

Workload implications of teaching and administering work-integrated learning: The Macquarie University experience through PACE

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ABSTRACT

Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program is an initiative designed to provide work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to all undergraduate students. The size and scope of PACE, and its thorough embedding into the curriculum across multiple disciplines, differentiates it from other university work-integrated learning initiatives. These characteristics also portend a number of workload implications for staff. While previous research and anecdotal evidence suggest that WIL units (i.e. courses, subjects) are more time consuming and resource intensive to administer and teach than 'traditional' classroom-based subjects, few studies have systematically collected empirical data on an institution-wide basis to test these assertions. This chapter presents preliminary findings of the first phase of a research project examining the workload involved in developing and delivering PACE units at Macquarie University. More specifically, we report data obtained using a diary-style survey instrument administered to ten university staff over one teaching session. Initial findings suggest that there is considerable variability in the workload involved in teaching and administering WIL units (particularly in terms of overall hours worked). The main drivers of this variability appear to be the number of students enrolled in the unit, and aspects of its mode of delivery. Some commonalities were also identified, most notably peaks and troughs in workload, atypical session structures and similarity in the types of tasks that were most time-consuming.

KEYWORDS experiential learning, higher education, work-integrated learning, workload

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INTRODUCTION

Macquarie University's Professional and Community Engagement (PACE) program is an initiative designed to provide work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities to all undergraduate students. It incorporates many diverse forms of practice- and experience-based learning including community development projects, service-learning, practicums, clinical placements, internships, fieldwork with a partnership component, and community/industry reference panels with project mentoring. Learning is firmly embedded within a rigorous academic framework, and WIL activities must serve the mission and goals of a community, government or industry partner if the unit is to be classified as 'PACE'. What differentiates PACE from other work-integrated learning initiatives is its size and scope. The program offers a vast range of experiences to undergraduate students in multiple disciplines right across the university. Over 3,600 students are enrolled in the 51 PACE units on offer in 2013 and it is estimated that around 10,000 students will participate in PACE each year when the program is fully operational in 2016.

Previous research suggests WIL units are more time consuming and resource intensive to administer and teach than 'traditional' classroom-based subjects, largely because of the different approaches to curricula and pedagogy required, and complex administrative and pastoral responsibilities involved in placing and supporting students before, during and after their WIL activities (Bates, 2011; Sattler, Wiggers, & Arnold, 2011). There is also a tendency to view WIL as an 'add on' task staff are expected to do in addition to their regular duties (Emslie, 2011; McCurdy & Zegwaard, 2009). Surprisingly, few systematic studies involving large-scale empirical data sets have been undertaken to validate these observations. Hence, there is a need for more empirical research to capture and explore workload complexities associated with a diverse range of WIL activities and units.

STUDY DESIGN

The current study was conceived to address gaps in the literature and to better understand the type and quantum of workload involved in implementing WIL, on the scale envisaged for Macquarie University through PACE. This article presents preliminary findings of data analysed from the first phase of data collection (March-June 2013). Specific research questions are: (1) what kind of tasks are involved in the development and delivery of PACE units (2) how much time is spent on these tasks (3) which types of staff currently do this work, and (4) do workloads differ systematically across different modes of delivery, and if so how?

A diary-style survey instrument was designed to capture data on the type and amount of work involved in teaching and administering PACE units offered across the university. All academic convenors and other staff involved in teaching or administering PACE units in Session 1, 2013 ($n=25$), were invited to participate in the study. Ten academic and professional staff (across eight units) volunteered, representing a response rate (measured on a unit basis) of approximately 30%. Participants completed the survey instrument through the online survey software Qualtrics. Data was collected over 20 weeks, covering all teaching weeks, as well as the mid-semester break and five weeks after the end of classes. At the end of the data collection period, nine participants had completed all the surveys (one had withdrawn). Data from another participant was unable to be used due to a misinterpretation of the survey questions.

