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Parallel teaching of postgraduate coursework students in undergraduate courses: An examination of student expectations, experiences and views

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Abstract

Postgraduate coursework students, in particular those in conversion programs, occasionally take courses that are in some way delivered in parallel with an associated undergraduate course. There are of course concerns about the impact of this practice of 'parallel teaching' on the quality of the student experience. A survey was conducted to explore the expectations, experience and views of postgraduate coursework students regarding parallel teaching in a particular context. The survey context was postgraduate coursework students enrolled in introductory level postgraduate courses taught in conjunction with large undergraduate economics course. The results are generally encouraging about the practice, but highlight some issues with which the students are concerned. Although responses are diverse, some trends include students desiring more differentiation of content rather than assessment, and students not expecting parallel teaching prior to course or degree commencement.

Introduction and Background

Postgraduate coursework students sometimes undertake courses that share a significant amount of content, resources, or class time with a similar undergraduate course. In this paper, that practice is referred to as 'parallel teaching', but it is also sometimes referred to by other terms such as 'co-teaching'. To complicate matters these terms are also often used to describe other practices such as multiple instructors teaching together.¹ More specifically, the definition used here is based on the definition of the institution at which this research took place, the University of Adelaide.

Parallel teaching in postgraduate coursework programs refers to any form of teaching that involves a significant component of undergraduate content forming part of a postgraduate course; or any form of teaching that involves undergraduate and postgraduate students being located in the same class. (University of Adelaide, 2006)

The practice of parallel teaching of postgraduate coursework and undergraduate students can occur in quite different circumstances, and these will also depend on the available structures of study in the specific higher education system. This paper focuses on the parallel teaching experience of postgraduate students in the Australian higher education system, although issues might be similar in other contexts.

Even within Australia, the diversity of postgraduate student experience is large, with a great degree of uncertainty regarding the standards of postgraduate coursework programs (Forsyth et al., 2009). An Australia-wide survey of postgraduate coursework students found that one in five were not satisfied overall with their course, and more than one in four were not satisfied with the resources and services supplied by their university (Coulthard, 2000). So clearly there is a need to investigate specific aspects of postgraduate coursework students' experiences further. In particular, Symons (2001) suggests that postgraduate coursework students often have high expectations for their program, which are often not met. The AUTC commissioned report by Reid et al. (2005) provides recommendations for best practice in postgraduate coursework programs. While the authors do not address explicitly the practice of parallel teaching, it is clear that the practice has the potential to impact these goals.

According to the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF, 2011), qualifications are structured in levels with quite distinct criteria; bachelor degrees are at 'Level 7', and masters degrees are at 'Level 9', while 'Level 8' encompasses bachelor honours degrees, graduate certificates and graduate diplomas. Parallel teaching occurs in two main contexts. It can occur by combining postgraduate students and higher level undergraduate (honours) students due to the similar outcomes required for the groups. Alternatively, the practice may be used to put postgraduate students into undergraduate classes when the postgraduate program is a 'conversion program', where the students is commencing study of a new discipline and therefore may need similar basic content to that delivered to undergraduates. In either of these situations, but perhaps in particular in the latter, it is possible that the practice of parallel teaching could impact on the students' experience and outcomes.

To date there has been little academic research on the particular context of the parallel teaching of postgraduate and undergraduate students. However the issue is certainly on the radar of the students and staff of institutions where the practice is occurring. For example PAUWS (2006) refer to a former Masters student who was unhappy with their treatment within an undergraduate course.

When referring to a Masters degree which was completed last year, a student referred to the feeling of dismay at being asked to submit one extra assignment because of his/her status as a postgraduate student in a class of undergraduate students. (PAUWS, 2006)

It is clear from the description that this student is unhappy with how the practice of parallel teaching was carried out. It is most likely that this student desired *more* differentiation from their undergraduate peers, but it is also possible that the student may have desired *less* differentiation (i.e. they did not want to do an extra assignment). It is these issues around the difference between experienced differentiation and desired differentiation that are investigated in the survey described later in this paper.

