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Research Skills Development in the MBA Capstone
Project: Tools for Facilitating Student Engagement

Research Skill Development in the MBA Capstone Project: Tools for Facilitating Student Engagement

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School of Business, UniSA, August 2017

With material adapted from the **Research Skills Development Framework**
developed Dr John Willison et al (2014 – 2015) see www.rsd.edu.au

And Goal Attainment Scaling developed by Prof Tom Kiresuk & Dr Colin Sharp et al (1968 – 2013)
see <http://ssrn.com/author=377024>

SUMMARY:

Aims:

- ❑ apply Research Skill Development framework to teaching introductory research methods to MBA students
- ❑ Use RSD in explaining to these students how their studies were enabling them to meet the AQF 9 requirements for a research (capstone) experience in the masters coursework degree.
- ❑ use of Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) as a student engagement tool in learning, teaching and evaluation of the outcomes of the MBA capstone project
- ❑ Trial a version of RSD pentagon

Preliminary Findings:

- ✓ *GAS was useful in facilitating self-evaluation of effectiveness of student engagement in students' own goal setting and measurement of the learning outcomes*
- ✓ *Despite initial reluctance some MBA students used RSD for their Masters Coursework capstone project development.*
- ✓ *anecdotal consultation is encouraging about adapting Willison's RSD pentagon to facilitate student engagement in strategic thinking.*

MBA capstone course: Strategic Management

Course Aim

This course provides students with theoretical and practical knowledge of:

- Strategic management and its impacts on organisational management and leadership and business conduct; the course focuses on how firms develop and execute strategy to create and sustain competitive advantage.
- Principles and methods of **research reporting, evaluation and decision making** applicable to organisational management and leadership, building on the research content of other MBA courses.
- The **planning and execution of a substantial research-based strategic project.**
- Students completing the course develop a body of knowledge that:
Contributes to a comprehensive and integrated application of strategic management principles to recent developments in the field of senior organisational management and leadership in international business environments.
- Provides a pathway for further learning.

“Tools” considered for student engagement and enabling MBA outcomes

- Research Skills Development Framework
 - ➔ capstone strategy/research project
 - ➔ pentagon for strategic thinking
- Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS)
https://www.bestthinking.com/articles/society_and_humanities/education/professional_development/measuring-outcomes-of-action-learning
- e-Portfolio to collate learning resources



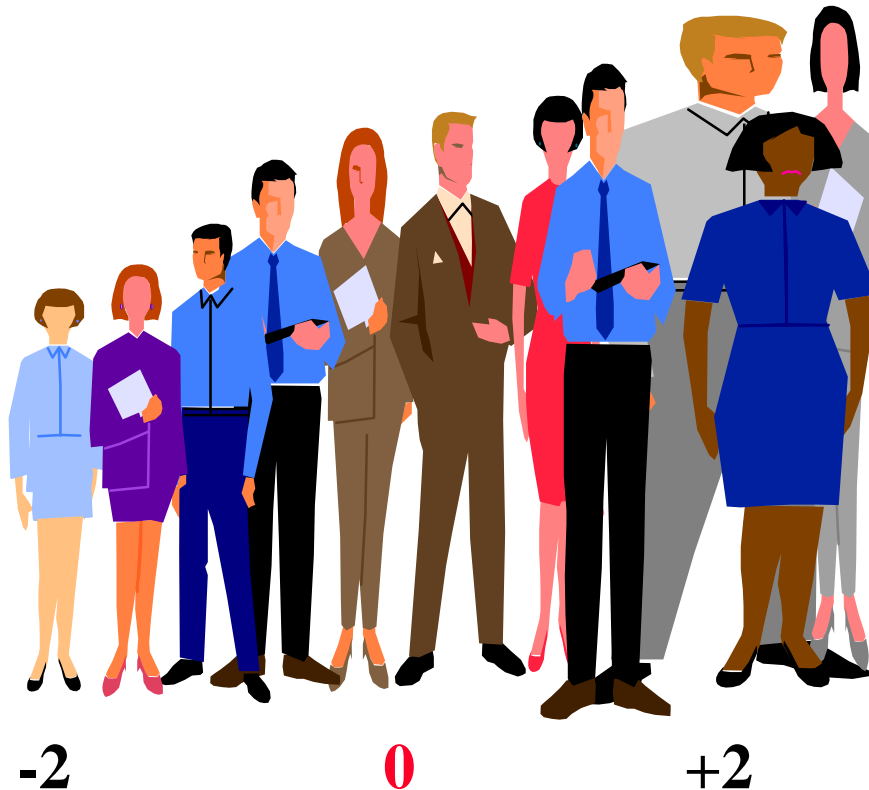
Goal Attainment Scaling

⇒ Goal Attainment Scaling meets S.M.A.R.T. Test

⇒ Engages stakeholders for agreement on outcomes

⇒ Goal Attainment Scaling uses both Qualitative & Quantitative methods

Kiresuk, T. J., A. Smith, & J. E. Cardillo, (eds.) 1994. Goal Attainment Scaling: Applications, Theory, and Measurement. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.



