

# Teaching Introductory Industrial Relations in Australian Universities: What? How? And For Whom?

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the teaching of introductory IR units, summarising how the units fit within various study programs, nomenclature, the organisation of teaching, teaching materials being used, unit content and assessment. The paper concludes with a range of questions which emerged both from our findings and from comments made by participants at various stages in our information gathering.

## Undergraduate Industrial Relations Programs

Thirty-five of the 39 Australian<sup>1</sup> universities in 2001 were offering at least one unit in IR at undergraduate level<sup>2</sup>. Of the 35 universities teaching undergraduate IR units, only 15 provided a major or specialisation in IR. The 'IR major' within these 15 universities was named as follows:

IR	6
IR & HRM	2
HRM & IR	4
Labour Studies	1
Work & Labour Relations	1
Employment Relations	1

Two of the universities not offering an IR major taught two units of IR within an Employment Relations sub-major. In the remaining 18 institutions, IR units were offered within HRM and/or Management majors. To be precise, they formed part of the HRM major in 16 universities and the Management major only (i.e. no HRM major) in two universities. In addition, IR units were offered as electives in an array of other degree programs many of which were within the Arts/Social Sciences and Business/Economics and Commerce areas

In comparison to the 15 universities offering an IR major, 29 Australian universities offered an HRM major at

undergraduate level<sup>3</sup>. Six of the 29 offered a combined IR and HRM major, as evidenced in the reporting on IR majors. This would appear to be a substantial change from a decade ago when Jenkins, Lansbury and Westcott found that

"Undergraduate programs in HRM were offered in 14 institutions compared with 24 which offered undergraduate programs in industrial relations" (1991, p.120).

The authors commented, at the time, that the HRM programs were "expanding more rapidly than industrial relations" (1991, p.120). The changed status of IR and HRM majors undoubtedly reflects changes of attitude in the broader community towards workplace relations. At a superficial level, we can observe the change in nomenclature of government departments and similarly, in the private sector, changes in titles of employees and sections working in the labour management area (Fells 2001). These changes are evidence of the ideological change which has occurred whereby management is asserting its prerogative more strongly and labour's political and industrial power has declined substantially. Further research, however, is essential to ascertain the extent of the change. What units are being taught within these HRM majors? What type of HRM is being taught within these HRM majors? Have

the bulk of IR units disappeared in those universities that no longer have an IR major? Or are some of the HRM majors an amalgam of what we would refer to as IR and HRM units? As both Capelli(1991) and Plowman(1991) pointed out at the 1991 ACIRRT conference on the importance of the field of IR, it is essential to look deeper to ascertain to what extent there might be, on the one hand, an accommodation between HRM and IR or, on the other hand, a 'takeover' of pluralist IR by HRM based on a unitarist philosophy.

**Introductory Industrial Relations Units**

Twenty-one of the 35 universities teaching undergraduate IR participated in this study, including 12 of the 15 offering an IR major. Monash University teaches three different introductory IR units across three separate campuses (different lecturers, separate degree programs) so all three course outlines were included in our study, making a total of 23 course outlines to be analysed.

*Place in Study Program*

The units were spread across the three years of the undergraduate curriculum. Of the 23 units, eight were at first year level (although in a number of cases they could be taken by higher year levels), 13 were second year, and two at third year level. In general, the existence of an introductory IR unit at first year level was correlated with the institutions offering an IR major. All eight first year level units were part of an IR major. The remaining four universities offering an IR major targeted their introductory unit at second year level with prerequisite units to be completed at first year level, although two allowed it to be taken at first year level as well.

Nine of the 23 units listed prerequisites as follows\*:

Introduction to Management	4
Introduction to HRM	2

Management & OB	1
Work & Organisations	1
Managing People & Organisations	1
"12 units of study"	1

\*One university set two prerequisite units. The nature of the prerequisites raises questions about the approach taken to IR in these institutions, as the majority of the prerequisites would appear to be related to the study of management.

*Title*

Only about half the units were actually titled 'industrial relations'. Of the 23 units, twelve were titled 'industrial relations' (with two explicitly titled '*Australian industrial relations*'), nine were titled 'employment/employee relations' and two were titled 'workplace relations'. There was a noticeable difference in title relating to whether or not the institution offered an IR major. Nine of the 12 units which contributed to an IR major, not surprisingly, were titled 'industrial relations' whereas only three of the 11 units which were not part of IR majors were titled 'industrial relations'.

