Assessing and assuring learning: university teachers’ reflections on effectively addressing skills deficits in business studies

Using data from a business school in a large research-intensive university in Australia, this study analyses proposed teaching and learning changes with a focus on ‘closing the loop’. Aspects of teaching and learning submitted by academic staff following assurance of learning (i.e., curriculum improvements) were analysed using content analysis, spanning 382 program learning outcomes, 25 different degree programs, 117 subjects and 5,828 pieces of individual student assessment (2009-2017). Analysis revealed six learning outcome themes, with ‘use, application and evaluation of relevant theories, methods concepts, ideas or models’ was most prominent. Suggested actions on each of the themes relate to various curricula changes, particularly 1) the move from teaching students ‘what to think’ to ‘how to think’, 2) from developing fundamental to complex skills, and 3) providing more opportunities for feedback. Broader implications for teaching practice are discussed.

Keywords: assurance of learning; quality assurance; accreditation; AACSB; assessment; business
Introduction

Demonstrating learning outcome achievement can be challenging for business schools. It requires strong alignment between what schools say they do (i.e., in mission statements, program aims and outcomes) and what they actually do (the actual practices of teaching). One data collection method to show quality is through a process called assurance of learning, driven primarily by business school accreditation. However, business schools have a variety of assurance of learning approaches and challenges are not uncommon.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of assurance of learning is ‘closing the loop’ — making continuous improvements based on the assurance of learning results (LaFleur, Babin, & Lopez, 2009). What closing the loop offers is a re-examination of how promises are delivered. The most obvious outcome of this re-examination is knowing if students learnt the material or not (LaFleur et al., 2009). If not, one of the ways LaFleur and colleagues suggest is changing the methods used to teach the core concepts students are expected to learn.

But before improvements can be made, it is important to first identify areas that need improvement. Following this, proposed actions can be suggested. Identifying areas for improvement can start by examining why some students have difficulty meeting expectations. This can lead to knowing any skills deficits, concepts missed, unclarified misunderstandings or particular skills and attributes that are missing in the assessed work or performance.

Assessment is thus critically important because it can offer meaningful information about the success of the program generally or the subject specifically, and to address issues that might exist or persist. To address areas of improvement, Biggs (2012) suggests examining deeply what teachers and students do that can influence the
overall student experience and how to best achieve desired learning outcomes. Often, it is this part that is most critical rather than making ‘cosmetic’ changes to the subject content such as changing textbooks or revising learning outcomes. This paper aims to do this: to examine the range of curriculum changes that academic staff wish to do in subjects following a quality assurance exercise to address the skills deficits of business students.

Despite considerable research on how assurance of learning is implemented in many business schools around the world (e.g., offering effective models and processes), there is less examination of closing the loop strategies or ‘enhancements’ that are proposed following assurance of learning. Interestingly, Rexeisen and Garrison (2013) found out that less than half of the schools they studied catalogue the ideas they use to close the loop. This suggests a variety of gaps: What enhancements to teaching and learning do staff propose and implement? Which particular outcomes do these enhancements relate to? Existing literature only broadly provides what needs to be done such as ‘doing more’ (e.g. adding new material or case problems). There is less specificity in the literature about the nature of the improvements proposed. There is also little attention to thematically arrange and understand in detail these proposed improvements and how meaningful they are to the business curricula. This lack of specificity poses a problem for academics who look for specific actions to take and practical examples to use when addressing skills deficits among business students.

This study addresses this paucity in research, which documents and investigates the closing the loop actions by academic staff (university lecturers) following assurance of learning exercises by answering the following questions:

(1) What specific learning outcomes need the most attention in closing the loop in assurance of learning?
(2) What actions have been put forward to address the challenges in achieving these learning outcomes?

(3) What can we learn from assurance of learning to improve the quality of teaching and student experience in business?

A study of actions submitted by academic staff between 2009 and 2017 (inclusive) reveals that the use, application and evaluation of relevant theories, methods, concepts, ideas or models is the most challenging outcome for students. Actions to address this suggest that a direct approach to improving both discipline-based and generic skills acquisition is necessary. There was a strong suggestion that this should be practice-focused — i.e., to use knowledge to evaluate issues or problems and provide solutions, to understand what implications those solutions might have and to think critically about potential and alternative applications to further the field.