Goal Attainment Scaling:

+ 2 Much More than Expected Outcome

+ 1 More than Expected Outcome

0 EXPECTED Outcome





- 1 Less than Expected Outcome

- 2 Much Less than Expected Outcome

WEAKNESSES of G.A.S.

- can only give *Relative* or change indicator
- not* normed or generalisable criterion referenced
- some perceive GAS as too *subjective*

REMEDIES:

-  should regularly be grounded in “objective” or *criterion referenced* instruments & observational data
-  combine with “*Global Assessment Scaling*”
(e.g assessment rubrics)
-  consult stakeholders & educate on its strengths & *weaknesses*
-  should be regularly *audited by someone independent*

Use of Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) in graduate management student Research Skills Development (RSD) in capstone project goals and outcome self-evaluation.

OPPORTUNITY: FOLLOWUP RESEARCH ON GAS & RSD

Would you be interested to help us develop the effectiveness of GAS & RSD aspects introduced in this workshop?

IF so would you please:

- 1) Agree to us following up on whether you use GAS &/or RSD in your work after up to 1 year?**
- 2) Agree to us conducting a follow up interview on whether you use GAS &/or RSD in your work after up to 1 year?**
- 3) Agree to us analysing your use of GAS &/or RSD in your work?**
- 4) Agree to us publishing the research on whether GAS &/or RSD is used in students' work after up to 1 year?**

Further information: See the Staff Office post on ETHICS & Research:

{NB: This research has been approved by the UniSA Human Research Ethics Committee (project #0000034548) July 2015}

ATTACHMENT 1: Data Summary (as at 9/8/16)

UniSA MBA Cohorts (strategy courses taught by Dr Sharp)	Agreed to Research followup	Cohort as Percentage of the MBA classes	using e-Portfolio	Comment
60 capstone students (last course for most MBA students from 2014)	12 (final GAS interview due by October 2016)	20	9 → Very Little use?	The author has requested “friend” access to their e-portfolios but few have responded. So from what the author can see from their e-portfolios which is publically available <i>almost all are not actively developing</i> or using this medium to the extent they could to prepare goals and career transition tools as they are about to leave the University.
68 pre-capstone students (first course for all MBA students from 2016)	16 (final GAS interview due by August 2017)	23.5	6 → some use?	The author has requested “friend” access to their e-portfolios but most have not responded. So from what the author can see from their e-portfolios which is publically available <i>some are actively developing</i> or using this medium to the extent they could to prepare goals and coursework/research tools as they are about to prepare for their studies towards their capstone course.

ATTACHMENT 2: EXAMPLES OF GASs WRITTEN BY STUDENTS

Here are two examples of GAS forms filled in and emailed by 2016 graduating MBA students **referring to RSD & their expected capstone outcomes** (typos original). As yet we have not met to make an assessment of their progress with a GAS rating.

Case 1:

Background:

He is a Design Engineer and Project Manager, in the manufacturing sector for several years with the same laboratory, who has finished his MBA. He initially felt his MBA capstone project was “not likely to get much traction” in his company because his unit is at the functional level in a subsidiary recently taken over by a large conglomerate. **But his approach to the top management to interview them about the company’s strategic direction for this capstone strategic review report opened doors for him. Indeed this project facilitated his reflection on his skills and he realised that his approach has relevance and he could achieve the goal : “To become more superior to my former self.”** Also he saw **the RSD and the Work Skill Development (WSD)** version as a way of encouraging and mentoring junior engineers in developing their research and consulting skills (see Goal 5).