Parallel teaching as an issue in postgraduate coursework programs has also been considered with regard to the AQF (Keating 2007, cited by Buchanan et al. 2010). Various authors have also mentioned the practice in passing with regard to the postgraduate coursework student experience, for example in Cluett and Skene (2006). However this brief commentary has not been backed up by research to date.

As well as the concerns regarding the potential negative impacts of parallel teaching on postgraduate coursework students' experiences, there could also be the suggestion that parallel teaching has beneficial aspects. Interacting with a more diverse range of students

may improve learning outcomes (Gurin et al., 2002), and this could benefit both postgraduate and undergraduate students.

What impact the practice of parallel teaching has on the experiences of postgraduate coursework students is something that should be understood so that courses can be better tailored to meeting best practice outcomes. It is important to understand where there are advantages, and where there are problems, so that these problems can be addressed.

The aims of the research presented in this paper are to develop an understanding of the expectations of postgraduate coursework students around parallel teaching prior to commencement, and to gain insight into the students' experiences of parallel teaching, and their views about its impact on the delivery of the course. This understanding of how and if the students' experiences differ from their expectations and needs may assist in the design of future courses that including parallel teaching.

Method

Since the way in which parallel teaching is delivered can vary dramatically across universities, fields of study, and courses, a particular context is focussed on for this analysis so that results are more easily interpretable.

The specific context chosen was the core introductory postgraduate courses in the School of Economics at the University of Adelaide. These courses are *Intermediate Microeconomics IID*, *Intermediate Macroeconomics IID* and *Intermediate Econometrics IID*. In each of those courses a cohort of around 10 to 30 postgraduate students share lectures with a large undergraduate class of up to several hundred students. Differentiation of course content occurs primarily through tutorials, online materials and assessment tasks.

A survey was given to a sample of students enrolled in *Intermediate Microeconomics IID* during Semester 2, 2009. This survey, attached as an Appendix, was conducted during a postgraduate tutorial class, after a brief introduction to the survey's scope. The survey was designed to examine the expectations, experience and views of parallel teaching; in particular with reference to the differentiation between the course and its undergraduate equivalent. The survey's introduction, which can be seen in the Appendix, clearly defines 'parallel teaching' for the respondents and advises them of the purpose of the survey.

Results

Sample

The survey was distributed to 11 students, who all completed it, although some questions have missing responses. These 11 students were those students of *Intermediate Microeconomics IID* who attended a particular tutorial class, and were 11 of the 13 students enrolled in the course. So although the sample size is small, it has a high response rate for that class, and can be considered quite representative of that particular class. Nine of the 11 students provided free-form written comments, which are considered particularly pertinent in this small sample context.

Five respondents indicated that they only were taking the course Intermediate Microeconomics IID, while another five indicated they also were taking or had previously taken *Intermediate Macroeconomics IID* or *Intermediate Econometrics IID*.

The sample contained eight males and three females, and around half international students.²

Expectations of Parallel Teaching

When asked if they were aware before commencement of their degree program that it *might* contain parallel teaching, five respondents expressed agreement, while five respondents expressed disagreement (there was one missing response). When it came to a question about awareness of parallel teaching in specific courses, only three of 11 respondents indicated they were rarely aware; these were three of the students unaware of the possibility before enrolment. Clearly there is some chance that some of these students may be disappointed by their unexpected participation in parallel teaching.

In terms of the pre-commencement expectations of the effect of parallel teaching on their course experience, four students were neutral, while four students expected a negative impact and three a positive impact. Three of the four students who responded negatively here also indicated unawareness prior to commencement of their program. This could suggest that negative feeling towards parallel teaching could be caused by a resentment of the unexpected occurrence.

Experience and Views of Parallel Teaching

Encouragingly, perhaps the key question of the survey asking for students' opinions on the overall impact of parallel teaching showed that only two students were negative towards it, while four were positive. Although there is a high proportion who are neutral, at least there is some evidence against a negative impact. These results are shown in Figure 1.