Assurance of learning and ‘closing the loop’

Avery and colleagues (2014) note that assurance of learning is a faculty-driven process managed by a team (e.g. a committee) where data is collected periodically using various forms of measurement strategies. They then use the results to “implement appropriate actions to ensure curricula and pedagogy are managed in a manner enhancing student learning and development” (p. 157). In short, the process is towards measuring the success of outcomes and providing guidance for improvement (Christensen, Judd and Nicols, 2011; Martell, 2007; Shaftel & Shaftel, 2007). Curricula actions and changes can vary. However, this same purpose of assurance of learning is shared by many researchers in various business schools (Balotsky, Stagliano & Haub, 2016; Christensen et al., 2011; Johnson, 2012). For example, Balotsky et al. (2016) document teaching
enhancements in a strategic management subject that is team-taught, capstone/integrative and with multiple classes.

This process of analysing results and making changes to the curriculum that can lead to improved outcomes (e.g. student learning) is better known as ‘closing the loop’. Colon, Badua and Torres (2015, p. 102) define it as the “process of using assessment data to implement actions that improve student learning”. Betters-Reed, Nitkin and Sampson (2008) also see assurance of learning as a change management concept and situates it in the change management literature. The associated motivations for, costs of or resistance to assurance of learning are well-documented in the literature (for example, see Eschenfelder, Bryan & Lee, 2014; Marques & Garrett, 2012) but are not the focus of this study.

However, there are conflicting challenges between assurance of learning and closing the loop strategies. When a business school is engaged in assurance of learning processes, it can be narrowly seen as an exercise to meet accreditation requirements, or as Bennett, Smart and Kumar (2017) put it, a compliance-driven process. Assurance of learning informs what problems might exist while closing the loop suggests what needs to be done to fix them. Often, suggested actions do not take place; and if they do, it takes time to systematically develop, implement and re-evaluate their effectiveness.

There are disagreements as to what constitutes closing the loop. First, changing assessment methods, for example, does not mean closing the loop, according to Garrison and Rexeisen (2013). Second, there is considerable flexibility in assessing student learning. Third, there is a variety of operational structures within business schools as to which units or individuals should be responsible for assurance of learning and closing the loop processes. Lastly, some business schools have no access to best
practices shared among a network of business schools. These challenges are likely to remain in the foreseeable future.

The data used in this study reflect similar data collected in various Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)-accredited business schools where a number of direct and indirect measurements are used. AACSB is an international professional organisation that provides accreditation to more than 800 business schools in more than 50 countries. Previously, indirect measures (student surveys, including subject experience questionnaires, graduates surveys and alumni feedback) were used to inform quality indicators such as enrolment and retention (French, 2011). Through assurance of learning, more direct or program-embedded measures are used to indicate quality by directly relating assessments to specific subject and program outcomes. A typical example is using rubrics to test whether students’ assignments, essays, examinations, field projects, or presentations meet desired learning outcomes. Curriculum maps are also used to better align subject outcomes and program outcomes (Gilbreath et al., 2016), an essential step in assurance of learning.

The assurance of learning framework described above is also similar to the process used in the business school where the data used in this study come from. The business school from a large research-intensive university in Australia offers a bachelor, masters and PhD programs in the accounting, economics, finance, management and marketing disciplines. The assurance of learning process in this business school investigates individual learning outcomes, develops assessment instruments (e.g. rubrics), analyses the results and ‘closes the loop’. This involves subject coordinators, program coordinators and the undergraduate and graduate programs coordinators to reflect on the results and suggest any curriculum changes. Any recommendation, such as making changes to content or delivery, followed by appropriate actions (or no
changes), represent closing the assurance of learning loop. Learning outcomes are aligned with the business school’s mission and strategic aims. This is consistent with the practice discussed elsewhere in the literature (Flanegin, Letterman, Racic & Schimmel, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Kim & Helms, 2016; Lawrence, Reed & Locander, 2011; Rexeisen & Garrison, 2013).

In this study, recommendations are known as “reflections”. Such proposed actions in reflections can be implemented as swiftly as during the semester (subject changes) or involve triangulating the assurance of learning results with other data such as feedback from students, alumni and employer for periodic review (program changes). Each semester, assurance of learning data, including analyses and reflections, are collected. The following section discusses in more detail the data used in this study.