Level of Expected OUTCOME	Rating	<p style="text-align: center;">CASE 1: Behavioural Statement of EXPECTED OUTCOMES: GOAL 5 – Senior Engineer (WSD Mentoring)</p>
MUCH MORE than EXPECTED	+2	(WSD Level 5) - Critically evaluates information using self-generated criteria based on experience and expertise to reflect on lifelong learning skills. Applies sophisticated critical thinking and analysis to initiate change and extrapolate outcomes.
MORE than EXPECTED	+1	(WSD Level 4) - Uses self-determined criteria to critically evaluate role and fill in gaps to generate lifelong learning skills. Applies critical thinking and works collaboratively to synthesise, analyse and produce innovative and creative solutions.
EXPECTED Outcome	0	(WSD Level 3) - Critically evaluates the match between theoretical and practical applications to generate knowledge. Works independently to synthesises and analyse a range of resources to generate new knowledge.
LESS than EXPECTED	-1	(WSD Level 2) - Evaluates information /data with some degree of guidance to understand and reflect on role. Applies a structured format to synthesise and analyse existing data and knowledge.
MUCH LESS Than EXPECTED	-2	(WSD Level 1) - Evaluates information /data using simple prescribed criteria to understand and reflect on role. Applies a simple structure to understand existing data and knowledge.

[1] WSD = The *Work Skill Development* version of Wilkinson's Research Skills Development developed by Dr Sue Bandaranaike (James Cook University)

EXAMPLES OF GAS'S WRITTEN BY STUDENTS Case 2:

Background:

He is a Finance Executive and Change Manager, for several years with the same large company in the banking sector, who has finished his MBA. *He initially felt his company's performance metrics were more sophisticated than GAS (but those metrics were "as boring as batshit"). GAS offers his own point of reference rather than the company's standards.* His MBA capstone project was expected to not to get much support from his indifferent boss. He said it was a "pity that the MBA didn't have this approach to strategy upfront".

He emailed: My GAS goals "have changed a bit but here is my... draft ... I am already well on my way to achieveing them".

"Originally when we spoke I wanted to prove I can generalise my leadership and between then and now I have done 6 weeks leading {organizational change}.... which has helped to raise my profile. While its only a start is has been enough to register my interest and show the other senior execs I have some capability. ..."

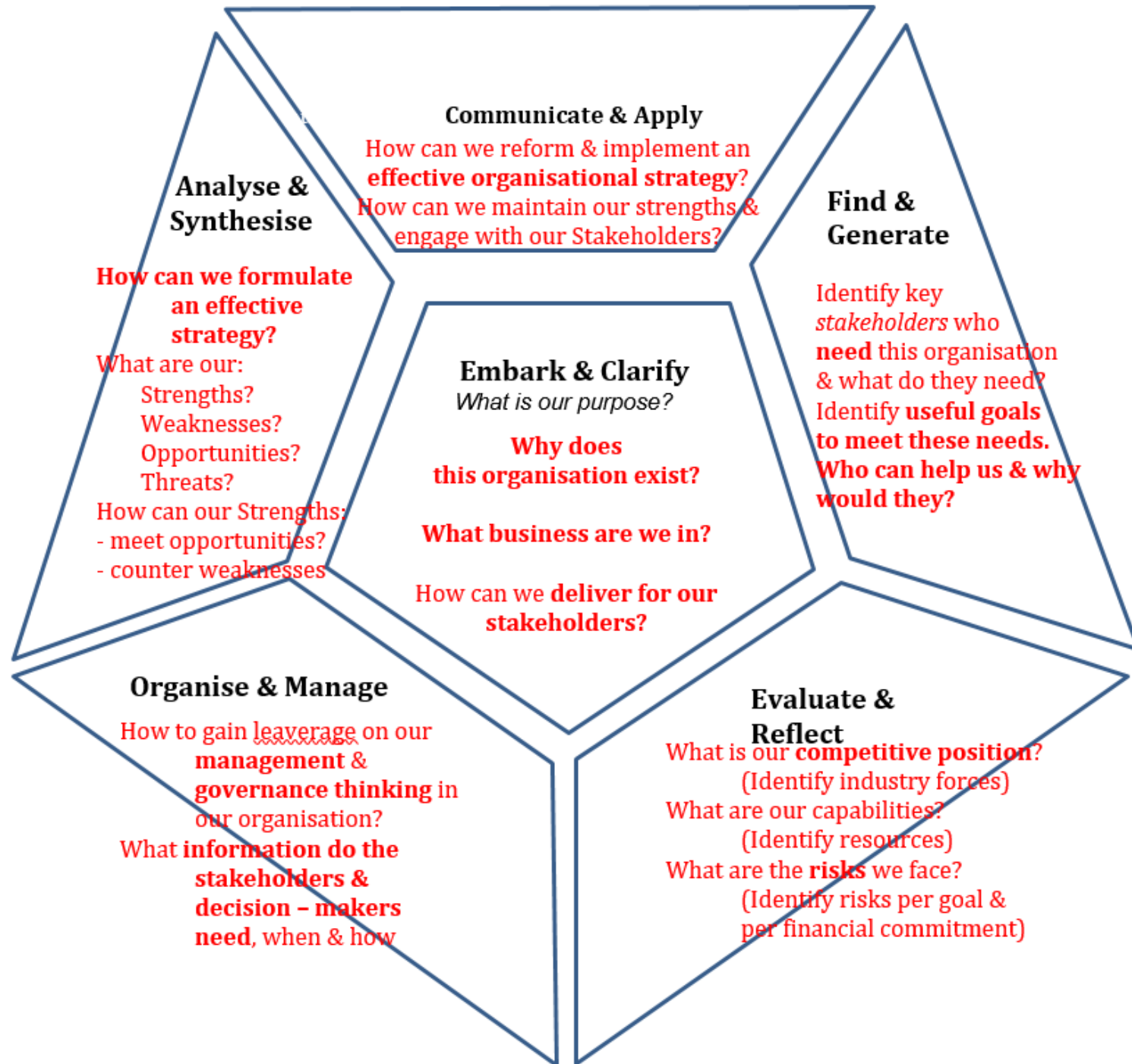
" I feel like I am setting myself up for some success with their support. The mentor has already spoken ... about using my skills elsewhere and {my boss} has agreed."

