Nurseries for leaders in a fast-changing world

Universities and research centres are meeting the needs of professionals who don’t want to slip behind the times, writes Erica Cervini.

Executive education is booming outside the traditional business school model as professionals seek specific leadership skills for increasingly complex work environments.

University institutes and research centres, as well as professional organisations are running their own versions of executive education to meet demand from university administrators, senior public servants and engineers.

The University of Melbourne’s LH Martin Institute specialises in tertiary education research. Deputy director Leo Goedegebuure says it began offering courses to fill a gap in the market.

General business school courses, he says, will give participants standard skills in finance and management, but not the knowledge and skills covering what drives people working in universities.

“If you go to Harvard Business School, you’ll get some really good outcomes, but it doesn’t tell you why managing a university is such a tremendously difficult task,” Goedegebuure says.

“What we try to do is contextualise good leadership and management programs, so that people are capable of operating in that really complex [university] environment they find themselves in.”

Goedegebuure says people in senior management positions have to understand the distinctive roles teaching and research play in faculties as well as the environment in which higher education operates.

The Martin Institute, which offers executive education around the country, attracts deans, pro-vice-chancellors and senior managers.

Goedegebuure says it’s important that administrators are recognised as professionals. A Moving into Management program will be offered later this year.

“We truly believe that management and administration in tertiary education is a profession,” he says. Engineers are also in demand to take on leadership positions.

Stephen Betros, executive manager (development) of Engineering Education Australia, the education arm of Engineers Australia, says engineers “go up the ladder much more quickly than they used to”.

This is partly because there is a growing need for engineers to manage massive projects involving mining and natural gas.

But younger engineers are also needed to fill vacancies left by the imminent retirement of baby boomers.

“What you’re finding is the need to transition people much more quickly through their career stages,” Betros says.

Programs are being created to do this. Engineering Education Australia is launching the construction management series for engineers who are required to become construction managers and for those who want a change.

In recognition of the importance of leadership skills for engineers, they can now apply for accreditation from Engineering Australia as an engineering executive.

They must first satisfy relevant leadership and management competency standards.

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Leo Goedegebuure, LH Martin Institute

An engineering leadership residential, to be held later this year, is aligned with the engineering executive competencies.

General manager Engineering Education Australia Ann Ellis says for the programs to be successful, engineers need to play a large role in them.

“They like to have involvement from people who have experience in business as well as engineering and are leaders,” she says of very practically orientated people who like to have things that relate to their real world, their life and their work.”

Exmond DeCruz, director of executive education at the Australian National University’s Crawford School of Government and Economics, says senior government officials also want to hear from leaders in their fields.

Late last year, Crawford executive education brought out Edward DeSeve, manager of the $US787 billion federal stimulus program in the United States, for a master class. DeSeve explained how he worked across 120 different government instrumentalities to deliver the package.

DeCruz says the programs, which cater for governments in Australia, Asia and the Pacific, are constantly evolving to keep up with trends such as the use of social media.

He says the programs take the best from the business world and “merge it with our sense of ethics and integrity.”

The Australian Catholic University’s new Centre for Corporate and Executive Education is also putting a distinctive stamp on its executive education offerings.

Centre director Tom Ristoski says business has become a lot more complex and challenging for new solutions to problems. As a result, the programs do not take a narrow business approach to their
There's a lot to be gained from getting perspective from theology, philosophy, counselling and psychology, media and communications,” he says. Philosophy, Ristoski says, can contribute a great deal to getting a team to develop critical thinking skills. The centre’s programs draw from each of ACU’s six faculties. Ninety per cent of programs offered are “in-company”, rather than on-campus. For example, the centre is running a nine-month leadership program for an insurance company. Ristoski says there is also growing demand for executive programs from healthcare professionals and those from the not-for-profit sector. From mid-year, the centre will begin offering open or public programs. “People just can't keep up with the rate of change [in their workplace],” he says.