Method

Data
At the conclusion of assurance of learning exercise, academic staff were asked to provide a response to a number of questions. This included the question “What strategies you will likely use the next time you teach this subject?” which was designed to collect ‘closing the loop’ data in order to know any improvements they wish to make. Responses varied in length. These responses, collected from 2009 to 2017, were summarised in a spreadsheet, then classified into themes (i.e., curriculum changes academics proposed to do). The responses were collected as email responses within a specified time (from 3 weeks to one month) in each semester. This has allowed the academics to have sufficient time to reflect on the assurance of learning results and to provide more considered, nuanced and detailed reflections. There are four departments in the business school the data was collected from: Accounting, Economics, Finance
and Management and Marketing (combined). The business school is one of Australia’s largest and research-intensive universities with more than 40,000 students and more than 4,000 staff reported in 2015 (source undisclosed for anonymity). This study is also made possible by an approved ethics application.

In summary, the assurance of learning reflections data related to 382 program learning outcomes, 25 different degree programs, 117 subjects and 5,828 pieces of individual student assessments during the period 2009-2017. Each suggested change was matched to a learning objective, discipline and level. This resulted in more than 4000 words of text to analyse.

Almost all of the rubrics designed and used included three levels of performance: below expectations, meeting expectations and exceeding expectations. The criteria in the rubric varied greatly depending on the assessment and the outcomes being assessed. All rubrics were aligned with subject learning outcomes that were clearly mapped with program learning outcomes. In the business school, this is achieved by a regular process called curriculum mapping. Each program director asks all the relevant subject coordinators to map their subjects against the program by indicating how their subjects contribute to achieving the program outcomes. This is done by indicating the level of emphasis a program outcome is covered in the subject in various teaching, learning and assessment activities.

**Content analysis**

Content analysis is a systematic analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2002). While it is a broad term for different tools to analyse text, it requires systematic coding and categorising of terms to locate meanings and patterns, their frequency, relationships and discourses (Mayring, 2000; Pope & Mays, 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013).
The learning outcomes consisted of low- to high-level outcomes ranging from asking students to “identify” or “describe” to “analyse” and “evaluate”. In the initial analysis, categories were developed for all learning outcomes, then into themes. At this stage, twelve categories were found. As there were further related categories, they were reduced to the final six themes of related learning outcomes addressed by staff reflections, discussed in the Results and Discussion section. The method of analysis employed was consistent with Elo and Kyngäs’ (2008) inductive approach to content analysis. This approach involves three phases — preparation, organisation and reporting and analysis — and includes open coding, creating categories and formulating general descriptions (i.e. abstraction). The abstraction employed in the data revealed the final six themes. An example (extract) of this open coding in one theme is shown below (Figure 1):

(Figure 1 here)

Reflections were also analysed using the same coding process. These reflections represent the future actions suggested by staff should they teach the same subject again.

(Table 1 here)

**Results and Discussion**

The six recurring themes found focused on learning outcomes that ask students to do a number of assessable tasks (first being the most shared theme) (Research Question or RQ1):

- Use, application or evaluation of relevant theories, methods concepts, ideas or models
- Evaluating the applicability of tools or techniques
• Critically analysing key issues or problems and providing solutions
• Developing fundamental skills that build onto more complex skills
• Analysing and explaining implications for practice
• Reviewing the literature and formulating research questions that can have a significant contribution to the field

**Use, application or evaluation of relevant theories, methods concepts, ideas or models**

This theme was shared among 53% of the total number of reflections received. Note that reflections can be categorised to one or more themes. The learning outcomes under this category cover 20 of the 25 programs and their emphasis on the use of theories or concepts as the core determining feature of the type of learning and teaching fostered within those programs. In a Master of Economics program (i.e. degree or course of study), for example, one of their outcomes is to “apply knowledge of theory to analyse real and hypothetical problems in different markets both domestically and internationally”. This objective cascades to subjects under this program and the assessments used in the selected subjects in assurance of learning show that students have been assessed against their ability to use, apply or evaluate economic theories or concepts they learn in lectures and tutorials. The application related mostly to discipline-based problems, cases, or issues given in the assessments, whether that was a final project essay, a single question or questions in the exam or a short assignment. This finding was most obvious in the economics and finance masters followed by management. It was less related to the bachelor program.

In summary, the most prominent changes are (RQ2):

• Providing students with more practical exercise opportunities (e.g. exercise questions to improve problem solving skills)
• Giving greater emphasis on the application of theory and concepts by using real-world problems

• Clarifying what is required and working through a sample excellent work (i.e. using exemplars)

• Reducing emphasis on developing fundamental technical skills to placing more emphasis on intuitive understanding

On reflection, based on the above, the academics point to almost the same direction. This direction involves exposing students to more practical activities including using exemplars and real-world problems with the aim of developing higher-order skills.

