

# DEVELOPING AN INNOVATIVE COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO CONTINUOUS PROGRAM ENHANCEMENT

A Participatory Action Research Study

## Abstract

This study aimed to develop and evaluate an innovative collaborative approach to continuous academic degree-program enhancement for the Bachelor of International and Hotel Management Program that focused on improving program learning and teaching quality, supporting meaningful and sustainable staff capability development and enhancing the leadership capability of program leaders. This was achieved by developing online self-paced course enhancement professional learning modules, creating an interactive program site embedded within the Learning Management System and nurturing communities of practice using action-learning processes to conduct scholarly inquiries into learning and teaching..

## Developing an Innovative Collaborative Approach to Continuous Program Enhancement: A Participatory Action Research Study

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### Project Summary:

This study aimed to develop and evaluate an innovative collaborative approach to continuous program enhancement, incorporating online self-paced professional learning opportunities and communities of practice that use action-learning processes to conduct scholarly inquiries into learning and teaching (L&T). This study built upon a successful pilot project that delivered three online course enhancement staff professional learning modules along with a program site to enable collaborative approaches.

With a rapidly changing higher education context, it is vital that academic programs at Griffith University deliver remarkable educational experiences that ensure that students are well-prepared for their chosen career path and life beyond university. In order to support students' development,

*'Our academic programs need to be relevant and interesting, responsive to **student needs** and provide technology-enhanced student-centred Learning and Teaching experiences'*

our academic programs need to be relevant and interesting, responsive to student needs and provide technology-enhanced student-centred L&T experiences (Academic Plan, 2017).

To ensure high quality programs, program teams must continuously update and enhance their programs. To facilitate staff engagement with this ongoing process, program leaders need to ensure that teaching staff are provided with opportunities to regularly contribute to the design, development, implementation, evaluation of the program, as well as, to participate in relevant professional learning opportunities (Academic Plan, 2017).

Whilst there are a range of opportunities provided by university groups for staff participation, increasing demands on staff make it difficult for them to attend face-to-face meetings and professional learning opportunities. There is a need to investigate the development of sustainable approaches for program teaching staff to participate in the continuous process of program enhancement whilst engaging in meaningful professional development.

## Project Leaders & Project Team:

Title	University Group and Department
<b>Project Leaders:</b>	
Dr Anna Kralj	GBS, Department of Tourism Sport and Hotel Management
Ms Louise Maddock	Office of the DVC(A), Centre for Learning Futures
<b>Project Team:</b>	
Assoc. Professor Michelle Whitford	GBS, Department of Tourism Sport and Hotel Management
Dr Liz Fredline	GBS, Department of Tourism Sport and Hotel Management
Dr Aaron Hsiao	GBS, Department of Tourism Sport and Hotel Management
Ms Julie Lambert	Office of the DVC(A), Centre for Learning Futures

## Project Rationale:

The project aimed to develop an innovative collaborative approach to continuous program enhancement that focused on improving program quality and enhanced student learning and success, whilst supporting meaningful and sustainable staff learning and teaching (L&T) capability development and enhancing leadership capability within the program. To achieve this, the project team designed, developed and evaluated a collaborative model for continuous program enhancement that incorporated online self-paced professional learning opportunities, program and course team action-learning processes and community discourse and dialogue about L&T in the program. It is envisaged that the model can be adopted and applied by program leadership teams across the Griffith Business School as well as by other Groups within the University. The L&T question at the heart of the project was *'How does an innovative and collaborative approach to continuous program enhancement impact on program quality; student learning, experience and success; staff learning and teaching capability development; program leadership development; and learning and teaching community development?'*

The collaborative model developed during this project supported all three broad goals of the Academic Plan 2017-2020, and in particular addressed these more specific goals:

- G1.1 Prepare career ready graduates to play an influential role in the world;
- G2.1 Our students will have a high quality university experience; and
- G3.3 Griffith will be the leader in the use of technology to provide flexible study options.

## Project Methodology:

**Project Leadership Team:** The project leadership team composed of four academic program leaders of the *Bachelor of International Tourism and Hotel Management* program at Griffith University (including one current and one former Program Director, one Program Advisor and a lead Course Convenor), and a Senior Consultant (Learning & Teaching) from the Centre for Learning Futures.

**Project Design:** A participatory action research design, inspired by the work of Kemmis, Carr & Nixon (2013)<sup>1</sup>, was used as a framework for the study's methodology. Multiple cycles of program level and course level action research was conducted across a one two-year time period. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University Ethics Committee. During the first year, the project leadership team scoped the project and initiated program-level action research processes to scope the project, engage the program community in program discussions related to learning and teaching at retreats and meetings, as well as, developing of the online program site embedded in the Learning Management System, and the online self-paced course enhancement professional learning modules with the support of an Educational Designer (Learning Futures). During the second year of the project, the project team initiated the course-level action research cycles, whilst continuing the program-level cycles of action research. This course enhancement action research involved selecting three courses as the pilot (study) courses and engaging with the Course Convenors of these courses, inviting them to join the study. For each course, one program leader enacted a facilitator role, facilitating the process of action research (reflect, plan, act, observe, reflect...) with the Course Convenor and the course teaching team *in situ* during Trimester 1. This process was repeated in Trimester 2 of the same year.

