GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY
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CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Commercial Employment Enterprises

BOND UNIVERSITY

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

ACPET
AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR
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UNIVERSITY
OF SOUTHERN
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Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Employability for-profit business endeavours

The 10 other case studies in the series are on the themes of:

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- Focus on graduate attributes
- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

The project took place between January and November 2014. The study was designed to investigate, disseminate and enhance graduate employability. Knight and Yorke (2004) are the world-renowned authorities on graduate employability. They define employability as, "a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations" (p. 9). In a large part, the role and function of these case studies is to make the implicit strategies and supports for employability explicit for heightened sustainable impact.

Throughout the project, four stakeholder groups have been fully consulted:

- Graduates
- Students
- Employers
- Educators/Career Development Centre professionals

The project data was collected through surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups.

- 1500 surveys were distributed. 821 surveys were submitted for a 55 per cent response rate. 705 surveys were fully completed.
- 86 in-depth interviews/focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed and analysed.

This case study on the role of commercial employment enterprises is based on interviews and focus groups with 11 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, educators, career development professionals and employers. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate employability has traditionally been the sphere of higher education providers, employers and the students/graduates seeking employment. However, as employment outcomes tighten and employers/higher education providers seek to maximise the effectiveness of their investment in strategies, it is important to consider the potential for other organisations to contribute to employability.

An important consideration in this regard is the relatively recent emergence of commercial *for-profit* enterprises offering services to graduate job seekers and/or employers. These typically take one of two forms or a combination of both. Most commonly, the services involve a range of psychometric testing to identify key strengths of individual job seekers measured against employability skills – this information can then assist the individual to identify and communicate those strengths and/or identify suitable career paths. Employers can use the tools to improve their recruitment strategies and identify internal staff development needs based on understanding the profiles of graduate employees.

An alternative model of employability services has been to provide a platform enabling students/graduates to connect with community organisations that provide internship opportunities. The strong relationship between students' exposure to the *real world* through internships and subsequent employability provides a rationale for engagement with these services.

Both models represent an expansion of available resources in the context of employability. These commercial organisations have employability as their sole or major focus and so working with them presents opportunities for higher education providers, employers and students/graduates to maximise their own resources in this area. With appropriate understanding, this has the potential to increase the total resource pool in the area of employability which is important in the resource-constrained higher education sector.

Case study aims and objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees in the context of services provided by commercial employment enterprises.

Keywords

- Commercial organisations
- Expansion of resources
- Employability skills
- Self-awareness
- Cooperation across sectors

A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY DEVELOPMENT BY A COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISE

**Hollie Gordon,
Founder of Milaana**

I am passionate about business as a tool for high impact and sustainable social change. Some call this social enterprise. I also believe in the potential of this generation and wish to ensure they have the opportunities and support to realise this potential. As an accidental entrepreneur I am extremely fortunate to be able to combine these two areas so early in my career.

It was during a year of solo travelling to various communities, particularly in India, that these passions for community engagement and social entrepreneurship surfaced. I returned to Australia to study a Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of International Relations at Bond University and, while learning more about the intersection of these worlds, I thought I would have to *do my time* in the financial sector before I had the skills and resources to make a meaningful contribution. In my final year, I was seeking work experience opportunities where I could truly learn and where my volunteered time could go to something worthwhile. What I found was a severe lack of structured opportunities for students, leaving many vulnerable for exploitation. At the same time, from my local volunteering experiences, I saw some of the serious problems we have in our own *backyard*. I saw that the community organisations working to address these issues are increasingly under-resourced and need to engage the next generation of ideas, technology and people for their sustainability.

It was so simple. Students and community organisations have SO much to offer each other, but just needed a better way to connect. I founded 'Milaana' to address this gap in July 2013. Milaana means 'to connect' in Hindi and www.milaana.org connects students with projects offered by community organisations for *Impact Placements*. Students search and apply for opportunities that combine the skills they wish to develop with the causes they care about. When I graduated in February 2014, I launched Milaana fulltime. I was able to go straight into Bond's Incubate/Accelerator Program, during which time we ran a crowd-funding campaign to build up the platform. We have established an initial presence in Brisbane and Sydney and are looking to take the platform national in 2015 with our *1,000 impact placements* campaign. The aim is then to be running international pilots where the issues we are addressing are far greater and encouraging local students to solve local issues in both developed and developing economies. As we grow, I hope Milaana can be an example of what today's bright and big-hearted students are capable of and I am most proud of the 20+ amazing young people that have joined our team since its beginning. From a worried final-year student just 18 months ago, I feel fortunate to have had an idea at the right time and I aim to make the most of this.

Hollie has been selected as a 'Young Challenger' for both the 2013 and 2014 Global Social Business Summits, is a member of the World Economic Forum Sydney Global Shapers Hub and was an Australian Delegate at the G20 Young Entrepreneurs Alliance Summit.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOR-PROFIT BUSINESS ENDEAVOURS?

