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Creating maximum impact: Engaging students through a social enterprise

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Degrees alone will not land graduates meaningful employment if students do not possess a range of complementary skills. This paper explores the setting up and impact of an enterprise, Business Without Borders Swinburne (BWB) which aims to enhance social prosperity across borders, through the application of business specific skills to create positive outcomes for the local and global community. BWB is a voluntary extra-curricular activity which was set up to provide students with opportunities to develop and enhance their employability skills through a social enterprise. Students are mentored by an Industry Board and gain invaluable experience working entrepreneurs in an enterprise with a formal structure. BWB has just celebrated its first birthday. It has been a highly successful initiative, raising over \$15,000 in funds, involving over 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students from courses across the post-secondary sector, and overtly contributing to the employment of at least 12 students and graduates. Using triangulation and a qualitative case study methodology this paper explores BWB through the lenses of the architects and proponents of BWB, Industry Board members, and students who are involved in BWB. Initiating co-curricular activities at a university requires energy, champions, and support from senior management. Industry Board members have found the experience very valuable and have gained insights into the capabilities and potentials of young students and graduates. Students have made new friends, developed networks, begun to develop professional identities, seen the impact and results from their efforts, whilst furthering their employability skills.

Keywords: volunteering, employability, social enterprise

Background

Degrees alone will not land graduates meaningful employment if students do not possess a range of complementary skills developed through various external experiences. Many options are available to Higher Education (HE) students, either as a supplement to or as part of their studies, which provide opportunities to develop personally and professionally. This paper explores the setting up and impact of a unique and innovative social enterprise, Business Without Borders Swinburne (BWB), which as a co-curricular activity provides post-secondary students with opportunities for growth and development whilst making a valuable contribution to both the local and global community. The aim of BWB is to enhance social prosperity across borders, through the application of business specific skills to create positive outcomes.

BWB was created to fill a void. Many HE students want to have authentic professional placements whilst undertaking their studies so that they can understand the structure and governance of organisations; understand how organisations operate; apply their skills in

genuine workplace context; have experiences that can enhance their resumes, provide examples when being interviewed for a job, and exemplify work readiness. Finding internships or work placements can be difficult for a variety of reasons, such as lack of opportunities, visa restrictions, and clashes with existing commitments.

Employability and the role of the university

The employability rate for university graduates who were available for full time employment within four month of graduation continues to decline from 82.4% in 2009, to 80.1% in 2010, 79.7% in 2012, 75.9% in 2013 and 73.8% in 2014 (GCA, 2015a). The labour market prospects for new graduates has not recovered since the global financial crisis (GFC), and continues to deteriorate. Employers are indicating at an increasing rate that there are inadequate numbers of appropriate graduates. In 2012 18.3% of employers indicated that they would have employed more graduates had they found suitable employees. This increased to 22.1% in 2013 and 23.4% in 2014 (GCA, 2015b), all indicative of worrying trends. Love of learning and an opportunity to experience a different way of life are two of the many reasons for going to university, although the majority of HE students are expecting that their years of study will lead to meaningful employment upon graduation, where they can make use of the skills and capabilities they have developed.

Debate about where employability skills should be developed and who is best equipped to assist with the process is apparent. Employers are “increasingly reluctant to invest in developing the transferable skills of graduates” (Tymon, 2013, p. 846). Kreber (2006) identifies that there are already multiple pressures on universities alongside reduction in external funding, and focussing on an area that has not been traditionally part of the core business competes with research and challenges learning and teaching. Some believe that transferable skills should be developed outside the formal curriculum. Tymon (2013) notes mixed evidence to the effectiveness of the development of employability skills through HE when compared with the skills developed through work experience or placement opportunities. Little doubt exists that graduates who have had opportunity to develop and practice skills in authentic workplace settings are better equipped to enter the professional workforce and do so faster than graduates who have not had such experiences (Lowden et al., 2011). It is accepted that access for HE students, for whom placements and internships are not professionally required, is patchy (Lowden et al., 2011). If universities are going to invest in programs that develop transferable skills, they need to make the experiences as authentic as possible, to emulate the real workplace closely to maximise the impact of such initiatives, whether within or alongside the formal curriculum.