**Project Data Collection and Data Analysis:** At the commencement of the project, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted with three industry representative contacts, along with focus group discussions with students of the BITHM program. At the completion of the second year action research cycles 1 and 2 (representing Trimester 1 & 2 cycles), focus group discussions were conducted with the project program team (program-level reflections) and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Course Convenors of the pilot course action research cycles (course-level reflections). All data was audio-recorded, stored in a secure online location and transcribed professionally. Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2013). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research*. Singapore: Springer.

<sup>2</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

## Project Outcomes:

### Program Team Reflections (Cycle 1)

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Cycle 1 of the Program Team Reflections was undertaken with Dr Anna Kralj, Ms Louise Maddock and Dr Aaron Hsiao present. A number of themes emerged from the reflective practice with regards to 'what went well' which can be seen below in Figure 1.

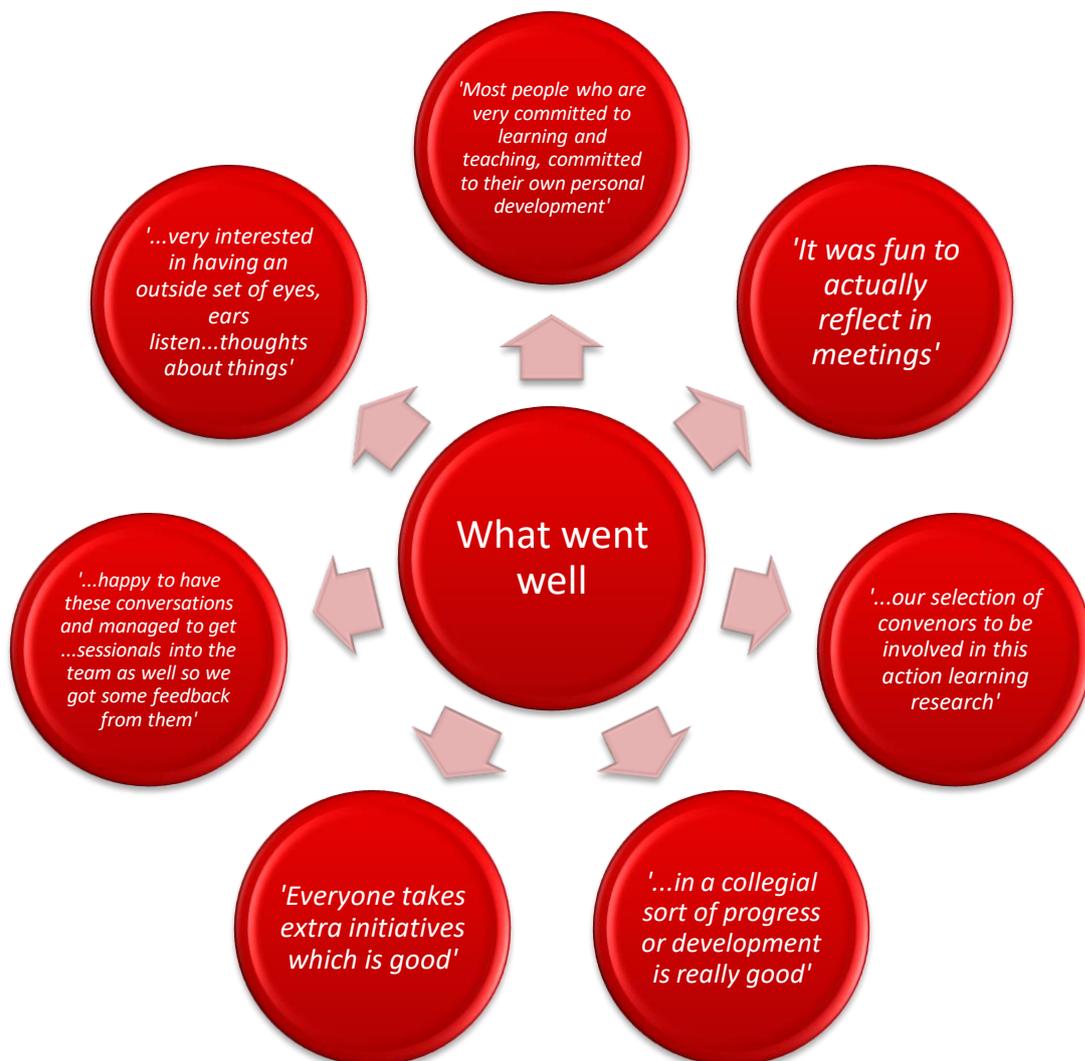


Figure 1. Program Team Reflections: What went well

Further discussion was undertaken with regards to specific challenges that arose during Cycle 1. As can be seen in Figure 2 challenges highlighted were the high workload of the team, the need for a more streamlined process regarding a course improvement plan, and the necessity for more consistency across all areas.