Six of the nine employment/employee relations units were the usual "wolves in sheep's clothing"; that is, classic IR units camouflaged as something different. Readers who are also teachers of IR will know what an 'IR unit' looks like, but for others, a typical IR unit (and some of the slight deviations or embroideries we found) will be described, in the Content subsection. Three units had progressed genuinely down the Employment Relations path in terms of content and general approach. One of these was about 50/50 HRM and IR<sup>4</sup>. The second was about 30/70 HRM and IR<sup>5</sup>, and the third unit approached Employment Relations from an international perspective, albeit that it was an introductory unit for the subject area.

In sum, as in our survey of comparative industrial relations teaching (Bailey and Todd 1999), it appears that some institutions are shifting their titles, but few are shifting the content of the units in any appreciable way.

### *Organisation of Teaching*

In all of the units the standard 'lecture and tutorial' teaching format was being used. Almost all were including a weekly tutorial although one university had scheduled the tutorial fortnightly, reducing the number of tutorials in the unit to five. Three of the units were being taught externally.

The typical unit involved three hours of face-to-face teaching including two hours of lecturing and a one-hour tutorial. A greater number of the lectures were organised into a two-hour block rather than two one-hour lectures. The information included in some course outlines suggested that this was enabling greater variety in the use of teaching materials and methods; i.e. the two hour block combined lecturing, video clips, student exercises.

### *Teaching Materials*

A textbook was prescribed in 18 of the 23 units. Of these 18, two prescribed two texts and four offered a choice of texts. Of the five prescribing no text, three provided Books of Readings. In total, nine units prescribed Books of Readings. Deery et al (1997, 2001) was the most commonly prescribed text (in eight of the 18 units prescribing texts). Petzall, Timo and Abbott (2000) and Keenoy and Kelly (1998) were set in five and four units respectively. Whether or not the unit was part of an IR major made little difference to the choice of textbook.

Introductory IR units place much emphasis on learning via reading beyond textbooks, with the typical unit providing a guided reading program with weekly readings related to each topic. Many of the course outlines also provided substantial guidance

to students researching IR with lists of reference books, relevant journals, suggested newspapers, websites, CD ROM and electronic databases.

Newspapers and electronic media were being used by many lecturers in these units, not just as reference documents but as part of course activities; 15 course outlines referred to exercises/learning activities involving analysis of articles in the media. Similarly, legislation and workplace documents such as awards and enterprise agreements were also cited in eight course outlines as part of the learning activities and students in three units were required to visit the IR Commission.

The use of videos/films to illustrate concepts was referred to specifically in seven course outlines with others making mention of videos in their program outline without further detail of which ones or how they would be used. Some of the videos focused on structural aspects of the IR system (e.g. the Workplace Relations Act 1996, the conciliation and arbitration system), the nature of work and employment, union activities (e.g. 'The Metals') while others were more broadly concerned with the socio-political and economic context of IR (e.g. 'Full Monty', 'Brassed Off', 'Billy Elliot').

Almost half of the course outlines (11) included details of websites as sources of information for students. The most commonly listed ones were for unions, employer groups, government agencies and media. There was evidence of two universities using departmental websites to provide an alternative source of course information (e.g. course outline, lecture overheads, assessment requirements, administration messages) for students as well as several others referring to departmental websites for course information. There was no evidence of the web being used for interactive teaching or assessment within any of the units.

The students' own employment experience was also being used as a learning tool in a number of units. Seven of the course outlines included specific exercises drawing on their work experience and undoubtedly it is also done in less formal ways by lecturers and tutors in other units.

*Unit Content*

The issues we were interested in here were: what topics were being covered, how frequently were they covered, and was there a 'typical' unit structure? Where there are deviations from the typical structure, what are they? Are there any units that could be said to be 'outliers' from the pack in terms of their content?

These questions are easy to ask, but not so easy to answer. It is difficult to give an informative picture of unit content that is clear and simple without *over*-simplifying. This is because weekly topics may have different titles but their content may be similar, or vice-versa. In general, the 'core' was standard, with more variance in how lecturers introduced the various units in the first few weeks, and some infrequently covered topics. Table 1 shows the frequency topics were covered.