Andrews (2013) asserts that university should be “a transformative experience through which students can prepare themselves to succeed in the many and varied roles they will undertake in future life”. Andrews (2013) contends that higher education should be seen as an investment by students and an opportunity to take charge of their personal and professional futures and explains that Keele University has implemented a program whereby students develop and are credentialed for their skills through co-curricular activities through a Higher Education Achievement Record. There seems to be little consistency in the way such co-curricular opportunities are described. Wilson et al. (2014) categorise co-curricular activities in HE as academic, which would relate to a student’s studies, and non-academic. Andrews (2013) explains that co-curricular activities relate to the curriculum whilst extra curricula do not. “Student volunteering generally refers to activities taking place outside the core curriculum. However, it can also be linked more closely to learning within the curriculum... or are part of, students’ academic work” (Darwen & Rannard, 2011, p. 177-8). Other terms

relating to such activities include civic engagement, learning linked volunteering, service learning, community service, and community engaged learning.

Student volunteering

In Australia the definition for volunteering states that “volunteering is time willingly given for the common good without financial gain” (Volunteering Australia, 2016). Paull et al. (2015) contextualise this. “University Student Volunteering refers to those activities that university students do that meet the criteria of time given (time, service or skills), no remuneration (unpaid/without financial gain), free will (willingly), of benefit to the community (for the common good), and formally structured (through a group or organisation)” (p. 3).

There are several reasons to encourage students to engage in volunteering: it helps students to develop a sense of self-responsibility and independence; develops a sense of duty and responsibility for others; enhances graduate employability; provides an opportunity for students to make a contribution to society; and provides job opportunities (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010, p. 114). In the Australian context Paull et al. (2015) found that students volunteer for a variety of altruistic, personal and professional reasons. Konidari (2010) identified 5 key areas of impact of volunteering on students: personal development, development of transferable skills; academic life; career prospect; and social impact. It is difficult to assess the actual impact of volunteering and co-curricular activities although there is substantial evidence of the connections between such activities and social, emotional and academic wellbeing of students. According to Darwen and Rannard (2011) and Paull et al. (2015) there has been limited research on volunteering and its impact in HE. The aims of this study are twofold. Firstly, to explore the motivations of the key constituents who engage in BWB and secondly to explore the impact that BWB has had on its key constituents, being students, the Industry Board and university.

The initiative

BWB is a social enterprise offering post-secondary education (from vocational through to post graduate) students opportunities to gain practical experience in a structured environment. Whilst the program has been initiated through the Faculty of Business and Law it is open to all students, as an engagement and advancement initiative, at Swinburne, a multi-sectoral university in Melbourne, Victoria. In November 2014, when BWB was officially launched, there were no other programs of this nature where students had the opportunity to create an organisation of their own with the intention of making a positive impact on local not for profit (NFP) organisations, as well as in developing nations, without leaving the country. Figure 1 provides an illustration of how BWB interacts with the community.

BWB is a voluntary activity which involves students planning and hosting events, and offering business services related to their studies to the local and global community. It operates as a social enterprise that is an organisation whose primary objective is to find ways to build and contribute to the community rather than making a profit. BWB is different from other student clubs and societies due to its unique structure. Students are mentored by an Industry Board and gain invaluable experience working as entrepreneurs, or creators of innovation within an enterprise that has a formal structure, periodically reporting to and meeting with the Industry Board. This structure also supports the sustainability of the initiative, as while students will enter and exit the university the Industry Board is ongoing. The structure of BWB is shown in Figure 2.