Figure 2. Program Team Reflections: Challenges

Also discussed throughout the reflection was regards to the 'improvements that can be made' (see Figure 3). Emphasised during the reflection was the need to simplify and centralise the process, and the benefits of integrating a course improvement plan. Further discussed was the need for a culture shift within the organisation towards building a community of practice, and the necessity for continuous focus on the four strategic areas: active learning, technology enhanced learning, authentic assessment and employability. Refer to next page for direct quotes regarding improvements.

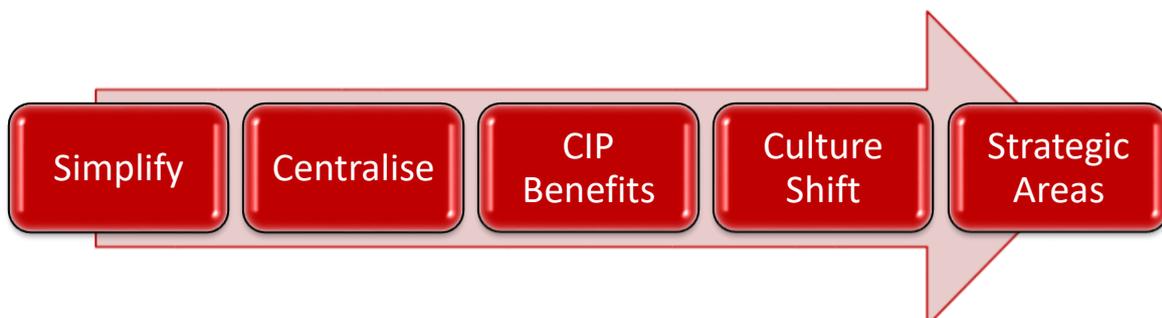


Figure 3. Program Team Reflections: Improvements that can be made

## **Direct Quotes:**

### ***Simplifying and Centralising the Process:***

- *The process we can probably make more succinct or more simplified.*
- *More integrated into what we are already doing rather than being an additional thing on top of what we are doing would encourage more participation.*
- *Something about the simple process rather than so many...just reflect it once.*
- *More centralised, and more similar. You know we had a similar goal to work together.*
- *Everyone takes extra initiatives which are good but it's not necessary as we're all heading in the same directions. Because everyone responded differently ... so we probably need to be more centralised in some way.*
- *So every course convenor has to produce the Mess report after finalising... and the mess report we have to briefly to.... I shouldn't say reflection, but we do...sometimes a convenor can provide more substantial information about a course.... rather than double handling.*

### ***Course Improvement Plan (CIP) Benefits***

- *A course improvement plan is something that happens at the end of every iteration of the course not just when you get 3.5 or below.*
- *If that became a process that we did engage in (CIP), all of us, we would have more data about courses 1) To feed back into BITHM redevelopment 2) To actually have people actually reflect on their courses. It would be useful when a course hands over from one person to another person you could get this bank of reflections over the years and then it would also be part of a process that were expected to do rather than an additional thing that we do out of the goodness of our hearts if we feel like it.*
- *Having that reflection every trimester is important for all courses and then that reflection could feed into a closing the loop report if you had a closing the loop report rather than the other way around. That's been shown in other areas to really maximise their, not only the results for redeveloping the course and making it a better course, but actually developing a more collegial culture so there have been other examples where people have come together and they then talk about these course improvement plans or like you were saying they get shared and they become a bank that other people can look at, so it develops that sense of 'we're sharing practice, we're opening up our practice', where it's becoming more collegial and that is shifting the culture once again to be more open and responsive.*

*'Having that reflection every trimester is important for all courses, and then that reflection could feed into a closing the loop report'*

- *Maybe we should as a change for the cycle that's starting now tell our conveners that we would like them to do...now what I don't like is the word 'course improvement plan' maybe there's another name that we can give it?*
- *In the professional learning modules we started using 'course enhancement plan' because of that very reason....so within the professional learning modules in there, there is support around in writing one of those or considering one of those on the program site so in there we have called it an enhancement plan because improvement - the CIP has a bit of a connotation to it whereas this is just - well regardless, you know, when you're doing reflective this is what you do - you capture all your thoughts and what's gone on in the course and then what you would do to redevelop it into the future.*
- *We could write a lot more in the form so there are two areas that I think you were talking about 1. Comment on the distribution of grades 2. Comments on the assessment plan and that is probably not quite broad enough, that comments on the assessment plan lose sight of things like 'what were the learning activities?' 'was the content the right content?' and things like that, so it could be that you can copy paste out of your course enhancement plan into your MESS so that it's recorded there as well. That's the other thing as well about the MESS is if we have a course enhancement plan it can become a repository for the department whereas the MESS is only held onto by the - what's now going to be a role for the ASO so it would be harder for us to access that but copy paste into the mess would be good. If you fill in your course enhancement plan it's going to fill your MESS for you.*
- *I think that would be really beneficial, they have already done the reflection on - but is that reflection on - I think they did it on the content as well, so it would be great to just do a very simple 'this is what went well' 'this is what could be improved - next time do this'.*
- *I think rather than do a google form next time though let's give them a document to fill in, so let's tell them at the start of this cycle that that's going to be an output that we want, a course enhancement plan.*
- *And we are going to, at the end, get everybody to write a course enhancement plan but one of the things we are going to need to do as a facilitation team is write a structure for this course enhancement plan, modelling it on a course improvement plan but also with a view to it being a document that we might be able to adapt in the future as we go forward.*