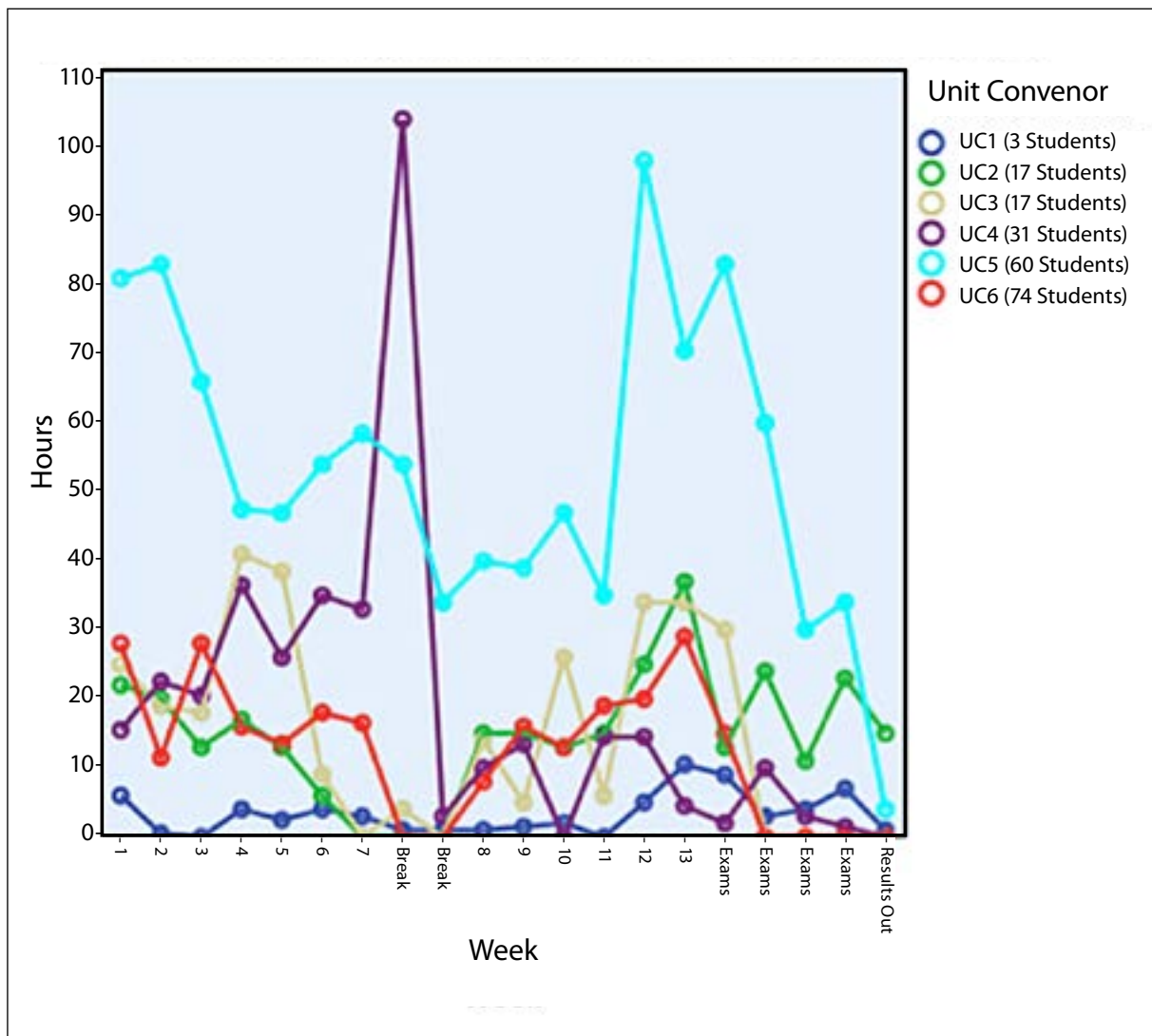
RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS – as the final data set only represented six units, inferential statistics could not be reliably used. The focus of the results reported here is on unit (course) convenor data, as there were insufficient numbers of professional staff in the sample to draw reliable conclusions on their workload.

