

# Graduate Employability

How universities can improve  
students' graduate employability:  
Lessons from National OLT research



# DASSH

## A workshop for the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities 2015 Conference



**A**  
**Commissioned National  
Research Project Funded by**



**Australian Government**



Office for  
**Learning & Teaching**

# Project Team

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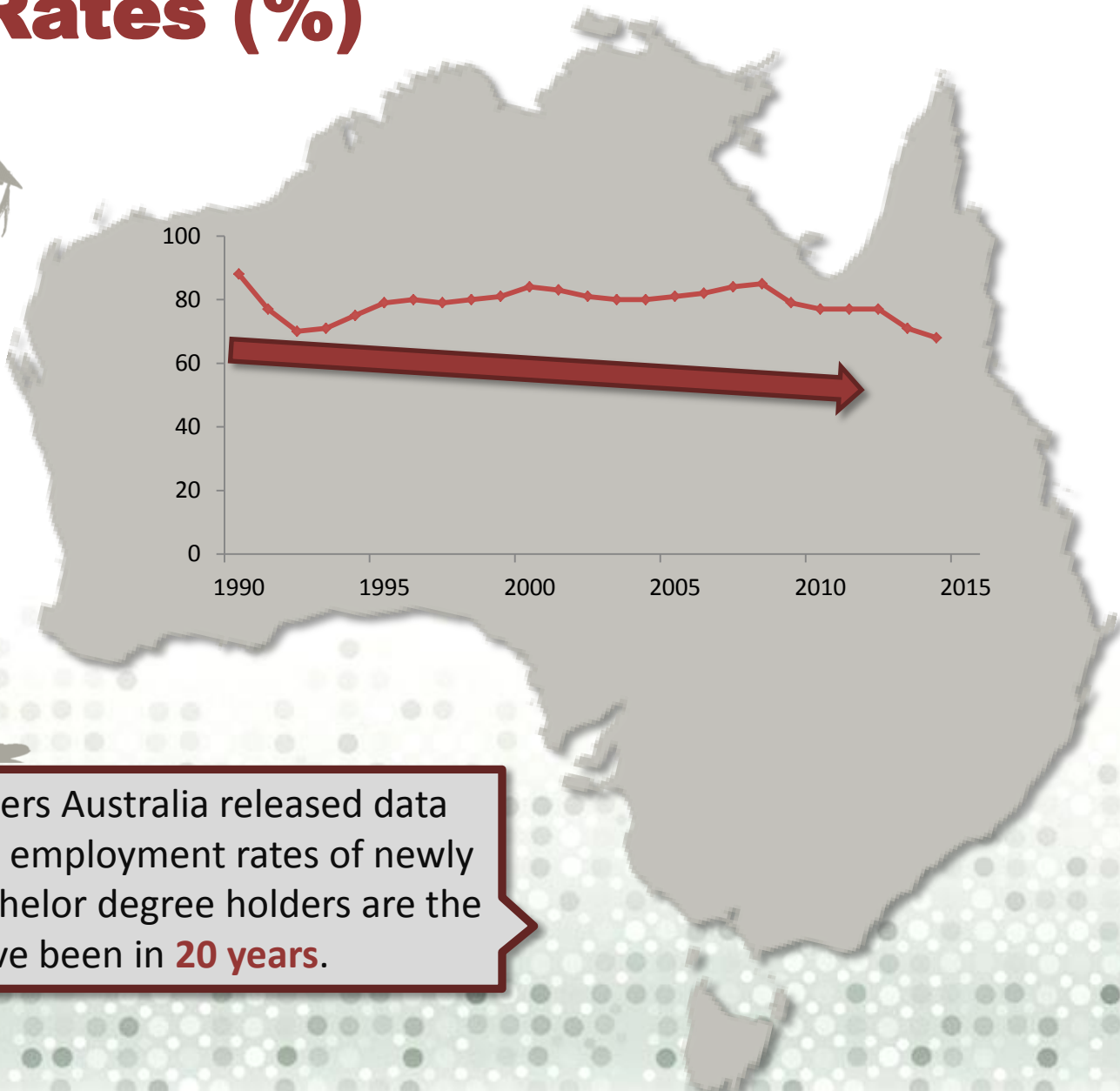
Grace Lynch, Garry Allan (*Evaluators*)  
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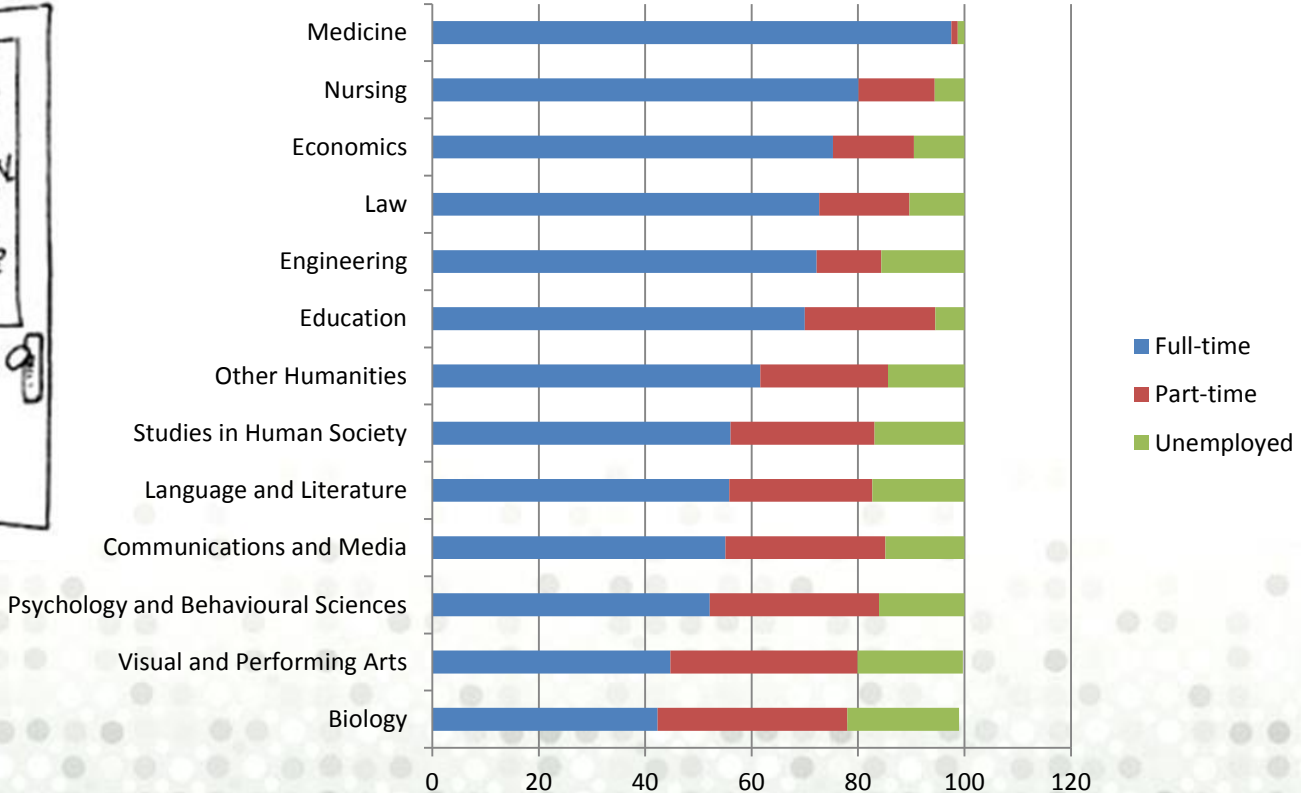
*...to all of the graduates, students,  
employers and educators  
who shared their strategies and  
success stories*

# Employment Rates (%)

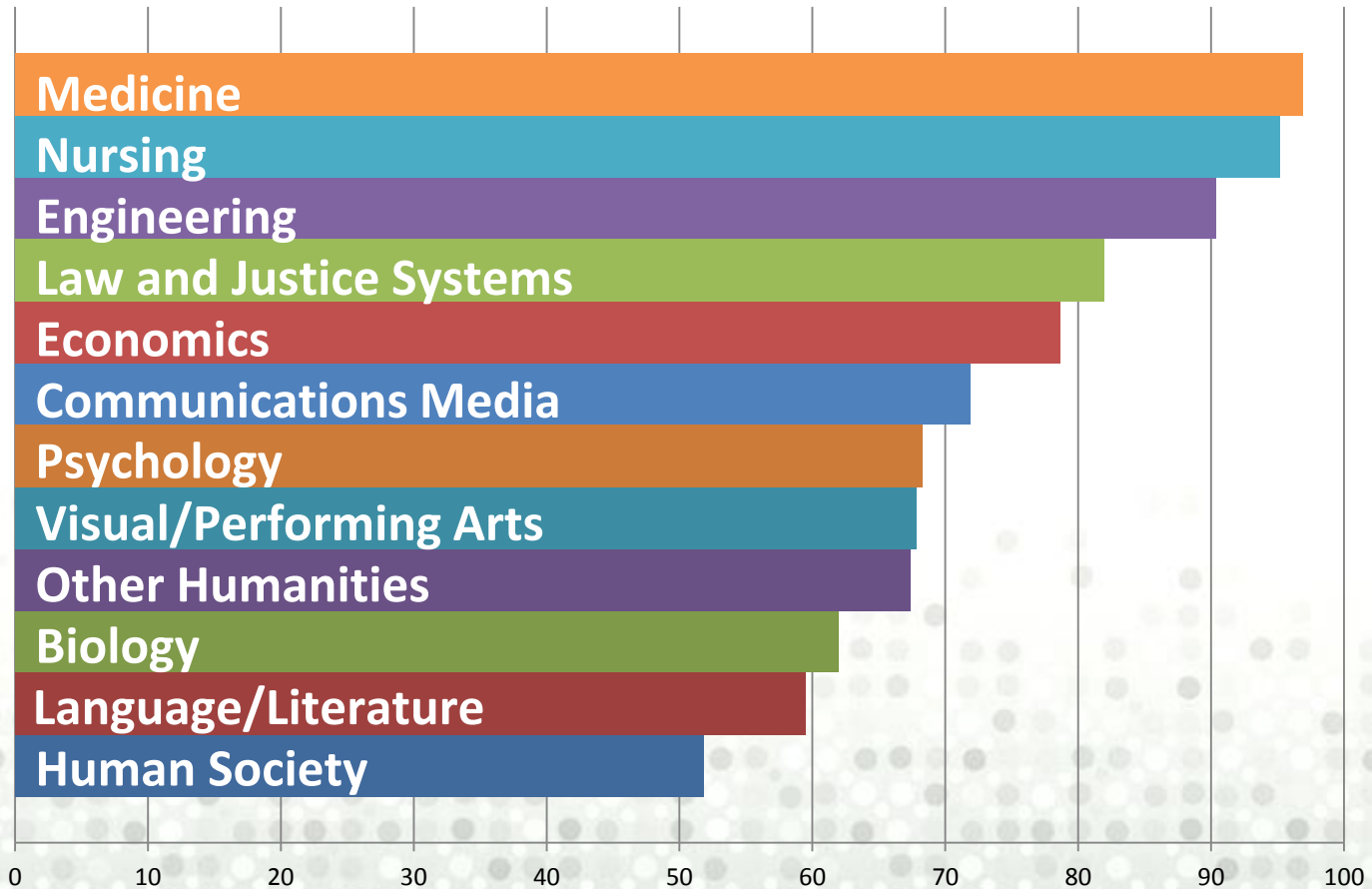


Graduate Careers Australia released data indicating that employment rates of newly graduated bachelor degree holders are the **worst** they have been in **20 years**.

# GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT RATES, 2014 (%)



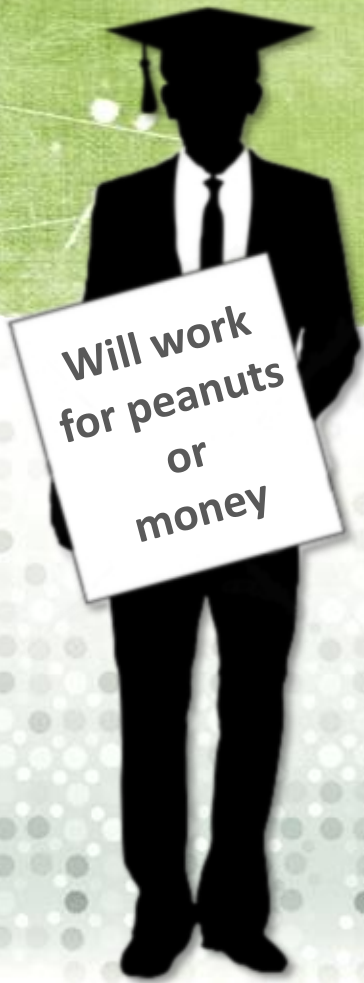
# Bachelor graduates in full time work who said that their field of study was at least somewhat important to their jobs, 2014 (%)





## The BIG Question

# *How do we increase* **GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY?**



*Definition of*

# GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY



## **Graduate Employability** means:

- Higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work
- Institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).



*What is*

# GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY



*To be employable once you have graduated from university means that you:*

- Are able to demonstrate soft **skills** (e.g. communication, problem solving) and career specific skills (e.g. computer software)
- Have accumulated **knowledge** and can apply information in the workplace
- Show a positive **attitude** of energy, commitment and contribution



*What is*

# GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY



*To be employable once you have graduated from university means that you:*

- Know yourself, your profile, your desired career path and be able to positively **present yourself**; and
- Leverage a developed **network** to connect you with career opportunities

Identity



# Our RESEARCH

147 people



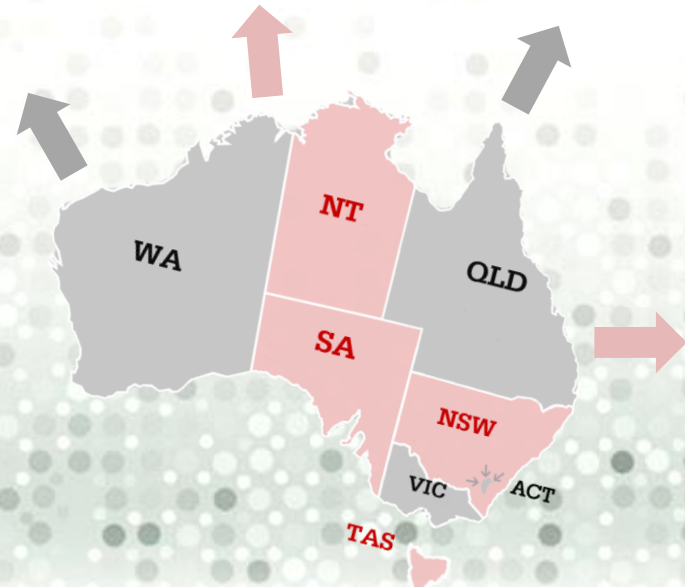
700+ Surveys

4 Stakeholder Groups  
Employers Educators  
Graduates Students

8 States/Territories and some International

80+

In-depth Interviews / Focus Groups



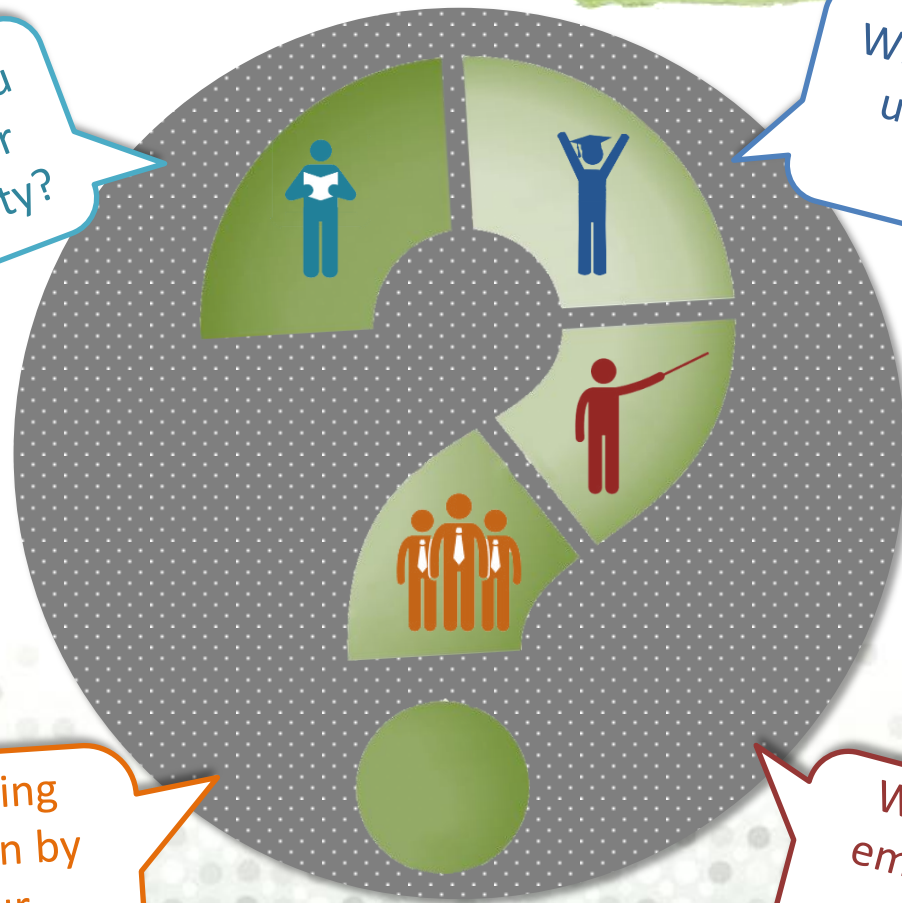
# Survey Questions About Strategies

What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?