*'If we wanted to extend this to a sort of community of practice within THS we would definitely need more of a **culture shift**, and more of an involvement from the head and down saying 'this is the way we want to approach learning and teaching'*

### **Culture Shift:**

- *That's been shown in other areas to really maximise their, not only the results for redeveloping the course and making it a better course, but actually developing a more collegial culture so there have been other examples where people have come together and they then talk about these course improvement plans or like you were saying they get shared and they become a bank*

*that other people can look at, so it develops that sense of 'we're sharing practice we're opening up our practice', where it's becoming more collegial and that is shifting the culture once again to be more open and responsive.*

### **Strategic Areas:**

- *We will also ask them a question about 'what did you think about participating in the ALT overall for the entire year - how did it help you?' Because we still want to try to align with that.*
- *Yes looking at the assumptions that are underpinning the practice; I mean ideally we would do that as well at some point.*
- *So I think we should still continue having the focus on one of those four strategic areas, so that was active learning, technology enhanced learning, authentic assessment and employability.*

## **Program Team Reflections (Cycle 2)**

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Cycle 2 of the Program Team Reflections was undertaken with Dr Anna Kralj, Ms Louise Maddock, Dr Aaron Hsiao and Dr Liz Fredline present. A number of themes emerged from the reflective practice related to the action research cycles implemented with the three selected BITHM courses.

### **Course 1 Facilitator Reflections (Liz)**

#### **What went well?**

- *Great teaching evaluations for [lecturer]*
- *[lecturer]'s a great lecturer and designs his course very well. He is ideal as he comes from industry and knows what industry is looking for.*
- **Positive feedback** on addition of CV to course
- *'Big Interview' software program incorporated into workshops: students able to practice on this program. Very positive feedback from students regarding this.*
- *..anecdotal evidence, some **higher ranking students** got really good positions.*

#### **What needs to be improved?**

- *Add a professional portfolio or an e portfolio*
- *Students could produce a product that they could put into a professional portfolio - perhaps a reflection on the experience of having that interview, or some other exercise for them to reflect on their own professional development.*

### **Course 2 Facilitator Reflections (Aaron)**

- Need to write down notes straight away after conversations and reflections with other staff members.
- Quiz reflects 'soft skills' i.e. gives an idea if student is being **responsible for their own learning** and have the right attitude.
- A major aspect is to highlight to students the importance of the **right attitude**, and it is the responsibility of lecturers and tutors to prepare the students to have this 'right attitude' towards their work and study.
- Students have to be independent learners and have the right attitude to want to go to workshops or lectures themselves.
- **Student attendance** has definitely increased.
- Overall reflection: at the beginning of the project everyone was keen, motivated and wanting to contribute. However, at the end of the project people started to get somewhat cynical about the process. People were less motivated to discuss and reflect and it became more of a burden. Transactional leaders: tick box and seen to be doing the job duties, **Transformational leaders** actually motivates and encourages. Aaron's self-reflection: was I being a transformational leader?

### **Course 3 Facilitator Reflection (Anna)**

- Hotel service operations management uses HOTS simulation for students who run their own hotel. Focus was on technology enhanced learning and there was a focus on active, assessment of active learning and authentic assessment, and looking at this more holistically.
- ...used the opportunity to meet with Marlene and Margarita and discussed how we would make changes to the course for next year based on a range of issues that had already been identified over the last say two or three trimesters, and some ideas that we were already having about changing the assessment.
- ...designed a new assessment (half hour live oral group presentation) to replace the final exam in order to make it more authentic and active. Students have to analyse their hotel with particular reference to the departmental area they were responsible for and reflect on what went well and what didn't go well and what could be done better in the future.
- Coming to a group consensus regarding implementation of the new assessment piece from a resourcing and administrative point of view was an interesting process. **We worked together well with good communication – working as a team.**
- We have achieved a new course profile. The new assessment item is approved and running this trimester. So we're going to be able to reflect on that for the following trimester.

*'So having more **collegial conversations** and having everybody more in touch with courses and the program would facilitate a more **consistent approach** and more to learning and teaching across the one course or across similar courses'*