For-profit business endeavours, or commercial employment enterprises, working in the employability realm, provide a potential bridge between students/graduates and employers. They offer services that include assisting students/graduates identify their strengths, and employers identify their needs. Leveraging their independence from higher education providers and employers, they add a unique perspective to the tools available for use by all stakeholders to increase knowledge and awareness of key employability strategies and skills.

Approach to achieve aims and objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.**

  Accessing the services of for-profit business endeavours, in conjunction with higher education provider services (e.g. career development services) can provide another avenue for students/graduates to identify their key strengths and effectively articulate them within job applications/entrepreneurial activities. These include identification that academic performance does not provide the full picture that a graduate should be portraying: "Have you had work experience; have you done part time work; have you done volunteering; have you done a range of other things and have you done pretty well still at university?"

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

  Awareness of, and/or partnering with, for-profit business endeavours provides higher education providers with opportunities to extend their capacities in employability-focused activities. All higher education providers operate within resource constraints. Awareness of, or partnerships with, these services have the potential to maximise deployment of limited resources by enabling the reduction of duplication. Higher education providers can then focus on areas that can only be addressed within the institution, for example, embedding strategies within curriculum and co-curricular activities rather than more generic employability strategies. With effective communication, external providers may result in increased communication and understanding between higher education providers and employers.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees in the context of services provided by for-profit business endeavours.**

  Engaging with for-profit business endeavours in the context of employability has the potential to provide employers with an increased understanding of their recruitment strategies. This may include an enhanced ability to understand what makes the organisation unique and what they share with other organisations rather than an isolated view of employment criteria: "We [the employer] are unique, we're different and you need to understand us", but "when you actually dig below the surface they [the employers]

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOR-PROFIT BUSINESS ENDEAVOURS?

are all asking the same fundamental things [of applicants]: can you actually hold a conversation, can you actually present yourself well, can you work well as part of a team?" This increased understanding of employers' context in the broader employability framework may also facilitate understanding of what they most need from graduate employees, and use of this knowledge to provide supports for new employees based on awareness of strengths and weaknesses in the context of the organisation's goals.

Challenges

"The solution needs to be an integrated ecosystem. The educators, students, job seekers, employers, recruiters, policy makers, researchers, have all got to start integrating and connecting and it is a massive challenge from a data and research perspective because there is so much variability and so much complexity in that."

Major challenges in the involvement of for-profit business endeavours in graduate employability involve capacity for cross-sectoral engagement and dialogue. Each of the major sectors involved (higher education providers, employers and for-profits) are invested in their own spheres and strategies and there are resource limits to their capacity to reach beyond these and establish meaningful partnerships.

The perceived by some disconnect between what higher education providers teach and what employers want/need may potentially be bridged by the for-profit services. Their independent perspective and additional resources may add to the employability strategies that higher education providers and employers can use to improve outcomes for all stakeholders – including students/ graduates seeking to use their degree for employability.

Successes

A multi-stakeholder approach involving educators, employers and, where available, commercial employment enterprises, may enrich and maximise capacity.

"Most students vastly underestimate what they are capable of."

"So in terms of mentoring from the professors, that was really fantastic and they were just opening doors and sort of providing continuing support. If you show initiative and you show your passion about the area, then the professors are just so eager to help you."

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH FOR-PROFIT BUSINESS ENDEAVOURS?

What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Fresh perspectives
- Expanded resource pool
- Graduate's ability to articulate employability strengths
- Increased career satisfaction through informed decision-making
- Stakeholder focus on key strength areas

How has the approach developed employability?

Interaction between commercial employment enterprises, higher education providers, students/graduates and employers is in its infancy. The ability to embrace another sphere of operations is challenging but the consequent addition of resources to the graduate employability space has the potential to expand capacity, maximise effectiveness of current strategies and support development of new strategies. "A good third party provider understands the issues and can provide a solution for the primary clients; that actually works quite well."

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Research the available options for identifying and communicating the skills/experiences you have that may increase your employability.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"It may not be the 'straight in the face' skills they are trying to get you to perform, but over time you will develop your presentation skills and your communication skills. It is not a crash course, rather it is slowly building your skills over three years and then in third year with professional development you will recognise 'oh, I have already been over that in my degree.'"

"It is not just about learning, lectures and doing exams, it is about building your self-confidence, building your professional ability."

Do not leave thinking about your employment options and employability skills until late in your degree – start early and regularly revisit your strategies.

FROM A STUDENT:

"During my second year at university I started doing some volunteering and I think I definitely developed some skills through that experience. But it was in my second to last year when I had to fill-out graduate applications a year before finishing that I was shocked; looking for internships when you do not have the experience. I had no chance on those applications because I was doing my thing, I was studying, and I was enjoying living."

Challenge yourself to take full advantage of opportunities to learn and expand your skill set.