"The GAS process, which largely in my mind, has been a useful one and writing it down on paper with the variations of what success does or does not look like has been a good way of thinking about measures of success.

I look forward to your feedback."

CASE 2: Example: Goal 2 = To apply RSD /evidence based decision making in reviewing strategic issues within 12 months (by Oct 2016)

Level of Expected OUTCOME	Rating	Behavioural Statement of EXPECTED OUTCOMES: GOAL 2
MUCH MORE than EXPECTED	+2	Apply RSD level 5: Open Collect and record self-determined information/data from self-selected sources, choosing or devising an appropriate methodology with self-structured guidelines. Evaluate information/data and inquiry process rigorously using self-generated criteria based on experience, expertise and the literature. Reflect insightfully to renew others' processes.
MORE than EXPECTED	+1	Apply RSD level 4: Self-initiated data collection and research/problem solving choosing appropriate self-determined criteria developed within structured guidelines. Evaluate information/data and the inquiry process comprehensively using self-determined criteria developed within structured guidelines. Reflect insightfully to refine others' processes (e.g., re-develop a previously structured research proposal for trial of new initiative with your own adaptation of criteria and methods and conduct the research/data collection).
EXPECTED Outcome	0	Apply RSD level 3: Scaffolds placed by top management shape data collection and research/problem solving with criteria related to the aims of the inquiry. Reflect insightfully to improve own processes used (e.g., Organise information/data using recommended structures. Manage self-determined processes with multiple possible pathways).
LESS than EXPECTED	-1	Apply RSD level 2: Bounded Research with criteria given by top management (e.g., Collect and record required information/data using a prescribed methodology from prescribed source/s in which the information/ data are not clearly evident).
MUCH LESS Than EXPECTED	-2	Apply RSD Level 1: Prescribed Research with simple prescribed criteria given by top management (e.g., Collect and record required information or data using a prescribed methodology from a prescribed source in which the information/data are clearly evident).



Limitations

Limited resources

This is an unfunded research project undertaken by the author, who is involved in short supplementary workshops on research skills involved in MBA strategy courses and capstone projects.

Self-selection biases –students have selected themselves

Researcher biases

This research was conducted by the Program Director of the MBA program at UniSA so there are obvious inherent biases, including:

- Conflict of interest
- Implication of power over students.

Research data morbidity

As with all longitudinal data collection there are continuity problems which are exacerbated by the limitations identified above.

DISCUSSION

Despite the limited sample and data available; current indications support the author's previous anecdotal data over several years – **it seems so far that:**

- ➔ As with SA SES execs (Sharp 2014) students say GAS can be useful for MBAs;
- ➔ Support for Willison's work - RSD can be useful for MBAs;
- ➔ The RSD Pentagon adapts well to a model to facilitate strategic thinking
- ➔ Too early to judge use of e-Portfolio....

These findings are shared with you as an opportunity for dialogue on:

- how to improve the engagement and experience of MBA students in their capstone project and WIL generally.
- the usefulness of GAS to facilitate student engagement in evaluating their own learning outcomes
- the usefulness of the RSD pentagon to facilitate student engagement in broadening their (strategic) thinking

Hopefully we can collaborate to further the associated MELTs