Bachelor of Philosophy: Focus Group Report

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1 Background

In 2012, as part of the new courses of study restructure, the University of Western Australia (UWA) instituted a Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) program. This program is intended to provide the opportunity for top performing students to excel in their studies and extend themselves.

Throughout Semester 1 the BPhil program coordinator, Associate Professor Jenna Mead, conducted a range of evaluation procedures including a SPOT survey. In June she requested that Elaine Lopes of the STUDYSmarter team conduct two focus group interviews with representatives of the BPhil cohort. The focus groups were conducted on Monday June 18th (Focus Group 1, FG1) and Tues June 19th (Focus Group 2, FG2). There were five participants in each group and each student represented the group that they worked with on their research project. There were 10 questions (see Appendix A) which guided the discussion and each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes. The focus groups were intended to provide rich detail about the experiences of the students and to provide more information about some aspects of the program which, based on feedback in the SPOT survey, the students were not entirely satisfied with.

2 Focus Group Discussion

2.1 Sense of Improvement as a Researcher

Overall, the students had a very strong sense of development of themselves as researchers, however they felt they needed to learn more about the research process. They felt slightly hampered by the subject matter was not interesting, this was a point which was agreed upon by all of the participants in FG1. It was, however, acknowledged that one of the research groups had been able to specialize in their area of study. A number of participants in FG1 indicated that they felt that the program had provided them with a good start and that they were still keen to pursue further research, or even a career in academia.

The students reported that at the beginning of the summer residence they had felt quite lost and that over the course of the program there had been a definite increase in their skills and an improvement in their ability to think as researchers. They added that they now have a better understanding of the breadth of research that is possible and now better understand how to identify and phenomenon which needs to be investigated. Previously they hadn’t understood the practicalities of research or the research process. In particular, they found working on the literature to be instructive – developing an understanding of where the boundaries lie. They also now know that research can be collaborative, that it doesn’t have to be a solitary process or task.

2.2 Group Skills

There was general agreement that the opportunity to work in a “functional group”, one in which all members were motivated to contribute to the work, made a “pleasant change”, although this was not true for all groups. It was also reported that in working with highly motivated students each person then felt responsibility for working harder to avoid letting the team down. The students felt that they had developed their skills in listening to others, working with others and learning from them. They reported that working in a group helped them to “stay on track”, to stay focused on the task at hand. Furthermore, when they were unsure of how to proceed with something other members of the groups often knew what to do. They received and gave realistic and honest feedback which was perceived to be a good learning experience. The students enjoyed the opportunity to work with others who they considered to be performing at a similar academic level to them, something which provided them with confidence in the ability of the group. They highlighted that they had learnt the importance of good organisation and communication skills for groups to function effectively. Comparing their experiences in GCRL1000 and other units the students recognised the value of having scheduled group meetings every week (in other units) and suggested that such a structure would be helpful in GCRL1000.
2.3 Course Structure

The students had a number of suggestions for improving the structure of the course, most related to the timing of information workshops and assignment deadlines. It was felt that there was time at the beginning and then too much stress at the end, this was particularly the case for the discussion of results where it was felt that there was too much time allocated to planning and then the writing up of the results was too rushed.

The students suggested that the deadlines created a degree of stress as they came up so quickly. In particular, it was felt that the literature review workshop and the deadline for submitting the literature review were too close together. The students suggested that the literature review workshop should have been held earlier, that they were all waiting for it and then the deadline was just a couple of days later. In regard to this it was considered that the feedback came too late (at the workshop). For example, the workshop on the literature review was held on the 16th of April and the students' literature reviews were due on the 18th. There was general agreement that the literature review could be due earlier so that there would then be more time for the data gathering process, which the students found to be rather rushed. They suggested that there was time for this after the submission of the proposal and that there was a need for more guidance on how to select literature to read as it was an entirely new task for all of the students.