Some examples of the reflections under this theme relate to the above summary:

“As for the implications for the subject content, delivery or assessment, I may need to review the lectures and tutorial exercises. The lectures need to give even greater emphasis to the application of the theory and concepts to real world problems. Perhaps more case studies and illustrations of the application of the theory need to be included.” – Academic #21, Economics, Masters

“We will introduce more real world cases to help the students understand the practice in the real world.” Academic #82, Accounting, Masters

Few academics also proposed changes around content and delivery such as re-ordering lecture materials, providing more time for students to ask questions and emphasising self-directed learning.

“I think I will re-order the material to give greater options in assignment setting. I taught [sic] material in Week 12 this year would be good assignment material, but it would have been unfair to the students to put in in an assignment due at the end of Week 12.” – Academic #40, Actuarial Studies, Masters

**Evaluating the applicability of tools or techniques**

This theme was shared among 46% of the total number of reflections received. A total of 16 learning outcomes shared in 18 programs related to this theme. The fundamental topic of this theme relates to students’ use and evaluation of various tools applied in various settings. This requires students to evaluate tools and techniques that relate to
public policy and business decision making. In economics, for example, statistical techniques were used to evaluate problems that relate to econometric theory. In finance, one example was related to students’ use of finance tools to solve specific finance problems.

The strongest themes that suggest important changes to the curriculum are summarised below (RQ2). They were observed more in the masters of economics and finance than in other masters programs, or the bachelor or PhD.

• Identifying early any weaknesses or difficulties and emphasising more on topics that appear to cause difficulty
• Stressing the importance of correctly interpreting answers based on the use of tools
• Encouraging students to be better prepared prior to attending lectures by using practice questions

As two academics saw it, a deeper understanding through clear explanations and providing more opportunities for practice in using tools were important.

“So I think there is a misunderstanding by these students who didn’t realise how much detail they should include. Explaining the model is very important no matter how correct they are in answering the question because both criteria together represent deeper understanding.” – Academic #13, Economics, Bachelor

“I will continue with my strategy of stressing the importance of interpretation, and providing guidance in all cases. As mentioned above, this component of the subject is the one most struggled with by students, and can only be mastered with lots of experience and lots of thought.” – Academic #51, Management, Masters

A few academics suggested changing assignment submission to an earlier date and including new materials.

In summary, three important actions were considered under this theme: detecting early signs of challenges in student learning, doing more practical examples, and explaining the importance of the use of tools.
**Critically analysing key issues or problems and providing solutions**

This theme collectively pertains to learning outcomes that require students, when presented with a problem, to use knowledge and skills gained to critically analyse those issues or problems and provide solutions. This theme came in the third spot, not too distant from the second theme above with 43% of all reflections shared across this theme.

Various ways in which this theme is addressed, from showing students exemplars of good work to enhancing feedback processes, were observed more frequently in the masters-level management and accounting than in the other programs (RQ2).

- Providing models of good answers (e.g., illustrating ‘excellent’, ‘good’ and ‘poor’ examples of answers; discussing mistakes made in an assignment, why they are mistakes and how they can be avoided)
- Providing students more opportunities for individual consultations and personalised feedback (e.g. providing students more time to work on a project and to provide feedback on several drafts instead of just one)
- Providing as much guidance and setting clear expectations as much as possible

Two academics voiced their strategies to do this by utilising various sources of and opportunities for feedback, including from peers.

“*I will discuss in class the major mistakes that were made in the assignment and elaborate why they are mistakes and how they can be avoided.*” – Academic #35, Finance, Masters

“*Further strategies will be employed next year to further improve the already high levels of performance. These techniques will include the provision of milestones for students to monitor their progress and to encourage them to work on the project for a longer period of time. Peer feedback is also expected to be incorporated to hold poor performers in a group accountable for lack of effort.*” – Academic #22, Management, Bachelor
Less prominent reflections include improving attendance and class participation, developing writing skills required in the field and improve interaction between students in class.