What strategies did you use to improve your employability?

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

Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?



# Strategies

Strategies	Students	Graduates	Educators	Employers
Capstone/Final semester project				
Careers advice & employment skill development	59%		64%	
Extra-curricular activities			65%	60%
International exchanges				
Mentoring				
Networking		52%	51%	
Part-time employment	53%	53%		
Portfolios, profiles & records of achievement				
Professional association memberships/engagement			54%	
Social media/networks				
Volunteering		50%		53%
Work experience/ internships/ placements	74%	74%		87%

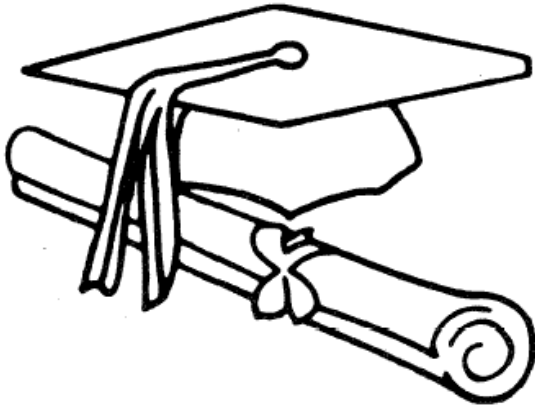


## **The overall findings of this project were that:**

- 1. There is evidence of gaps between the perspectives of students, graduates, employers and higher education personnel in how to approach the overall higher education experience for heightened employability**
- 2. Multiple stakeholders stated that the most employable graduates are those who have a broad-based experience, and are able to sell their own personal identity, brand and profile**
- 3. Transferable skills and a broad-based student experience are more important than the particular discipline of study for impacting employability**
- 4. Higher education personnel (private and public) believe they can bolster graduate employability by promoting/supporting extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and skill development (technical and transferable) through work experience, internships and placements and other types of employability strategies**
- 5. Students have a variety of needs, resources and capacities, such that extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and experiences may not be realistic and accessible to all**
- 6. There are barriers to employment, such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background that may override employability strategies and supports.**



# Results related to DASSH disciplines



**45%** of employers ticked one to four of the generalist disciplines (humanities, life sciences, computer science, visual/performing arts)

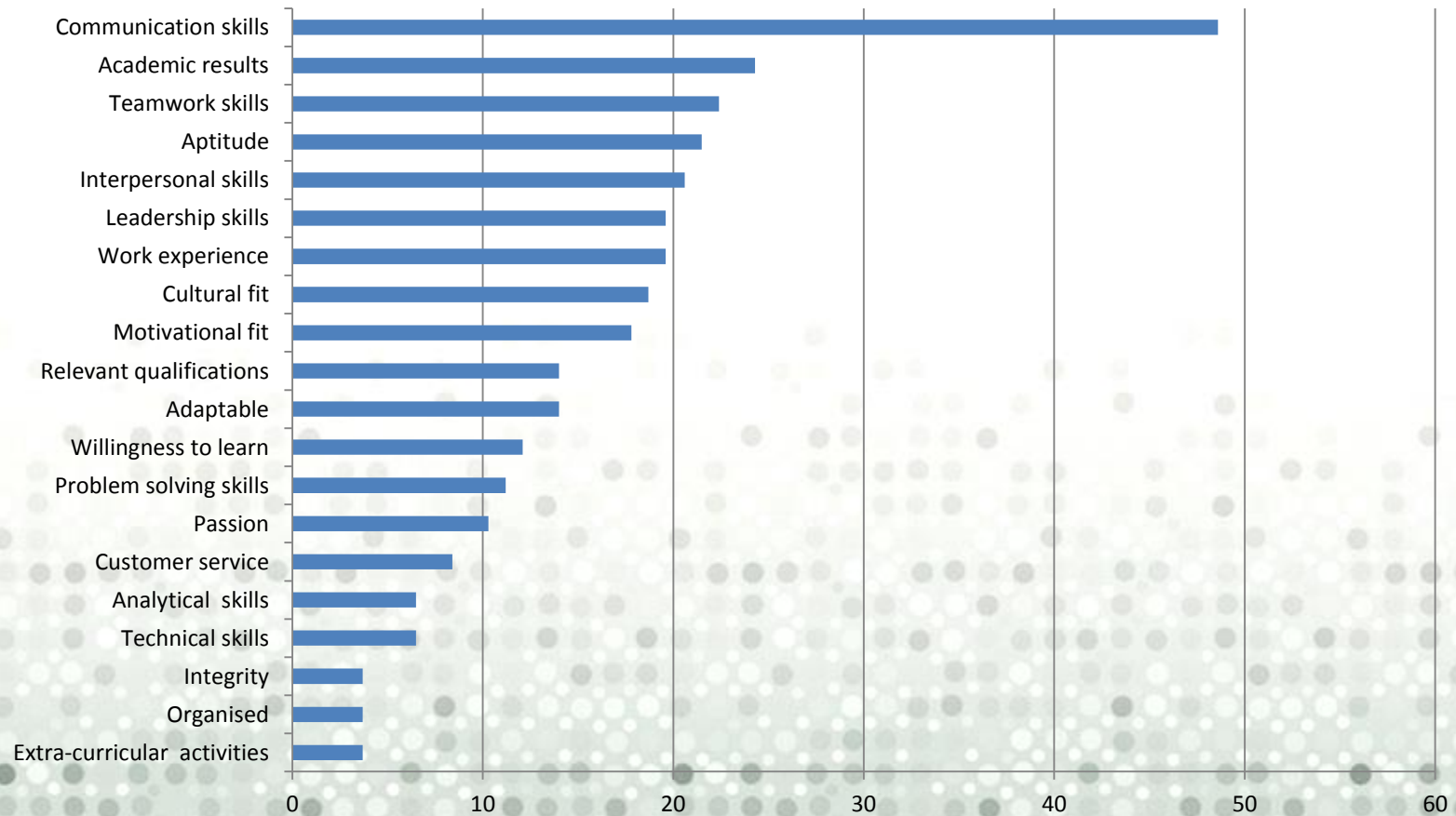


Employers were asked to tick the disciplines from which they have or are likely to employ graduates...

Discipline of study/work by stakeholder groups

Disciplines	Students	Graduates	Employers
Accounting	21%	5%	6%
Business		8%	
Construction			4%
Consulting			4%
Education	23%		4%
Law	15%	7%	
Nursing	19%		
Psychology	26%		
Social Sciences		5%	
Sport and Recreation			4%

# Most important selection criteria when recruiting graduates, 2014 (%)



for

# STUDENTS

- **Start early - in your first semester**
- **Participate in work experience, placements and internships**
- **Join extra-curricular (student societies, clubs, competitive sport)**
- **Do volunteer work (related to your career pathway)**
- **Get to know your professors and your career development centre personnel**



for

# GRADUATES

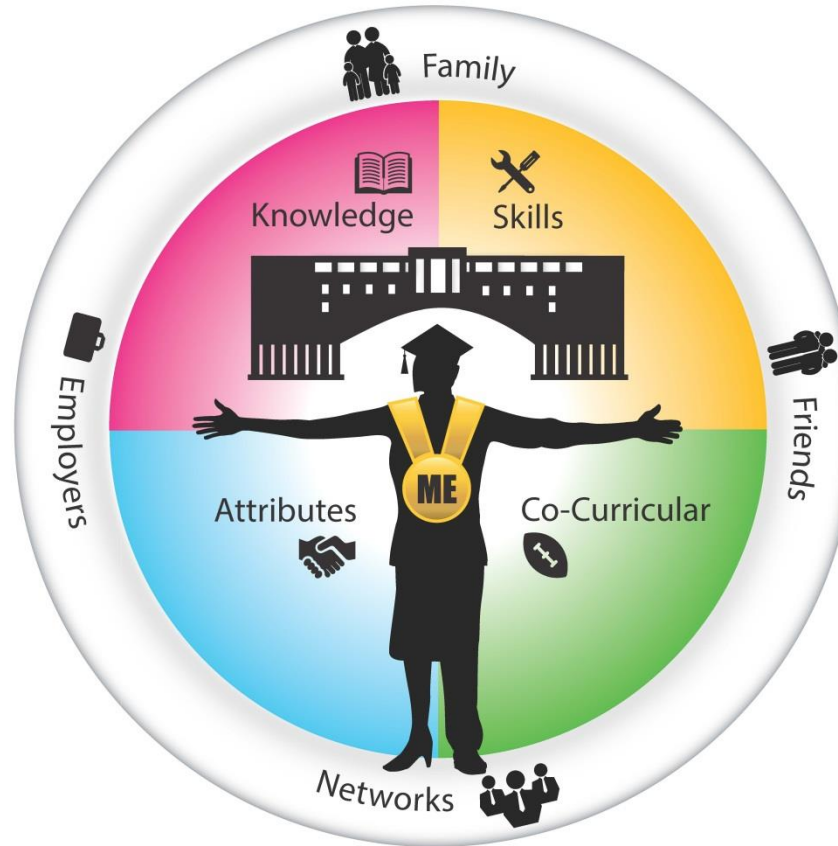


- **Less is more – choose a few prospective employers, do your research and tailor your application**
- **Edit, edit and edit again – particularly your online applications**
- **Participate in industry graduate initiatives when offered**
- **Know yourself and practice articulating / demonstrating your personal employability brand**
- **Remember that interviews are two-way. Do you fit the organisation and do they fit you?**

# Graduate employability framework

## Graduate Employability Framework

This framework is designed for students, graduates, employers, higher education academics and career development professionals based on the data from over 700 surveys and 85 interviews/focus groups. Support for the production of this framework has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this framework do not necessarily reflect their views.



Graduate Employability means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work.

# Graduate employability framework

## Graduate Employability Framework



Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work. Graduate employability has ten elements.



1) **A higher education degree** – the figure in the image is standing in the shape of a T. The body represents the specialisation of the degree. In order to be employable, the student/graduate extends oneself, reaching out for a broad-based and full experience.



2) **Respectable grades or levels of achievement in the degree** - grades are a factor in employability but study should not be pursued to the exclusion of other student experience.



3) **Knowledge** – employable graduates have a broad knowledge spectrum and the ability to apply that knowledge, including emotional intelligence.

4) **Career focus and goals** - whereas students are encouraged to be open-minded and widely pursue their options, focus and an intentional career pathway often advance employability.

5) **Identity** – the figure in the image is wearing a 'Me' medallion. This represents the central importance of identity. Successful graduates have confidence, defined career goals, explicit self-awareness and are able to communicate their employability profile to future employers.



6) **Match between industry employment vacancies and type of degree** – long-term hiring patterns should be considered when selecting a discipline.



7) **Internships/Work Experience** – students have pursued opportunities to experience the desired industry and network with employers and professional associates.

8) **Skills** – employable graduates are able to apply their knowledge and skills to work within their chosen industry and identify strategies to facilitate transferability to other workplaces.



9) **Attributes** – employability behaviours such as teamwork, resilience and flexibility are nurtured in the broader context of family, friends and community and reinforced in higher education.



10) **Co-curricular** – students have actively engaged in a broad-based variety of experiences (relative to the needs and resources of diverse students) such as sport, volunteer work and student leadership positions. Higher education has supported, embedded and acknowledged these relevant activities in the program of studies. This also gives students contact with a wide range of contacts, such as Career Development Professionals and Professional Bodies (represented by "Other Networks" on the diagram.)



Kinash, S., Crane, L., Judd, M.-M., Mitchell, K., McLean, M., Knight, C., & Dowling, D. (2015). Graduate Employability Framework. Supporting graduate employability from generalist disciplines through employer and private institution collaboration. [www.graduateemployability.com](http://www.graduateemployability.com)

for

# EMPLOYERS

- **Offer work experience, placements and internships**
- **Make yourself available to your local universities and/or online**
- **Prioritise the transition and adjustment of new employees / graduates. Assign a mentor**
- **Invite innovation and intra-preneurship**
- **Allow the opportunity for new employees to meet with senior management and to rotate between divisions**

for

# EDUCATORS

1. Support increased opportunities for student work experience, placements and internships.
2. Explicitly articulate the relevant graduate employability skills in the learning outcomes for every subject.
3. Design authentic assessment activities, aligned with industry practices, standards and approaches.
4. Know your disciplines' career options and outcomes and be explicit about career pathways.



for

# EDUCATORS

5. Make the learning experience about knowledge, skills and attributes.
6. Invite employers to engage.
7. Invite graduates to engage.
8. Explicitly teach students how to be employable.