In regard to the literature review, the students also felt that they required more practical input as to what academic writing looked like. They suggested that they required a better understanding of where they were in terms of academic writing, that they needed to develop an understanding of academic writing before they could produce their literature reviews. It was further suggested that after the literature review the progress of the project felt very rushed. This was particularly the case for students whose study participants took time getting back to them. The students who chose option had a sense that “100% of the assessment was conducted almost in one week”, the practice presentation was on the 30th of May, the final paper was due on the 1st of June and the reflective essay was also due on the 1st of June and some students had work due in other units at the same time. Both focus groups commented that they would have preferred the literature review workshop to be held earlier and for the literature review itself to be due earlier which would then provide more time for the following aspects of the unit.

Overall, it was felt that the basic structure of the course was good. In relation to this, it was reported that the group sessions with Jenna and the supervisors were very helpful and that the students had a good rapport with both Jenna and their supervisors.

2.4 Assessment

2.4.1 Assessment Options

The groups had two options in regard to assessment and final marks. In Option 1 the students received marks for their research proposal, literature review and final paper whereas students who selected Option 2 received feedback on their research proposal and literature review and had all their marks allocated for their final paper. Overall, option 1 was approximately twice as popular as option 2. Having the choice was considered to be very stressful and in general the students indicated that they would rather not have a choice. This was particularly so as they felt that they didn’t really know what they were making a choice about, they felt that they didn’t know enough about research or working in groups or assessment at university. A number of the students indicated that they wasted time at the beginning of the program trying to decide what was the better option, others decided quickly, one group by “the toss of a coin” indicating the difficulty the students had in making a well-informed decision. For the groups which chose option 1, the decision was largely made based on a fear of “putting all [their] eggs in one basket”. The students who chose this option found the ongoing deadlines and the desire for good marks kept them very motivated. On the other hand, it was felt that option 2 enabled the students to focus on the process rather than the marks and that this provided them with an opportunity to concentrate on developing their skills. In general, it was considered that option 1 better supported the aims of the course but that there should be more weighting given to the final paper. As it was, students who chose option 1 felt that they received their marks when their work was at a less developed stage and when they were still developing their understanding of the standard of work which was expected and they felt that this worked against them. One suggestion was for the
marks to be calculated both ways and for the best mark to be awarded to compensate for having to make an uninformed decision.

FG1 considered that the reflective essay was worth too much and that what was required was not made clear. However, some students reported learning a lot from writing the reflective essay and considered it to be a helpful process. They suggested that it would perhaps be better to time this task so that it was due after everything else had been finished. In regard to this the students found the 1 week extension for the deadline for this task to be helpful.

Submitting drafts of the tasks was found to be useful as instructive feedback was provided, however FG1 thought that it would be more motivational if a tentative mark were provided. This would also indicate whether the students were on track or not.

2.4.2 SPARK

Both focus groups agreed that SPARK (Self and Peer Assessment Resource Kit) was not appropriate for the BPhil program. It is designed for a particular cohort and is designed to be motivational however the students suggested that it did not work in this way with this group of students. It was considered that SPARK “skewed the marks” and that it was an imprecise instrument, however it was also it was pointed out that the difference in rating was too small to make a significant difference to the marks. SPARK was considered to be a good learning tool but not ideal for ascertaining marks. Furthermore, it was considered that some of the questions were irrelevant to the BPhil program.

Some students enjoyed the peer feedback and suggested that the comments were useful. It was agreed that it would be good to have more feedback although it was noted that some students weren’t happy with their feedback and would in all probability not want more.

It was agreed that SPARK could be good for motivating students who weren’t contributing to group work but that is wasn’t useful in functional motivated groups such as those in the BPhil. It didn’t work well with such small groups providing an imprecise measurement. Generally not considered to be useful and that it should not be used for generating marks.

2.4.3 Number of Assessments

Overall, the focus group participants agreed that there were not too many assessments in the program and that the range of assessment tasks was useful and that they introduced the students to the whole research process. It was, however, considered strange that no marks were allocated for the colloquium (the final presentation) and that no or limited feedback was received on the mock presentation. It was suggested that the students were more comfortable and better prepared for the colloquium and that they felt they did well in these presentations and as a result would have liked to have marks allocated for the task.