“I will encourage more interaction between the students and the teaching staff, and among students themselves. Also, guest lectures by practitioners help to enhance students’ knowledge and understanding of the present business environments from a pragmatic perspective.” – Academic #54, International Business, Bachelor

“We should interact more with students to get a timely feedback of their understanding on this part of the course.” – Academic #31, Accounting, Masters

**Developing fundamental skills that build onto more complex skills**

This theme was shared across a third of the reflections. Developing fundamental skills can include drill exercises and problem sets to reinforce learning. Understanding complex topics require the progression from basic to advanced skills acquisition. The stages in skills development are an important aspect of primarily the major subjects in accounting, finance and economics programs.

The reflections received from staff vary. They included supplemental learning resources or support that was made available. They were also more prominent in the bachelor and honours degrees than in the masters.

The solutions offered by academics were mostly changes to the way content is delivered. It can be observed from the reflections that the overarching change they wish to do was to (RQ2):

- Develop a series of online videos for the fundamental topics covered in the subject so that less time is spent on these during lectures (i.e. flipping)
- Use more local examples to complement textbook and study materials
- Encourage students to seek out available support (e.g. consultations with tutors)

Some of the examples of comments under this theme point to leveraging on prior knowledge, transitioning students to the new learning experiences and “ways of
doing” in Australia and highlighting how important quantitative skills acquisition is, particularly in the first year bachelor degree.

“*We are currently transitioning some of the lecture content into online video lectures. This will allow students to review the content on a needs basis.*” – Academic #52, Management, Bachelor

“I *think a mixture of lectures and lab sessions have been effective, and I will continue to use this strategy the next time I teach this subject. I can give students more exercise questions to practice the numerical skills.*” – Academic #37, Economics, PhD

**Analysing and explaining implications for practice**

A number of assessments dealt with students’ ability to analyse and explain the implications of decisions and judgements to disciplinary practice. Following analysis and evaluation of problems or issues, some assessments in accounting and management specifically required students to discuss implications to accounting and management practice. This learning outcome was less evident in assessments in finance and economics.

The reflections surrounding this theme include a variety of approaches that reflect better alignment of teaching and learning activities and assessment to learning outcomes as well as reinforcing in-class discussion and use of practical examples. This theme was shared across 15% of reflections and can be traced in accounting and management masters programs. The strongest responses relate to (RQ2):

- Reviewing the learning outcomes in the subject
- Revising the assessment questions to provide clearer direction to and alignment with specific learning outcomes
- Spending more time on in-class discussions to increase depth
- Increasing the number of resources available in the learning management system (LMS) to include more practical cases and examples
Reflections surrounding this theme relate mostly to essay assignments and how they are designed to ask students to extend their understanding from theory to practice. The following comments are most representative of this theme.

“...insist that students begin very early in semester to understand what a journal critique is by reading the multiple examples we posted on the [learning management system].” – Academic #74, Masters, Marketing

“Use the in class and external resources and explicitly link to the objectives that are at the beginning of each class. The emphasise being that students are required to demonstrate this knowledge to excel in the subject.” – Academic #27, Accounting, Masters

**Reviewing the literature and formulating research questions that can have a significant contribution to the field**

Research is a key component of study and assessment at this university. It is essential for students to have a clear understanding of their field and this can be shown in their assessments. It was recognised that staff reflected upon improving students’ research skills. An example of this is to provide students with more feedback opportunities either through the submission of drafts prior to the final written assessment or more in-class discussions. This reflection was more evident in the accounting masters lecturers involved in assurance of learning, but only represent nearly 10% of all reflections.

The suggested change can be summed up by this response: allowing for more student-staff interactions and feedback loops to develop a solid grasp of the field.

**Further insights and limitations**

Examining the six different themes tells us a few things (RQ3). The most obvious would be to think that the proposed changes relate to addressing skills and attributes considered relevant in both undergraduate and graduate studies. It is clear that the emphasis is on higher-order cognitive skills such as *analysis*, *application* and *evaluation*. These skills mirror Bloom’s 1956 levels of knowledge (Armstrong, n.d.)
and Biggs’ (1999) kinds of learning that are more complex than the use and acquisition of fundamental skills.

The reflections centred on solutions that address skills deficits. Critical thinking remains an important skill as well as research skill. This study has found that lecturers propose activities that have a strong focus on developing these various skills.