# STAKEHOLDER ROLES

Each Stakeholder has roles to play:

## Students

Seek out and fully participate in employability initiatives

## Graduates

Be strong alumni and success story ambassadors for your alma mater

## Educators

Prioritise graduate employability as a goal and high-impact outcome of the student experience

## Employers

Welcome graduates and continue lifelong learning opportunities



# STAKEHOLDER ROLES

## University leadership and strategy:

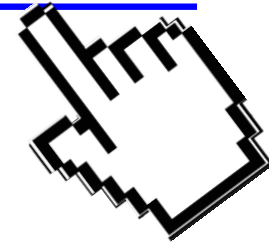
- Top priority  
*Second questions*
- Alignment with the strategic plan
- Strategy planning  
*Collaborative conversations*
- Industry engagement
- Collaboration with the Career Development Centre  
*Internal agents know your degrees and disciplines & embedded strategies*





**Contacts**

**[www.graduateemployability.com](http://www.graduateemployability.com)**



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**Madelaine-Marie Judd**

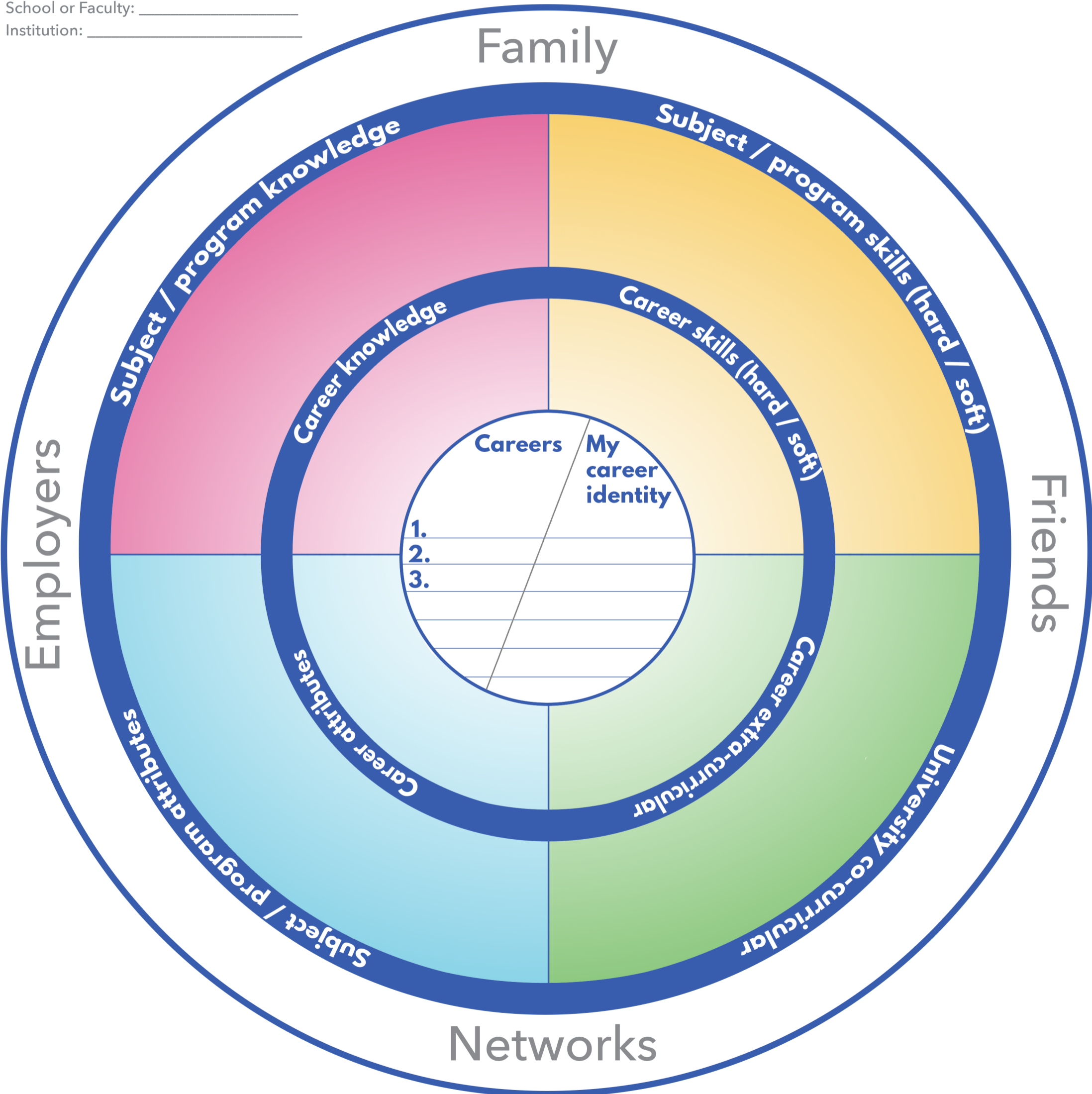
✉ [mjudd@bond.edu.au](mailto:mjudd@bond.edu.au)

# GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY IN THE EVERYDAY UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

This worksheet has been designed to support students and educators to improve graduate employability in the everyday university curriculum. Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. It also means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce. This worksheet has been designed based on the data from 700+ surveys and interviews/focus groups, with 147 people. Support for the production of this worksheet has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this framework do not necessarily reflect their views.

Student Instructions: [graduateemployability.com/worksheets/student](http://graduateemployability.com/worksheets/student) Staff Instructions: [graduateemployability.com/worksheets/staff](http://graduateemployability.com/worksheets/staff)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Role/Title: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Discipline: \_\_\_\_\_  
 School or Faculty: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Institution: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Graduate employability in the everyday university curriculum: Staff Worksheet Instructions**

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This worksheet has been designed to support students and educators to improve graduate employability in the everyday university curriculum. Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. It also means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce. This worksheet has been designed based on the data from 700+ surveys and interviews/focus groups, with 147 people. Support for the production of this worksheet has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this framework do not necessarily reflect their views. Suggested reference for this worksheet:

Kinash, S., Crane, L., Judd, M-M., Mitchell, K., McLean, M., Knight, C., & Dowling, D. (2015). Graduate Employability Worksheet. Supporting graduate employability from generalist disciplines through employer and private institution collaboration. Sydney, NSW: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. <http://GraduateEmployability.com>

### *Instructions for worksheet completion*

1. Fill-in the date, your name and other information at the top of the page.
2. In the centre circle, insert the titles of three careers commonly achieved by students from your program / discipline and something that makes your graduates distinctive in recruitment, or in other words, what might make them stand-out among other graduates and serve as a personal brand (My Career Identity).
3. Move outwards to the next circle; this circle is about knowledge, skills, attributes and extra-curricular in your graduates' intended career/s. In the pink section, write-in what they will need to know to be successful in those careers. In the yellow section, write-in the hard and soft skills that they will need to have mastered. In the blue section, write-in the attributes that you expect will serve them well (e.g. critical thinking, communications). In the green section, write-in the extra-curricular that employers will look-for in recruitment (e.g. volunteer work).
4. Move outwards to the next circle; this circle is about knowledge, skills, attributes and co-curricular your students are learning through your subject and/or program. In the pink section, write-in what key knowledge they will be learning; a good place to look for this information is in the learning outcomes. In the yellow section, write-in the hard and soft skills that they will be developing; a good place to look for this information is in your assessment guidelines. In the blue section, write-in the attributes that they will be developing through this subject / program (e.g. critical thinking, communications); good sources of this information are your program and/or university graduate attributes. In the green section, write-in the co-curricular activities that you and/or your university will be supporting your students to participate in and weave into their studies (e.g. will you be encouraging them to reflect on the skills they are gaining through sport or student society leadership as part of assessment?)
5. Reflect on the alignment between the career circle and the subject/program circle. Is there a good fit between the knowledge, skills, attributes and extra/co-curricular activities between the career and university studies? Are at least some of the types of tasks they are undertaking as assessment similar to the types of tasks they will be undertaking within their careers?
6. Move to the outermost circle. These are the other factors and people who are key to your students' employability. To the right or left of the word "family" and "friends" write-in your recommendations to your students about how to access the supports they will need. Next to "networks" and "employers" write-in any and all contacts you have that will support your students' employability efforts.

Engage with the other resources, ideas and videos throughout our website. <http://GraduateEmployability.com>

### ***Final Recommended Activity:***

**Email us the contact information from the top of the worksheet, as well as three to six specific goals for improving your students' graduate employability. Remember to commit to completion dates for these goals. e.g. By the end of the semester, I will have invited three employers as a guest-panel to provide industry advice to my students. In six-months we will follow-up with you to see whether you have actioned your goals. Email: Madelaine-Marie Judd [mjudd@bond.edu.au](mailto:mjudd@bond.edu.au)**

## **Graduate employability in the everyday university curriculum: Student Worksheet Instructions**

---

This worksheet has been designed to support students and educators to improve graduate employability in the everyday university curriculum. Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. It also means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce. This worksheet has been designed based on the data from 700+ surveys and interviews/focus groups, with 147 people. Support for the production of this worksheet has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this framework do not necessarily reflect their views. Suggested reference for this worksheet:

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<http://GraduateEmployability.com>

### *Instructions for worksheet completion*

1. Fill-in the date, your name and other information at the top of the page.
2. In the centre circle, insert the titles of three careers you might consider and something that makes you distinctive in recruitment, or in other words, what might make you stand-out among other graduates and serve as a personal brand (My Career Identity).
3. Move outwards to the next circle; this circle is about knowledge, skills, attributes and extra-curricular in your intended career/s. In the pink section, write-in what you will need to know to be successful in those careers. In the yellow section, write-in the hard and soft skills that you will need to have mastered. In the blue section, write-in the attributes that you expect will serve you well (e.g. critical thinking, communications). In the green section, write-in the extra-curricular that employers will look-for in recruitment (e.g. volunteer work).
4. Move outwards to the next circle; this circle is about knowledge, skills, attributes and co-curricular you are learning through your subject and/or program. In the pink section, write-in what key knowledge you will be learning; a good place to look for this information is in the learning outcomes. In the yellow section, write-in the hard and soft skills that you will be developing; a good place to look for this information is in your assessment guidelines. In the blue section, write-in the attributes that you will be developing through this subject / program (e.g. critical thinking, communications); good sources of this information are your program and/or university graduate attributes. In the green section, write-in the co-curricular activities that your university will be supporting you to participate in and weave into your studies (e.g. will you be reflecting on the skills you are gaining through sport or student society leadership as part of your assessment?)
5. Move again to the outer circle. These are the other factors and people who are key to your employability. To the right or left of the word "family" write-in how your family supports your employability. Likewise for friends. Next to "networks" write-in the people or associations you should be getting to know and leveraging for employability while in university. Do not forget your professors and career development centre personnel. Finally, next to "employers" write-in particular employers that you would like to research and ideas for getting to know them during your studies.

We recommend that you return to this sheet, refining, revising and adding-to frequently throughout your university studies. Engage with the other resources, ideas and videos throughout our website.

<http://GraduateEmployability.com>

### ***Final Recommended Activity:***

**Email us the contact information from the top of the worksheet, as well as three to six specific goals for taking charge of and improving your graduate employability. Remember to commit to completion dates for these goals. e.g. By the 30<sup>th</sup> October, I will have met with my university career centre to apply for an internship. In six-months we will follow-up with you to see whether you have actioned your goals.**

**Email: Madelaine-Marie Judd [mjudd@bond.edu.au](mailto:mjudd@bond.edu.au)**


1-26-2015

# 8 ways to enhance your students' graduate employability

Shelley Kinash

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# Teaching the Bond Way

## Issue 2: 8 ways to enhance your students' graduate employability



## 8 ways to enhance your students' graduate employability

by Dr Shelley Kinash, Director of Learning & Teaching, [skinash@bond.edu.au](mailto:skinash@bond.edu.au)  
26 January 2015

*Graduate Employability* means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

In the words of our Vice-Chancellor, Professor Tim Brailsford –

“At the University-level, we remain the only Australian university to require all of our undergraduate students to complete a series of core subjects aimed at producing leaders of tomorrow equipped with the generic skills so important to a successful career. The personal development opportunities offered through extra- [and co-] curriculum activities in the form of *Beyond Bond* set our graduates apart. We believe that this syllabus is a world-first in terms of its

reach and structure. *Beyond Bond* will assist in defining the uniqueness of a Bond graduate.”

One of our key actions at Bond, as articulated in our Strategic Plan, is to –

**Develop strategies to deliver superior graduate outcomes with a focus on globally relevant careers.**

Bond University is fortunate to have a stellar Career Development Centre that not only provides exemplar services and supports to our students, graduates and employers, but also provides sector leadership in employment development. However, the Career Development Centre cannot achieve Bond University’s high graduate employment targets on its own. It takes the concerted effort and collaboration of every Bond University staff member, student and graduate (in cooperation with employers) to ensure that each and every graduate achieves the highest quality graduate outcomes.

### **Bond University – Leader in Graduate Employability Research**

In December 2013, the Bond University Office of Learning and Teaching, the Faculties of Society and Design, and Health Sciences and Medicine, and the Career Development Centre were together awarded a national commissioned project grant through the Australian Government, Office for Learning and Teaching. In February 2015, the final report was submitted.

Kinash, S., Crane, L., Judd, M-M., Mitchell, K., McLean, M., Knight, C., Dowling, D., & Schulz, M. (2015). *Supporting graduate employability from generalist disciplines through employer and private institution collaboration*, report prepared for the Office for Learning and Teaching, Australian Government. <http://graduateemployability.com>

This project was commissioned by the Australian government based in part on 2013 survey data released by Graduate Careers Australia, resulting in the key finding that graduate employability rates are the lowest they have been in twenty years. Graduates from degrees without clearly defined career pathways experienced the lowest employability rates; these degrees are humanities, computer science, life science and visual/performing arts. The achieved aims of the Bond-led project were to:

- achieve a greater clarity on the issues, challenges and contexts of graduate employability;
- identify and review the strategies that have been successfully used to address these challenges;
- create opportunities for the diverse stakeholder groups to share their perspectives; and
- promote strategies that may be used by the various stakeholders to collaborate on improving graduate outcomes.

The universities/organisations partnering in this learning and teaching research project were:

- Bond University (lead)
- James Cook University
- University of Southern Queensland
- Australian Council for Private Education and Training

The Project Team was comprised of:

- Associate Professors Shelley Kinash and Linda Crane (Co-Leaders)
- Madelaine-Marie Judd (Project Manager)
- Professor Sally Kift (Critical Friend)
- Associate Professor Cecily Knight (JCU)
- Professor David Dowling (USQ)
- Kirsty Mitchell (General Manager, Bond Career Development Centre)
- Matthew McLean (Bond University Graduate)

The project activities included: reviewing the literature; surveying students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers (705 valid surveys received); conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups (147 participants); and hosting a multi-stakeholder national graduate employability symposium (150 delegates).

## *Overall Results*

The overall findings of this project were that:

- there is evidence of gaps between the perspectives of students, graduates, employers and higher education personnel in how to approach the overall higher education experience for heightened employability;
- multiple stakeholders stated that the most employable graduates are those who have a broad-based experience, and are able to sell their own personal identity, brand and profile;
- transferable skills and a broad-based student experience are more important than the particular discipline of study for impacting employability;
- higher education personnel (private and public) believe they can bolster graduate employability by promoting/supporting extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and skill development (technical and transferable) through work experience, internships and placements and other types of employability strategies;
- students have a variety of needs, resources and capacities, such that extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and experiences may not be realistic and accessible to all; and
- there are barriers to employment, such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background that may override employability strategies and supports.

*Co-curricular Activities* have similarities and differences with extra-curricular activities. Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities mean student recreational and/or leisure pursuits that take place outside of regular curriculum or program of disciplinary learning outcomes. These activities are pursued beyond the classroom and/or online learning. Activity examples include university sport, club/society membership and student leadership. Whereas extra-curricular activities are separate and apart from the formal

learning program, higher education institutions align co-curricular activities with formal schooling so that such activities are part of the overall learning experience. Co-curricular activities are designed to work in conjunction with the discipline curriculum to support employable graduates.

### *Key Findings regarding Employability Strategies*

A literature review revealed empirical evidence for a positive relationship between twelve employability strategies and graduate employment. The twelve strategies in alphabetical order by the keywords are: *capstone*/final semester projects; *careers* advice and employment skill development; engaging in *extra-curricular* activities; *international* exchanges; *mentoring*; attending *networking* or industry information events; *part-time* employment; developing graduate profiles, *portfolios* and records of achievement; *professional association* membership/engagement; using *social media*/networks; *volunteering*/community engagement; and *work experience*/internships/placements. Respondents from four stakeholder groups were asked to tick relevant strategies from the list in response to the respective questions:

- *Students* – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- *Graduates* – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?
- *Employers* – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?
- *Higher Education Personnel* (educators & career development professionals) – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

Survey responses were plotted by stakeholder group. The percentage of respondents who ticked each of the listed employability strategies in response to the respective survey questions is indicated on Table One. Where 50% or higher of the respective stakeholder group ticked each strategy, the figure has been highlighted on the table through bolding and shading. Seven of the graduate employability strategies (as shown on Table One) were ticked by the majority of respondents to this survey. Support for these strategies was reiterated throughout the interviews and focus groups.

Table 1: Supported Employability Strategies

Strategies	Students	Graduates	Higher Education	Employers
Careers Advice	59%	47%	64%	28%
Extracurricular	48%	47%	65%	60%
Networking	49%	52%	51%	40%
PT Work	53%	53%	36%	38%
Prof Assocs	29%	37%	54%	34%
Volunteering	47%	50%	48%	53%
Work Experience	74%	74%	40%	87%

Survey analysis revealed perspective gaps between the four stakeholder groups as to what strategies improve graduate employability.

- *Part-time work* - Whereas the majority of students and graduates ticked this strategy, it was left un-ticked by the majority of employers and higher education personnel.
- *Extra-curricular activities* - The majority of employers and higher education personnel ticked this strategy, and it was left un-ticked by the majority of students and graduates.
- *Internships, placements and work experience* – Only 40% of surveyed higher education personnel ticked this set of strategies, versus 74% and higher for other groups. Follow-up interviews revealed almost unanimous belief in this approach to employability across stakeholder groups, including higher education personnel. The strong majority of interviewees added the proviso that unless there are more financial/human resources, higher education cannot fully support these strategies.