2.5 Learning Activities

2.5.1 Self and Peer Review of Literature Review and Proposal

In general, engaging in self and peer review of the literature review and proposal was thought to have provided opportunities to learn more about research and improve the quality of their work. The students didn’t think the self-review was particularly useful, especially for the proposal as they did not think they were knowledgeable enough. In general they considered that it was essentially editing. Others thought the self-review was useful in that it provided the students with an opportunity to compare their own work to that of others. Overall the students preferred reading and reviewing others’ papers as it helped them to get a sense of the standard of work that other groups were producing, however, they found it difficult to give useful feedback and didn’t feel they had appropriate experience to do so. It was however suggested that it made them look at their own work in a different way. They felt that it would be more useful to see others’ final papers. They also commented that the self and
peer review process only required minimal time and effort. Overall, however, they agreed that they favoured the feedback provided by the supervisors.

2.5.2 Jigsaw Presentation

The students thought this was a good primer or practice run for the final presentation. They found it useful in clarifying their projects, refining their presentations and improving their comfort in presenting to an audience. However, they didn’t feel that it helped them to improve their presentation skills as it was too informal and they received little or no feedback on their presentations.

2.5.3 Colloquium/Group Presentation

The colloquium was not assessed and the students didn’t receive any feedback on their presentations and therefore they did not find it especially useful. They did say that they felt quite relaxed, that there was little pressure associated with the activity. This was not just because it wasn’t marked but also because they had been more time to prepare for it and this was useful as it provided the opportunity for the students to reflect on the content and structure of their presentations. In regard to this, the public speaking session/workshop was useful in preparing the students. The students liked being asked questions by academics as this helped them to further clarify their projects and they felt that this helped them to expand their understanding of the topic.

2.6 GCRL1000

It was generally agreed that the unit took more than 150 hours. This included the summer school, sessions, group meetings and research. FG1 suggested that GCRL1000 took up more time than their other units combined and that this was in part because they knew their supervisors and felt more connected to the unit and in part because they were trying to overachieve.

2.7 BURT

The students particularly enjoyed the summer residence component of the unit. The summer residence was generally considered to be very good but also very intense and perhaps too “packed”. Throughout the residence they felt sleep deprived and a bit overloaded. The students were focused on getting to know each other and found it to be a very fun and social time and a great opportunity for developing friendships. The sense of community and collaboration with like minded people were particularly valued.

The students also appreciated the strong relationships they formed with their supervisors. In particular, the students found the feedback provided by their supervisors to be of tremendous value and they appreciated the opportunity to draw on the experience of their supervisors.

On the guest lecturers the students commented that many were very interesting and inspirational but it was felt that others didn’t understand the BPhil and that their presentations weren’t relevant to the students and that they then lost focus. The students also noted that only two presentations at the summer residence were from the humanities yet the topic of their project was humanities based.

The students commented on feeling a sense of responsibility and independence in participating in the unit and that they felt privileged to be on the project. On completion of the final paper the students reported feeling extremely satisfied and had a real sense of achievement.

2.8 The Research Topic

Initially the students hated the topic. This was in part because they didn’t know much about the topic (sustainable education). They expected to be provided with more background information on the topic they would study. The topic was heavily grounded in the social sciences and was not considered relevant for some of the students, however they acknowledge that it was still helpful in developing their
knowledge and skills and that it helped them to understand an alternative ways of conducting research. The students felt hampered in that they always had to go through the supervisors and couldn’t take the initiative it directing their research focus but reported that over time it made more sense. FG2 commented that in the end they thought it was a clever topic as they were themselves getting a sustainable education and so it actually was relevant to them and this enabled them to find the topic interesting. It was also noted that there was limited scope for impact as they couldn’t see implement their findings (gender and Engineering).

Initially the students said that they found it difficult to find literature on the topic but that in the end this was beneficial as it helped them hone their literature research skills. The representative of one group commented that it wasn’t until the literature review that they really knew what it was that they wanted to do in the project.

It was acknowledged in FG2 that it was good that the topic had limits, as without these the students would have been tempted to overreach and may have struggled with the project.

One group found it annoying that their topic was stolen by one of the supervisors to give to another group which was struggling to come up with a focus.