UNIT CONVENOR WORKLOAD

Figure 1 shows the diversity that exists among PACE units in terms of both total workload and the distribution of that workload over the course of the session. Total workload for unit convenors over the course of the session ranged from 65 hours to 1050 hours with a median of 300. Two unit convenors entered particularly high values for workloads, with a few cases exceeding 80 hours in a week. In each of these cases the research team contacted the participant to confirm data had been correctly recorded (i.e., one unit contained a fieldwork activity, and another had a higher number of enrolments with individual placements).

Figure 1: Weekly Workload Hours for each Unit Convenor



Despite these differences, workload for the majority of PACE units in the sample, exhibits features that would also be expected in traditional units. Specifically, unit convenors are busiest at the beginning of the session and then again towards the end when a significant amount of assessment takes place. Most convenors also reported a noticeable drop in workload around the mid-semester break. However, in contrast to a traditional classroom unit, there was a long period of preparatory work. Although not shown in Figure 1, the majority of convenors reported that they began unit preparations between 1–4 months prior to start of the session, and in two cases work started as long as eight months in advance.

Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the types of workload tasks that unit convenors are undertaking, specifically the percentage of time spent on these tasks. Tasks that take up the most time are: assessment of student learning, curriculum delivery and other student-related tasks. While the first two of these are characteristic of traditional units, the third category is less so. ‘Other student related tasks’ covers the workload involved in activities such as conducting pre-semester information sessions for students, pre-semester consultations with students, matching students to PACE activities, monitoring/liasing with students during PACE activities, problem-solving, troubleshooting, conflict resolution, and post-activity follow-up with students.

