

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

***GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR POSTGRADUATE DISTANCE
EDUCATION IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT***

A Dissertation submitted by

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Abstract

This study examines an existing postgraduate distance education program in project management in the setting of a regional university (University of Southern Queensland), and explores ways in which the program can be reconceptualised so that it aligns with validated pedagogical principles. By means of a comprehensive and in-depth analysis, the case study approach holistically explores the organisational context within which the program exists, the pedagogical frameworks by which the program is offered, and the educational setting within which students undertake their learning tasks and activities. Activity Theory has been used to undertake the study which has been guided by the question:

What are the guiding principles for the development of a conceptual framework for postgraduate distance education in project management?

The study progressively explores the contextual issues that influence postgraduate distance education for project management, the characteristics and circumstances of the learners, and the pedagogical frameworks, principles and practices guiding postgraduate distance education for project management in the case study setting. Data have been collected consistent with the principles of grounded theory through document analysis, semi-structured interviews, a web-based survey and focus group sessions. Data analysis has taken place iteratively with the findings from each stage guiding the collection and analysis of data in the subsequent stages. From the overall findings of the data analysis, key principles have been identified to guide future development of a conceptual framework for postgraduate project management distance education in the University.

The findings from this study are embodied in a matrix of 9 key principles and 16 sub-principles, and recommendations flowing from those principles are summarised below:

- Distance education teaching and learning must be acknowledged as a *core function* of the University consistent with its vision, mission and values;

- *Constructive alignment* must be achieved across all administrative and academic functions of the University involved in the delivery of distance education;
- *Postgraduate teaching and learning* at a distance must be recognised as a discrete component of teaching and learning with specific characteristics and resource requirements;
- Administrative and academic policies, regulations and practices must incorporate genuine *openness* and *flexibility* as essential attributes of postgraduate distance education;
- Academic staff must be adequately *trained and resourced* to teach postgraduate programs at a distance;
- Administrative, teaching and learning practices should evolve from a *student-centred learning community*, driven by an understanding of the postgraduate distance education students in the project management programs, and their needs and objectives as lifelong learners;
- Relevant *graduate attributes* should be defined for postgraduate students in the project management programs, and learning tasks, activities and assessment should be structured towards development of those attributes;
- Postgraduate distance education students should engage in *interactive and collaborative* learning tasks and activities in order to attain high-level intellectual skills and abilities that are required for project management practice;
- Postgraduate distance education students should engage in *situated learning*, where tasks and activities take place in authentic project management contexts that respect students' individual learning settings and circumstances;
- Postgraduate programs in distance education should be structured with regard to curriculum and assessment to deliver *learning outcomes* that are endorsed by all stakeholders in the project management programs, both internal and external to the University.

Certification of dissertation

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Signature of Candidate

Date

Endorsement

Signature of Principal Supervisor/s

Date

Signature of Associate Supervisor

Date

Foreword

After thirty-years in industry as an architect and project manager, the author commenced a temporary teaching position at the University of Southern Queensland and this subsequently evolved into a new career with responsibility for a Master's-level project management program. A desire to provide the optimal student learning experience revealed the complexity facing a new academic in providing postgraduate distance education students with learning outcomes that match students' expectations and those of the broader professional community. The author inherited a teaching and learning model which at the time was perceived to represent 'best practice' for postgraduate distance education, but was also aware of students' dissatisfaction with their experiences and learning outcomes. Many students were unable to complete their studies because of the circumstances under which they studied and the constraints of the learning environment, but the view of many stakeholders was that this reflected real life and postgraduate study was a training ground for practice in an unforgiving workplace.

The author subsequently adopted a more flexible and student-centred model and saw the students as co-learners. Personal observation of the conflicts that students encountered throughout their studies prompted a desire to find better ways of assisting students to achieve their personal goals and learning objectives, and to enjoy their learning experience along the way.

As there is no recognised theoretical framework by which postgraduate project management education can be offered at a distance, this study addresses that gap. Over the course of this study from 2002 to 2008, internal and external forces brought about considerable changes to the organisational, political and financial landscapes within the University, and a major objective of this study has been to contribute to the debate on how we, as a university community, can provide a more effective and rewarding learning experience for postgraduate distance education students in project management.

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