## **Overall reflections from the team:**

### **Students' attitudes:**

- Some students are **not prepared to take responsibility** for their own learning. They feel that they need to get that piece of paper and then that will solve all their lives problems. These are all **challenges for the program** that we need to find a way to resolve the downward trend to all of those things getting worse.
- If we can't solve the problem how can we improve it just a little bit? How can we go about improving the students' ability to be more independent, self-directed learners?
- It is a matter of **embedding those within a program** but it also has to be a **program wide approach**. So it has to go from first year and all the expectations in first year, first trimester, all the way through to final release of...at the beginning it's all guided direction and that kind of thing. And not expecting them to understand right now, but then by the end of third year they should be going out on to placements and be **fully independent and self-directed**. So how do we embed these kinds of scaffolded learning experiences through the program to support them with that? I think it's a key challenge and I think one that we'd be able to have a look at working towards.
- What can we do to encourage attitudes towards learning, doing things on time, doing things for yourself, engaging with processes, having initiative...basically the soft skills...if we talk about this at a **program level collaboratively**, then we can build in more expectation from us.
- If we structured our approach to learning and teaching and assessment slightly differently where you develop that attitude, and it will require extra-curricular or co-curricular activities and be **linked to the business plus model and great Griffith graduates** of influence. It can't just happen in an isolated way in courses.
- So in terms of developing attitude... like in the service industry, it's almost like we're the supervisors and the students are the employees and it's our job to create...**to motivate the students to have the right attitude** and that doesn't come from the assessment design itself. It comes from our selling of the assessment to them, and we can only sell something that we believe in, and we can only believe in something that is actually possible to implement. A lot of these designs are like blue sky thinking, that in an ideal world if we had all the time and all the resources, yeah, we could go and do that.

*'How can we go about improving the students' ability to be more independent, self-directed learners? It is a matter of **embedding those within a program** but it also has to be a **program wide approach**'*

### **Staff:**

- Everyone needs to be clear **how the courses fit into the overall program**.
- The **link between students' poor attitude and staff attitude towards teaching** – one feeds the other and it's got into a negative cycle, downward spiral. What we hope to achieve is a positive cycle, where a **positive attitude towards teaching** can engender a **positive attitude towards learning**.

#### Handover Process:

- ...not enough time to engage with each other when we're not teaching the course. It's been a good process to get together and focus on the course when we're not actually convening and teaching it.
- Hopefully that workload model will allow a bit more **continuity in the future**.
- ...lack of continuity from one trimester to the next.

#### Assessment:

- ...university and GBS wide issue: using the **same assessments** over and over again. Does that give students an unfair advantage when they have to take the course again? So we're actually looking at this at a GBS level that if you keep the same convenor all the time then, and you ask them to keep changing the assessment, then that can be managed because the convenor knows that it's different. But if you **keep changing the convenor** all the time, the new convenor asks for the assessment from last time and then - do you know what I mean? That actually encourages using the same assessment over and over again. That's **not just limited to our program...** and it's not limited to our school group or university. It's an **issue in university education** in general.
- Part of the problem at a program level to try and get convenors together and say, "okay, what's going in your course so that we can map it to the rest of the program" is that we keep getting convenors say to us, "I'm only looking after this course this trimester, next trimester there will be somebody else and I don't know who that is yet". And the workload model **doesn't really encourage a lot of investment in improvement** unless you have the same course over a number of years and get a return on investment for the amount of hours that you've dedicated in the past.

*'There needs to be a handover process that is stronger from one course delivery to the next. This would create more **consistency**'*

#### Challenges to implementing changes:

- We can't go implementing anything else new at the moment because you can only really focus on **one major implementation at the time**.
- You can't introduce everything all at once. You have to be able to introduce something then be able to **evaluate its effectiveness prior to introducing another variable**.

#### Improving reflections:

- ...use your **mobile phone** to record your self-reflection straight away after the conversations with colleagues.
- ...several colleagues could do a reflection together. Everyone can listen to everybody's reflections allowing for a deeper reflection.

*Learning and Teaching Advisors:*

- *How we prepare a student's attitude...this needs to be passed onto teaching or learning advisors also, so it can be incorporated into how they **design the assessment**.*
- *They need to be much more focused on what we really want to achieve, rather than how it fits with their pedagogical needs in terms of assessment design.*

*Time Pressure:*

- *That **time pressure** is something that is **still a concern** and has already come up recently about we need to do this research in a way that doesn't add more, but coming up with **processes that are effective and efficient** isn't something...it's beyond the remit of this small program team, it can only happen in broader conversations because we can't impose at what we think are good ideas on other people.*
- *...and is this where the sponsorship as we were talking about the other day in the other meeting, this is where the sponsorship from the **head of school, the support of deans** and so on, and this is why this project has support, this is why these conversations need to be had because these are the kinds of thoughts that need to be...that people need to be aware of.*

*We need to work on a more **collaborative and collegial approach** and this includes the Learning and Teaching Advisors. This needs to come down from **leadership** thereby setting up a **relational culture** within the entirety of GBS.*

*BITHM Program Site embedded in the LMS:*

- *...the BITHM site, I'm still convinced it's a **great idea** and I really want to use this committee as a vehicle for encouraging the use of it, but just us going around and telling people use the BITHM site, use the BITHM site, we really need **evidence** because that doesn't work.*
- *Why, why do we have it? What's the purpose of that site? Are we actually engaging everybody in the use of it and why? Why would they need to go there? So these are the kinds of things that we can work on. Then in the planning, if that's part of, and now that we do have some support, I think this is key to that.*