**Table 1:** Frequency of topics covered (n = 23 outlines)

<i>Frequently covered topics</i>	<i>No. of units including topic</i>
General conceptual/theory/overview	23
Bargaining	
(Awards, EB, AWAs, tribunals)	23
Unions	21
Conflict (and co-operation)	21
Management	18
'The State'	15
Explicit historical material	9
Employment relationship	9
Equity, rights, efficiency, power, justice, social responsibility	7
<i>Less frequently covered topics</i>	

International issues	5
OHS	5
Employer Associations	
(as a distinct topic)	4
Gender	4
Consult'n and part'n	4
Negotiation and advocacy	2
Performance management	2*
Pay (HRM perspective)	2
HRM and planning	1*
Job analysis, T&D	1*
Recruitment and selection	1*
Unfair dismissal	1
Shopfloor IR	1

\* A single 'outlier' unit covered these four topics; in the case of performance management, one other unit also covered this topic.

One of the more difficult areas to classify were topics in the area of the role of the state, the law (including tribunals, awards, and the various statutes), and bargaining issues. In practice there was a huge degree of overlap between these areas. The role of tribunals, for instance, can be covered in any or all of these topics. With respect to gender equity, it could be seen (from readings specified, or tutorial questions asked), that a few units explicitly considered this issue under 'bargaining', and other units may have addressed this issue in lectures on bargaining, unions, or the like. So we do regard our classification system as highly arbitrary.

The average unit had two 'introductory' weeks, two or perhaps even three weeks devoted to bargaining issues (individual and collective)/the law/tribunals, with most other topics being covered in one week each. There were some rare exceptions to the latter. Two units spent three weeks on unions, and three units spent two weeks on management issues. Coverage of 'general IR theory' was generally confined to one seminar (or less), although of course some units covered some theoretical material on

unions, or management, or the state, when dealing with those topics.

**Table 2: A 'Typical' Unit Outline<sup>6</sup>**

1. Introduction to the Unit: IR overview
2. Some Theoretical Frameworks
3. The Union Movement
4. Management
5. Government
6. Industrial Action and Conflict
7. Industrial Tribunals
8. Collective Bargaining and Arbitration
9. Reforming the System
10. Wage Determination
11. Enterprise Bargaining
12. Shopfloor Industrial Relations Negotiation
13. Current Issues and Review

The overall content of the unit can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the core content of the units is remarkably standard, with few units venturing out into areas such as gender equity or an IR perspective on occupational health and safety. It may be that in some institutions, these issues are covered in more advanced IR units, or in specific gender/diversity units and stand-alone OHS units. In addition, these topics are standard offerings in HRM units (although IR units would presumably take quite a different perspective on these topics to HRM units).

Secondly, there was a strong 'macro' focus in all units. Introductory IR units are still predominantly institutional in focus, despite the shift to workplace bargaining. Where there is some 'micro' content, it is not a large amount. Three universities run 'partner' units at a micro level, after the macro unit. There are two contrary points of view on the necessary balance between 'the big picture' and the detail (including specific skills). An employer of IR graduates in entry-level positions put it to one of the authors that he wanted students

to have 'the framework' and good levels of understanding of the institutions and the legislation; once they had that, he could fill in the detail they needed to know by on-the-job training. On the other hand, students sometimes report that they wished they had been shown exactly how to draw up a workplace agreement or an enterprise bargaining document.<sup>7</sup>

The macro focus of the units meant there was little micro case study material – whether individual disputes, or 'process'-type studies of bargaining in workplaces. The 1998 Waterfront dispute was mentioned in several of the outlines, although it would be argued that this was illustrating macro, rather than micro, issues. Two units used Fells' (1995) study of enterprise bargaining in a hospital, one used the 1995 Mt Isa lockout (Gardner and Palmer 1995), and a variety of other case studies were used (eg van den Broek 1997, Bramble et al 1996). One could argue that lecturers analyse current disputes in the news all the time (and/or encourage students to do so), but this material tends to be superficial, and gives little analysis. One unit outline included about seven or eight, short (one to two page) purpose-written studies of IR issues as discussion topics. Another unit outline was unusual in its use of historical disputes over the century. A few units had quite a degree of micro or case study material, but by and large the emphasis was on broader readings about institutions and processes.