The six themes focus on the acquisition of key skills not unique to Australia. Institutions and countries elsewhere have adopted essential skills acquisition as an important outcome of tertiary study, arguably driven by the nature of current and future work (Kemp & Seagraves, 1995; Lecky & McGuigan, 1997). Research on employability skills, for example, point to how important generic and discipline-specific skills are to the workplace. Known also as ‘core/key’, ‘transferable’ or ‘essential’ skills in other countries, generic skills were conceptually developed in the UK, US and Canada as initially encompassing a set of work and life skills (Conference Board of Canada, 2000; Turner, 2002). Discussions about generic skills, dubbed ‘core competencies, in Australia began in the 1980s and came to the fore more strongly in the 1990s following the Mayer Committee Report in 1992 (Australian Education Council, 1992). There is generally an alignment between study goals and employment needs.

Because academics have sent in their reflections mostly by email, what would be good to do in the future is to interview them to dig deeper into the changes and action plans they wish to do. This will most likely reveal a more nuanced approach to the process of collecting reflections as well as documenting a more detailed action plan. The same goes for follow-up meetings where such action plans can be tracked at a later date whether they were implemented and what were the effects on student experience. An example of this is what Johnson (2012) studied to re-assess the improvements in student performance once curricula changes were made. In her study, a test was
developed to measure the quantitative skills of students but found no marked difference in their quantitative skills in statistics and finance. A similar type of re-assessment measure is a limitation that the current assurance of learning process can address, and one that this study did not look into further. The data included in this paper are those initial reflections only following the assurance of learning results. Interestingly, others attribute the faults of not meeting expectations to other reasons:

“I will first see the number of students enrolled and then decide which strategies to use.” – Academic #78, Finance, Masters

“All of the underperforming students were non-English speaking. This weakness in communication skills was compounded by an inability to understand what was involved in the exercise: to develop a decision making frameworks using the conceptual foundations discussed in class. All these students filled their assignments with description of the industries involved.” – Academic #24, Management, Masters

Limitations and future research directions

It would be of further interest to examine the proposed changes and how they were implemented in classrooms, which ones were pursued and what were the effects on student experience, or how such improvements flow back to the program. The latter is one of the more persistent problems ‘closing the loop’ strategies try to solve. Program outcomes are assessed but improvements do not necessarily return to the programs (Betters-Reed et al., 2008). Griffin and Cook (2009) also note that there is little evidence to suggest that the data enhance teaching quality and lessen student dissatisfaction in their programs. There is also the challenge of providing further evidence that the assurance of learning process improves student learning (Garrison & Rexeisen, 2014). If done properly, it would provide a more comprehensive picture of not only teaching innovations but also enhancements. This is useful in providing information about how subjects and programs improve using feedback from quality assurance exercises as one source of evaluation information. One other approach is to tier the skills in learning outcomes instead of treating them equally (Harvey &
McCrohan, 2017). Whilst the present study has this as limitation, it nonetheless offers readers the nature of priority areas in learning and teaching that need emphasis as seen by academics, the changes academics perceived as effective to target these areas and the important contribution of assurance of learning exercises to inform and improve curricula; and ultimately student learning experience. To improve this paper further, a quantitative approach to analyse the perceptions of academics would be a useful addition. However, a more important addition is to study a large number of business subjects across various areas beyond what was covered in this study and to examine if there are any differences in academics’ curriculum actions and enhancements. Finally, it would be of particular interest to analyse a number of student assessments and identify specific issues that relate to various discipline-specific and generic skills and how they can be best addressed by academics.

**Conclusion**

This study used data from the proposed changes to aspects of teaching and learning that staff indicated following assurance of learning. The results revealed six key themes that reflect all of the learning outcomes analysed. These outcomes pertained mainly to critical analysis, evaluation of information and use of tools and techniques. The suggested changes that point directly to these outcomes were analysed. Results strongly suggest that to improve discipline-based and generic skills acquisition a focus on practical application is proposed — i.e., to use knowledge to evaluate issues or problems and provide solutions, to understand what implications those solutions might have, and to think critically about potential and alternative applications to further the field. As academics, what solutions can we come up with when we observe skills deficits among students? The changes to be made must first signal a paradigm shift – from teaching ‘what to think’ to ‘how to think’, from developing fundamental to
complex skills, and providing more opportunities for feedback. This focus on practical application should mirror the students’ future world of work, ensuring that concepts are less abstract and more reflective of professional practice. Finally, changes to teaching, learning and assessment and the broader student experience should focus on further development of essential skills, including critical thinking, teamwork, problem solving and communication skills. Whilst this study focuses on business students, it nonetheless provides important findings for academics from various disciplines to consider, and to see the benefits of conducting ongoing quality assurance exercises.

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