

# Using the ICCS at the Outset of an MBA Student's Journey: The University of Queensland Experience

By Leah Stackhouse

In 2005, the University of Queensland embarked on a major review of their MBA program, resulting in a decision to completely redesign the program and its delivery. That redesign brought about a dramatic change in the program's global ranking.

Professor Polly Parker was appointed Director of the MBA program at that time and led the redesign effort, including the creation of a new, mandatory *Management Frameworks* course which she taught. The course included the Intelligent Careers Card Sort (ICCS) Career Exploration System among a number of assessments that the students took and evaluated for relevance and applicability. There were other innovations, including enrollment in 'paired' courses where students took two courses with complementary knowledge to enhance holistic, cross-disciplinary thought and application. Professor Parker also instituted a peer coaching approach both in her course and across the program.

## Adopting the ICCS tool and framework

The redesigned MBA program debuted in 2006 with a class of 50 students. *Management Frameworks* was a mandatory first-semester course for all students with a goal of having students assess, at the outset of their program, where they were in their career journey, why they were pursuing an MBA and what they wanted to get out of their studies. This holistic perspective would set the stage for their program and beyond, by influencing the students' approach to their coursework and future career goals by sharpening their personal sense of purpose.

Throughout the course students took several common psychometric assessments (e.g. MBTI, values card sort, Strengths Inventory, EQ assessment) as well as the ICCS to analyze their own style and preferences through the assessment results. A particular emphasis was placed on the integration of personal data and relevant academic literature. The ICCS took more time than any other assessment approach and sought to provide a more holistic view of the students' career situations.

Students were grouped into peer coaching trios to discuss the results of the assessments and to practice coaching others. Professor Parker purposely selected trios so students had the chance to play roles as coach, client and observer. As part of the coaching process they learned how to have effective feedback conversations as both giver and receiver.

The ICCS was used to determine the students' most important statements for each dimension of knowing why, knowing how and knowing whom of their individual career experiences. In their peer coaching trios they explored the “what” – interpretation and examples underpinning their card selections, the “so what” – insights from these selections to identify career themes, and the “now what” – crafting action plans to pursue these themes. Action plans focused on defining measures of success and actionable behaviors, and capturing any support they might need to achieve these goals.

This course continued to use the ICCS for approximately 10 years - for the 7-year tenure of Professor Parker's MBA Program Directorship, and a few years beyond.

## Outcomes and impact

Turning to look at the outcomes of deploying the ICCS, The University of Queensland saw a range of positive impacts on the students individually, as well as contributions to the success of the MBA program more broadly.

### Students

Students experienced both immediate and longer-term positive impacts from using the ICCS:

- The key project for students at the end of the course was completing a self-reflection across the various assessments to determine which was the most relevant and applicable and why. In this regard, the ICCS was deemed to be universally helpful in understanding career-related strengths and motivations and developing an action plan, for both students' MBA studies and their future careers.
- As Program Director, Professor Parker ran pre- and post-program workshops with the students to provide them with “bookends” of their career focus. In the post-program workshop students reflected back on their assessment and the progress they had made (or not) on their goals. This deepened their commitment to their future career intentions.
- Professor Parker also invited the University's Careers Services colleagues to visit relevant classes to see what was being covered and how. Students shared the assessment results with the visitors, thereby providing a readymade personal platform from which to work. This provided a helpful connection between the academic side of students' coursework and the professional staff side of students' career planning.

- Professor Parker often encountered alumni who cited the positive impact of the ICCS and the course more broadly, even many years after completion. One recent commencement speaker who was an MBA alumna remembered the ICCS vividly, and spoke about the relevance of her action plan. Professor Parker has read similar remembrances of the impact of the course and the ICCS on people's career trajectories after congratulating alumni taking up new roles.

## Program

In terms of the MBA program overall, the redesign under Professor Parker's tenure as Program Director – including the *Management Frameworks* course, the ICCS assessment and the peer coaching approach – yielded several positive impacts:

- The coherence and cohesion of the program increased as evidenced from student feedback surveys. A key part of the coherence was the formation of career themes and action plans – as well as an understanding of the underlying motivations and strengths from knowing why, how and whom – which increased their understanding of the interdisciplinary connections across courses and the relevance of those courses to their future career plans.
- The peer coaching trios often maintained the connections established in the *Management Frameworks* course throughout the full program, offering peer support, insight and coaching to maintain and update their career themes and action plans.
- Part of Professor Parker's role as Program Director involved student recruiting, new student orientation and other public events. The structure of the program - with its focus on personal career reflection and development, coaching as a leadership tool and applied practice through peer coaching, paired courses etc. – was often a differentiating factor in attracting new students.
- Prior to Professor Parker assuming the role of MBA Program Director, the University of Queensland's program was outside of the top 100 in *The Economist* global MBA program rankings. Under her direction the program rankings steadily increased over subsequent years, **until they reached the top 10**. While this was attributed to a range of innovations, the ICCS was a foundational element of the *Management Frameworks* course that launched the MBA students' future career journeys.

In sum, leveraging the ICCS at the beginning of their studies created a map to help students navigate their academic studies and future careers, based on the direction set by the career themes and action plans they generated through self-reflection, sense-making and peer coaching. Reflection and peer coaching during their continued studies, the integration of their results into career planning services, and the final reflection in the post-program workshop provided ongoing opportunities to adjust their 'map' as their circumstances changed. The ICCS played a part alongside other innovations in increasing the value of the program as recognized in global rankings.

Professor Parker, now a Professor Emerita at the University of Queensland, has established a national and international reputation through her research and teaching focused on career management and development, peer coaching, leadership development and human resource development. She has published widely in academic journals such as the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Organization Behavior*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Human Relations* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. She is the lead author of the book *Peer Coaching at Work: Principles and Practices*, and in her final years at the university held the post of Associate Dean in the Faculty of Business, Economics and Law.