Figure 2: Percentage of Time Unit Convenors Spent on Each Category of Task

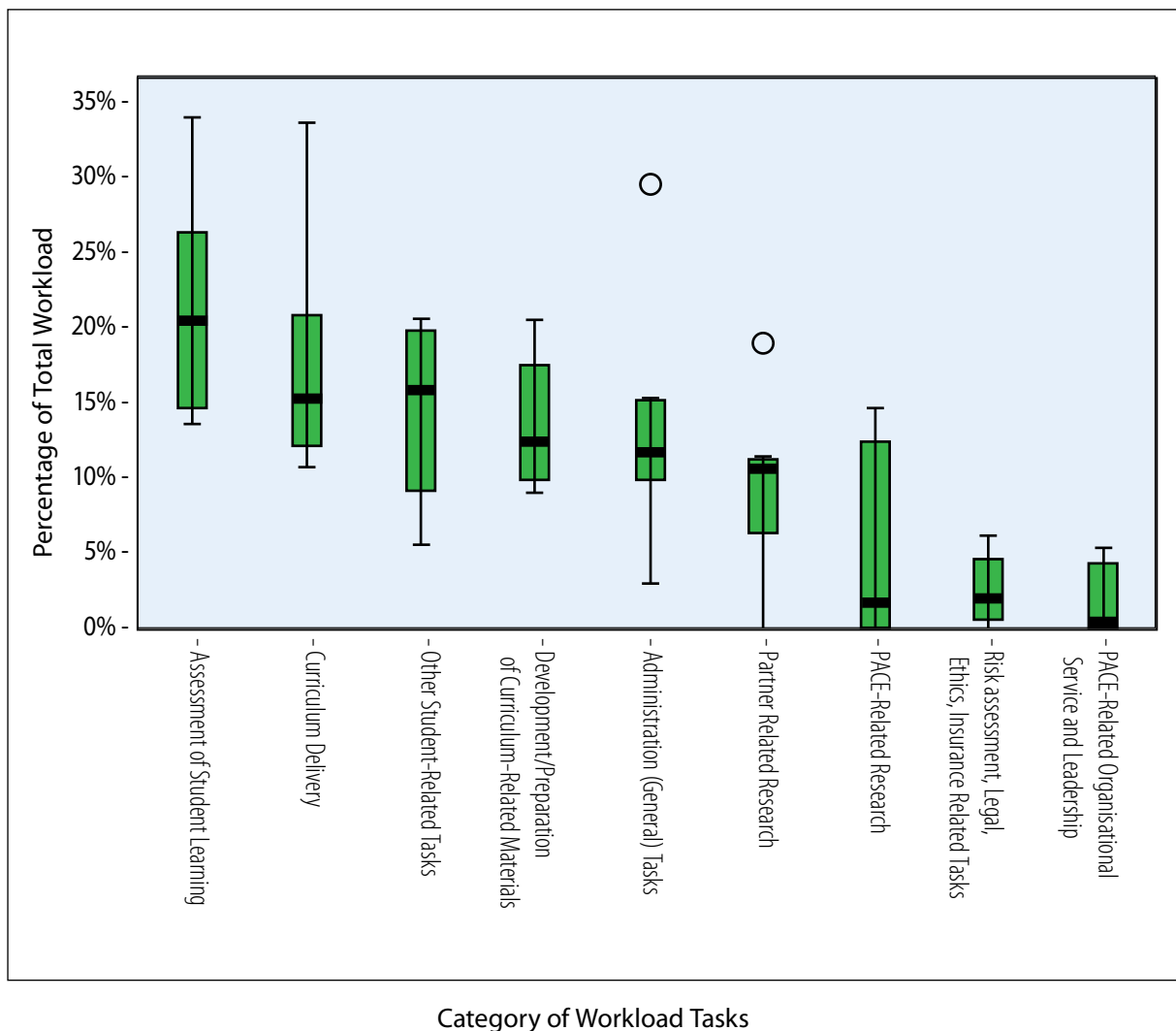
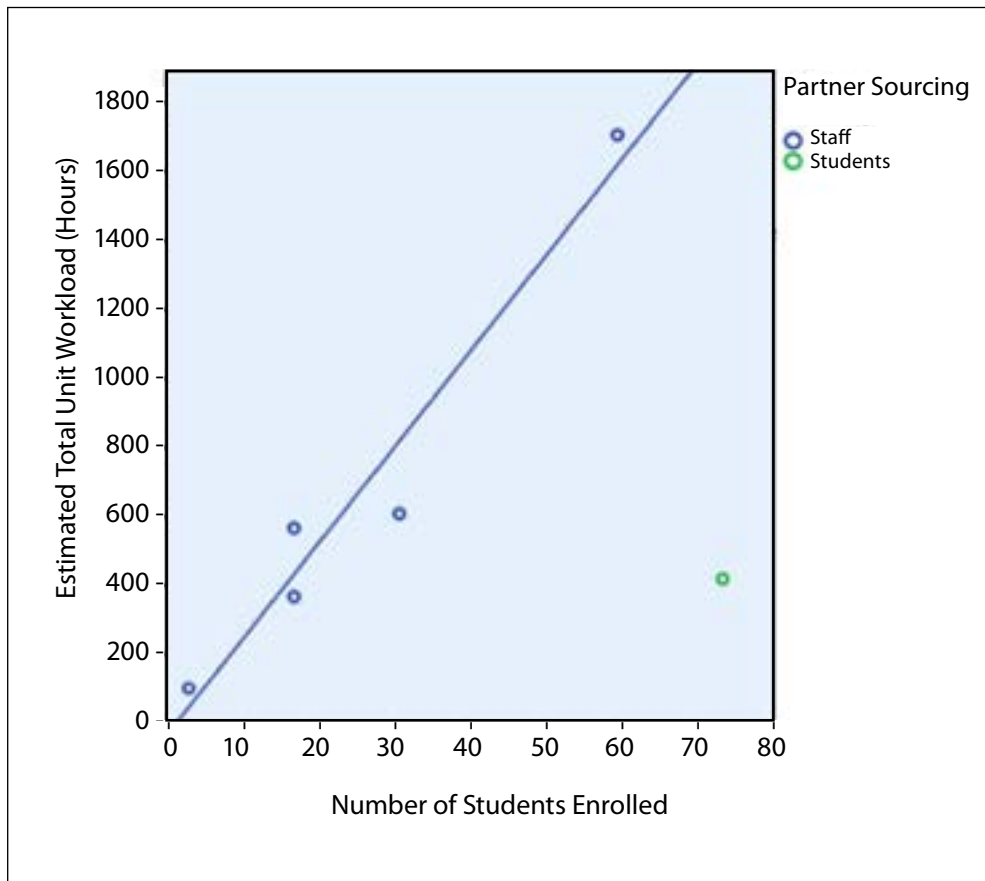