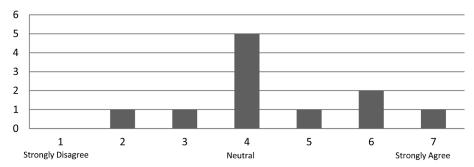


Figure 1. Overall, I feel that parallel teaching has impacted the quality of my course experiences in a positive way (Likert responses).

Only three of the 11 students agreed that they had benefitted from the presence of the undergraduate students, while five disagreed and the rest were neutral.

While the majority disagreed with the statement 'Since I have little experience in this field, I want to be treated the same as the undergraduate students' to some degree, there were two students who agreed, and both strongly agreed (7 on the Likert scale).

Experienced Differentiation of Postgraduate Courses

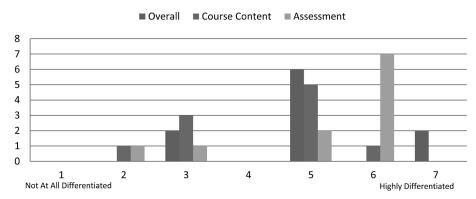


Figure 2. Experienced differentiation of postgraduate courses from undergraduate (Likert responses).

As can be seen in Figure 2, most students seem to think there is a reasonable differentiation overall. However, there is a big difference between course content and assessment. The students seem to feel that the course content is not very differentiated, but that the assessments certainly are.

Desired Differentiation of Postgraduate Courses

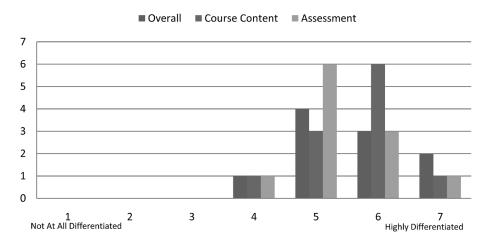


Figure 3. Desired differentiation of postgraduate courses from undergraduate (Likert responses).

Figure 3 shows that the students report desiring a reasonably high level of differentiation for course content, but a lower differentiation for assessment. This may be due to the assumption that differentiation of the assessment for postgraduates would means making it more difficult relative to the undergraduates.

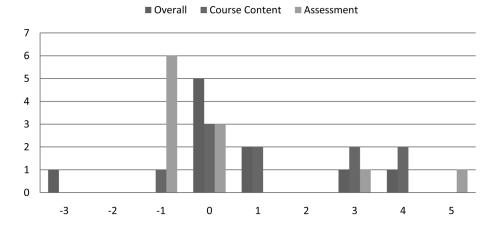


Figure 4. Experienced differentiation in excess of experienced (derived from differences in Likert responses).

The aggregation of results shown in Figures 2 and 3 hides some of the story, so it may be more useful to look at the difference between desired and experienced differentiation for each student. Figure 4 similarly shows a general trend of students to report that the general level of differentiation in the postgraduate course is similar to what they desire, but that they would prefer more differentiation in course content and less in assessment.

The survey also obtained information on students experienced and desired level of differentiation over a variety of characteristics: depth and breadth of content, pace, difficulty, relevance, staff support, class time and class size.

	Ex	perienc	ed		Desired	l		ed in Experier	
	+	0	-	+	0	-	+	0	-
Depth of Coverage (Deeper)	7	3	1	11	0	0	5	4	2
Breadth of Coverage (Broader)	7	2	2	9	2	0	4	4	3
Pace (Faster)	5	6	0	6	4	1	3	5	3
Difficulty (More Difficult)	9	1	1	9	2	0	1	5	5
Real-world Relevance (More Relevant)	6	5	0	10	1	0	6	3	2
Staff Support (More Support)	5	5	1	9	2	0	8	3	0
Class Time (More Time)	1	8	2	5	5	1	5	5	1
Class Size (Larger)	2	4	5	3	3	5	3	4	4

Table 1: Experienced and Desired Differentiation of Content by Specific Characteristics

Many students believe there is already differentiation for the postgraduate group relative to the undergraduates across many of the characteristics. However they tend to want more differentiation on many of them. That being said, there is often conflict, for example with three students wanting the pace increased, three students wanting it decreased, and five students happy with the pace, there is no clear direction of preference for the cohort as a

whole. It is clear that the students would like more staff support, but that is not surprising since it is quite obviously a 'good' characteristic. The other salient result is that many students would like more class time. This result is less obvious, since although most would consider 'class time' a good characteristic, many of the postgraduate coursework students also have significant work and family commitments.