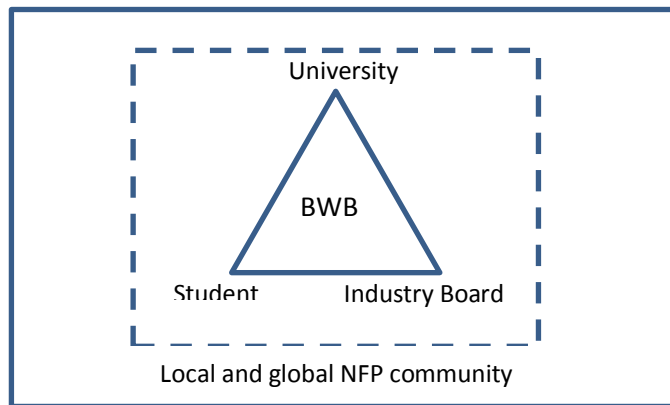


Figure 1: BWB interaction with the community

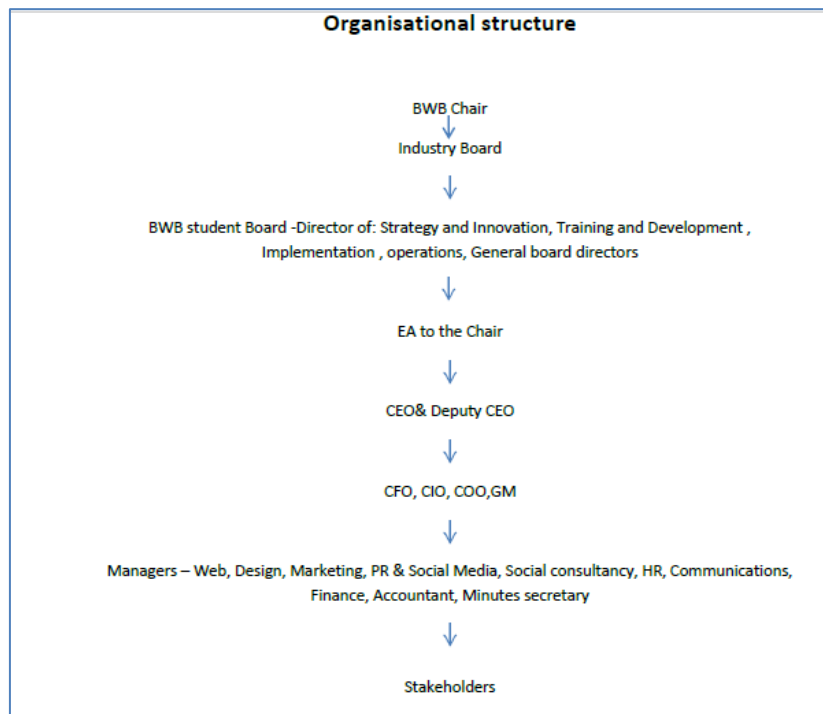


Figure 2: Organisational structure of BWB

The Chair of BWB is the conduit between the Industry Board and two student bodies, the BWB Student Board and the Management Team. The original Industry Board consisted of 9 members mainly from industry and organisations outside of Swinburne University. BWB has financed 29 KIVA microfinance loans in 17 countries with 3 loans having been paid back and reinvested. It has organised and successfully held a Social Impact Forum with an impressive line-up of speakers. Social consultancies have varied from developing and updating websites to preparing documentation, grants submissions and business plans for NFP organisations. In 2015, BWB's first year of operation, 150 undergraduate and postgraduate students from courses across the post-secondary sector were involved, over 10,000 hours of voluntary work has been contributed and over \$15,000 in funds were raised and least 12 students found employment. More details about BWB can be located at <http://www.businesswithoutborders.swinburne.com/>.

The study

A qualitative case study approach has been used for the study, employing an interpretivist paradigm to develop an understanding of the reasons why various constituents became and remain involved with BWB. There are three key constituents; being the university that set up and supports BWB; the Industry Board that provides governance, direction and support for the initiative; and the students who are involved in BWB. A further stakeholder for BWB are the recipients of the funds raised and services provided. They have been excluded from the current study due to difficulty of access and confidentiality. Triangulation has been used to validate the results across the participating constituents.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 people, who have been heavily involved with the setting up and running of BWB. Two participants represented the university's views; 5 participants were from the Industry Board, most of whom had been involved with BWB since inception; and 8 participants were students. Three of the students had been involved from inception; four of the students had been involved for about a year and the final student had recently signed up. As saturation was reached no further students were recruited for the study.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data was then systematically analysed using the process recommended by Creswell (2009). Data analysis involving dissection, reduction, sorting and reconstitution of the data (Spiggle, 1994) was undertaken. Both a priori and emergent categories were identified.