*Program 'wins':*

- *We have definitely improved that (**community engagement**) because we've now got this, a bunch of people that extends beyond our research group and includes some convenors in the program know what we're doing, who can advocate on our behalf...so **we absolutely have made steps towards improving the community**. So even that little tiny piece that we've done has improved the community. The next thing is, is that scalable? Can we actually move from the small scale to the entire department? Obviously that's the big unknown and that's what we're going to try and do in the next project.*
  - *How is it impacting on **student learning experience and success**? ... if we did want to get data on the impact, we could talk to a couple of students that have been involved in these*

*courses if we wanted to, or we can just use the SEC data comments from those courses. That would be enough if we didn't want to do more interviews, for example.*

- *It's about student learning and...**staff learning and teaching capability** development, well we've definitely got data on that from the convenors...then we've got **program leadership development** and you know, there's a whole lot going on there as well, so these reflections.*
- *...but also there's other things in there as well and we've got **frameworks** that we can reflect on and put when we're doing the analysis and talk about what you've all done and how that has then where you've gone from and where you are now.*
- *I think that we have evidence of **program level leadership improvement** as well. One of the things, as a direct result of this, that last year's project, something that I'm quite proud of us for, is using this project as a vehicle to get that **learning and teaching committee** happening. I'm really confident that having that committee will **improve the quantity and quality of our discussions at a department level**, departmental level, about learning and teaching, which can only then feed back into **program enhancement**. So I see that committee meeting as a direct result of our project last year and our ability to against seemingly insurmountable odds and it's a small team with not much voice in the larger organisational picture, to get that action I think we should all be very proud of ourselves.*
- *...advocacy has had such a big impact and... a long-term impact on not just the program but the whole department. So it's not just the program team but the whole department team and therefore that's going to have **far reaching impact on students**. Thousands of students will be positively impacted by that. So yes...there's been **a realisation of the ability to influence** and I think that is really a significant accomplishment.*

*'...we have absolutely enhanced that **program quality** by the actions that we have taken in T1 and T2 with this small bunch of convenors reflecting and improving and introducing new things'*

## Student Focus Group Discussion Reflections

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Two student focus groups were conducted in 2019 in order to garner their experience of the Bachelor of International Tourism and Hotel Management program and courses.

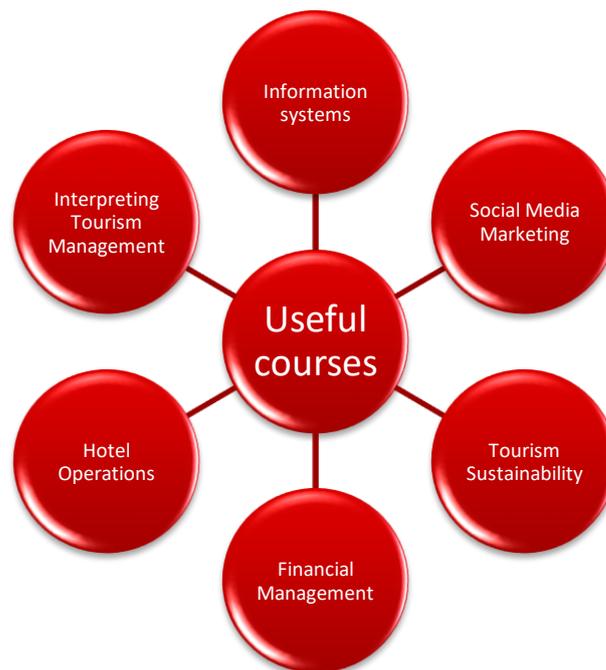
### *Students reflections - Program Strengths:*

- Group project and group work: good to interact with other people.
- Real-life examples in the lectures: enhances understanding for students.
- Step-by-step learning approach.
- Work-related experiences offered in the course will improve employability (internship).
- Short excursions/extra curriculums: reflections as learning in the course will improve employability.

- Presentation: boosts confidence, ability to persuade people.
- Group assessments: positive (good members), weaknesses (unknown people who don't contribute as much) -> ability to work with unknown people when in the work force.
- Group assessment: have to do a peer review. This is really important to group work.

***Student perceptions of useful courses in the BITHM program:***

- **Information systems:** technological skill may be important for future employability. Interactive discussion (everyone talks, student input, creativity) -> students' idea -> freedom -> practical
- **Social Media Marketing:** real-life experiences, contribution to the companies.
- **Sustainability of Tourism:** allows students to think about tourism that will help the locals, and that will help improve the local economy.
- **Hotel Operations:** forecasting skill, looking at a big picture.
- **Financial Management:** ability to check if the business financial is on-track; applicability of the content.
- **Interpreting Tourism Management Information:** very practical, can be applied to real-life.



*Figure 4. Student perceptions of useful courses in the BITHM program*

***Students perceptions of BITHM Courses that were not useful:***

- **Economics for Decision-Making:** theory-based, hard to understand.
- **Accounting for Decision-Making:** more useful than economics course.
- **Introduction to Research:** won't be useful for future employment.
- **Management course:** too many online lectures; too many models, hard to apply to the real world, lacks interaction, unable to ask questions to lecturers directly.

