmstad has focused two main areas, namely Finance and Control in SMEs and Growth and Internationalization in SMEs. Today, SIRE has expanded its interest domains to also cover issues in regional learning and leadership. Halmstad University is furthermore involved in the Nordic Consortium for Born Global Research and views itself [13] as one of the most dynamic and fastest expanding universities in Sweden. The institution recruits students from across Sweden and hosts many foreign exchange students and staff. As a small university, it offers students the opportunity to easily make contact with other students and also with staff. Channels of communications are easily established and the atmosphere is informal and positive.

External relations are extremely important to Halmstad University. Collaboration with companies and organizations in the surroundings is one of the key factors in every task the institution carries out. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, through joint actions the quality of research can evolve and be validated. Together with partners, models, methods and ways of working can be developed in order to stimulate the interplay between theory and practice. Secondly, as a university they involve themselves and take an active part in society activities and development. This concerns comprehensive social issues such as humanism, democracy, quality of life and welfare. However, these questions also deal with contributing to change and development within a certain knowledge, skill, technique or problem area.

Halmstad University is active and a driving force in regional development while simultaneously being a national and international resource. Under the unifying concept “The Innovation University”, the institution works with technology, characterized by innovation and entrepreneurship, and social and humanistic sciences oriented towards communication and transformation processes. New initiatives are tested for improving education and research with students often working independently in projects.

Besides international research networking, the institution also engages with partners in promoting entrepreneurship at undergraduate and graduate levels. Many international students attend courses in Innovation Management and in areas of business and IT, there are several links and double degree programs with partners in several European countries. At time of writing, a new initiative is being investigated for the development of a network for IT and entrepreneurship, targeting young people and university graduates in Morocco.

This new venture is being carried out in conjunction with UK partners, within the European Union TEMPUS framework.

**BUSINESS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Educational programs should promote an ethos of lifelong learning and develop in graduates the capacity for long-term personal and professional development through self-learning and reflection. A business degree program should further seek to foster graduates who are confident, creative thinkers with the capacity to solve problems, think creatively, negotiate, make decisions and resolve conflict [15].

I) Curricula

Combining knowledge from two very dynamic fields, the BIT courses explore and provide insight into the theories and practice behind how to do business with IT. The BIT modules are all offered as freestanding units for Swedish and international students. They often attract students who are interested in developing a fundamental understanding of how IT and information systems can be linked with business to provide a powerful team. Granting 7.5 ECTS points each, the modules are all taught in English and include a mix of learning and teaching styles, involving traditional lectures, tutorials, workshops, online discussions, one-to-one seminars, blended learning, and individual research assignments.

The first, introductory course (BIT1) focuses on marketing and general business management issues, in combination with IT. It aims to introduce the concept of IT and its impact on modern business operations. Upon completion, students will have an understanding of how IT and IS can be a positive factor in a company’s development and strive for efficient operations. Besides insights into the theoretical framework, students will also have a working knowledge of standard office software, hardware, various business applications, and systems development issues. The course focuses on IT primarily from a managerial end user perspective, specifically addressing a theoretical interaction between marketing and information systems.

BIT2 raises insights to a more strategic level where changing entire businesses through the means of IT becomes the focus. A major objective here is to increase student awareness of how IT can be used for competitive advantage. Upon completion, students will have achieved working knowledge of how to formulate IT strategies and will also have gained insights regarding IT management issues. Again, the course focuses on business (here: strategic) rather than strict technological considerations of IT in local, national and global business environments.

Of crucial importance to companies today, BIT3 addresses e-commerce and e-business issues, dealing with the design of content and e-commerce business aspects behind the setup of Internet-based sales or services. A considerable part of this course uses Internet technologies in its operation and reflects that e-commerce is a fast-growing business nowadays and is considered to be of strategic importance to most companies today. The aim of this module is to introduce the students to a theoretical framework relevant to the
development, implementation and management of commercial websites, while also offering the possibility to put theory into practice.

While having less business focus than the first three, BIT4 provides an interesting insight into the leisure and learning domains. Through lectures and workshops, this module covers computer games and educational software (from Kindergarten to university) as well as more business-direct issues such as e-learning and e-training. This module also introduces students to business models as well as development and management issues behind edutainment and focuses specifically on concepts, methods and discussions applicable in this area and how it can be related to business to encourage a proactive relationship with customers.

II) Teaching

In tutoring modules such as these, it is important to reflect on the nature of the input experience and influences provided to students. Two tutors tutored on these modules, both with considerable experience and expertise in relating theory to practice, in an academic and business setting. All modules were taught through the use of the English language. One tutor was Swedish with fluent English-speaking skills while the other was from England. This provided a valuable input basis with which to widen the international basis of the modules. Both tutors had expertise of teaching international students, teaching in an international arena and attending conferences all over the world. This experience provided a rich source from which to draw examples and reflect on knowledge in the context of the students background, thereby adding an enriched learning dimension to their learning experience. This was felt to be an important factor as a less informed source of teaching support would not have provided such in insight.