Student Comments

Nine students completed the comments section, which is not a very large sample to draw trends from. However a relatively large proportion seem to reflect on the usefulness of the postgraduate tutorial, compared to the lecture.

My experience of parallel teaching was ok but I think I would have benefited more by this course and teaching if it would have been only a postgraduate course like the postgraduate tutorial. (Student D)

Smaller class sizes provide more focused learning. The PG tute is very helpful compared to the lecture. (Student F)

A further two students specifically requested a longer tutorial session.

- ...we need more than one hour's tutorial class each week. (Student E)
- ...tutorial hours should be longer than right now (Student H)

Reflecting the general positive experience of parallel teaching, several students did mention it as something they liked or, at least, didn't mind.

I came for the postgraduate course without previous experience or knowledge, from this point of view, I personally do not mind parallel teaching... (Student E)

It is good to have a class with undergraduate because some of postgraduates do not have background or do not study in Uni for years... (Student H)

Individual students expressed varying opinions about other topics, mirroring the results of the Likert scale questions. Whether the students were negative, neutral or positive towards parallel teaching in general, many of them offered basic suggestions for ways that their experience could be improved upon. They asked for extra revision of basic concepts prior to commencement of the class, deeper discussions of some of the content, more extensive orientation and involvement with the School, and a slower pace to help with (that student's) lack of math background.

Discussion

Only undertaken in one particular context and class, and with a sample size of 11 respondents, this project is only a preliminary analysis of the issues facing postgraduate coursework students involved in parallel teaching. However, the results do show that there is a diversity of opinion amongst this particular cohort, and do also show some trends in responses.

The survey results provide some important insights which may help instructors to understand student expectations of parallel teaching. Around one third of the sample expected a negative impact on their experience, and with many of these students also being unaware

of the possibility of parallel teaching before commencement, it may be that this had some impact.

In this particular sample, the majority of students overall felt that the practice of parallel teaching had impacted them positively, or were neutral about it, with only two students expressing disagreement about a positive impact. This is encouraging and supports the continuing use of this practice for this specific student group.

However, there is also a noticeable trend towards the view that the course content is not highly differentiated, but that the assessment is. This is a concern, since assessment should be appropriately aligned to course content to maximise learning through assessment and feedback loops (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The experience in the studied context of assessment differentiated more than the content is present in other institutions where similar practices take place, and is likely what caused the 'feeling of dismay at being asked to submit one extra assignment' in the student's views paraphrased by PAUWS (2006). This concern should be understood by instructors of these courses, and perhaps may help assist in the design of these courses. If lecturers believe the current structure is appropriate, then at least they may want to make sure the postgraduate coursework students understand why the content and assessment structure has been selected, so that they feel like their course has been tailored to their needs, rather than a question added to the undergraduate assessments on an ad-hoc basis.

In particular from the comments section, there also seems to be a preference for the postgraduate-only tutorial class, and a desire to increase the time of this session. This may be something that the lecturers of these courses may wish to consider.

Clearly the fact that this survey was undertaken only in a quite specific context, that the number of survey respondents was small, and the fact that a reasonable proportion have experience only with a single course, mean that caution must be taken even when extrapolating these results to other cohorts of students in similar contexts. Applying these elicited experiences and views to other contexts of parallel teaching is even more tenuous. Certainly this analysis shows that there is much more interesting study to be done to understand the expectations, experiences and views of postgraduate coursework students involved in parallel teaching. As there is currently a dearth of peer-reviewed research on this topic, this paper provides an important starting point and impetus for further research.