### *Key Findings regarding Graduate Employability Themes*

Eleven key themes emerged through the surveys and were developed through the interviews and focus groups. An extensive case study was written for each. A brief description of the key finding for each theme is provided below.

1. *Multi-national corporations* – Graduate employment through multi-national corporations offers the unique work-based learning experience of formal graduate development programs, which are highly esteemed by project participants.
2. *Competitive sport, athletes & employability* – It was the experience of project participants that students who engage in extra-curricular activity, such as sport, experience advantages in graduate employability.
3. *Entrepreneurship* – Project participants expressed a belief that entrepreneurship is an increasingly viable and valuable career pathway for higher education graduates. Project participants stated that higher education support of entrepreneurship is a productive response to changing traditional employment vacancies.
4. *Private institutions* – The importance of establishing strong links with industry through the adoption of both formal and informal approaches was articulated as a key to enhancing graduate employability. Project participants expressed a belief that private institutions are providing leadership through example in this domain.
5. *Career development centres* – The experience of many higher education institutions, as expressed by project participants, is that students visit career development centres too late in their program of studies. Project participants shared examples of higher education institutions strategically embedding career development supports throughout the student learning experience.
6. *Indigenous employment* – Quality learning, teaching and employment outcomes of indigenous students were key concerns of project participants. A salient theme was that heightened employability of indigenous graduates can only be realised when community stakeholders authentically work collaboratively to build initiatives.
7. *Commercial employment enterprises* – Project participants stated that for-profit and fee-for-service career supports can support institutions and/or individual graduates to heighten employability outcomes.

8. *Government* – According to project participants, government departments and agencies are significant employers of Australian graduates. Project participants articulated the importance of preparing students for recruitment and application processes unique to government positions.
9. *Emerging careers* – Project participants observed new careers emerging from technological innovation and change. They articulated the importance of preparing students for careers that do not yet exist, or are not in their fully evolved form.
10. *Generalist disciplines* – Project participants stated that generalist disciplines lead to a broad range of graduate career options. They expressed a belief that generalist disciplines are a viable option for students/graduates.
11. *Graduate attributes* – Project participants stated that graduate attributes are an important domain of the student learning experience, as employability appears to be advanced through a balanced developmental focus on attributes, knowledge, skills and communicated identity.

### *Recommendations for Future Action (Applicable to All Disciplines)*

The commissioned project team derived recommendations for students, graduates, higher education personnel (educators and career development professionals) and employers. Each has an important role to play in heightening graduate employment outcomes. These recommendations are evidence-based and emerging directly from the project activities of literature review, survey research (705 completed surveys), and interviews and focus groups (with 147 people).

#### *Students*

- Start early, such as in your first semester.
- Participate in work experience, placements and internships.
- Join in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (e.g. student societies, clubs and competitive sport).
- Get to know your professors and your career development centre personnel.



### *Graduates*

- Choose a few prospective employers, do your research and tailor your applications.
- Carefully proof read and edit all application forms.
- Participate in industry graduate initiatives when offered.
- Know yourself and practice articulating your personal employability brand.

### *Higher Education Personnel*

- Support increased opportunities for student work experience, placements and internships.
- Explicitly articulate the relevant graduate employability skills in the learning outcomes for every subject.
- Design authentic assessment activities, aligned with industry practices, standards and approaches.
- Know your disciplines career options and outcomes and be explicit about career pathways.

### *Employers*

- Offer work experience, placements and internships.
- Make yourself available to your local universities, educator providers and/or online.
- Prioritise and facilitate the transition and adjustment of new employees and graduates.
- Invite and value innovation and intrapreneurship.
- Support new employees to meet senior management and rotate them between divisions so they can better understand their role and your business.

### *Australian Government*

- Contribute to employability schemes to create more graduate vacancies.
- Provide further funding to higher education and employers (particularly to those who have particular needs such as small and medium enterprises) for internships, placements and work experience.

Engaging with graduate employability is an important means of making an outstanding contribution to student learning experiences and achieving the Bond University key action to –

**Develop strategies to deliver superior graduate outcomes with a focus on globally relevant careers.**

The rest of this article is written for teachers. Here are –

## **8 ways to enhance your students' graduate employability**

### **1. Support increased opportunities for student work experience, placements and internships.**

The number one graduate employability strategy-set emerging from education research, including the recent Bond-led national project, is *work experience, placements and internships*. Teacher networks provide the top means of identifying and securing these opportunities for students. Use your discipline/industry connections to build partnership opportunities for students. Stay in close contact with the Career Development Centre and make introductions. Suggest opportunities to students and recommend students to industry contacts. Maintain a flexible, personalised curriculum and program offering, such that students who optimise their education experience through work experience, placement and internship opportunities are not disadvantaged by missing required subjects or sequences. Take a co-curricular approach, whereby you explicitly direct students to draw-upon their work experiences to prepare assessment, graduate portfolios and other core learning experiences.

### **2. Explicitly articulate the relevant graduate employability skills in the learning outcomes for every subject.**

Every Bond University subject has a role to play in graduate employability. Deeply consider how this subject aligns with graduate employability and discuss with students at the beginning and throughout every semester. Ensure that at least one of the learning outcomes for every subject explicitly links to “graduate employability” helping students to put the puzzle pieces together for optimised graduate outcomes.

### **3. Design authentic assessment activities, aligned with industry practices, standards and approaches.**

In designing assessment, ask yourself whether the outcome, process and mode are equivalent to those currently being used in graduate destinations. For example, if most of your assessment items are paper-based multiple-choice exams, it is important to ask yourself whether employees in industries where your graduates are commonly employed typically work off-line and are required to recall fact-based information on a regular basis. If your assessment requires students to write a series of long, referenced research essays, it is important to ask whether the emphasis on this skill is adequately developing their possible industry-based skills such as creating press releases and short social media posts. While essays can be a necessary academic skill to prepare some students for future post-graduate work, is assessment adequately balanced such that multiple types of graduate outcomes are supported? Know the typical, common and/or range of destinations of your graduates. Analyse what types of work these graduates do and align your assessment accordingly.

### **4. Know your disciplines' career options and outcomes and be explicit about career pathways.**

When choosing a degree pathway, students and parents want to know about career outcomes, graduate pathways and success stories. It is important to stay in contact with graduates in order to inform yourself and your future students. However, this information is not only relevant to prospective or future students on a marketing basis, but to your current students. It is important to align lessons and assessment with industry trends and practices. Know what is happening *in the field* to ease the transition and properly prepare students for these outcomes. Employment is constantly changing and new opportunities emerging. In order to adjust curriculum and learning experiences accordingly, it is vital to stay connected to industry. Remember to regularly share this information with students and engage them in reflective conversation about graduate employability.

## **5. Make the learning experience about knowledge, skills and attributes.**

Before the printing press and then the proliferation of information via the internet, teachers were the rightful keepers of *the book* and thereby knowledge. It was appropriate that teachers read, recited or lectured long passages. They had the information and the students did not. The efficient means of passing on that knowledge was through verbal report to large groups of students. Now the students have access to most if not all of the necessary information through books, the web, video recordings and countless other sources. The teacher's role has shifted to one of helping students filter, evaluate and apply the information. Employers are vocal about the destructive nature of teachers who have continued teaching through long lectures followed by recall exams. Employers state that graduates are arriving with university HDs but limited technical skill and soft skill such as that demonstrated by professionally taking and adjusting to feedback, working in a legitimate team and appropriately interacting socially. Bond University intentionally uses the term *learning outcomes* to refer to what students will be able to demonstrate and *do* upon subject and then overall program completion. It is important that teachers know what graduates will need to be able to *do* and then design learning experiences such that these skills are developed through the program of studies.

## **6. Invite employers to engage.**

Throughout the Bond-led national research project on graduate employability, employers said that they want to engage with universities in order to develop quality employees. There are numerous ways in which to involve employers.

- Invite employers as guest speakers or panellists.
- Review your curriculum and assessment with employers and ask for their feedback on whether, when and how they use this knowledge and these skills in their careers. Explicitly present this information to students when introducing a new module and/or new assessment.
- Ask employers to grade/rank/evaluate/provide feedback on submitted assessment. For example, if you are assessing a tender proposal, ask a panel of employers to share which bid they would select and why.

- Develop case studies with employers and use these as learning materials with your students.

## **7. Invite graduates to engage.**

Likewise, invite graduates to come on-campus and/or online through iLearn and share their experiences with your current students. In addition to the engagement ideas as shared with respect to employers, consider also inviting a panel of graduates to address and answer questions from your students. Here are some questions that can be posed to graduates.

- What are you doing now?
- What is your advice for current students?  
About their studies?  
About their approach to seeking employment?  
About what they should be doing as students to ensure they are employable?
- What do you wish you would have known as a student that you know now as a graduate?
- How do you see your industry changing/evolving? What can students do to prepare?
- What knowledge, skills and attributes are key to your career?

## **8. Explicitly teach students how to be employable.**

Have conversations with students about employability at the beginning, middle and end of the semester. Here are the specific employability recommendations that emerged for students through the Bond-led national project.

- Start early, such as in your first semester.
- Participate in work experience, placements and internships.
- Join in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (e.g. student societies, clubs and competitive sport).
- Get to know your professors and your career development centre personnel.

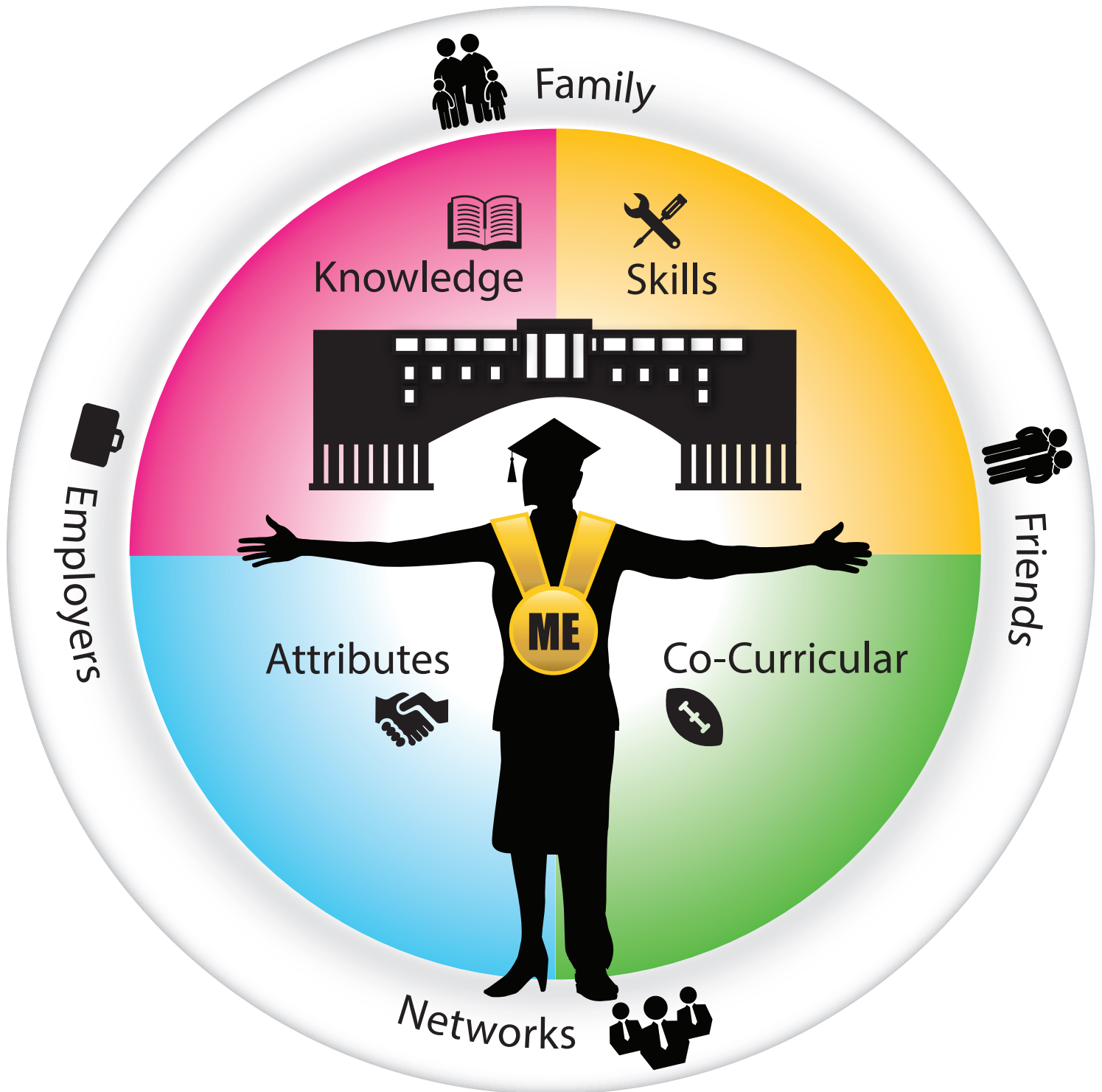
Discuss each of these key points with your students. Invite staff persons from the Bond University Career Development Centre to come to your class and meet your students, providing them with further advice and support.

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# Graduate Employability Framework

This framework is designed for students, graduates, employers, higher education academics and career development professionals based on the data from over 700 surveys and 85 interviews/focus groups. Support for the production of this framework has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this framework do not necessarily reflect their views.



**Graduate Employability** means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work.

# Graduate Employability Framework



**Graduate Employability**  
Graduates – Students – Employers – Educators  
[GraduateEmployability.com](http://GraduateEmployability.com)

Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work. Graduate employability has ten elements.



1) **A higher education degree** – the figure in the image is standing in the shape of a T. The body represents the specialisation of the degree. In order to be employable, the student/graduate extends oneself, reaching out for a broad-based and full experience.



2) **Respectable grades or levels of achievement in the degree** – grades are a factor in employability but study should not be pursued to the exclusion of other student experience.

3) **Knowledge** – employable graduates have a broad knowledge spectrum and the ability to apply that knowledge, including emotional intelligence.



4) **Career focus and goals** – whereas students are encouraged to be open-minded and widely pursue their options, focus and an intentional career pathway often advance employability.

5) **Identity** – the figure in the image is wearing a 'Me' medallion. This represents the central importance of identity. Successful graduates have confidence, defined career goals, explicit self-awareness and are able to communicate their employability profile to future employers.



6) **Match between industry employment vacancies and type of degree** – long-term hiring patterns should be considered when selecting a discipline.

7) **Internships/Work Experience** – students have pursued opportunities to experience the desired industry and network with employers and professional associates.



8) **Skills** – employable graduates are able to apply their knowledge and skills to work within their chosen industry and identify strategies to facilitate transferability to other workplaces.



9) **Attributes** – employability behaviours such as teamwork, resilience and flexibility are nurtured in the broader context of family, friends and community and reinforced in higher education.



10) **Co-curricular** – students have actively engaged in a broad-based variety of experiences (relative to the needs and resources of diverse students) such as sport, volunteer work and student leadership positions. Higher education has supported, embedded and acknowledged these relevant activities in the program of studies. This also gives students contact with a wide range of contacts, such as Career Development Professionals and Professional Bodies (represented by “Other Networks” on the diagram.)



**Australian Government**



**Office for Learning & Teaching**

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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Multi-National Corporations



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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:

- Employment through multi-national corporations

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

- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employers
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports

- Commercial employment enterprises
- 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 personnel

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 multi-national corporations (MNCs) is based on interviews and focus groups with 17 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, educators, career development professionals and employers from three MNCs. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



“INTRAPRENEURSHIP FOSTERS THE QUALITIES OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP, INCLUDING FLEXIBILITY, CREATIVITY AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF INNOVATION. INTRA-PRENEURSHIP DIFFERS FROM ENTRE-PRENEURSHIP IN THAT THE FORMER IS WITHIN LARGE ORGANISATIONS SUCH AS MNCs, THEREBY PROVIDING SECURITY AND CONTINUED INCOME.” (FROM AN EDUCATOR)

# INTRODUCTION

Multi-national corporations (MNCs) are businesses that have offices, employees and other resources in more than one country.