There were some 'practical', hands-on activities in the outlines. Three outlines had (simple) practical exercises on finding material in and interpreting awards/agreements. It may be that this skill is taught in industrial law units. However, where IR is merely a service unit in an HRM or management major, there may be no industrial law component. In addition, four outlines had a practical negotiation activity.

The lack of micro case study material and practical activities is consistent, of course, with the 'macro' focus of the units.

#### *Assessment*

The most typical assessment pattern consisted of three items, as follows:

Exam 40-50%;

Essay 30-35%;

Tutorial Participation 15-20%

There were many variations on this 'typical' pattern. All units had exams, which contributed between 30% and 60% to marks, but most commonly 40-50% (14 of 23 units). Three units contained some kind of a quiz, test or multiple choice exam part-way through the semester.

The majority of the units contained only *one* substantial written assignment. Eight of the 23 units contained *two* substantial written assignments ('substantial' being classified as anything over 1 000 words). Most units set essay topics based on the role of one of the parties in IR, or the theme of change in IR, or process issues (bargaining, conflict, effects of legislation).

We identified a few innovative assessment questions or exercises. Most of these revolved around the use of current disputes in some way. For instance, one unit required an analysis of a *Business Review Weekly* article on the 2000 Commonwealth Bank/Finance Sector Union dispute. Units at one institution set a Media Portfolio, which required the student to collect media articles during the semester and write an analysis (about 3 000 words) on a 'thematic' basis, on at least three broad issues. Some institutions required a small media portfolio and commentary, or asked students to present a short analysis of a single issue as part of their tutorial mark. Another assignment involved a research project, either a case study or survey of workers in a particular job, or a study of a

particular organisation). Finally, one unit involved students writing a shorter essay, based on analysis of a union journal,<sup>8</sup> analysing the challenges confronting a particular union and its responses, and then a second (longer) essay, using this material to write a more analytical treatment on the theme "unions' fortunes are in their own hands".

These various 'innovations' appeared to have value in allowing students to focus on their own areas of interest and/or what was currently in the news, and yet avoid the problem of plagiarism (except from each other!) and recycled work. Informally, a number of respondents to the survey commented on the issue of plagiarism, and we are interested in determining to what extent this is a general problem, and to what extent (if at all) lecturers are either (a) finding more sophisticated ways of detecting plagiarised work; and/or (b) devising assignments based on set material (such as those described above) to try to deal with the problem.

There were a few other variations, depending on the orientation of courses, involving assignments based on role-plays. One institution involved students writing a report on a visit to the Industrial Commission.

Overall, assessment was reasonably uniform, with few variations or unusual features.

#### *Past and Future Changes to the Introductory IR Units*

Further information was sought from participants on past (previous five years) and future changes to the introductory IR units within their universities. Thirteen out of 23 participants responded to these questions.

Almost all referred to the ongoing revision of unit content to take account of legislative changes and current case study material (e.g. major disputes). Two

lecturers commented on changes to course content to include new topics, OHS for one and equity for the other. Two units had also been modified to adopt a more international comparative approach. Three respondents mentioned the change of name for their introductory unit from 'industrial relations' to 'employment relations', one of these noting the consequent change of content to include more 'HRM' material.

Perhaps the most noteworthy (but not surprising) change anticipated was the need to respond to demands for more flexible modes of delivery; what was surprising was that only three respondents mentioned it. Little change was foreseen in content beyond the normal updating of material.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, whereas the 1980s might have been noted for an expansion in IR teaching, the 1990s has witnessed a diminution in IR teaching and a substantial growth in HRM teaching. Almost double the number of Australian universities are offering undergraduate majors in HRM compared with IR (29:15). This reflects changes of attitude in the broader community towards managing the workplace and obviously changes the context for many of us teaching IR. This overriding political and philosophical change is also witnessed in the nomenclature of the introductory IR units, almost half of which are titled employment/employee/workplace relations rather than 'industrial relations'. But the change in name has not generally translated into substantial change in content or approach.

