

CASE STUDY

General information
Name of institution: Victoria University
Primary contact/s: Associate Professor Jeannie Rea. Jeannie.rea@vu.edu.au
Location: Melbourne, Australia
Type of institution: Teaching and Research University.
Name of unit/subject: Course: Graduate Certificate in Planetary Health 4 Units <i>Planetary Health: A Place-Based Approach</i> <i>Responding to Climate Change Through a Planetary Health Lens</i> <i>Disaster Resilience and Response Through a Planetary Health Lens</i> <i>Making a Healthy Planet: A Transdisciplinary Transformation</i>
Discipline: Transdisciplinary
Level of study: 1 st level postgraduate
Intensive offer: 4 units of 4 weeks over 4 months, Synchronous online.

Issue
Introduction
Responding to a moment in time: <i>Natural disasters and global pandemic placed planetary health on centre stage.</i>
<p>By early 2020 massive bushfires had merged into a single fire front across much of southeast Australia. The devastation of our ecosystem was captured around the world through distressing images of rescuers removing wounded koalas from burned landscapes, and holidaymakers evacuating smoky beaches by ship. When the COVID-19 pandemic added to the social and economic magnitude of Australia's environmental crisis, Victoria University made a swift whole-of-university commitment to the growing international movement for 'planetary health'.</p> <p>The convergence of the consequences of record global temperatures and the coronavirus pandemic brought the concept of planetary health onto centre stage. Planetary health is a rapidly developing academic field addressing the intersections between the health of the planet and the health of communities, understanding that each profoundly effects the other.</p> <p>The Graduate Certificate in Planetary Health (GCPH) was a response to this moment in time. The course was designed to meet the demand for innovative solutions to current and emerging issues. The global pause created by the COVID-19 crisis provided Australia with a rare opportunity for businesses, government and community to focus on new approaches for planetary health.</p>

VU's graduate certificate was a world first in explicitly taking a place-based approach to planetary health, where the focus is upon finding socially equitable solutions relevant to local communities, that can be shared globally.

This fitted with VU's mission to prepare students to be future-ready. The course recognised that some jobs have gone; others will demand new thinking and skills and there will be new jobs we have not yet realised. The course was primarily designed for people wanting to change the direction of their careers and/or pick up the new 'environmental' roles in their existing workplaces, as well as towards recent graduates wanting a career to make a difference for people, place and planet.

The GCPH was a standalone qualification aimed at meeting the demand for innovative responses to problematise, address and resolve current and emerging issues in the workplace and communities - to find solutions to today's problems for tomorrow's world. The course was explicitly transdisciplinary drawing upon teaching, research and professional experience and expertise across public health, community development, community psychology, environment science and education, politics, history and economics, culture and diversity, communications and design, systems thinking, business and engineering.

The transdisciplinary approach, foregrounded Australian Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, and developed students' capabilities in ethical practice and research literacy. A unifying feature were the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), developed in response to recognition of the need for a planetary approach bringing together and interrogating previous goals for human health and for environmentally sustainable development.

The course team brought together a range of academics and professional staff including from Moondani Balluk, VU's Indigenous Academic Unit. We sought input too from the university facilities and procurement areas, as well as calling upon researchers working on planetary health projects, and we also relied upon community partners.

VU was also transitioning all our higher education offering into intensive model based on one unit at a time for four weeks in small classes – the VU Block Model®

The GCPH was the first postgraduate block model course. And significantly it was a new course, rather than transitioning an existing course. The course writers were all very experienced academics in their disciplines, enthusiastic about transformative and transdisciplinary pedagogy and practice. We came from Indigenous studies, science education, public health, community development, environmental and gender studies. We relied upon the enthusiastic cooperation of colleagues around the university. And we worked with the specialist VU Block Model® design and development team.

The content and assessment facilitated students gaining practical skills to apply the latest academic knowledge to their professional interests, with most assignments designed to simulate situations they may encounter at work.