***Student perceptions of other strengths of the program:***

- Experiences with services and people: extra curricula activities as part of the course.
- Real life based content in the course.
- Learning facilities.
- Content slides are good; Workshops & tutors (dedicated). Workshops more beneficial and useful than lectures.
- Career development: CVs and resumes.
- Workplace experiences: mark the performance.
- Wants to market myself in the industry; sell yourself out in the market.
- Help you travel and know more.
- Offers internships
- Work-related experiences.
- Problem-solving skills in the assignments.

***Student perceptions of advantages of studying at Griffith University on the Gold Coast:***

- Tourist destination (holidays, events).
- Opportunity to experience in this tourist environment.
- Multi-cultural environment living and studying on the Gold Coast.
- Enhances awareness of multi-cultural perspective.

***Student perceptions of aspects of the BITHM program students disliked:***

- Lectures online: lacks interaction, low attendant rate, boring.
- Lecturers reading the slides, students feel there is no point in attending classes.
- Exams and assignments: just do them to pass the course.
- At first there are no work-related experiences.
- Limited space for internships because of limited CPs.
- Some of the courses are not practical, lots of memorisation

***Student suggestions to improve the BITHM program:***

- Increasing the number of PASS class, more beneficial to the students.
- More experiences (excursions, real-life content).
- Focus on the exam/assignments in lectures would be useful.

## Industry Representative Interviews

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Three one-on-one telephone interviews were conducted by Dr Aaron Hsiao with leading industry representatives.

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees highlighted the importance of ‘ways of being’ or ‘**soft skills**’ (see Table 1), and the significance of these skills to the industry at large. Industry Representatives emphasised the more technical skills can be easily learned, but that it is the ‘soft skills’ that differentiate between the customer experiencing just a type of ‘service’; or a ‘personalised experience’.

*Table 1. Count of ‘ways of being’ (soft skills) from industry interviews*

Ways of Being (soft skills):	Times mentioned:
Flexibility, capability and appropriate responsiveness (ability to react and respond to changes in the environment) (being a strategic thinker)	8
Insightful - able to see the bigger picture (their jobs is about providing an personalised service experience and a lifestyle)	4
Adaptability	4
Communication skills	3
Strong emotional intelligence	2
Attitude (positive outlook)	2
Critical thinker	2
Genuine	2
Personable, persuasive and perceptive	2
Personality and characteristics (an individual’s nature or temperament)	2
Strategic thinking	1
Problem solving	1
Willingness to work	1
Perceptive	1
Good negotiation skills	1
People skills	1
Quick learner	1
Manners	1
Caring attitude and mindset	1
‘Being your best self’	1

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*‘When we choose people, when we interview new employees, we focus more on the softer skills and personality’*

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Other attributes or skills emphasised by industry experts were the ‘ways of knowing’ and ‘ways of doing’, also referred to as **‘hard skills’**. These are the skills that the employees have mastered, and can demonstrate. When these skills were referred to by the industry representatives the emphasis was with regards to the ease of being able to train employees:

- *‘It’s always very easy to train them, like making coffee, or cooked meals or how to carry the trays and everything – the skills’*
- *‘It’s always easy to train skills’*
- *‘Practical skills are becoming more of a taught thing on the job’*

Other discussions centred on the changes within the industry such as the casualisation of the workforce, the increasing technology impacting skills needed within industry, and the focus on providing a customer an ‘experience’ – not just a service:

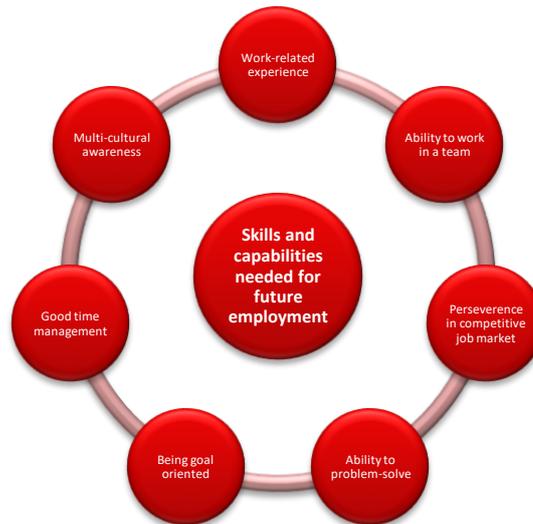
- *‘Definitely a shift towards the more casual employment’*
- *‘A lot more innovative and technological based employment, so we require students to have a lot of different skills than they previously would have come out with’*
- *‘We talk a lot about lifestyle and the holistic experience. So the hotels or a trip is not merely a trip or hotel anymore, it’s about the whole experience’*
- *‘They actually want an experience, something that actually is meaningful’*
- *They want an actual experience because they’re spending hard earned money. They want to know that they’re being appreciated, so they want an experience’*

*‘Being able to give a customer experience and not just customer service is really, really important’*

### ***Employability and Work Readiness:***

When discussing employability and work readiness industry experts emphasised the importance of integrated ‘soft’ and hard’ skills (Figure 5):

- *Internships/work placements/part-time jobs which provide valuable industry and real-world experiences;*
- *Students gaining direct, hands-on experience in industry; and*
- *Students presenting themselves as professionals (as compared to previously seeing and presenting themselves as students);*
- *The need for a balance between the technical skills and the ‘soft’ skills.*



