

Weekend College: A Case Study of Delivering Full Time Computing Programmes in the Framework of

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ABSTRACT

The Universal College of Learning introduced a new concept of delivery in 2000 – the Weekend College. This initiative was modelled on international educational trends, in an effort to cater for an untapped market in the community.

The initial idea was to repackage existing full time programmes delivered during the day and group them into modules that could be delivered around the weekend college timeframe. Students would remain equivalent full time students, which meant they qualified for a student loan, and allowance if required. Students could also enrol in the programmes as part timers.

Programmes on offer were the first year of the Bachelor of Applied Information Systems degree, the National Certificate in Computing Levels 2 and 3, and some papers from the New Zealand Diploma in Business.

Short courses were also offered with great success. These were based on existing units in BAppIS but were promoted under different titles to attract information systems professionals wanting to upskill.

The marketing strategy was aimed at professionals in full time employment wishing to gain a tertiary qualification without having to give up full time work.

This paper will examine how the weekend college project was formulated, the process involved, successes, advantages and disadvantages, and future ideas and initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the introduction of the new Weekend College concept at the Universal College of Learning (UCOL) in Palmerston North.

A vision document was formulated which identified the weekend college model. The concept was modelled on international educational trends around the

framework of extension initiatives. Many universities (internationally – mainly in the United States) have separate Weekend College entities running alongside their mainstream university programmes. Web sites from these colleges show the majority of courses offered are at Diploma and Degree level rather than lower level certificate courses. The structure of these programmes was usually set up as alternate weekends of delivery for approximately 16 weekends per paper. The bibliography provides URL's for web sites of universities in the United States that have weekend college models.

UCOL's Weekend College had a similar concept in mind and based its initiative on these international models. However, UCOL had a wider focus with regard to the programmes on offer to prospective students and wanted to cater to the needs of the regional community. In response to this a range of courses from Level 2 to Level 7 were offered.

2. MARKETING

The campaign used the catch phrase "At Weekend College you can advance your career, even on your days off!"

The following logo was created as the Weekend College symbol:



An external marketing consultancy determined the target markets and advertising campaign. The consultancy identified the target market as those people in full time work, wanting to gain qualifications without having to give up their job.

As a result, a major part of the marketing budget was channelled into direct marketing to employers in the

Manawatu region. In retrospect there were flaws in this approach. Employers did not respond positively to the idea of employees studying every weekend while remaining in their full time capacity at work. Feedback indicated that they perceived they may not get optimum work outcomes during the working week and were concerned about employee 'burnout'. Enrolments showed only a small percentage of students were actually in full time employment.

Regional radio and TV advertising were also used to promote the concept. Lead time was short – promotion commenced only three weeks before the commencement of most of the courses. This is seen as having contributed to the small amount of enrolments in the degree programme. Students considering a year-long commitment to studying almost every weekend needed more time to make a decision and organise their other commitments such as sports, family responsibilities etc.

3. PRODUCTS DELIVERED

Full time courses on offer at the date of the Weekend College commencement were:

- Year One of the Bachelor of Applied Information Systems
- National Certificate in Computing Level 2 & 3
- New Zealand Diploma in Business
- Certificate in Retail Marketing
- National Certificate in Business Administration and Computing Level 2
- Electronic-Business Level 7.

4. FORMULATION

Of the six full time programmes on offer, the authors were involved in the formulation of the National Certificate in Computing and the Bachelor of Applied Information Systems degree (BAppIS). These two are discussed.

Working groups were formed for each of the two programmes with the initial task to form a delivery model. Table 1 shows the model developed for BAppIS. This model allowed for the first year of the degree to be offered over one year. The year

was split into three semesters, with students able to enrol full time or part time in any semester. Each semester was 15 weekends in duration with a two to three week break between each semester. Four units were delivered in each semester, with two units running concurrently for 7½ weekends each. A two-hour flexi night class was also offered once a week for those students interested in extra tuition. The proposed delivery structure was Saturday and Sunday from 9.00-4.30pm with ½ hour for lunch. The flexi night class was to be offered on a Monday night from 7-9pm.

The National Certificate in Computing (NCC) Levels 2 & 3 was delivered around the framework of two weekends on with one weekend off with one evening tutorial class. The course was made up of unit standards and clumped into modules – Technology, Applications, Business and Presentations. The course was delivered over 24 weekends with two modules delivered for the first nine weekends with the next two for a following nine weekends. The remaining six weekends were for assessments and catch up. Sessions were 9-12 noon and 1-4pm on both Saturdays and Sundays. Full contact hours were 14 hours a week with an expectation of self-directed learning hours during the week of around six hours. The course started in September 2000 with a finish date of April 2001.