Notes

- 1 Alternative uses of the terms are common in secondary education (e.g. Dieker & Murawski, 2003), and special education (e.g. Scruggs et al., 2007).
- International student status was not asked in the survey, and the data is generally not available on student records to academics for equity reasons. So this proportion is simply inferred from informal knowledge of the students' situations

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Appendix: Student Questionnaire

Student Survey

Parallel Teaching of Postgraduate Coursework Programs in the School of Economics



Some postgraduate courses share a significant amount of content with an undergraduate course. The University of Adelaide refers to this practice as 'parallel teaching'.

The purpose of this survey is to get feedback on your expectations, experience and views on parallel teaching in the core introductory courses in the School of Economics.

Completion of this survey is not compulsory. Your responses will be anonymous.

	Context of Parallel Teaching		
1.	Tick all of the below courses in the School of Economic currently taking.	s that you have taken previously, <u>or</u> are	
	Intermediate Microeconomics IID Intermediate Macroeconomics IID Intermediate Econometrics IID		
	For the remainder of this survey, please consider the ${\bf q}$ above courses $\underline{{\bf only}}.$	uestions in light of <u>your experiences</u> in these	
	Expectations of Parallel Teaching		
		Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	N/A
2.	Before commencement of my degree program, I was aware that my degree program <u>may</u> contain parallel teaching in some courses		
3.	Before commencement of the specific courses, I was aware that the courses would contain parallel teaching	Always Sometimes Never 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	N/A
4.	Before I experienced parallel teaching, I <u>expected</u> parallel teaching in these courses to impact on the quality of my course experience in the following way	Strongly Positive Neutral Strongly Negative 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	N/A
	Experience and Views of Parallel Teaching		
5.	Overall, I feel that parallel teaching has impacted the quality of my course experiences in a positive way	Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree 7 6 5 4 3 2 1	N/A
6.	I have benefitted from the presence of the undergraduate students	Strongly Agree	N/A
7.	Since I have little experience in this field, I want to be treated the same as the undergraduate students	7 6 5 4 3 2 1	N/A

8.9.10.	I feel that the experience and knowledge I bring with me is adequately acknowledged in the course I feel that my position as a postgraduate student is adequately respected in the course The delivery of the courses suits my learning style	Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree N/A 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree N/A 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
E	experienced Differentiation of Postgraduate Cou	rses
11. 12.	Overall I feel the postgraduate courses <u>are</u> different to the associated undergraduate courses to the following extent I feel the postgraduate courses differ from the associated undergraduate courses in the follow ways:	Highly Differentiated Not At All Differentiated 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12A	Course Content	Highly Differentiated Not At All Differentiated 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12B	Assessment	Highly Differentiated 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12C	Depth of Coverage	Deeper
12D	Breadth of Coverage	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12E	Pace	Faster
12F	Difficulty	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12G	Real-world Relevance	More Relevant 7 6 5 4 3 2 Less Relevant N/A More Support Same Less Support
12H	Staff Support	More Support Same Less Support 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
12I	Class Time	More Time
12J	Class Size	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A

	Desired Differentiation of Postgraduate Courses	
13.	Overall I feel the postgraduate courses should be different to the associated undergraduate courses to the following extent	Highly Differentiated Not At All Differentiated 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14.	I feel the postgraduate courses should differ from the associated undergraduate courses in the follow ways:	Highly Differentiated Not At All Differentiated
14A	Course Content	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Highly Differentiated Not At All Differentiated
14B	Assessment	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14C	Depth of Coverage	Deeper Same Less Deep 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14D	Breadth of Coverage	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Faster Same Slower
14E	Pace	7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A More Difficult 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A Less Difficult 7 N/A
14F	Difficulty	More Relevant
14G	Real-world Relevance	More Support Same Less Support 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14H	Staff Support	More Time Same Less Time 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14I	Class Time	Larger Same Smaller 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 N/A
14J	Class Size	

(e.g. Good or bad experiences of parallel teaching in particular courses inside and outside of the School of Economics. Any constructive feedback or suggestions. Any feelings, viewpoints, or opinions you					
want to share.)					