There were no essays and no exams. Students who had done postgraduate level study before were a little dubious – but the feedback was that the quality and expectations were much more challenging than expected – and they acquired new knowledge and skills to implement in at work and more broadly.

This course would always have been one semester, but the default would have been studying four units at a time. Our pitch for the GCPH was 4 units of 4 weeks over 4 months and you are ready to pivot your career. Helpfully, there was even government

short course funding for post pandemic economic and social recovery. The course was online and attracted participants from across Australia.

Goals

The learning outcomes were:

- 1 Critique and evaluate theories and discourses of place-based planetary health . through a transdisciplinary lens;
- 2 Propose and lead in appropriate planetary health approaches in organisational . development and change;
- 3 Design and implement critical interventions in policy and programs utilising planetary . health discourses and approaches;
- 4 Advocate and apply a place-based approach to planetary health framed . interventions and innovations;
- 5 Distinguish and appreciate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander standpoints and . perspectives, including contextualising global critiques and experiences of First Nations peoples and communities;
- 6 Creatively apply investigative and research skills to problems and issues through a . planetary health framework.

Challenges

To introduce and develop students' knowledge and skills to achieve these ambitious learning goals in four months noting students came from a diversity of disciplinary, work, cultural and aspirational starting points.

Foregrounding Australian First Nations standpoints and perspectives, of which few students had much background nor understanding including of why a postcolonial critique was critical.

To maintain the momentum in a fulltime course when students had other demands upon their time – including living through the pandemic.

To provide the range of content in ways that were meaningful for the students and enabled deep inquiry into unfamiliar areas through a transdisciplinary lens.

To create authentic assessments that captured contemporary workplace activity rather than more traditional essays and exams.

Solution

The course was created and developed – and then reviewed after each delivery with the focus upon whether the learning outcomes were achieved – in the four units sequentially over 4 weeks model.

The units were not developed independently, but sequentially as part of a course. (This did not mean that the units could not also stand alone as when offered as electives to

students of other courses, students also achieved the learning outcomes and enjoyed the experience.) However, the sequencing really assisted while also facilitating the focused deep dive.

The first unit surveyed key issues, principles, and approaches, and was followed by two applied units. The first of these addressed responding to climate change and the next responding to crisis. The final unit focussed upon planning and acting for transformative change.

Unit 1: *Planetary Health: A Place-Based Approach*

Unit 2: *Responding to Climate Change Through a Planetary Health Lens*

Unit 3: *Disaster Resilience and Response Through a Planetary Health Len.*

Unit 4: *Making a Healthy Planet: A Transdisciplinary Transformation*

While each unit reflected the particular expertise and interests of unit convenors, common threads ran through all for units. These included 'capsules' on Australian Indigenous experience and perspectives, planetary health, the UN Sustainable Development Goals and a place base approach. Assessment criteria continued to address these key themes within specific unit tasks. Students were able to refer to previous units and reflect upon their learning as they made their way through the course.

Academics from Moondani Balluk provided advice and critiques as well as teaching in the course which increased the authority of the commitment to foregrounding First Nations standpoint and experiences. However, the matter of who should be teaching Indigenous content remains a live debate, as does the challenge to non-Indigenous academics wanting to be involved in this counter-hegemonic and anti-racist work.

The characteristics of the VU Block Model® were important in holding momentum – including students receiving grades on the weekend after finishing a unit before starting the next one on Monday.

Enabling flexibility even with in the strict new unit each four weeks was necessary as people have busy lives and things happen – including for some students getting COVID.

Utilising the mix of well-developed and 'full' unit sites in the LMS that facilitated self-paced learning where that suited students. There were 2 three-hour evening online classes each week, and whilst attendance was not required, the interesting program including impressive guest speakers and fantastic student presentations in had students clearing their calendars to participate. The intensity and momentum kept students going – and building their own support network – which was ongoing.