2.9 Provision of Feedback

In the SPOT report one aspect which received a relatively low rating was the provision of timely feedback (only 37% of students agreed that they had received timely feedback while 39% disagreed resulting in a mean of 2.92). The facilitators were surprised about this as they felt that there had been ongoing feedback provided throughout the course and wanted to find out why the students had responded to this question in the way they had. During the focus group discussions the students commented that the sufficiency of the feedback was not the problem but rather the timeliness of it. At a number of points during the unit the students felt that there was not enough time between the feedback and the submission date for completed tasks, for example, in the case of the literature review there was not enough time to act on the feedback before submitting the final paper – feedback was given on one day and the paper was due the next. The students thought that there needed to be more of a gap. Although the students thought the whole unit was fast paced they commented that this was particularly the case at the end (the last week) and there was no time to improve on prior tasks.

On the whole the students commented that the supervisors provided very good feedback and that they were always available, however, at times there was little opportunity to implement suggested improvements. Some students also suggested that the feedback from their supervisor was “a bit vague, especially about conceptual issues”. It was also noted that the groups received feedback from their supervisors which they addressed and then after submitting their work they received more feedback and the students felt frustrated by this as they thought they had made all necessary improvements to their work. This perhaps points to a misunderstanding of the research and academic writing process.

In regard to the draft paper the students commented that the feedback from their supervisors was helpful but the feedback from their peers was more critical and they found this very worrying.

The one area where the students felt that feedback wasn’t provided was after the colloquium and they commented that this would have been valuable, however, they did receive informal feedback in the form of comments and questions from academics.

2.10 SPOT Ratings

Another item on the SPOT is ‘The teachers are well prepared’. 53% of students agreed and 21% disagreed. When asked to provide other feedback on the SPOT ratings the students commented a perceived lack of preparedness on the part of the presenters at times. FG2 suggested that some of the workshops could have been presented in a more efficient and focused manner. They did, however, comment that the teachers were “good”, “motivated” and “keen”.

The participants in FG1 suggested the SPOT was conducted at a particularly bad time as it was extremely busy for them and they were tired and that this may have impacted on the feedback provided.

They also pointed out the problem of the very small sample which (n 38) completed the SPOT and that it is a fairly blunt instrument which is not necessarily designed for the particular cohort or unit and is perhaps not relevant.

On a positive note, it was noted that this was the first time the unit had been run and that this was done so to a high level overall.

2.11 Final Comments

The students noted that they enjoyed the unit much more than it would seem from the feedback. They attributed this to the fact that their feedback is focused on improving the unit/program rather than highlighting the existing strengths. Overall they found the unit to be very satisfying to complete and added that they are very happy now that it is done.

One suggestion was that it was important to find a way to keep the group going and to keep the strong connections with peers that had been built over the course of the program.

It was also suggested that the students would like the opportunity to submit their papers to a journal as this would contribute to their sense of academic achievement.
3 Appendix 1

In addressing the following questions please give specific examples where possible.

1. Thinking like a researcher-
   Think back to day 1 of the summer residence. How would you rate yourself in ‘thinking like a researcher’ now compared to then.

2. Collaboration-
   What group skills have you learned

3. Course structure-
   What worked well and suggestions for change

4. Assessment-
   • Which assessment option did your group choose? Why did you choose that option and do you think it assisted the way you approached your learning.
   • Is there too much assessment?
   • Did you think the range of assessments was useful?
   • Is SPARK useful in terms of managing group dynamics? Do group work and the SPARK tool have a place in generating a mark?

5. Did the following activities assist your learning (If “yes” in what way?: If “no” please elaborate)
   • Self and Peer review of the proposal
   • Self and peer review of the Lit review
   • Jigsaw presentation (when each of you had to individually speak to a small group about your project)
   • Group presentation

6. Did GCRL1000 take more than 150 hours to complete?

7. What were the best things about the research training unit (BURT)?

8. Did you feel restricted with what you were able to do in the research training unit? Please elaborate.

9. At the end of the colloquium on June 5 Jenna addressed the SPOT feedback provided by the BPhil cohort. Of particular surprise was the low rating given to the timely provision of feedback in the BURT unit. Considering how much feedback was provided (supervisor and peer) throughout the unit can you elaborate or explain why students may have perceived this as being insufficient?

10. Is there anything else that you can add to better explain the SPOT ratings?