FROM A STUDENT:

"I noticed myself change so much at the end of my placement compared to when I commenced. At the beginning of the placement I was very scared of answering the phone in the office and talking to my boss, but by the end of it I was very confident in what I was doing and I noticed that my grades got massively better after my placement."

Do not restrict the settings in which you seek to gain experience – be open to what may seem to be alternative options.

FROM A GRADUATE:

"I knew that if you went to a small company you would have a lot of experience and I think there are fewer rules; smaller organisations are much more open to what you can do. I was able to talk to my bosses about where I wanted to go next, which I enjoyed, and I was mentored while I was there."

ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

Recognise the importance of connectivity and the networks that may be available to you through your alma mater's alumni association or equivalent.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"I think just helping students find ways to get out there into the real world, and see what it is like, to hear from people who are there and from other *young* people who are there doing it, and maybe even providing more mentorship between recent alumni and the current university students."

Ensure that you understand yourself and the range of skills/experiences you have to offer and that you can clearly describe these to a potential employer or leverage them to create entrepreneurial opportunities for yourself. Use the full range of services to assist you in this – the educators who taught you, career development services offered by your alma mater, employer websites/job vacancy postings describing what they seek and the range of commercial employment services.

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Be explicit about teaching employability as an important and valued part of a degree.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"You have to actually teach students what employability is because it is everywhere and you think they know what it is, when maybe they don't know. Maybe they haven't seen a model of what employability looks like; you've actually got to show them that and engage them with that."

Embedding important elements of professional development within degree content and assessment will facilitate students' understanding of themselves and enhance their ability to communicate their skills and abilities.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"The final piece of decision making is an action plan. Where am I now? What do I need to do next? Have them reflect on what they've been doing in the module and what they've learnt about themselves – what they've learnt about the job market. What do they need to do next in terms of an action plan? Is it I need to go on a course for this or I need to do more research about finding out about that? We get them to do that as a reflective account."

Consider strategies that are relevant to a particular degree, that encourage students to use prior knowledge and identify their strengths and weaknesses. These strategies may include those that promote active learning, incorporating real-world scenarios through problem solving.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"It makes you think, ask questions and communicate, activate prior knowledge so we're asking them to pull back on what they've learnt already in their previous studies or previous year. We are asking them to use their information that is in their head rather than just what is there at the time and that's part of life. It tests and reinforces your understanding."

Ensure that each degree incorporates industry presence to facilitate students' understanding of what employment in relevant sectors involves and how this may vary. For maximum impact, weave this throughout the degree so that students recognise what they need to be doing early.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"Professional development is part of the course, especially in that final year, there is the professional development module which was really beneficial because we had different companies coming in. The companies told us what they wanted and the exact needs were very different between all the various companies."

ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

Understand your requirements for graduate employees and extrapolate this to the supports you need to provide to maximise their success within your organisation.

Do not approach this in isolation – take a sector-wide view and engage with other stakeholders including commercial employment enterprises to ensure your needs are understood and realistic.

FROM AN EDUCATOR:

"You actually have to invest a bunch of time up-front in actually defining employability and what you are looking for in terms of frameworks."

WHAT'S NEXT?
SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished through dedicating more financial and human resources to internships, placements and work experiences. In the survey research, the literature was systematically reviewed to derive strategies for which there was empirical evidence for positive impact on employability. Twelve strategies emerged (listed here in alphabetical order):

• capstone/final semester project

• careers advice and employment skill development

• extra-curricular activities

• graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement

• international exchange

• mentoring

• networking or industry information events

• part-time employment

• professional association membership/ engagement

• social media/networks

• volunteering/community engagement

• work experience/internships/placements

The survey questions were articulated as follows on the four stakeholder versions of the surveys.

• Students – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?

• Graduates – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?

• Higher Education Personnel – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

• Employers – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?

By a substantive margin, the strategy set to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

Work experience/internships/ placements

This strategy set was indicated on 74 per cent of student surveys, 74 per cent of graduate surveys and 87 per cent of employer surveys. It was selected on a minority of higher education personnel surveys. This difference between stakeholder groups was addressed in many of the 86 in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted after the surveys. All of the interviewed higher education personnel support the idea and value of work experience, internships and placements. However, these employability strategies are expensive and time consuming.

One of the strongest themes across the project was that more resources should be invested in work experience, internships and placements, in order to have a sustainable impact on graduate employability development. One important element of addressing the capacity of resource-constrained education and employment sectors to invest more resources into employability strategies is to expand the range of stakeholders (and therefore resources) involved. One avenue to achieve this is to engage with the focused expertise provided by commercial employment enterprises to leverage their expertise and knowledge rather than attempting to channel limited resources into duplicating those services.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading and Resources

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For further information and resources:

http://graduateemployability.com

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The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- How can employability strategies be weaved throughout the curriculum rather than isolated towards the end of program?

- What are effective strategies to inform students of the full range of employability supports within and beyond the higher education provider?

- How can sustainable engagement with the full range of employability stakeholders be effected within the curriculum to have meaningful impact on student employability?