Three distinct advantages of MNCs from the perspective of graduate employees are that:

- MNCs have a large variety of departments and roles.
- MNCs frequently host internships and graduate development programs.
- MNCs often provide an opportunity for international engagement and experience.

Despite these advantages, graduates state that MNC employment does not suit everyone, and that there are low employment vacancies across sectors including in MNCs. As one graduate stated, “There are more graduates than there are jobs.”

One of the unique challenges of MNCs from an employability perspective is that, despite the advantages listed above, they are often perceived as traditional, staid and thereby not cutting-edge and innovative.

A number of MNCs have responded to emerging employment trends by welcoming, inviting and developing intrapreneurship as one of a number of strategies to attract and retain graduates.

## 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.
- MNC Employers - To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within MNCs.

## Keywords

- Leadership
- Confidence
- Intrapreneurship
- Business acumen
- Realistic expectations
- Extracurricular activities and internships
- Networking
- Personal brand

# A TRUE STORY OF MNC GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## Recount of an interview with a career development professional

An international student (originally from South America) studying Masters of Accounting and Finance couldn't quite get the credit average needed as a minimum to be considered by the *big four* professional services.

His curriculum vitae included some great achievements such as starting his own business as an entrepreneur, running his own business, and he had been involved in everything on campus that he could in terms of experiential hands-on activities. He came to see me for his counselling sessions and halfway through last year I asked him, "Don't you want to work for one of the big four?" He said, "Oh, I don't think they would want me." to which I asked, "Why not?" He had this incredible A-type personality; strong, confident, charming and so easy to talk to.

I asked him, "Why don't you think the big four will love you?" to which he answered, "I can't quite get the credit average and I know that's their minimum." I responded, "You just need to get in front of them. It is all about networking."

I went on to say to him that "On a piece of paper you are not going to 'cut it', they [the big four] are not emotionally invested in you, but if they get to meet you and they see that you would be a real front-of-house person, not a back-of-house person, they will fall in love with you and want to hire you."

One of the big four had a boardroom experience lunch, so I ensured he was selected to attend. He is also very, very close to a credit average and we like to be flexible and give people chances. I knew that they would be cool about it, so I invited him to the lunch.

During the boardroom lunch, out of everyone in the room, he stood out. The other students were super-intelligent high distinction students, but they were too shy. They didn't ask intelligent or brave questions, and didn't answer questions when it was asked of them. Whereas, he was confident yet humble, participatory by asking questions and responding. It was like a conversation.

It was absolutely lovely to watch and halfway through this experience the recruiter said to me "He's amazing!" Subsequently, they offered him the summer internship which he's now completed which led to them offering him a graduate role. This example shows how important experience, networking and confidence can be.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS?

From an employability perspective, MNCs are different from other types of employers in that they usually have brand recognition with higher education institutions and graduates. In other words, MNCs are one of the first considered employers. Their prominence is intensified by their financial resources, continued growth and thereby number of recurring vacancies warranting presence at career fairs.

## Approach to achieve aims and objectives

The following suggestions derive from interviews/focus groups with the stakeholder groups.

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

Design and require attendance at workshops that focus on employability skills. Intersperse these workshops throughout the degree and at critical points or progressions. For example, a workshop on critical thinking would precede a career place observation in the first semester. Another workshop on making the most of a work experience would precede that work experience.

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

Provide training and development in leadership, business and commercial acumen as part of the formal degree. Credit students for extra-curricular activities that have the capacity to develop

confidence, teamwork and a customer-service orientation.

- **MNC Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within MNCs.**

Design a formal, supported system of learning for graduate employees within MNCs. Begin with classroom education, in-house within the MNC, for new graduate employees. Continue support for established employees via workshops, hosted conversations with MNC executives and other leaders, and offer rotations through various departments.

## Challenges

Research participants shared that MNCs have the financial capacity and the number of recurring employment vacancies to warrant engagement in higher education recruitment activity and to host internships. Small businesses often do not. Participation in an MNC internship, even with built-in rotation across departments, offers interns a limited set of experiences. MNCs typically have a large number of employees working in defined and highly differentiated roles. An internship in a small business, on the other hand, could provide students with a diverse and multi-faceted set of experiences.

Employees in small business tend to have loosely defined roles and are engaged in every facet of the business. One of the challenges is how to fund internships in small businesses and thereby foster a full and complete practical experience that would likewise prepare graduates for employment in MNCs.



FROM AN EMPLOYABILITY PERSPECTIVE, MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS ARE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF EMPLOYERS IN THAT THEY USUALLY HAVE BRAND RECOGNITION WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND GRADUATES



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS?

Another challenge is the perception (among research participants) of a disconnect between what is taught and how students are developed through higher education, against what is required by/in MNCs. In the context of MNCs, some employers commented that graduates often arrive with unrealistic expectations. Employers commented that educators have a role to play in portraying a full picture of the work, including both the loftier and more menial aspects. Further, graduates have to be prepared to begin in entry-level positions and work their way up; a degree is not a ladder to an immediate management position.

The formal career promotion pathways within MNCs were perceived by research participants as highly effective. One interviewee commented “A lot of our leaders within our MNC, I’m talking right up to the most senior people, have actually progressed through these programs starting at graduate entry level.”

MNC employers are increasingly concerned that the intensity and the demands of the higher education technical curriculum have weakened rather than strengthened graduate outcomes. While students need to be introduced to technical skills and protocols as well as computer applications through their post-secondary studies, higher education institutions are also being called upon to require students to learn and apply leadership and business acumen. Extra-curricular and/or co-curricular activities that allow students to develop and practise these attributes are essential as articulated by the majority of interview participants.

## Success initiatives

MNCs tend to favour graduates from particular higher education institutions because the recruits with this education arrive with an effective balance of technical skills, attitude and applied life experience. The education does not stop once the graduate is hired. Long-term, satisfying and productive relationships between employees and employers can be fostered through formal workplace initiatives as described by research participants including:

- **Buddy and mentor matches**

Each new graduate employee has another early-career partner for mutual support and a mentor who bridges the relationship between the employee and manager, helping the new employee understand the MNC culture.

- **Strategy projects**

The new graduate employee works with an assigned team to produce a practical outcome and present the initiative to senior leadership. This provides exposure to senior leadership and fosters applied understanding of business.

- **Development goals and activities**

In addition to the strategy project, the graduate employee regularly reviews clearly articulated goals and key performance indicators.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH MULTI-NATIONAL CORPORATIONS?

- **Rotational assignments**

In the first year of employment in the MNC, the graduate employee completes work within a scheduled rotation in multiple divisions, departments and teams. This rotation gives graduates exposure to a broad knowledge base and wide network. Together, the MNC and graduate employee can find the best match for ongoing employment.

- **Soft skills training**

Continued professional development is provided in need areas such as presentation or negotiation skills.

## What are the impacts?

### Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Marketable graduates
- Improved employment rates
- Longevity of employment
- Decreased recidivism
- Increased career satisfaction
- Upward mobility
- Workplace cultural coherence
- Enhanced teamwork
- Productivity and innovation
- Economic sustainability
- Information and knowledge

## How has the approach developed employability?

The interviewed MNC employers discussed employability both in terms of successfully being hired, and then performing well within the MNC and subsequent promotions within a career pathway. One of the MNCs described specific evidence of impact within workplace employability initiatives:

“The evidence of success exists. There are a number of statistical measures that they’ve used. For example, the Experienced Commercial Leadership Program, based on the evidence they had, was that those who completed the program achieved 30 per cent higher performance ratings than the general population of the company.”

“Every employee is given a rating based on their performance, how they perform against values and how they exhibit our values. Then they’re given a score based on a matrix. The population of people on this graduate development program, were achieving 30 per cent higher performance, on those two measures than the general population of the company.”



## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### Go beyond good grades.

*FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“There are five or six points that we equally weigh. Grades would be one of them; work experience; extra-curricular activities; their application; and how they express their interest to work for us and their interviews.”

### Participate in extra-curricular, co-curricular or other such activities (e.g. sport).

*FROM MNC EMPLOYERS:*

“The recruited graduate has shown some of the motivations to go and seek work experience or volunteering or some kind of extra-curricular activity which may not be in the exact field they’re going to be in, but we can see the transferability of what they’ve learned into the type of role that they might take.”

“It’s that well-rounded individual. It’s not just good grades. It’s a lot of other things. It’s people that are out there interacting in whatever their interests are, whether it be sport, music, volunteering, work experience, academics and student societies. All of that comes together to create a picture of the individual.”

### Start early.

*FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“University can teach you the technical side of it, but the ability to network with other people and be a leader, should be coming through when you reach Year 10 at school.”

### Do your research.

*FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“We want engaged, well-researched, leadership quality candidates. People who aren’t just going to sit and wait for opportunities to come to them. They need to be proactive and search it out. It’s on the student to be able to reach out and make those connections.”

### Complete an internship.

*FROM MNC EMPLOYERS:*

“Internships allow for a more in-depth interaction that allows both the candidate and the MNC to really suss out whether or not this is the right culture fit, or if this is the type of work that the person wants to do.”

“The work experience and internship gives us another avenue to see how they performed because we can talk to the person in another department or within another company that has employed them and that’s a first-hand view of how well they went and how they’ll perform within our company.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

## **Demonstrate to prospective employers that you have employability attributes that align with the MNC's values.**

### *FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“What sets someone apart from the others and what makes this one higher, than that person in particular, are the soft skills; the skills, qualifications and experiences that you can't learn just by going through university. It comes down to a set of values that they have and these align to what we call our growth values.”

## **Be meticulous when completing employment applications.**

### *FROM MNC EMPLOYERS:*

“We get so many resumes and cover letters that I don't have time to look at them at all. If they have not completed the online application form fully and completely they will not get an interview. It is NOT okay to say ‘See my resume’.”

“I understand that nowadays, with social media, people just type things out and they have lower case [the word] ‘I’ – if you put lower case [the word] ‘I’ – it's honestly not correct. Attention to detail; it's an important part of it.”

## **Once employed, take up leadership opportunities.**

### *FROM A GRADUATE EMPLOYED IN AN MNC:*

“It's such a large organisation that it's easy to just become kind of a number. To stand out you have to drive change. Leadership skills become a big emphasis. That's what I've found.”

## **Find doorways to the MNC through participation in internships and graduate development programs.**

### *FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“Last year we ran an internship program where we got a number of people to join us on a temporary contract basis over December and January. Then after that point, those that were considered high performers by their manager were made offers. It was an extended interview. Managers were familiar with the graduates that they were hiring and they also managed to build that rapport before they started.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

**Encourage and support (and considering requiring) student involvement in extra-curricular, co-curricular and other types of employability activities.**

*FROM A GRADUATE EMPLOYED IN AN MNC:*

“I think a lot of people need to be pushed to use the services and to participate - it needs to be made clearer that you do actually need to think about these things earlier on.”

**Support work experience, internships and placements.**

*FROM A GRADUATE EMPLOYED IN AN MNC:*

“People I know didn’t even graduate because they didn’t get work experience. It was a formal requirement, but it wasn’t a formalised, supported process.”

**Place emphasis on the development of transferable skills.**

*FROM AN MNC EMPLOYER:*

“Universities can be too academic focused and it breeds this group of technical graduates that come, and can only talk about technical stuff. There seems to be a disconnect between what universities are offering and the actual skills that we require to be successful.”

**Invite employers to help form and transform curriculum.**

*FROM GRADUATES EMPLOYED IN MNCS:*

“We learnt a lot of things that were very good in theory, but when you come to the workplace, you have to throw a lot of that out the window and re-learn it because it doesn’t quite work. Getting business people more involved in the lectures will probably be useful to show us what the *real world* is going through right now.”

“We had a compulsory subject, as part of a university industry-based learning program, that was all about information technology for communication. It was things that the employers told the university that ‘we need to know’ for them to take us on in an internship. The university took on that feedback, formed a subject around it and made it compulsory for us. And I think that was good.”

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Are MNCs the answer to graduate employability? They have high numbers of employment vacancies, as compared to other types of employers. There are employment opportunities in multiple industries, including graduates from generalist and/or non-professional degrees.

For example, MNCs often hire engineers, accountants, public relations personnel and others in various roles and functions, such as to write and present technical reports, design in-house computer applications and manage human resources. MNC employers explained that they are increasingly open to a wider range of degree types and disciplines. "We like backgrounds that are relevant to industries, so that has expanded our scope when it comes to who we recruit. Recently we've definitely been making a push to broaden our degree backgrounds because each business is starting to have different types of needs."

The MNCs participating in this case study had dedicated time and effort into developing ongoing learning opportunities for graduate employees. Graduate employees who participated in interviews and focus groups highly commended MNCs as employers.

While MNCs are a vital stakeholder in graduate employment, they cannot be expected to be the single solution to lifting economies and sustained graduate outcomes. Employment tends to be centred in state capital cities. Graduates from regional

universities thereby have to move out of their home communities in order to take up this employment. There are also far more qualified applicants than there are available vacancies. For example, one graduate stated, "You go through university and everyone's saying, 'Engineering! It's so in demand!' That's because people who'll tell you that actually aren't aware."

The onus is on the students to differentiate themselves. Numerous stakeholders from the MNCs said that "All graduates have the degree, that's not what will make them stand out and gain employment." Research participants emphasised that students need to embrace opportunities to develop their employability skills and attributes throughout higher education and then communicate that distinctive value-proposition as they present themselves to employers (both pre-employment and once employed). Unique and skilful personal branding may be the answer for individuals, but this solution will only impact the successful applicants.

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished by 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.



# WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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 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. In the context of MNCs, there was widespread support for internships within MNCs and within small businesses in order to prepare for employment in MNCs.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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Price, C. (2012). *The One Thing to Win at the Game of Business*. Brisbane: John Wiley and Sons Australia, Ltd.

## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Mantz Yorke
- University of Adelaide
- Ericsson Australia
- GE Australia and New Zealand
- PwC

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

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Which of the expressed views are universal employability principles and which are particular to the context of MNCs?
- Is there really a gap between the perspective of employers and educators that needs to be bridged? Are students/ graduates caught in the middle and thereby not adequately prepared for graduate employability?
- How can educators and employers work together to increase internship opportunities for students?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Competitive Sports, Athletes and Employability



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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:

- Competitive sport, athletes and employability

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

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- 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

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- 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 competitive sport, athletes and employability is based on interviews and focus groups with 11 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, employers, educators and career development professionals from four different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.





**"I LOOK FOR A RESUME THAT ALMOST LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE BEEN WORKING FOR FOUR YEARS IN ADDITION TO STUDYING. THEY'VE BEEN PLAYING SPORT, VOLUNTEERING OR DOING COMMUNITY WORK. I LIKE TO FIND PEOPLE THAT LOOK LIKE THEY'VE BEEN BUSY, HAVE A FULL LIFE, THAT THEY'RE DOING A LOT OF THINGS APART FROM JUST STUDYING AND SITTING IN THEIR ROOM."  
(AN INTERVIEWED EMPLOYER)**

# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this case study is to present evidence that student participation in co-curricular activity, such as competitive sports, has the power to lift graduate employability.

This case study addresses competitive sports, athletes and employability from two perspectives. First, it addresses sport organisations as graduate employers. As explained by one of the interviewees, there are ten sectors within the sports industry. Graduates can become employed in: 1) local government, 2) state government, 3) federal government, 4) international, 5) professional sporting organisations, 6) not-for-profit, 7) facilities, 8) equipment manufacturers, 9) retail companies (including shoe and clothing) and 10) media. While most of these sport industry roles require a university degree, employers tend not to restrict recruitment to sports management or other types of degrees specifically within the sports discipline. Employers tend to hire for a degree, personality, skills and experience that best fit with the profile of the role. For example, if hiring in a media role, recruiters are likely to hire graduates from Public Relations, Journalism or other such university programs. Employers stated openness to generalist degrees such as Humanities, Life Sciences, Performing Arts and Computer Science.