The assessments were a challenge especially for students used to lectures, essays and exams. Authentic assessment items included a case study of a place based intervention from within students' professional field; a plan for applying SDGs to your workplace; composing an opinion piece on an issue in climate change; presenting to a commission on a climate change case; making a podcast advocating climate action; group simulation on a transdisciplinary disaster response; case study investigating and proposing a transdisciplinary response to an environmental sustainability challenging the workplace; and designing a campaign plan.

The Government COVID recovery subsidised places were significant as Australian postgraduate coursework fees are otherwise a real deterrent to undertaking further studies especially for those without secure and decent incomes.

Justify the solution (Explain reasons for selected response over other potential responses)

Most significantly this course was a response to a moment in time, so an innovative immersive and intensive solution was merited and the circumstances of COVID mitigation strategies in the first two years helped to facilitate it.

A regular 4 units over 12 weeks option would have been unlikely to have worked due to too great a spread of focus and time for students to organise their lives and participate and successfully complete the assessment tasks. In a non-intensive and immersive delivery model it would have been a challenge to undertake the course full time and achieve impressive results with most scoring Distinctions and High Distinctions with remarkably high calibre submission – and particularly importantly applied to their workplaces. Some students reported that they did take leave to hang in and complete the fourth unit and chose to prioritise finishing that last unit. Already having results for the first 3 certainly spurred them on.

This intensive immersive course also laid groundwork and supported work going on across the university as academics sought to include planetary health within units across courses. By 2023 the graduate certificate was suspended as options were available for students to take planetary health approaches in other professional and more specialised courses. The ground had shifted with planetary health, green solutions and climate action becoming much more the expected approach in Australian workplaces.

Results and reflections

Support results and benefits with evidence

These comments from students support the contentions made above:

“I enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Planetary Health because I wanted to easily explain the interconnectedness of sustainability issues to people in our community and talk about it confidently. I thought it would be a shallow dive into the topic, but there is nothing shallow about the course. You come out with your eyes open.”

“I used my research for one of my assignments to convince one of our suppliers to start stocking a bio solution to replace non-recyclable plastic library book covers. It was one of the first big wins I had right after graduating.” **VICKI**, Manager Community, Library & Customer Services, Blue Mountains City Council.

“Before enrolling at VU, I didn’t know much about the Indigenous perspective on sustainability but I definitely needed it. I am grateful for all the new things I have learned and feel that I now have a much more nuanced understanding.” **BELINDA**, Co-Founder, Earth Crusaders & Marketing Manager, CHT Architects

“I really liked the idea of studying a field that is still pretty new and could provide me with the latest thinking in sustainability.” **BEN**, General Manager, Communications and Social Sustainability at NGH

“I’m still surprised at how much of an impact a short course has had on my life, and I think that’s down to being such an important topic and an interesting way of learning... The course has changed the way I think and make decisions every day. I’m more aware of the positive and negative impacts we can have, both locally and globally.” **ANDREE**, Student Services Manager

"In this open and diverse environment, you learn from classmates as well as the highly experienced lecturers and guest speakers, who were so inspiring and motivating."
CAROLINA, Psychologist.

Advice to colleagues

For those of us involved it was an opportunity – green field new course and a extending the undergraduate VU Block Model® into postgraduate programs. You do need to be committed and enthusiastic about trying something different, confident in subject matter and adventurous in assessment items.

Take a whole of course approach rather than unit by unit, to facilitate the developing knowledge and skills, through a sequence of activities and assessments. For example, what may be a case study of a workplace innovation in an early unit can become a plan for innovation, to making the case for implementation. There was opportunity for wide and deep skill development through the assessments rather than repeating the same assessment items.

Support from senior levels of the university certainly helps in smoothing the way when trying something new and adventurous.

Recognise a 'moment in time' and respond to it.

Resources required

To facilitate getting the course written, designed and developed a dedicated Course Chair is needed with sufficient time to focus upon this work.

A team of academic colleagues interested in taking on transformative work.

The expertise of educational design specialists

Support from university leadership to smooth process that could otherwise hamper innovative design, development, and delivery of immersive intensive innovation.