Figure 2 also indicates the diversity of workloads among different PACE units. Most notably curriculum delivery was taking anywhere from 11% to 34% of unit convenors’ time, while administration tasks took 3% to 30% throughout the course of the session. The amount of time spent on unit development and partner-related tasks is also variable. If this session was the first time the unit had run as a PACE unit, development work took 17-20% of convenors’ time, compared to 11% on average for those which had previously run as PACE units.

TOTAL UNIT WORKLOAD

As noted earlier, results reported here do not include data from professional and other support staff. Despite the sample size, it is possible to make initial estimates of the *total* workload involved in teaching and administration of these units, by summing all the work done by individual unit convenors, then dividing this figure by their estimate of the percentage of work they personally did for their unit. These calculations were used as the basis for Figure 3. Interestingly, unit convenors estimated the work done by other staff to range from between 0% to 33%.

Figure 3: Total Unit Workload by Student Enrolments



Analysis was undertaken to determine which unit characteristics (if any) had a meaningful impact on the amount of work required. It is evident from Figure 3 that five of the six units lie approximately on a straight line indicating a linear relationship between student enrolments and total unit workload ($r^2 = 95\%$). While the sixth point may simply be an outlier, it also happens to be the only unit where students are responsible for sourcing their own partners and WIL activities. This could indicate a second variable with a strong impact on workload, however more data from similar units is required to make this determination.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Preliminary results indicate there is considerable variability in the workload involved in teaching and administering WIL units. Student enrolments are a key driver of workload, at least for unit convenors. Whether staff or students are responsible for sourcing partners and WIL activities also appears to be important, but more data is required before definitive conclusions can be drawn. Further, potential drawbacks of relying on students to source partners need to be taken into account, especially reputational risks to the university. Commonalities across WIL units include: peaks and troughs in workload, atypical session structures (early starts and late finishes), and the main time-consuming tasks, viz: assessment, curriculum delivery, and other student-related tasks. While the first two of these are common to traditional classroom teaching, the latter are fairly unique to WIL units.

Limitations to the current study need to be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, the majority of units surveyed were small to medium in terms of enrolment size, and the patterns observed here may not be apparent with respect to units with larger class sizes. Second, there is a great diversity in the modes of WIL delivery. The relatively small sample size of the first tranche of the study means the full extent of this diversity has not yet been captured. Third, the limited number of professional staff participating in the current sample prevents us from reporting the workload of non-academic staff, which is likely to have an impact on results for some units. All of these limitations will be addressed as the two-year study progresses. Two potential sources of bias should also be considered. Over two-thirds of PACE unit convenors opted not to participate in the current phase of the study. It could be that a particularly high workload prevented these unit convenors from participating, which would imply a systematic underestimation of the total workload in results reported here. On the other hand, knowledge that the results of this study could be used to inform future workload and resourcing models could create an incentive for participants to overestimate workload.

Analysing workload patterns of different types of tasks across the session, identifying other potential factors to explain the variability in workload across units and analysis of professional staff contributions will be undertaken as a next step. Over the course of the next two years, all staff involved in the teaching and administration of the 50+ PACE units offered at Macquarie University will be invited to participate in the study, with the aim of building a robust evidence base to address the four research questions. The ultimate goal is to use this evidence base to address gaps in the literature and to inform future workload and resourcing models for WIL in higher education.

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AUTHORS

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