The second perspective of the case study concerns students who engage in sports while enrolled in university. Whether or not students plan to pursue a sports-related career upon graduation, it was clear throughout the interviews and focus groups and supported by prior research, that participation in sport enhances employability in most, if not all, sectors and industries. Notably, most students are unaware that the attributes they

develop by participating in sport are valued by employers and often make the difference between who is interviewed, hired and promoted. Raising awareness of students/ graduates and teaching them how to articulate their sports-related employability assets is the main goal of this case study.

## From the research

Researchers (Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli and Wilson, 2013) described evidence providing an affirmative answer to the following question: *Does engagement in sport impact positively on graduate employment and longer term employability?*

The researchers concluded their report with the words: “The research concludes that sport does matter and can contribute positively in various domains. It is a *force for good* and a sound investment from the perspective of the graduate, employer and universities. Now is the time for all partners and stakeholders to realise the potential of sport and to act accordingly.” (p. 56)

## Career development professional

“I can’t think of many graduates that I am aware of that have been truly successful who haven’t had a broader experience than just being a student. Generally, those students that we recognise as elite athletes are high achievers in all they do, and sport is just part of it. Students who are engaged with those activities while they are studying are getting jobs more easily, better quality jobs and are contributing more so to society thereafter.”

# INTRODUCTION

## University student (Ironman participant)

“I think as a student, it is really helpful to listen to the research, employers, graduates and career development professionals to understand that employability is more than just academic achievement. It was an eye-opener to see that sport and community engagement play a big part in the company’s selection criteria.”

## Why is it that student participation in sport has such a strong impact on employability?

The research introduced on the previous page, produced by British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS), listed 31 attributes used by employers to describe what makes athletes excel as employees. Listed in no specific order, these attributes are:

Teamwork, motivation, communication, networking/social skills, confidence, time management, competitiveness, resilience, personal drive, commitment, able to take instruction, self-awareness, respect for others, sense of fun, tenacity, breadth of interests, leadership, organisational skills, flexibility, good health and mental wellbeing, self-discipline, determination, ambition, problem solving skills, planning and strategic skills, passion, energy, ability to multi-task, initiative, self-respect and pride.

These attributes were echoed throughout the interviews and focus groups forming the basis of this case study. For example, a student services specialist within a university shared,

“It’s around leadership, teamwork, people management, managing complex tasks with not a lot of resources, influencing groups of people where you don’t have a natural authority (a team), which I think is a really important skill. It’s okay to be able to *tell* somebody because you are their boss, but if you can *influence* a group of people when you are their peer, I think that is a significantly more powerful skill to have.”

A research participant who works for an Australian university employing students as volunteers and temporary staff in order to scaffold their employability, explained,

“Our first charter is to really make sure that the students have a balanced student life, and sport obviously plays an important role in that in terms of socialising, in terms of building confidence, in terms of health and fitness as well, and really having something outside study. It is also a great vehicle for building not just confidence but leadership skills. Those skills are transferable and those students who work in those co-curricular programs have better career opportunities. That’s always been known or thought anecdotally but we’ve never had the evidence to prove that.”

The object of this case study is to present evidence that student participation in **extra-curricular** and **co-curricular** activities, such as competitive sports, has the power to lift graduate employability.

There is an important distinction between extra-curricular and co-curricular, even though those interviewed and participating in focus groups sometimes used the terms inter-changeably. Extra-curricular means that the activity takes place outside of, or beyond the curriculum.

# INTRODUCTION

Classifying sport as extra-curricular assumes that it is not a core component of the university learning experience. Co-curricular, on the other hand, means that activity is completed in conjunction with, alongside or as a part of the learning experience. A shift is taking place in universities whereby sport and other such activity is increasingly acknowledged, supported, reflected upon, badged and credited as part of the university learning experience. One of the interviewed educators explained, “If you believe in the idea of co-curricular then it’s about developing the whole person, not just having the technical skill.”

In order to turn sporting participation into an employability-plus factor, the graduate must be able to articulate the attributes that were gained, practised and evidenced through that activity.

“It’s about how quickly you can stand out from the page and how succinctly you can demonstrate that you can actually deliver on the selection criteria. It’s about demonstrated capacity. It’s the language you use in applications. It’s, ‘I have demonstrated the capacity to articulate the organisation’s objectives through my experience in ‘x’ and providing an example.” *Interviewed employer*

Beyond listing their sporting activity, graduates need to be able to be explicit about what attributes they developed, or in other words, specifically what the sporting activity demonstrates about their capacity as future employees.

“You learn in recruitment training, a piece of paper isn’t worth much. Anyone can write anything on a piece of paper. If I want them to tell me about the event I’ll ask, ‘What

did you do there?’, ‘What was your role?’ and then they’ll need to talk me through it.” *Interviewed career development professional*

“Even though the students have had the experience, they’re not very good at selling the experience. To use a non-sports example to illustrate the point, our next step will be to make sure that students understand that by painting a fence you learnt these skills and you should make sure that you talk about these when you go for an interview.” *Staff person within a University Leadership Program*

## 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 with sport attributes and/or in sport organisations.

## Keywords

- Sport
- Engagement
- Co-curricular
- Initiative and self-motivation
- Resilience
- Passion
- Community involvement
- Leadership
- Volunteerism

# A TRUE STORY OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS, ATHLETES AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## **Don Knapp, CEO of Australian University Sports Ltd**

I am a product of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) system which is an integral co-curricular component in the US higher education system. NCAA member universities support around 150,000 student-athletes on full scholarships annually at a cost of approximately \$1.5 billion. The NCAA system is an example of a dual career and education approach which values and promotes excellence in sport, education and training while preparing athletes for working life after sport.

My experience was that combining sport and education in preparation for the “real world” was very empowering. I believe that many of the skills that I developed through co-curricular activity provided me with a distinct set of skills and attributes that enhanced my chances of securing employment and advancing my career as both an educator and professional sports manager. Specifically, I am referring to the acquisition of professional leadership skills such as:

- Goal setting and communication
- Intrinsic motivation and the ability to motivate others
- Teamwork and working collaboratively
- Strategic planning and the ability to achieve alignment, and
- Competitiveness

My belief is that sport is a wonderful co-curricular activity when combined with higher education as a means for developing skills that prospective employers find attractive. In fact, it should be of an overt aim for higher education institutions to ensure that most, if not all, co-curricular offerings on campus aim to develop similar skills sets to those that are so often acquired through participation in sport.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

The sport culture and athletes, sometimes have a reputation of being stereotypically highly competitive, non-academic, self-centered and uncaring. These reputational characteristics were not perpetuated through the research informants. All of the people informing this case study worked with numerous athletes on a regular basis and most were athletes themselves. Not a single disparaging word was said against athletes. One of the interviewees specifically described the current generation of student athletes as “generous” and “socially minded.” He also described a growing student commitment to “the ethical stuff.” An employer within the sports industry stated that he hires people who “effectively articulate their values and their mission and what they’re all about.” A number of the interviewees spoke about “sport for development” or in other words “using sport as a tool for other developmental outcomes.”

An important aspect of involvement with sport is volunteering within sporting organisations and/or sporting events. All of the informants, across all stakeholder groups, emphasised the importance of community service and volunteerism. Volunteerism was depicted as an opportunity to *pay it forward* and *give back*. Notably, while the details of the volunteer experience were described as *voluntary* and variable, completing at least one volunteer experience was not presented as *voluntary* at all.

- “We find a lot of volunteering opportunities for students to really get their hands dirty and to experience the community and working with disadvantaged students.” *An interviewed educator*
- “If you don’t go and volunteer somewhere you won’t get a job. You have to! It’s the industry.” *An interviewed educator*

## 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.**

Throughout the interviews and focus groups there was strong thematic evidence of a growing university priority to foster employability in students and thereby graduates. All four universities whose staff interviewed for this particular case study had formalised teams and supports to improve employability. The priorities and mechanisms had two main facets. The first was instrumental supports to ensure that students have access to co-curricular employability initiatives. The second is to communicate *to students* the importance of these initiatives and the impact on employability. University staff are finding numerous, diverse strategies to engage students in employability approaches.



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“BEING AN OLYMPIAN PROVIDES YOUNG TALENTED INDIVIDUALS WITH A DISTINCTIVE VALUE PROPOSITION TO PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYERS. BUT RARELY IS A SPORTING ACHIEVEMENT ENOUGH TO GUARANTEE SUCCESS IN LIFE AFTER SPORT. IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPETITIVE CAREER MARKET, TODAY MORE THAN EVER HIGH PERFORMING ATHLETES NEED TO COMBINE THEIR SPORTING PURSUITS WITH EDUCATION AND CAREER PLANNING FOR LIFE AFTER SPORT. IF OUR YOUNG OLYMPIANS ARE GOING TO CONTRIBUTE TO MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, EDUCATION IS AN EQUALLY IMPORTANT INGREDIENT AS SPORT IN HELPING THEM DO SO.”

FIONA DE JONG, SECRETARY GENERAL, AUSTRALIAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

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

Many universities acknowledge the powerful role of combining sport and leadership initiatives to foster enhanced graduate employability. Universities are thereby forming specialised student support teams who educate students and help them to coordinate and succeed in volunteer work and other forms of work experience such as internships. These units themselves supervise student experiences and coordinate external experiences.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees with sport attributes and/or in sporting organisations.**

Employers from sporting organisations appear to welcome the opportunity to host student volunteer and work experience through such initiatives as internships. It is the culture of the sporting industry that professionals support student development as altruism and *paying it forward*. Special events, competitions and other such periodic surges in sporting activity provide heightened opportunities for meaningful experience. When such events are taking place, there are opportunities for many students to participate in learning experiences such as promotions, budgeting and event management. Many of the employers also addressed formal continuing education for employees within the organisation to assist the transition to employment within the sporting sphere. Employers particularly acknowledged necessary supports to employed graduates within their first year. Employers described mentorship and formal training for such early career professionals as one of the factors of successful graduate employability.

## Challenges

- **Nature of employment**

One of the challenges of employability in sporting organisations is in the context of the nature of the industry. Many of the employment opportunities are described as *cyclical, periodic* or *seasonal*; there are ebbs and flows in employability. During major sporting events and competitions, numerous staff are required and the roles and functions are various and challenging. In between these surges, less staff are required and the work is described as more routine and even mundane. The salary of people in continued roles was described as lower than in equivalent roles in other industries. This particular employment context poses challenges to both employers and employees. It can be difficult for employers to find a sufficient number of qualified staff to take on heightened responsibilities during surge-times. Employees may be unhappy to wait for periodic contracts or require permanent, continued employment to pay their expenses including university loans (HECS fees).

- **Gender imbalance in senior roles**

Some of the interviewees described gender inequity in the sport industry. One of the interviewees depicted the gender profile as “the top is heavier male, and the bottom is heavier female.” Some of the issues include “teenage girl drop-out” from sports, meaning an interrupted history if they choose to return to the industry later. Other interruptions in career profiles are introduced through “child-bearing years” and then sometimes by heightened “caring responsibilities” for older generations.



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

In addition, it was indicated that some athletes are sceptical of having women in executive positions in male sports.

## Successes

- **Internships**

All of the interviewees and focus group participants suggested internships as a solution to the challenges of sports employability. For example, one of the interviewees stated, “If students do it well and they get the partnership right, then they can be employed at the end. That has started to happen as the good interns are getting offered work at the end of the internship.” Many of the interviewees and focus group participants noted an availability decline in the number of internships. They commented that this decline was problematic when combined with a lowered graduate employability rate overall and a recognition that internships are a key factor. One of the research participants commented, “I think the cap on this is ultimately going to be business’ capacity to provide real opportunities. The government should consider giving employers money to employ apprentices because it clearly comes at a cost to your business.”

- **Combined sports and entrepreneurial skills and consultant acumen**

As many of the sporting positions require niche skills and short-term contracts, students who develop a mindset and skills of entrepreneurship and consultation are better placed to thrive. Entrepreneurial thinking involves graduates recognising needs and pursuing ideas and developing skills to match. Forming identity as a consultant enables a graduate to cope

with, and appreciate the novelty and excitement of, changing opportunities and budget accordingly. One of the described innovations to support students to develop these mindsets was titled the *Big Idea Subject*. It was described as “a social entrepreneurship program so students get together in groups and they develop something to solve a social program and that is in partnership with *The Big Issue*.” Other university programs combine sports with leadership initiatives and training to again develop graduates who are change implementation savvy.

- **Understanding competitive sports as an employability approach for industries other than sporting**

As stated throughout this case study, the experience of participating in competitive sports helps athletes develop attributes that make them marketable and allow them to shine in any industry. In other words, athletes are not confined to employment within sporting organisations. One of the staff from an in-house university support service explained that sporting awards are recruitment “conversation pieces.” Another interviewee stated that “students who are engaged with those types of activities (such as sport) while they are studying are obtaining jobs more readily, the jobs are better, and they are contributing more so to society thereafter.”

- **Balancing study with other pursuits**

Interviewees and focus group participants consistently stated that grades are only one factor of graduate success and should not be pursued to the exclusion of other components of the student experience.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

One of the interviewees stated that “grades are not the same as capabilities.” Further advice is that “students need to play to their strengths.” Employers stated that they would rather a graduate profile in which the student excelled in a subset of subjects and articulates these domains as particular strengths. Rather than achieving honours in all subjects, the student is advised to balance intense study with sport participation, engaged connection, volunteerism and other co-curricular pursuits. One of the employers explained, “The cover letter, what they’ve studied and where they’ve been employed most recently are the three key things I would look at when short listing. Also, how their skill set matches the position description. But their grades haven’t generally been something that we’ve been provided or would probably want to look at anyway.” Another interviewee stated, “I’m not interested in your brightest. Most of those kids cannot function in my environment because all they know is study. So we need to look beyond that. So the brightest aren’t necessarily the best.” Several of the research participants informing this case used the image of the letter T. Students have their discipline and their study, which is the vertical line. In order to be employable they need to top it off with the horizontal line, expanding their reach across a wider range of areas, domains and pursuits.

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described on the previous pages include:

- Heightened awareness of educators, career development personnel, students and graduates.
- Acknowledgement of co-curricular, activities including sport.
- Students starting earlier on their graduate employability development.
- Collaborative efforts and initiatives between students, graduates, educators, career development personnel and employers.
- Reflection on pragmatic employability goals combined with value-based approaches to learning and contribution.

## How has the approach developed employability?

As acknowledged by many of the participants in this case study research, most of the initiatives are new and commencing. University focus on graduate employability and recognition of (and funding towards) employability supports are too new to evaluate the impact. Formative evaluation indicates that efforts are extended in the right direction, but time will tell whether graduate employability rates continue to decline or will experience a rise alongside university heightened awareness and initiatives.





# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS, GRADUATES AND EDUCATORS

## For students

### Get to know your professors.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“If I don’t know your name by the end of this subject, I am not going to recommend you for a job. So the advice that we give our students is to get out there and get themselves known, be professional and engage. That stands in the classroom as well.”

### Engage and connect.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“In sport, everyone knows one another. So get yourself out there, go to things, learn new stuff, talk to people. Sport is really small and everyone [seems to] know everyone, so the ones who are successful are the ones that everyone knows, are good operators and the word gets out and they get employed before they even start looking.”

### Be proactive and show initiative.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“I think it’s more about what the student gets out of university. I think it requires more proactivity on the part of the individual. I look for the person who you can’t stop from engaging, the person who’s really a go-getter and doesn’t need to be encouraged to be engaged.”

“Sport is important as it demonstrates time commitment, the ability to work with teams and fellow peers in both the competitive environment and in time management. It plays to a lot of different core competencies that we would be looking for when it comes to leadership, team interaction and so forth.”

## For graduates

### Network.

*FROM A UNIVERSITY CAREER*

*DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“The issue around employability is also that of being involved in any organisation through extending your networks. That, by nature increases your employability because of the people in the extended group that you now know, providing opportunities for you to have conversations in the workplace.”

## For educators

### Orient the employability curriculum around skills rather than specific jobs.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Educators need to provide from the get-go to students, the idea of the breadth of roles out there. You also need to encourage them to think about skills rather than jobs because the jobs that the students are going to end up [employed in] in ten years’ [time] don’t exist yet.”