Findings

This section considers the key findings of the study around two principle themes of motivations to participate in BWB and the impact of BWB. These are considered from the perspectives of the three groups of constituents.

Motivations to participate in BWB

The motivations of the three key constituents are presented in this section.

Students

Paull et al. (2015) classify students' motivations to volunteer into three categories, social, values and employability. When analysing the data from the student cohort relating to motivations for becoming involved with BWB a fourth category emerged, that of doing something innovative and interesting (see Table 1).

Holdsworth and Quinn (2010) claim that there has been a shift in the intrinsic motivation for those who volunteer from philanthropic and altruistic intentions aimed at the beneficiaries and communities, to more individualised gains for the volunteers themselves, a way to develop their own 'personal capital' (p. 120). Konidari (2010) also found that the predominant reason for students carrying out volunteer work was to enhance their career and curriculum vitae. The responses received in the current study contest these findings.

Table 1: Students' motivations for joining BWB

| Social | Values | Employability | Innovative/interesting |
|---|--|--|--|
| Networking Recommendation from another student Be more active and involved Work with people from outside my course and discipline area | To assist others Giving back to society The social impact aspect | To get some experience To learn and apply new skills To get additional training To get experience in applying business knowledge in an authentic context To understand the structure of businesses, how they operate and get things done | Looked like an interesting initiative Liked that it was a not quite sure where it was going or what it was going to do Getting involved in a start up Doing something different |

University

Three key reasons why the university supported BWB were identified. These are internal drivers, creating opportunities and employability. Internal drivers include the following: BWB is aligned with the mission of the University which is “committed to innovative education, strong industry engagement and social inclusion”, as well as the vision of the Business School which is “to advance business innovation and social impact through our career-ready graduates and our industry-engaged research”; pressure from students who sought opportunities, to do more than was on offer; increasing motivation, success and retention. Creation of opportunities includes: provision of a unique activity; opportunities for students to get out of their comfort zone; opportunity for community engagement; developing a social conscience; opportunity to collect evidence toward university awards such as Emerging Leaders and Volunteering awards; and translating classroom learning to the real world. The Employability category contains similar items to those identified by the students and includes developing links to organisations. Whilst the motivations of the university to support BWB align with the reasons provided by Paull et al. (2015), it was felt that the three categories identified provided a better fit to the data than the classifications offered by Paull et al.

Industry Board

Five Industry Board members provided feedback on their motivations to join the BWB. As BWB has a unique structure these responses cannot be compared and contrasted to literature, however three key themes emerged: values, preparing students for the future or employability, and personal and professional development.

Table 2: Industry Board members' motivations for joining BWB

| Values | Employability | Personal and professional development |
|---|--|--|
| Aligns with personal community involvement strategy Want to contribute to the development of an engagement program Opportunity to mentor students Passion for preparing students for the workforce | Provides opportunity to translate learnings into a practical setting Universities are not good at preparing students for employment | Have never been on a board before Want to do something different To see if a community based organisation can have a real impact |

Comparison across constituents

Table 3 provides a comparison of the motivators for the three constituent groups. The common theme is to assist in students to develop employability skills. There is only one common category between the motivators of the students and the university, but two common categories between the Industry Board and the other two constituents. Thus the Industry Board members appear to have a close alignment with both the university and the students who engage with BWB.

Table 3: Comparison of motivations for joining BWB

| Motivations | Students | University | Industry Board |
|---------------------------------------|----------|------------|----------------|
| Social | X | | |
| Values | X | | X |
| Employability | X | X | X |
| Innovative/interesting | X | | |
| Internal drivers | | X | |
| Creating opportunities | | X | X |
| Personal and professional development | | | X |

Impact of BWB

The impact of BWB is considered firstly from a holistic perspective and then from the perspectives of the three constituent groups. The groups were also asked to discuss the impact of involvement with BWB on all three constituent groups to determine if these converged.