### **Questions for Further Research**

At this point, we would like to raise a series of questions relating to issues which emerged both from our findings and from comments made by participants at various stages in our information gathering.

- How has the growth in HRM teaching at undergraduate level impacted on the teaching of IR? Should there be (can there be) better integration of the two subject areas within the teaching? Is it affecting the student enrolments in IR units? Evidence of its impact on content?
- If an introductory IR unit is taught alongside or as part of an HRM or Management major, what implications does this have for content? Do HRM and/or Management students approach IR units with different expectations? Are the different paradigms (i.e. unitarist/pluralist) being bridged?
- Are international students enrolling in introductory IR units? If so, what impact are they having on, for example, content and assessment procedures?
- Given that there is a need for a macro approach in the teaching of Introductory IR, how much room is there for a micro focus within these introductory units? Should practitioner skills such as negotiation, award interpretation be included in introductory units? Balance between academic analysis and vocationally oriented knowledge?
- To what extent are the textbook(s) determining content and structure? In particular, Deery and Plowman and subsequently, Deery, Plowman et al?
- Are IR teachers anticipating the use of the web for interactive teaching purposes? Are IR teachers expecting in the near future, the need to adopt more 'flexible delivery' modes?
- With regard to assessment, is plagiarism an issue and, if so, how has it been addressed?

**Appendix 1: Undergraduate IR Teaching Australian Universities**

<b>C/O in survey</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Teach u'grad IR</b>	<b>IR major</b>	<b>HRM major</b>
*	UniSyd	y	y	y
*	UNSW	y	y	y
*	UTS	y	n	n
*	UWS	y	y	y
	Macquarie	n	n	n
*	Newcastle	y	y	y
*	Wollongong	y	y	y
	Charles Sturt	y	y	y
*	Southern Cross	y	n	y
	New England	y	n	y
	Aust Cath Uni	y	n	y
	ANU	n	n	n
	Canberra	y	n	n
*	Monash - Clayton	y	n	n
*	Monash-Berwick	y	n	n
*	Monash - Caulfield	y	n	y
	Melbourne	y	n	y
*	RMIT	y	y	y
*	Deakin	y	n	y
*	VUT	y	n	y
	La Trobe	y	n	y
	Swinburne	y	n	y
	Ballarat	y	n	y
*	Griffith	y	y	y
*	UQ	y	y	y
*	James Cook	y	n	y
*	CQU	y	n	y
	USQ	y	n	y
	Sunshine Coast	y	n	n
	Bond	y	n	y
	QUT	n	n	y
	Adelaide	y	y	n
	Flinders	y	y	n
*	UniSA	y	y	y
	NT Uni	y	n	n
*	UWA	y	y	y
*	Murdoch	y	n	n
*	Curtin	y	y	y
*	ECU	y	y	y
	Notre Dame	n	n	n
*	U Tas	y	n	y

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the teachers of introductory IR units who provided us with course outlines for this study. We aimed originally to include NZ universities in the study but found that the assumption of extending the study across two countries was flawed.

<sup>2</sup> The four universities not offering undergraduate IR units were Macquarie, ANU, QUT and Notre Dame.

<sup>3</sup> The 10 universities not offering an undergraduate HRM major were Adelaide, ANU, Canberra, Flinders, Macquarie, Murdoch, NTU, Notre Dame, Sunshine Coast and UTS.

<sup>4</sup> The IR component covered the main IR institutions and their processes, and the HRM component covered HR Management and Planning, Job Analysis, Training and Development, Recruitment and Selection, and Performance Management.

<sup>5</sup> As above, with the HRM component covering workforce development (including job analysis, HR planning, recruitment and selection, training and development) managing performance and workplace change.

<sup>6</sup> Selection of a "typical" outline was somewhat arbitrary. We chose this unit on the basis that it contained no "outlier" topics, and covered all the popular topics listed in Table 1. It was a second year unit, part of a double major in HRM and IR, and with Management I as a prerequisite.

<sup>7</sup> It is of course impossible that an introductory IR unit could cover the full process of drawing up a collective agreement.

<sup>8</sup> The students were offered a choice between a 'hard copy' of a public sector union journal, and a nominated issue of *Workers Online*, the electronic journal of the NSW Labor Council.