III) Learning

Modules presented use a blended learning style involving face-to-face lectures, seminars, e-learning, e-mail, use of a virtual learning environment and compilation of a reflective learning journal in various mixes. This varied diet ensures that students encounter different types of information relating to business information technology while also encouraging them to think and analyze what they are learning, apply it and also reflect on it.

BIT1, as the initial scene setting module, demands a more traditional face-to-face style of teaching in delivering the conceptual aspects of business information technology. However, there is still scope for considerable discussion often using a case study format to encourage the application of learned knowledge to practical situations. Required coursework includes a written report and a written final examination, besides oral presentation(s).

BIT2, with its more strategic outlook, employs a more discussion based style, with the emphasis leaning more towards discussion in seminars and with less traditional lecture input. Here, the required assessment coursework includes an extensive written report (target length is defined to 20 pages) presented in a seminar, and a written examination with questions covering both theoretical issues and “consultancy” case studies to solve.

BIT3, with an emphasis on e-commerce, focuses Internet interactions between company and customer and uses a format that forces the students live like they learn. It relies on a much more independent style of learning using discussions, presentations, online learning, reading and website development. Peer assessment and the use of online reflective diaries [14] are innovative features here, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning. This provides a useful springboard for future Continuing Professional Development experiences, emphasizing to the students the importance of lifelong learning and reflection. In any training for future entrepreneurship, it is important to be secure with base line knowledge and to be able to apply it to new situations innovatively and creatively. Students are encouraged to reflect on the knowledge gained in the preceding modules and also draw on existing knowledge of international e-commerce using examples from their own country.

The educational outlook of BIT4 is reflected in the teaching and learning style as this is a mix of lectures, workshops and seminars. Assessment includes active participation in seminars, two term papers and a software development project.

IV) Students

Unsurprisingly, students participating in the BIT courses come from a range of backgrounds, e.g. business, media, IT, sport, teaching, languages, engineering. An understanding of how IT can enhance operations, develop markets and services or bring about improved efficiency will be valued in any area of work. There are no prerequisites for attending this block of courses, as no prior knowledge in this area is assumed. BIT2 and BIT3 do however require successful completion of BIT1 or previous work in a class with similar content/focus. The strength of the courses comes from its participants: with many different and varied prior experiences, discussions and student group work will often evolve into areas that would normally not be covered if the module involved business students alone.

Participating students originate from countries across the world including China, Germany, New Zealand, France, Hungary and the Netherlands. The BIT modules use empirical, behavioral and computational approaches in different types of problem domains, including IT strategy, decision support, supply chain, e-commerce, interaction design, and software development. They draw on a multitude of disciplines such as information systems, computer science, cognitive science, organizational science and business management, as well as social and cognitive psychology in their effort to address the use of appropriate, innovative, effective design (and the use of information technology) to support business initiatives.
As the initial scene-setting module, BIT1 lays the foundations for the rest of the BIT courses. This unit is offered in September and January to enable students to be able to access this fundamental base module whenever they commence their studies at Halmstad. This is followed by BIT2 for September-entry students to further develop their strategic understanding of IT systems. In the spring semester, these students can then progress onto introducing an e-commerce (BIT3) or business education/game design (BIT4) element into their portfolio. For students commencing their international studies in January and consequently undertaking a shorter period of international study, more limited opportunities are available. While BIT1 provides the necessary base-line concepts, students are unable to take the BIT2 module. They have however the option to progress immediately to BIT3 or BIT4. This limitation and the realization that this innovative and real-life curriculum is of potentially considerable value and interest to students from across the University provides the impetus to undertake further development, thereby widening participation opportunity.

VI) What the students say

The best judge of any products are its users. In providing a work-focused curriculum, it is hoped that the students will engage, not only in the material but in the whole sentiment and ethos of the entrepreneurial approach. Based on some initial feedback, it is encouraging to see their reactions to the module to date:

"Nowadays it is necessary to react as fast as possible to the changes in the world market. Without IT, business could not develop so fast and will be not so competitive. We have to see all the potential of saving money through the possibilities IT offers to business. I see the link between business and IT as a very important aspect. In my opinion, business and IT belong nowadays together; one cannot work without the other. ....Looking at this I find it very important to take some classes which link these two topics to not get stuck in two different worlds without seeing the connection."

