Reporting back on 'accelerate', a pilot social initiative aimed at challenging and extending the top students in a large first-year business course

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In 2017 we piloted an extension to our large and complex first-year team-based learning program at the University of Auckland Business School. We chose 30 top performing students out of a cohort of approximately 1700 from the first-year to participate in a project that integrated their academic content with high-performance teamwork in a real-world environment by consulting for a not for profit organisation. Our aims were to challenge and extend our top students and contribute to the literature by furthering the collective understanding of how best to engage gifted and talented students in team contexts. This paper discusses our experiences and findings from this pilot project and seeks audience input on our proposed way forward.

Background

Since 2011 the Departments of Management and Marketing at the University of Auckland Business School have together administered BUSINESS 101 and 102 as a two-course sequence of core first-year subjects. The courses run on a flipped classroom pedagogy under which lectures and assigned readings/homework are inverted (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Milman, 2012). Under this model, students engage with their course materials online, and then apply the knowledge gained through applied exercises in their permanent class teams. One of these in-class exercises is assessed each week. Business 101 and 102 serve multiple strategic purposes for the Business School. In addition to conveying foundational Management and Marketing content, the courses also act as a vehicle for transition and socialisation to University life for first-year students. They aim to prepare students for careers in which critical thinking and the ability to function in a team will be vital (Haidet, Kubitz & McCormack, 2014). Consequently, a great deal of resource is put into student support for the areas in which students may be weak. We are aware that the effectiveness of teams relies heavily upon their cohesiveness (Omar & Ahmad, 2014), but also acknowledge that in compulsory courses with large and very diverse cohorts such as ours, the objective of challenging and engaging top-performing students while simultaneously nurturing those who struggle can be very difficult indeed (Carrie, Mulla, Patterson, Kilkoll-Proffit, Brookes, Sima & Agee, 2017). In semester II 2017 we responded to this tension by piloting a program aimed at challenging and extending our top students in a real-world context outside the classroom (Mulla, Kilkolly-Proffit, Carrie, Brookes, Agee, & Sima, 2017). This paper will discuss the results of this program and raise questions as to how best to proceed in light of the pilot.

Literature upon which the initiative is based

For a number of years we received feedback that while highly performing students understood our reasons for catering to those who struggle, they felt that we did not cater adequately to their needs as students who excel. They wanted to be challenged beyond the standard curriculum, and were bored when we failed to do so. We consequently explored the available literature to see what if anything was being done in this area, and found support for the idea that top students required and excelled under not only curricular extension, but also deeper and more meaningful forms of socialisation through interactions with other top students, faculty members and the broader organisation (University) (Weidman, 2006).

Our first-year team-learning ethos with its emphasis on communication, problem solving and critical thinking reflects employer feedback that effective teamwork is fundamental to many modern workplaces (Agnew, 2016; Team Spirit, 2016). Cultural socialisation initiatives and literacy programs are established to run parallel to the curricular aspects of our courses. Assistance is also provided to students with disabilities and academic skills support is provided to everyone, but until recently, there was nothing in place to cater specifically to the needs of our 'academically gifted' students. Literature suggested that co-created educational approaches such as ours were valuable, but were even more so when they extended students beyond established boundaries (Taylor, Hunter, Melton & Goodwin, 2011). We could see that there was certainly a hunger for such extension from our top students.

The literature on teaching high-achieving students is rich, but there is a dearth of studies focussed on doing so in large class settings in tertiary Business Schools. This is reinforced by Milward, Wardman and Rubie-Davis (2016), whose research focussed on the New Zealand tertiary sector in particular. Subsequently, there have been calls for reconfigured curriculums specifically for high achieving students and gifted underachievers (Reis in Borland 2003). It has been argued that the best response to the adept learning abilities of these students is first to identify such learners (Robinson, 1997), which can be challenging, and then to cater to them by creating programs designed for swift and agile thinkers (Taylor & Milton, 2006).

Milward et. al. (2016) have highlighted that gifted and talented students are diverse in age and ethnicity, but Robinson (1997) has stated that a suitable index of 'giftedness' is the highest-achieving 2-5% of students in a given cohort. In fact, Robinson (1997) emphasises that a broadening of the curriculum to include otherwise excluded content "can serve to enliven and broaden instruction for students capable of mastering more than the usual fare" (p234). The challenge for us was how best to embed such a broadening of the curriculum in a way that did not alienate or leave behind those less capable of such extended learning.