Achievements of BWB

Respondents in the study were asked their opinion regarding the key achievements of BWB over the past 16 months. Aside from the achievements listed earlier, respondents felt that the greatest achievement of the enterprise was that it had been successfully established and was continuing to operate. Other achievements included significant growth and maturity of students with a noticeable improvement in self-efficacy; strengthened links with community groups; growing interest from NFPs organisations seeking assistance; growing interest from industry to join Industry Board; the breadth of impact that BWB is able to have; and the continuing support provided by senior university management.

Impact on Students

Co-curricular activities such as BWB provide opportunities for growth and development, and can influence engagement (Konidari, 2010) however influence on academic outcomes is inconclusive (Wilson et al., 2014). Students were asked about the impact of BWB on their studies and the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Responses were focussed around the following themes: motivation to study harder and complete course; opportunity to see theories come to life; providing insight into the business world and the importance of credentialing; broadening perspectives and understanding different discipline thinking, such as Engineers in Human Resources, and Accountants' understanding of the role of Marketing and Public Relations; improving time management and organisational skill; and improving grades.

Students were then asked to think about how involvement in BWB has impacted on them more broadly. Students' responses aligned with the five themes identified by Konidari (2010) (see Table 4).

Table 4: Impact of BWB on students - the student perspective

| Personal development | Development of transferable skills | Academic life | Future career prospects | Social impact |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Learnt a lot about themselves – how much they are capable of/coming out of shell/improved relationships with others Learning from others | Opportunities to participate in professional development Time management and meeting deadlines Thinking on feet/Doing things under pressure Collaboration and teamwork experience Soft skills – such as critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, research and analysis, able to tackle unfamiliar problems, ability to be self-directed, learning from experiences Developed and practised leadership skills Making a website in a team Working in teams with different personalities and areas of expertise Meeting with actual clients Conflict management and negotiation | Understanding the difference between academia and business world Ability to apply learnt skills in a real world setting Enhanced technical skills like using new programs not learnt at university | Transferring skills learnt through BWB to part time work Better understanding of career opportunities and personal strengths Highlighted importance of applying for graduate jobs early Enhanced portfolio with authentic artefacts Authentic experience for those who cannot get a job, need an opportunity to develop confidence and international students | Ability to help others Networking Meeting people in a different context Making new friends/meeting people with diverse interests and backgrounds |

The strongest response to this question was in the area of development of employability skills; a deepening appreciation for the transferring of knowledge and skills from university to the workplace; and preparing to apply for professional employment. Throughout the students' responses the following underlying themes were evident: development of a social conscience; improved self-efficacy; and emergence of professional identities as a direct result of involvement with BWB.

Representatives from the university found it challenging to respond to this question as they had had minimal contact with the students over the year, except when they attended various BWB presentations and events. They stated that BWB had impacted on the students in the following ways: dramatic improvement in confidence and ability to present; getting involved and getting things done; improving abilities and awareness of the business world; personal and professional development; and recognition through service awards. Thus their responses fell into three of the categories above, excluding academic life and social impact.

Responses from members of the Industry Board could readily be classified using Konidari's (2010) categories and in general were aligned with the responses of the students themselves. They also said that through BWB students would: be more motivated and connected with their studies; understand that a degree is not enough; understand interconnections between functional areas within organisations; understand organisational structures; and see the relevance of their studies.

Impact on university

According to the responses of university leaders the impact of BWB on the university falls into three broad categories namely enhancing the university's reputation, student development and other. Through BWB the university's reputation is enhanced in a number of ways, including: enhancing the community profile of the university; marketability to potential students; showing commitment to the community and humanitarian issues; providing further links to industry; and increasing the profile of student volunteering. The university feels that BWB also has a significant impact on its students. More specifically the university sees BWB as enhancing employability through the provision of real work experience, and the development of leadership skills; creating an opportunity for students to provide evidence required for various service awards; improving students' confidence and public speaking ability; and providing opportunities to develop organisational and project management skills. The Other category contains miscellaneous benefits to the university such as: BWB providing a replicable model of how to run a successful and sustainable social enterprise; BWB adds to university and student life; and BWB offers a unique selling point as well as providing evidence that the university and faculty are committed to their missions, as discussed previously.