Students who wanted to be eligible for loans and allowances needed to enrol as full time students.

Semester One 2000	9 th September – 17 th December
Semester Two 2001	13 th January – 22 nd April
Semester Three 2001	12 th April – 19 th August

Table 1

Weekend College: Semesters for Year One

This meant each programme had to be spread across enough weeks to constitute a full time course. (Some students chose to be part time and only wanted to do particular units). Full time enrolments of these students spanned two academic years (September 2000 to April 2001 for NCC and August 2001 for BAppIS).

The Weekend College concept and delivery models

were approved by the Information Systems Industry Advisory Committee and the Academic Approvals Committee. A visit was also arranged for the external monitor of the BAppIS programme. Each group was supportive of the model apart from reservations that students may be taking on a heavy study load with delivery occurring on most weekends. Each committee also saw the need for students to have access to student services such as the library and student studios during the weekend.

One of the outcomes of the working groups was a recommendation regarding the need for additional administrative support to run the programmes effectively at the weekend. This was to ensure that students were provided with the level of communication and support that daytime students get. The existing programme leaders did not want to take on this additional responsibility with already heavy workloads. The need was seen for a Weekend College Administrator whose role would be to be on campus every weekend. The Administrator would provide support to lecturers if required and to ensure students had logons, resources etc. This recommendation was approved and an administrator was appointed at the commencement of the college start date.

Students were to be offered all the services to those of weekday students – although some of those services had to be accessed during the week, eg. student resource centre, learning centre, and health centre. Access to student studios, computer support and the library were all available during the weekend.

An orientation night and student handbook were organised to cover all the programmes on offer. Present at the orientation evening were representatives from each of the student services, programme leaders for each programme, the Dean of Faculty, and a Maori representative who performed a powhiri. After the welcome each programme was introduced with students having opportunities to ask questions. The evening combined to provide a social experience for the students in order to feel part of the UCOL community. Students also had their ID photos taken on this night, the student handbook was issued and a tour of the campus provided.



5. DISCUSSION

One of the issues was obtaining lecturing staff to teach at the weekend. It was important to ensure that quality of delivery was maintained. This posed a difficulty, as teaching staff in the weekend would not necessarily be the same as the daytime teaching staff. Offers were made to existing staff to vary their contracts to provide for extra remuneration if they were interested in extra work at weekends. Some lecturers took up this offer, in other cases, part timers with relevant industry experience and qualifications were contracted.

Another consideration was to ensure weekend college students were getting exactly the same material as daytime students. Processes were put in place to ensure quality of delivery, such as: unit plan and teaching materials prepared by existing subject specialists; pre and post moderation of assessments; and lecturer evaluations completed on all weekend college lecturers.

The concept of weekend college appears to have been successful internationally particularly in the United States. However, it may be that the kiwi lifestyle and culture tends to preserve weekends for family and leisure/sports activities rather than full time study. Enrolments for the weekend college have shown a gradual growth pattern with numbers increasing as new units are offered. Overheads have been high to get programmes up and running via the weekend college. Budget constraints demanded that programmes required a minimum of eight students to run. Enrolments at the outset of the college were not high and often programmes being run were not economically viable.

One market that wasn't expected was daytime BAppIS students who had failed units in the first semester. These students enrolled as part timers in the weekend college to repeat the unit that year instead of having to wait until the next academic year.

The Weekend College programmes also attracted high school students who wanted to pursue a computing qualification, but did not have computing as an option in their school curriculum. These students enrolled in the National Certificate in

Computing.

Short courses based around Year two units from the BAppIS programme were also offered. Information Systems (IS) professionals in work were targeted and an email promotion was sent out to a range of industry related organisations. The courses that were extremely popular and fully subscribed were: Internet Programming in Java and Building e-commerce Applications. Due to their success these courses have been repeated.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the formulation and delivery of two of the Weekend College programmes. The Weekend College initiative is believed to be first in New Zealand, and has provided the Manawatu community with flexible and innovative study programmes. The work undertaken by the working groups ensured that quality processes and academic outcomes were consistent across both the week day and week end programmes. The success of the short courses, in terms of enrolment numbers, point towards a focus in the future on short, block mode courses, rather than full time programmes spread over long periods. It is anticipated that the Weekend College at UCOL will continue to grow and will offer a wider spectrum of courses in the future.

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