Roberson and Franchini (2014) address extending students' learning by engaging in projects and then mentoring future participants, and Kift (2002) discusses the practical value that practicing professionals can add through projects. This literature formed the basis for our formulation of a pilot program in which our top students were chosen to participate in the extension project, 'Accelerate', which applied Groves, Sellars, Smith and Barber's (2015) conceptualisation of six engagement lenses for improving student outcomes.

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

Our first and pilot iteration of the 'Accelerate' program in 2017 was mutually successful in meeting our objectives of (a) engaging top students beyond the standard classroom

curriculum; (b) providing top students with an applied project experience with an external organisation; and (c) creating tangible value for the external organisation through engagement with our top students.

The program involved us selecting 30 students from a group of 60 who expressed interest in participation. This group of 60 was drawn from the wider cohort of 1700 students (roughly 100 of whom achieved an A+ grade in semester 1 2017). To earn a place in the program, students were screened on the basis on their grades and a short written expression of interest that outlined their motivation for participation. The selection process was challenging and in need of further refinement in future iterations, but it produced a relatively diverse group of individuals from different ethnicities and genders.

Once selected for the program, students were brought together in an initial orientation evening that involved administrative information from us and a range of networking and socialisation exercises over food and beverages. Staff then left the room and students were allowed to arrange themselves into teams of five. Staff were each allocated as mentors to one team for the duration of the semester. Students were introduced to our external organisation, St John Ambulance New Zealand, initiated into some issues or problems the organisation wished to address with their fundraising opportunity shops, and were given rolling deadlines for written deliverables that applied the tools taught in Business 101 and 102 to St John's stated problems. Teams decided amongst themselves how best to interact with each other and their staff mentor, with most choosing to meet weekly, but some also conducting themselves entirely remotely via email and other electronic correspondence. Apart from the initial orientation evening, students were required to attend two further sessions for all groups at which they were able to interact with representatives from St John, ask questions and generally interact with other groups to share insights and ideas.

The final and most important deliverable for the groups was an oral presentation of their findings and recommendations to a number of representatives from St John, including members of the board of directors, National Marketing Manager, Store Managers, etc. who chose a winning team based on these presentations.

Students understood from the outset that though 'Accelerate' ran parallel to Business 102, they were still required to enrol in that course, and that their participation in the program would not contribute to their grades in any way. Similarly, though the University funded catering and prizes, staff participation was also purely voluntary and in addition to full-time workloads. Both staff and students were very positive about experiences in the program, and students were keen to see similar opportunities in the remaining years of their degree.

Description of impact

The project aligned closely with the Business School and University's strategic goals to develop an entrepreneurial ecosystem, though in this instance, with a deep social focus. The close interaction students had with staff through the program is unusual at first-year, where large student numbers usually stretch staff to a point whereby it becomes difficult to get to know individual students. This was noted as particularly important and desirable by both staff and students. Students also gained valuable skills and experience for their future endeavours in industry alongside real-world insights rarely available to first-year students, and all involved had a positive tangible impact on a charitable organisation that was one of the most rewarding aspects of the program.

Originality and practicality of the initiative

With its particular emphasis on extending top students in real-world contexts, this project is unlike anything trialled at other Business Schools in New Zealand outside of a traditional honours program. The fact that it extends gifted first-year students is particularly novel, and its emphasis on social enterprise is particularly significant. The first iteration of the program has indicated that it is practical on a small scale, though it does require refinement in selection processes and questions remain about how best to embed such a program so it can benefit a greater number of students going forward without unduly burdening staff. Questions remain as to whether a formal streaming of 'top students' into a class for those identified as academically gifted separate from the rest of the cohort would be beneficial for those students. Similarly, we do not know what impact the removal of such students from the broader cohort would have on other students. As the first iteration of the program was purely voluntary and did not have an impact on student grades, we do not know how best to assess a graded version of the program in a manner that ensures it is comparable to the broader first-year experience while simultaneously retaining the altruistic social motivators that drove the success of the pilot. These are issues we would like to discuss with our colleagues at STARS.

Key questions that will be posed to encourage audience participation

1) Does anyone in the audience have any experience or ideas around selection of 'gifted' participants beyond just a reliance on first-semester grades?
2) The program has proven successful on a very small scale, but given the resources required to upscale it, is it desirable and sustainable in the longer term?
3) Given that long-term plans for embedding and extending the program involve formally creating a stream of Business 102 for 'gifted' students, what are the implications for those students, the broader cohort, and the program itself when grades are at stake?

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