"Thinking about the connection of IT and business brings many ideas to me. I see that there is still a lot of business out there which has not been discovered and where you still can make money. I do not have to look far but just around me I can discover things which can be improved by taking more IT into existing business. By taking the classes BIT 1 and BIT 3 at Halmstad University I got many ideas for this."

"Before studying BIT, I thought IT was something very technical, very "Engineer stuff" as opposed to Business stuff. I thought it was rather isolated in the company rather than integrated. But now, I see how it can be everywhere, how it is linking everything in the business."

"We are able to search all around the world for the best offer that fits to our needs. Additionally, IT helps business to save a lot of manpower and to use the personal touch for tasks where it is not possible to replace the human decision taking."

The BIT3 module has been run in blended learning form for the last three years, requiring students to manage their own time to a much greater extent. This more flexible, non-traditional style of learning has uncovered an array of new issues for students. Throwing more emphasis on their ability to manage not only their time, but themselves, their studies and their leisure activities, they have to ensure that an adequate amount of time is given to the module.

"First of all it is quite difficult for me to study not in class, because we are quite used to it and there is a totally different pressure on us, but, in my opinion, it is a great way to learn something."

"Maybe if we will do it more often we will start to love it really, but at the moment I have some problems to dispose my time in the right way. This will help me also to learn to arrange my time in a more efficient way."

"I think it is good to study this away from my home country because I get a different view – like the British or the Swedish opinion about business and IT. It feels OK to study IT in Sweden because it is something the country is good at."

"I am really satisfied the way offered to learn in this way, because it may be also a possibility for my working life."

VII) Planned developments

The link between business and technology can never be one to lie dormant for long, especially with the seed of entrepreneurship ever present. The rapidly evolving nature of these disciplines means that academics must constantly revise and update syllabi and curriculum materials [17]. As a result, there is increased emphasis on entrepreneurship, which is now an integral part of many undergraduate programs.

Developing the curriculum further to encompass a still wider range of aspects of business information technology concepts is underway involving the entrepreneurial approach, sharing culture and values, the development and support of people, developing the entrepreneurial organization, responding to markets and adding value. It is important to move away from the conventional focus of entrepreneurship education on new venture management, business plans and growth and innovation, to a broader concept based on an understanding of the way entrepreneurs live and learn [16]. To date, new modules are proposed in the people aspect of e-business and the importance and concept of e-marketing (such modules are already offered in Swedish). In addition, the involvement of entrepreneurs from industry would further enhance the existing curriculum, thereby ensuring that the relevance to international entrepreneurship is maintained in terms of content and style [18].
With the increase of international students wishing to access this type of curriculum, the opportunity for the creative use of technology in order to broaden and further develop the learning styles is being seized. This will help to deliver innovative curricula providing students with a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of technology enterprise to enlighten international students of the opportunities that entrepreneurship can offer them.

In order to widen potential participation to this curriculum, one idea currently under consideration is to develop a more flexible blended learning operation involving a broader core structure, encompassing the conceptual elements of BIT1 taught in traditional style. The other BIT modules would then be offered in a more flexible style, enabling the offering of the other modules to be run concurrently in both terms and thereby enabling more students to be able to access this curriculum during their sometimes limited stay at Halmstad. A Swedish version of BIT4 is already running in its second year, taught solely on distance and using communication tools such as e-mail, conference systems, chats and virtual (but live, and on-line) seminars through Skype (free Internet telephony conferences, www.skype.com) and the Microsoft Network system (MSN Messenger) for free person-to-person video conferencing.

The development of a summer course curriculum at Halmstad has already commenced, recognizing that today’s learning experience no longer fits into a fixed timetable slot of the traditional academic year. Courses offered for 2005 almost triple in number the number of courses offered in 2004. Certainly, the declared lifelong learning and widening participation strategies of the Swedish Government and the establishment of the Swedish Net University and numerous other state supported agencies suggest that this type of initiative is to be welcomed. Moreover, courses such as Internet Marketing and Internet Business Models are also offered at locations outside Halmstad having dense summer populations. These entrepreneurial types of courses will be also ideal to include within this new innovative type of curriculum framework, offering would-be entrepreneurs, until now outside the traditional learning arena, the opportunity to be able to access more traditional styles of learning of a fascinating subject.

**THE WAY FORWARD**

Working with students in this exciting and dynamic area of development offers a rich environment for new enterprise, research and dynamism. As young people embark on their careers, being able to provide insight and enthusiasm and open eyes to the possibilities of future enterprise provides a range of positive teaching and learning experiences. Simultaneously, the ever increasing opportunities within business information technology offer a rich tapestry of developments for the creative and innovative entrepreneur. What better way to open the door of opportunity to today’s learners by raising awareness of their true entrepreneurial potential?

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N.B. J.K. Smalley = J.K. Hamilton-Jones