*Figure 5. Industry perceptions of skills and capabilities needed by students for future employment*

### ***Program Design:***

When discussing potential improvements to program design, Industry Experts emphasised:

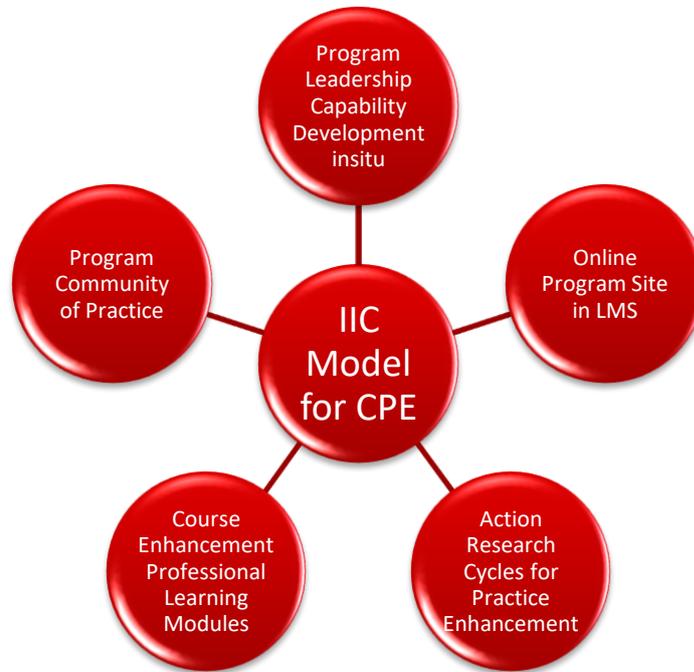
- The need to bring in guest lecturers who are involved in industry, and who can showcase the diverse opportunities available in industry;
- The need for stronger partnerships with industry;
- Making the program very realistic, authentic, current and practical in terms of course content;
- Embedding into the program critical thinking and problem solving skills;
- Helping students to become globally conscious, and aware of new trends in industry;
- Introduce more real life case studies into the program;
- Courses that will allow students to be both knowledge-wise and have the practical skills needed.

*'...the softer skills ... and also maybe you can introduce more... **real life case studies** and the **new trends of the industry**. So the students understand a lot of the things happening in the **real world** ... before they graduate'*

*'We'd rather see people who have stepped outside their comfort zone and worked in a variety of hospitality areas to get an understanding of what the 'big picture' looks like, not just their area of interest'*

## BITHM IIC Model for Continuous Program Enhancement

As a result of this participatory action research study, the following model is proposed for academic program leaders and teams to enable innovative, iterative and collaborative (IIC) continuous program enhancement.



*Figure 6. BITHM Innovative, Iterative and Collaborative (IIC) Model of Program Enhancement*

The **BITHM Innovative, Iterative and Collaborative Model of Program Enhancement** is composed of five (5) elements:

1. **Program Leadership Capability Development:** The continuing evidence-informed practice-based development of program leadership capability of Program Directors/Advisors and Course Convenors underpinned by action learning cycles including reflective practice in situ
2. **Online Program Site in LMS:** The development of an online ‘one-stop-shop’ Program site embedded within the Learning Management System to facilitate shared access to information about the program and collaborative activities by program staff and students
3. **Action Research Cycles for Course Enhancement:** The implementation of participatory action research cycles for course enhancement facilitated by Program Leaders and Course Convenors
4. **Online Course Enhancement Professional Learning Modules:** The development of and access to self-paced online professional learning modules for course enhancement for use individually and collectively by Course Convenors, educators or course teams.
5. **Community of Practice:** Building professional relationships amongst staff and collegial atmospheres across the program through action learning processes, face-to-face and in online environments

## Conclusion

This participatory action research study successfully achieved its aim to develop an innovative collaborative approach to continuous program enhancement within the Bachelor of International Tourism and Hotel Management Program at Griffith University.

The resulting BITHM ***Innovative, Iterative and Collaborative (IIC) Model of Program Enhancement*** supports continuous program enhancement by concomitantly enabling program leadership capability development, online program site engagement by program colleagues, action research cycles for program and course enhancement, online self-paced course enhancement professional learning and a developing community of practice for collaborations face-to-face and in online environments.

The development of the model was achieved through an action research process at the program and course levels which focused on enhancing the learning and teaching practices within the program, establishing and maintaining online collaborative spaces, and providing self-paced online professional learning opportunities. The project team recognise that the model has been specifically designed for the Bachelor of International Tourism and Hotel Management Program, however, propose that the *IIC Model of Continuous Program Enhancement* may be able to be used by other academic program teams at Griffith University.

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## Contact project leaders

**Dr Anna Kralj**  
BITHM Program Director  
Griffith Business School  
Griffith University  
a.kralj@griffith.edu.au

**Ms Louise Maddock**  
Senior Consultant (Learning & Teaching)  
Learning Futures, Office of the DVC(A),  
Griffith University  
l.maddock@griffith.edu.au

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