When comparing the responses of the university to Industry Board, synergies were seen across two of the three categories of reputation and student development, however students' responses were focussed on the reputational aspects alone.

Impact on Industry Board

When considering the impact of participating in BWB on the Industry Board members there is cross over with the motivations described earlier. However, the responses to each question were analysed separately and for the impact the following groupings have been identified: giving back; pride in students' achievements; and professional development. These are expanded in Table 5. The views on the impact of BWB involvement on the Industry Board from the university and students were consistent with the first two categories that is giving back and seeing the students develop, however the items discussed as part of these categories were a subsection of those identified by the Industry Board members.

Table 5: Impact of BWB involvement on Industry Board members

| Giving back | Pride | Professional development |
|--|---|---|
| Helping the next generation of professionals Indirect contribution to the work of NFP Wanting to give Swinburne graduates a competitive edge | Opportunity to facilitate and observe student development I get back so much more than I am putting in Achieving so much in such a short time Wonderful to see students flourish | Learning and experiencing the functions and operations of a board Like being part of a board Networking with dynamic people |

Discussion

Much of the data collected related to the operation of the organisation rather than the outputs achieved. This can be explained in several ways. A lot of time in the first year of operation was spent on working out how the organisation works as BWB was a start-up and its business developed organically as opportunities arose and students developed the confidence to select projects. Whilst the structure of the organisation was developed by the Industry Board, the business of the organisation and how it would actually operate was left to the students to

decide. For students participating in and understanding how an organisation operates, its protocols and reporting lines was where the greatest learning took place. Whilst many students work part time they have limited understanding and experience of how large organisations operate. Several of the interviewed students held positions on the Student Board, which was responsible for setting the strategic direction as well as governance of the enterprise, meaning they had less direct involvement with the projects and initiatives than those who were the managerial positions.

The student motivations uncovered in the current study expand Paull et al.'s (2015) three category classification and contest previous findings (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2010; Konidari, 2010) that students volunteer for individual gains ahead of altruistic purposes. Konidari's (2010) 5 key areas of impact were affirmed. Tymon (2013) found that there is only limited alignment between the views of students and other stakeholder groups and this is somewhat supported in the current study, although it can be difficult for constituents to see the experiences through the lens of other groups, especially when they have not had the experience themselves. For example, Industry Board members were generally able to articulate the effect of BWB on students as they had all been students at some stage, whilst some of the students found it more challenging to reflect on the impact of BWB on the other constituents.

Whilst the original intentions of BWB were modest, focussing on providing students with opportunities to practice their soft skills whilst making a social impact the reality is that the enterprise has achieved so much more. The key achievements include providing students with opportunities to

- experience a corporate environment through which they can practice and hone their professional skills and capabilities
- collect evidence to receive recognition of their professional skills and add to their CVs
- reflect on their experiences and participation in BWB and its impact on themselves, other BWB members and the community
- enhance their professional identities and develop professional networks
- contribute to the social welfare of communities, locally and abroad
- receive mentoring and professional development from experienced Industry Board members, and
- make new friends.

The impact of BWB on the Industry Board members, university and the community has also been broader than initially imagined.

Conclusions

BWB has been fortunate to have the support and input of talented and hardworking people without which it would not have been possible to achieve these outcomes. Senior university management support is critical for the effective operation of such an initiative. This paper highlights the positive aspects of BWB as this is how the key constituents perceive the enterprise. There has been substantial progress with outcomes unimaginable a year ago, there have also been problems and tensions, which have been overcome through the goodwill, dedication and passion of those involved with BWB.

The limitations to this exploratory study include the modest sample size particularly of student members of BWB; the qualitative nature of the study so impact cannot be accurately measured; and input has only been sought from those who are engaged with BWB. Whilst it would be impossible to isolate the impact of BWB especially on the students involved it is recommended that future studies consider quantification of the impact of BWB to more precisely measure the benefits of engagement on the five key areas identified by Konidari (2010), as well as undertaking a longitudinal study so as to compare skills, attitudes and aptitudes prior to involvement with BWB and post involvement.

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