### Do not over-emphasise employability.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“You need to teach them transferable skills; how to think and how to write, how to form an argument, weigh evidence. I think as an industry we are losing that. There is a lot of focus on academe of just being job-ready, and I agree with that, but you need the caveat of ‘What job?!’ because the job that you are ready for now exists, but the job you have in ten years might not [currently exist]. There needs to be an acknowledgement that the broader skills and creativity are what makes stuff happen.”

## 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. In the context of competitive sports, athletes and graduate employability, those interviewed and participating in focus groups were strong advocates for more and higher quality internships.

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

### Part-time work versus volunteer work

In the survey research, the possibility of part-time employment as a graduate employability strategy was perceived only by students and graduates. Fifty-three per cent of both stakeholder groups ticked this strategy. This seems to indicate a need for perspective – alignment between students and graduates with employers and educators because a minority of the latter two stakeholder groups ticked part-time employment as an employability strategy. One of the interviewed employers shared, “I don’t really care that they worked at Coles or Woolworths, I’ll be honest, [it is] how they supported themselves at university.”

On the other hand, all of the interviewees and focus group participants emphasised the importance of volunteerism in the context of sport. On the surveys 50 per cent of graduates and 53 per cent of employers ticked this strategy. A minority of students ticked the strategy, thereby indicating that at the time of survey completion, students did not plan to volunteer throughout their studies. Educators did not tick the strategy, presumably because this was not something that their university formally supported as an employability strategy. It appears that this discord between perspectives is an indicator that perception checking, attitude alignment and further education is warranted.

### Slight negative correlation between accessing career supports and employment

The survey asked students and graduates to indicate whether they had secured career employment at the time of completing the survey. Notably, there was a negative correlation (albeit small) between accessing career supports and employment. In other words, those that ticked that they planned to, or had accessed career services, were less likely to have found a career. This should not be interpreted to mean that career services are harmful. What is indicated is that career services are often used as a measure of last-resort. In other words, those students who are nearing their final weeks, and graduates who have not yet found employment will finally contact university career services for help. This lends support to the proposition offered throughout this case study that employability activities such as competitive sport are undertaken as co-curriculum and presented as components of the well-rounded graduate profile of evidenced attributes.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and resources

Allen, K., Bullough, S., Cole, D., Shibli, J., & Wilson, J. (2013). *The impact of engagement in sport on graduate employability: Final report*. London: British Universities & Colleges Sport. Retrieved from [http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS\\_Employability\\_Research\\_Report.pdf](http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS_Employability_Research_Report.pdf)

Knight, P., & Yorke, M., (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Volunteering WA. (2014). *Volunteering to learn*. Retrieved from <http://volunteeringwa.org.au/about/research/volunteering-to-learn.aspx>

## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

### Thank You To:

- Fiona de Jong
- Martin Doulton
- Janelle Farley
- Tony Jermyn
- Michael Jones
- Andy Hsien Wei Koh
- Don Knapp
- Tim Lee
- Emma Sherry
- Tim Smith
- Joy Villalino
- Rod Warnecke

- Australian Olympic Committee
- Australian University Sport
- Bond University
- La Trobe University
- Melbourne University
- Monash University
- RMIT University

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

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Is it a moral obligation of universities to cap course enrolments based on balance with employment vacancies?
- Is working on a sporting event or competition, an appropriate and viable internship if not aligned with a fulltime, continuing vacancy?
- How do students balance study with co-curricular pursuits such as competing in sport?
- What are the most effective means of teaching students and graduates how to articulate the attributes that they develop through co-curricular activities such as competitive sports?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Entrepreneurship



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<http://graduateemployability.com>

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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:

- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)

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

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Competitive sport, athletes and employability
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- 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 Entrepreneurship is based on interviews and focus groups with nine people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, educators and employers from five Universities and five Entrepreneurial businesses. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING - 'LEARNING BY DOING'. REAL-LIFE PROJECTS EMBEDDED INTO THE DEGREE. "EXPERIENCING WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE AN ENTREPRENEUR NOT JUST A MINDSET ABOUT ENTREPRENEURSHIP." (FROM AN EDUCATOR)

# INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurship signifies an alternative means to *traditional* notions of graduate employability. Entrepreneurial start-ups are increasingly established by recent graduates as a means of self-employment. An educator described ethical entrepreneurship as “being able to work out when things are going wrong, in your own humble way, with your own level of intelligence and what you are born with, how to try to manage that situation in an efficacious fashion to help move it in a productive way forward.”

Two distinct advantages of entrepreneurship from the perspective of graduates and educators are that:

- Graduates do not have to rely on waiting for a job to find them. They can effectively “create value in that particular industry area” themselves.
- The world is becoming more uncertain with respect to employment. By grounding student knowledge in an entrepreneurial mindset, educators are effectively instilling students with the adaptability to tackle an uncertain marketplace. Embedding experiential projects in curriculum was recommended by interviewees as a means for students to develop business acumen and skills.

However, as one entrepreneur argued “the failure rates of start-ups are incredible.” Therefore, one of the key attributes among entrepreneurs is resilience, and the “ability to recover from failure.”

## 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 within SME<sup>1</sup> start-ups.

## Keywords

- Experiential learning
- Maturity
- Networking
- Cultural fit
- Mentoring
- Creativity
- Motivated

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1 SME, the acronym for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises. This is determined by the number of staff employed, and the annual turnover of the enterprise. See European Commission. (2014). *What is an SME?* Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

## A TRUE STORY OF ENTREPRENEURIAL GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

### **Joshua Schoenbart, Founder of The EyeBook**

As a ten year old in 2004, I started buying and selling eyewear. I would buy glasses at wholesale cost, sell them at retail cost and then use the profits to buy and purchase more frames. I continued to do this until around high school.

I formed The EyeBook in 2012. The EyeBook is an optometric database connecting eye care professionals in the United States with patients based on their specific needs. We have a database of thousands of different practitioners and relevant data about each one of them that provides information about the different brands they carry, conditions they treat, specialties they have as well as insurance plans they accept. This allows patients, for the first time, to have an efficient resource to filter their search and find the *perfect practitioner for them*. The EyeBook now has over 5,000 practitioners currently in all 50 states, serving over 10,000 American consumers monthly.

In January 2014 I was asked to join the board of the Office of Entrepreneurship and Technology Transfer as an associate of Business Development and External Communications. The Dartmouth Entrepreneurial Network (DEN) includes over 45,000 people and 14 chapter cities, [professional] courses and workshops, speaker series, start-up competitions, and networking activities. The DEN is a core component of the newly established Dartmouth Office of Entrepreneurship and Technology Transfer. Drawing on an extensive pool of expertise, the Network offers a wide range of services to the Dartmouth community including strategic advice, one-on-one mentoring, educational programs, networking opportunities, infrastructure, and office and lab space.

*Joshua Schoenbart is a United States Delegate for the G20 Young Entrepreneurs Alliance and World Entrepreneurship Forum. Additionally, he has recently been recognised as a Future Global Leader by Web Summit 2014.*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESSES?

Entrepreneurship offers an alternative means through which graduates can obtain employment. Student engagement with enterprises also provides an opportunity for educators to “activate a feedback loop” in order to understand what is occurring within the marketplace and alter curriculum accordingly.

## 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.**

Support Incubate/Accelerator programs through greater funding by university and business sectors. Raise greater awareness of programs to students across all disciplines. Incubate/accelerator programs are conducted over approximately a 12-week period, in which students develop a business plan and launch their enterprise under the guidance of a mentor. At the conclusion of the 12 weeks, students then present their business model to industry partners.

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

Provide opportunities for students to apply classroom theory to real-world practice. This can take different forms ranging from internships, mentoring, networking events, or international exchanges. Such opportunities allow students to develop soft skills that are required in industry, including “Do they know how to build a network? Do they know how to speak up

in a meeting? Do they know how to find a mentor in an organisation?”

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within entrepreneurial start-ups.**

Provide ongoing training for employees, especially graduates, on how to effectively work within the organisation, with a focus on the organisation’s culture.

Use internships as an opportunity to challenge students, and not just to complete menial tasks. One employer stated that internships are used to “grow that person and groom them, so when the internship is done, I have an employee that is totally capable of doing the job.”

## Challenges

A distinct gap remains between the market and the university sector. Several interviewees said that “it would be really cool if universities collaborate with employers to develop training programs.” Research-intensive universities have been critiqued for prioritising the development of academic attributes rather than employability attributes. Some entrepreneurial educators stated that students in Australia are disconnected from the market for this reason. For example, one research participant said “Because they are enrolled in research universities, I find that students here in Australia don’t have the necessary kind of thinking.”

Another challenge that has emerged, particularly in the technology sector, is that “innovation is truly outpacing the amount of jobs that we have.” Employers within this sector have commonly argued that



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESSES?

graduates do not have the relevant hard skills required to work within industry. Students can effectively combat this challenge through participating in work experience programs throughout their degree, to embed hard skills that employers are seeking.

A final challenge is that SMEs or community organisations often “lack essential business skills or staff due to being underfunded.” In order to mitigate this concern, research participants suggested a partnership could be forged between community organisations, SMEs and universities to provide students with internships.

## Successes

Entrepreneurs and educators emphasised that student participation in *real-world* projects and industry engagement, while completing academic qualifications sets students apart when seeking graduate employment. The list of successful initiatives is extensive, some of which include:

- **Industry Mentors**  
Research respondents recommended drawing upon alumni networks to serve as mentors for students while attending university. Mentoring provides an opportunity for students to expand their connections and networks prior to graduating. At Singapore Management University, Ms Lim, an entrepreneur and educator, stated that alumni networks are maintained with alumni guest lectures and alumni teaching assistants. More broadly, many universities achieve similar objectives by involving professionals with programs as sessional staff.

- **Incubate/Accelerator Programs**  
Students develop their own business model and launch their business over the course of a 12-week program. This provides exposure to industry mentors and enhances the business acumen of students.
- **Leadership and Reflective Workshops**  
Embed workshops throughout courses which focus on students setting their professional goals, reflecting on, and defining their values, and/or building their own personal brand through social media and networking. Such workshops enhance the confidence and reflective disposition of students and graduates and provide a clear example of successful co-curricular activities.
- **Student Societies and Associations**  
Student leadership within university societies and associations develops student ability to manage people, organise events and create effective programs. An employer stated that “we like to engage in student societies and leadership programs that have high calibre students” as a means for future recruitment for the graduate positions.

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Realistic expectations of industry roles
- Reflective and life-long learners
- Strong networks with industry
- Enhanced business acumen
- Development of leadership skills
- Ability to work effectively in team environments

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENTREPRENEURIAL BUSINESSES?

## How has the approach developed employability?

The interviewed educators, employers, students and graduates discussed improvements within the university sector relating to industry engagement. An educator described specific evidence of impact through the fostering of alumni networks and connections with existing student cohorts.

At Singapore Management University, entrepreneurs return to the university and act as residential entrepreneurs. “They actually, on a weekly basis, write about what they go through as entrepreneurs, so new entrepreneurs will know what life is like, what to expect, what are the pitfalls. So these are the things that they talk about, not just the business, but what goes on around it.” Facilitating these discussions ensures students have a realistic understanding of what is involved to be an entrepreneur, and develops connections between alumni and students.

# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

## Advice for Students

### **Complete internships and related work-experience while at university.**

*FROM A GRADUATE/EMPLOYER:*

“I really don’t like it when I see that someone has gone through school and they don’t have internships. In fact most of the time the degree is the last thing that I will look at but instead I want to look at their job history, and I also want to see that they are doing things that apply their knowledge from school, onwards.”

### **Organise discipline specific careers fairs through Student Associations.**

*FROM A GRADUATE:*

“A lot of student societies organise their own job fairs because sometimes they don’t find the job fairs the university organises very helpful. So that doesn’t happen a lot, but it does happen.”

## Advice for Graduates

### **Have an awareness of the current marketplace whereby graduates will have to continually upskill.**

*FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“I think going forward it’s going to be very hard to find a job that you’re going to be able to sit in for a long time. I think most jobs are going to, maybe have a two-year life span, max. It’s going to be more like contracting all the time. Which means that as this generation of kids finish school, they’re going to need to be able to up-skill regularly. They’re going to need to have to constantly pitch their skills and apply for new roles. I think there will be some enjoyment in it because I think there will be more opportunity for a work-life balance, but certainly you’ll need to have - I think they call it grit - that grit to just keep going. Because along with those sorts of things, without having that stability that our previous generation have known in the workforce, there’s going to be some heartbreaks there as well.”

### **Related work-experience.**

*FROM A GRADUATE/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“I need people who understand those logistic headaches that come into those events. So people who have worked in similar industries to me, or had the experience in working, that’s really important to me.”

# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

## **Understand the company culture and share a passion for the specific industry.**

*FROM A GRADUATE/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“But probably the most important thing is just looking for people who fit the culture within our company, and usually with us, be passionate, be excited, we’re looking for those people who can really, when you talk to them about events, they breathe the passion of it and you get excited just talking to them.”

## **Have realistic expectations.**

*FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“So I think some understanding of an expectation of where you start and where you need to climb the corporate ladder or even in entrepreneurship that you can’t be sitting in your high office ordering everyone around.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Train students in new skills, such as software and social media.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“[There is a] need to train students in new skills rather than the old skills because students have to differentiate themselves from the old market.”

### **Set realistic expectations for students.**

*FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“The way a university can differentiate itself, is by teaching soft skills where you have people that are coming out of the university really understanding the environment they are going to enter and what it is going to be like.”

### **Encourage and support students to undertake co-curricular activities.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“It is all about connecting with students. It’s providing opportunities for them, through Incubate [programs], who want to do start-ups. It’s having events like The Startup Kids for people who just want to experience the start-up space and see what it’s all about. It’s business planning competitions, it’s management competitions, it’s having an open door so the people can come in and talk.”

### **Highlight to students the varying careers they can pursue.**

*FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“So what I would really like to try and instill in students before they finish their educational process, is that if you get to the end of the program and there’s a job there waiting for you and that’s the path you want to go down – wonderful! But, if you get to the end of your learning and there isn’t a job there waiting for you, and you have three years, four years, however many years’ worth of study and skill behind you - you should be able to tailor that to suit a need and to meet a need in the market; start your own business and make your own income.”

### **Provide real-life simulations in subject material.**

*FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“Exposing the [students] to the sorts of questions and queries and the realism - that is what you experience in everyday life. That would be it; it would be bringing everyday life into all aspects of the learning process. You want to simulate what the real world is going to be like as much as possible.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Emphasise a clearer link between course content and the skills developed.**

#### *FROM AN ENTREPRENEUR:*

“Teach the [students] to value what they’re learning as an individual skill set so that they can apply it in their own way, and so that they’ll [graduate] and [think], I don’t have a job to do but hey, you know what, I was so good at creating newsletters, so what about if I go out and I talk to 30 businesses and I see how they manage their newsletters at the moment, and see if there is a way that I can generate an income by creating their newsletters for them.”

### **Provide assessment tasks that develop soft skills.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“In class we don’t just teach academic things, we train the [students] in terms of their presentation skills, their ability to speak up, things they don’t teach in university - we do those things. We have a [training] course [entitled], Finishing Touch, [during which we] teach [students] how to dress, how to speak, what to wear to an interview and what to say.”

“[Soft skills] allows students to understand what it takes to be employable. I think universities offer very different needs from the real world or the commercial world. Students don’t know, [but] they need to know, so [there is a need] to bring industry into the university.”

### **Ensure the course material and content also caters for mature-aged students.**

#### *FROM A STUDENT/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“If I [were] a younger student, and I’m planning to get into it, I [may] have the perception ‘Yeah, okay, well I’ll gain a bit of this understanding, a bit of knowledge and so on’, but, [in my view], the majority of my knowledge and [skills] will be gathered when I start working. For me and some others who are already working and already doing things, the majority of information is [somewhat] irrelevant.”

