



# **PROMOTING INTERDISCIPLINARY EDUCATION Vice-Chancellor's Courses at the Australian National University**

*(Conference Theme: educating the next generation)*

Poster by designers & conveners of the VC courses

[Richard Baker](#) (VC course champion/Leadership & Influence)

[Shayne Flint](#) (Unravelling Complexity)

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# Overview

- ❖ In 2008 the ANU introduced Vice-Chancellor's (VC's) courses to support novel approaches to study across disciplinary interfaces.
- ❖ There are currently four courses:
  - ❖ Unravelling complexity
  - ❖ Creating knowledge
  - ❖ Leadership & influence
  - ❖ Mobilising research

*(At ANU, a course is a unit or subject taken within an award program. A student with a full-time load takes 8 courses in a 2 semester academic year.)*

# Genesis

VC's courses are the confluence of several strands:

- ❖ Realising the opportunities for research-inspired education.
- ❖ Supporting students to study outside traditional boundaries set by Faculty disciplinary perspectives.
- ❖ Giving agency to teachers who wish to work outside traditional approaches to instruction in universities.
- ❖ Realising the claim made by Boulton & Lucas in their paper "[What are universities for?](#)" prepared for the League of European Research Universities.

*Universities serve to make students think: to resolve problems by argument supported by evidence; not to be dismayed by complexity, but bold in unravelling it*

# Student experience

## Students:

- Are selected to have strong academic track records
- Apply for VC courses beyond degree requirements
- Study in a cross-section of disciplines
- Encounter other proficient students they have not already met
- Participate intensively in teaching the courses as well as learning
- Encounter problem-based pedagogies imbued with high expectations of broad reflective learning

# Unravelling Complexity

- ❑ *Unravelling Complexity* examines how engineering, science, visual art, history, psychology and other disciplines address complexity. The deep connections between economic, historical, social, legal, scientific, engineering, environmental and moral dimensions of complex problems are drawn out and explored in depth.
- ❑ Instruction comprises guest lectures and panels addressing a topic in complexity, with opportunities for question and answer (Q&A) participation by students. This is followed by a student-led participatory tutorial on that topic.
- ❑ Examples of the student's work on learning portfolios are at <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/uc/example-work-4/>
- ❑ An outline of the course is available at the site <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/uc/weekly-topics/>

# Creating Knowledge

- ❑ *Creating Knowledge* (CK) is for students from all areas of the ANU who are interested in what makes universities tick. It affords students early in their degree the time and the space to consider the nature of academic inquiry and its relationship to other ways of knowing and creating knowledge.
- ❑ Featuring a host of researchers and ideas from different disciplinary and cultural perspectives, CK presents a series of expert panels on the different ways knowledge is constructed across the ANU. Each panel is preceded by a student-led participatory tutorial that prepares for the forthcoming topic. There are also workshops to support assessment tasks.
- ❑ Examples of the students' interviews and writing are at <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/ck/example-work/>
- ❑ An outline of the course is available at the site <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/ck/weekly-topics-2/>



# Leadership & Influence

- ❑ *Leadership and Influence* gives students opportunities to directly ask questions of people who have created major change in their own fields. Guest lecturers include prominent leaders in the military, law, business, education, Indigenous justice and social movements.
- ❑ Instruction comprises lectures and panels by recognised leaders with opportunities for Q&A participation by students. This is followed by a student-led participatory tutorial, with frequent workshops to discuss approaches to assessment tasks.
- ❑ Examples of the student's work on learning portfolios are at <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/li/example-work/>
- ❑ An outline of the course is available at the site <http://vc-courses.anu.edu.au/li/weekly-topics/>

# Mobilising Research

- ❑ *Mobilising Research* challenges and supports students to explore the organisation of research for the good of society. It asks how we identify and integrate what is known from disciplinary research to contribute to the resolution of experienced problems, how we prioritise research agendas for the good of society, and how research findings are implemented or used in practice.
- ❑ Instruction involves individual reading leading to weekly discussion tutorial in small groups (3-5 students) around the topics of scholarly disciplines, problem framing, and integration. Assessment items are evaluated formatively by peers prior to submission for summative assessment.
- ❑ The course is being presented for the first time during the current semester. Course materials will be archived on the VC course open-access WordPress site at the end of the course.



# Conclusions

- ❖ The ANU's VC courses provide novel student experiences as they were designed to do.
- ❖ Participants' responses are positive and point to transformational experiences.
- ❖ Wider participation by ANU students would open their educational perspectives and experiences. Buy-in to enlarging participation in VC courses by academic managers, curriculum gatekeepers, and a cadre of teachers is a significant challenge.
- ❖ **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & COURSE CONVENERS**  
(You are most welcome to contact any of the VC course team)
  - [Richard Baker](#) (VC course champion/Leadership & Influence)
  - [Shayne Flint](#) (Unravelling Complexity)
  - [Mary Kilcline Cody](#) (Creating Knowledge)
  - [Lawrence Cram](#) (Mobilising Research)We gratefully acknowledge the dedication and versatility of Chris Browne, VC course Tutor.