### **Emphasise experiential learning.**

#### *FROM A STUDENT/ENTREPRENEUR:*

“The grade has become such a competitive thing in the workforce, in America, and I think around the world, I think people are striving so much for the grade so they’re going to study for the exam and then it stops there. And that’s the biggest issue; you can’t just study for an exam, you need to study the concepts. That’s really why I think that, by [experiential learning] you’re going to learn more and you’re going to learn the skills that come out of it, not the specific of what it actually is.”

“You learn for an exam you don’t learn for the true skills and that’s the biggest issue.”



'FLEARN' IS A CONCEPT MEANING LEARNING THROUGH FAILURE. AT THE G20 YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS ALLIANCE SUMMIT 2014, IT WAS STATED THAT FAILURE SHOULD BE SEEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY IN WHICH TO DEVELOP AND LEARN FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES. THE ONLY TRUE FAILURE IS NOT TO LEARN FROM YOUR EXPERIENCES.

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Multiple research participants said, “the idea of just going and getting a degree doesn’t work anymore.” Simply put, graduates are not guaranteed employment upon the conclusion of their academic studies at university. Further, data was released from Graduate Careers Australia (Guthrie, 30 July 2014) which highlighted that fulltime graduate employment, four months after the completion of studies is the lowest in twenty years. So are entrepreneurial start-ups the solution to the graduate employability crisis?

Entrepreneurial start-ups grant graduates the opportunity to be self-employed, and target their specific skill set to meet a demand in the market. Successful entrepreneurs are innovators who redefine a concept drawing upon the skills they have developed. Entrepreneurial initiative is also valued by employers due to their flexibility and ability to problem-solve. “It’s the, how do you deal when you don’t have a market, or you don’t have a product.”

Despite this, the failure rates of entrepreneurial start-ups are high and require large investment of time and resources. Graduates pursuing a career as an entrepreneur must be resilient due to these failure rates, and the need to continually up skill to meet the demands of the market.

Incubate/Accelerate programs provide the requisite support through mentoring and financial assistance to students to pursue an entrepreneurial career while studying. Even if the graduate decides not to pursue an entrepreneurial career, completing such programs as co-curricular activities, can be of value when seeking employment. As an employer stated, “taking up opportunities for

leadership and entrepreneurship as well is really well-valued so when people have had their own business, whether it has been, ‘I’ve designed a website for three clients’, anything like that really gives them that business and commercial acumen we’re looking for.”

In the views of research participants, 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/internship/placements



## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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 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. In the context of entrepreneurship, there was widespread support for student internships within SMEs, along with paid graduate positions within SMEs. As start-ups usually cannot afford the costs in employing a graduate, it was recommended in interviews that funding should be derived through government, small business and corporate investment.

Each stakeholder group may benefit from funding these opportunities. The government would be reducing the number of unemployed graduates and ensuring graduates have a well-rounded skill set; and the corporate sector is investing in the future of their company, as many graduates will work their way towards employment in large companies in the future. Internships through SMEs can provide students/graduates with an opportunity to broaden their skill set as interns are exposed to a greater variety of tasks than would be possible at a large company. As an entrepreneur stated, within “six months fulltime, a small business owner could imbue a huge amount of skills.”

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- All Gifted
- Bond University
- Club Kidpreneur
- Endless Entertainment
- The Eyebook
- Incubate, University Of Sydney Union
- Naked Ambition
- Singapore Management University
- Startup Apprentice

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 educators and entrepreneurs collaborate to provide opportunities for students and graduates to work within SMEs?
- To what extent, if any, should entrepreneurial assessment be embedded within course content?
- Are entrepreneurs *born* or can they be *made*?
- Is it viable to train university students to become entrepreneurs, and is university the right educational context for this program/outcome?
- Is there a risk of students stealing one another's ideas if engaged together in training programs, learning to be entrepreneurs?
- How can intellectual property (IP) issues be addressed within entrepreneurship activities?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Government as Employer



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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:

- Government as employer

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)
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- 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 government as a graduate employer is based on the experience of an author currently employed by government as a graduate, and interviews with fellow public servants. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.





# INTRODUCTION

Governments of all levels are significant providers of employment in Australia. With staff nearing 160,000, the Australian Public Service (APS) stands out as one of the nation's largest employers (Australian Public Service Commission, 2014). Not only this, the APS is among Australia's most significant providers of graduate employment.

The number of graduates joining the APS peaked in 2011-12 at 917 (Towell, 2014). While this number has reduced to 784 in 2012-13 and 712 in 2013-14, the APS remains a mainstay in the annual recruitment of university graduates (Towell, 2014).

Given this commissioned project's focus on the employment of graduates from generalist degrees, the role of the APS in employing generalist graduates is pertinent. To this end, it is arguable that the APS is Australia's largest employer of graduates from generalist degrees each year.

Meanwhile, the 700 plus graduates employed by the APS do not stand-alone as graduates employed by government. While this case study focuses on the Australian Government as an employer, state, territory and local governments are employing graduates all around the country.

Every graduate has a story of how their employment came about. For graduates employed by government, this is no different. This case study is, in large part, my story (Matthew McLean) as a graduate employed in the APS in 2014. It is supported by the stories of two of my close colleagues, who are also 2014 APS graduates.

The story of every graduate is necessarily shared by a story of their employer. My story is no different. My employer, a member of the APS Senior Executive Service also helps share my story in this case study.

## 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 within government.

## Keywords

- Opportunities
- Confidence
- Commitment
- Extracurricular engagement
- Communication
- Experience
- Independence
- Transferable skills
- Service

# A TRUE STORY OF GOVERNMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## Matthew McLean, Bond University graduate

I received a Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship to study Law at Bond University in 2010. For as long as I can recall, I harboured ambitions to be a solicitor. While I relished in learning the law, it soon became apparent that I was not passionate about its practise.

Throughout my studies I was involved in some interesting work. Initially working for a senior Queensland politician and later in research roles for the University's Office of Learning and Teaching and the Centre for Law, Governance and Public Policy.

Meanwhile, I became actively involved in student politics. From 2011-2012, I served as the Vice-President for Education on the Bond University Student Association. The following term, from 2012-2013, I led the Student Association as its President.

My studies continued in good stead and I completed my Bachelor of Law with Honours. At that point, at just 21 years of age, I felt unprepared to graduate. Still thirsty to study law, but remaining uncommitted to practise it, I enrolled in a Masters of Law with a Major in Corporate and Commercial Law.

Around this time, my research work involved some consultancy work on the design of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This landmark social policy reform was led by the then Department of Families, Communities, Housing and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA). I relished the policy work, particularly its focus on delivering social benefits to the disadvantaged. While my

previous work for Members of Parliament had given me a taste of politics, I now had a thirst instead for policy.

At this point in time, I knew I had to focus more closely on securing graduate employment. After meeting with our dedicated Career Development Centre staff, I became aware of Australian Public Service (APS) graduate programs. Still immersed in their work on the NDIS, I applied for FAHCSIA.

The recruitment process was rigorous. Like many other APS graduate programs, thousands of applications were received for only a few dozen positions. The sheer volume of applications required the following stages of recruitment:

- Individual registration including submission of Curriculum Vitae and Academic Transcript.
- Written statement against selection criteria.
- Online cognitive testing.
- Formal telephone interview.
- Face-to-face Assessment Centre including:
  - Assessed group activity
  - Time-limited written assessment
  - One-on-one interview
- Online psychometric testing.
- Phone interview with departmental official.
- Reference and referee checks.

At the conclusion of this robust process, I received an official offer to join the Department as part of their graduate program for 2014. Throughout each stage of this process, I found my experiences at university were key to my advancement.

# A TRUE STORY OF GOVERNMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

The counselling I received from the career advisors made me aware of the graduate opportunity, but also ensured I could put my best foot forward in the process. In the interviews, I could offer my extra-curricular involvement as behavioural examples.

All the while, my practical work experience offered relevant subject matter experience I could share throughout the assessment process. The mentors I picked up along the way generously offered to serve as my referees. One went so far as to relay how the then minister responsible for FAHCSIA had praised the consultancy work I contributed to around the NDIS.

In January 2014 I relocated to Canberra. In February 2014, as a result of machinery of government, changes to the Department of Social Services (DSS), my work began.

My graduate year has been a genuine learning curve and an exciting start to my public service career. Rich with training opportunities, replete with new friendship and experiences, I have enjoyed every moment of it.

Under the leadership of a remarkable Branch Manager who has been generous with her time, advice and experience, I have had the opportunities to tackle significant policy issues and set my sights on a long-term public service career.

While in 2015 I will no longer formally be a graduate in the Department, the graduate employment skills I gained at university and throughout my graduate program, will remain with me in years to come.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

Public sector employment is distinct from private sector employment. While work may take similar forms and involve equivalent functions, employment by government is different from employment by a corporation. The regulations involved in government employment, including the Public Service Act, APS Value and a binding Code of Conduct, render the employment contract of a public servant unique.

In recent decades, the number of university graduates employed by government has increased exponentially. While historically, entry to the public service could occur by way of a school-leaver exam or various traineeships and cadetships, the typical entry level position in the APS now requires a tertiary degree.

At time of authorship, there exists an APS-wide recruitment freeze for new positions in the public service. Departmental graduate programs have been singled-out as an exception to this freeze. As a result, from September 2013 the primary means through which an individual could enter ongoing employment with the Federal Government is through a graduate program.

The size of government departments and the scope of the various levels of government have broad benefits for employment in the public sector. Agency resources allow for structured and comprehensive graduate programs including competitive salaries, formalised training and any number of professional development opportunities.

The ongoing shift towards a professionalised public service characterised by tertiary qualification has opened up further

employment opportunities for graduates from generalist degrees. The vast majority of APS graduate programs require at least a bachelor-level qualification but do not eliminate applicants based on the discipline of that degree.

In brief, employability through government is unique in size, scope and potential for generalist graduates. The better equipped prospective graduates are to apply for, engage in and pursue government employment opportunities, the better their graduate outcomes will be.

## 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.**

Ensure students are aware of the opportunities provided by government from an early point in their studies. Many departmental recruitment processes share similar elements including interviews, assessment centres and public sector-centric workshops. These should be made available to students, particularly those from generalist degrees.

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

A large proportion of government graduates are engaged as generalist recruits. Higher education providers need to therefore provide training to students with general employability skills in leadership, communications and strategic thinking. This can be provided for by appropriate supports

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

and credit for extra-curricular involvement and degree-relevant work experience.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within government.**

Government departments themselves can benefit from an open dialogue with both students and higher education providers. There is considerable demand for university graduates and they should begin a conversation with educators around what characteristics and skills government employers seek and how universities can develop and/or enhance employability support systems.

## Challenges

The promising opportunities of governmental graduate employment are not without their challenges. Many students will enter tertiary education with an employment goal that does not match the public service. Students in professional service degrees including Law, Commerce and Business are likely to have their sights set first on top-tier professional service law firms, investment banks and consulting entities.

Students in major Australian metropolitan areas such as Sydney and Melbourne may be reluctant to consider a move to the nation's seat of government, the Australian Capital Territory. While government as an employer offers attractive and competitive remuneration opportunities, multi-national corporations and top-tier professional firms often have the flexibility to offer higher initial wage packages or the prospects of partnership and equity in the future.

There are challenges for government employers as well. As expressed by a manager interviewed for this case study, "Employers have to be realistic that they're getting someone who has a range of skills and needs to be inculcated into workplace culture." Just as graduates in the private sector will struggle to be all things to their employer on their first day in the job, graduates in the public sector will require ongoing training and support.

Graduates also face the general issue of their own employability. One government graduate interviewed for this case study noted that the main challenge was to re-create herself into an *employable* person. Fresh out of university, an undergraduate degree under her belt, she applied for graduate employment and did not succeed. It was then she realised, "a university degree is not enough these days." Employability is greater than qualification.

Another government graduate cites the difficulty for students to know what employers are looking for in terms of overall employability. This is a challenge shared by graduates across industry, demographic and qualification. Without a crystal clear idea of what employers seek, graduates struggle to hit a target they do not understand with precision.

## Successes

The challenges outlined in this case study are not problems without solutions. Government-based graduate employment continues to thrive in Australia and each year, hundreds of living, breathing case studies illustrate this. Each year, the list of success stories increases as more graduates work their way through government graduate programs.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

The ongoing employment prospects of graduates are bright. The upper echelon of the Australian Public Service is replete with former graduates. Many Departmental Secretaries and Agency Heads themselves entered the public service through graduate programs. Meanwhile, many titans of industry and leaders in science and medical research have applied their government graduate training on entry to the private sector.

The human capital commodity of a university graduate has inspired many government agencies to develop tailor-made and evidence-based graduate programs. While many entrants enter graduate programs rich with employability skills, their government employers invest further in these skills and allow for training opportunities to refine their development.

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Skilled and highly-employable graduates
- Labour and social mobility
- Increased employer and employee satisfaction
- A highly professional public service
- Efficient use of taxpayer funds
- Improved public sector culture
- Heightened career prospects
- Driven national leaders
- Learned graduate experience

## How has the approach developed employability?

The approach has developed employability by delivering the following employability skills identified by graduates and employers:

- Developed ability to think
- Ability to work well in teams
- Ability to maximise opportunities
- Confidence
- Emotional intelligence
- Communication skills
- Research ability
- Analytical skills
- Leadership
- Attention to detail





## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### Volunteer far and wide.

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“I did a number of different work experience programs throughout my university degree. In particular my volunteering experiences were good for demonstrating the areas that I was interested in, but I think that this can [also] show the areas in which I’m not interested. So when I was interviewing with former FACSIA, it was quite easy to demonstrate that I was interested in working with the people-groups that they do policy and programs for, compared to when I would interview at commercial law firms and I couldn’t demonstrate any real interest in commercial law from my extra-curricular or volunteering roles.”

### Engage in extra-curricular activities.

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“I remember after I finished my undergraduate degree I had no experience. I had just worked at Bakers Delight and gone to university. I applied for a volunteering job at Oxfam and didn’t get it. I thought I’ve got to lift the bar, lift my game a little bit. So I did an internship in a homeless shelter, I got a job at Centrelink and I really started to target what I was doing in my time outside university in that direction. From there my employability suddenly became reasonably high in this sector; [subsequently] getting the job that I’m in now. I think it was definitely worth doing a lot of extra-curricular activities - I really believe that just doing your university degree is not enough these days.”

### Develop your understanding of government and the public service.

#### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“Knowledge of the Australian Government and the civil service that supports it will help students gain graduate employment in government. Furthermore, once commencing in the APS it will allow [graduates] to put their best foot forward and to do so quickly. There is much that has been written about government in Australia, from the daily newspaper to the endless resources online and archived. A genuine interest in politics and policy will be invaluable.”



## ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

### Be confident and have a go.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“One of the things that lots of graduates need to work on is their confidence. And I don’t mean by that an overinflated view of your confidence, but the ability to know what you’re good at and to be able to present that. The other strategy that I see in graduates is when they are asked if they’d like to do something, say ‘I’ll have a go.’”

### Ask questions and seek advice.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“I offer every graduate who works in my branch the opportunity to spend an hour a month picking my brain about whatever they want. A reasonably good predictor of success is whether they are willing to do that or not. Some just say ‘I don’t see the value in doing that’, and that’s fair enough - I’m happy for people to do that, but they also tend to not seek out any other mentors. It’s been interesting to watch that pattern. Those who take me up on that offer, even if just a couple of times, tend to also be the ones who seek out mentors, who want to do further study, who ask advice. My view is that people who have been around for a while tend to know different pathways through a career and so can give you options. So the graduates who succeed the best are good at asking questions, at seeking input from other people about how they might advance their career.”

### Network with other graduates within your department across agencies.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“With around a thousand graduates commencing in the APS each year, networking opportunities are provided *en masse*. These valuable networks deliver many benefits. In the short term they offer new friendships and shared experiences, particularly for graduates relocating to Canberra for the first time. In the long term, these networks will serve you well as future colleagues emerge and your connections can assist you in securing jobs and performing your day-to-day responsibilities.”

## ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

### **Employ people who can be mentors for future staff.**

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“Employers should look for people who are really good mentors, and give your very valuable resource of your graduates to them to develop. So that your first two experiences should be with really good mentors and then we’ll ‘let you loose’ on the general population.”

### **Guide students on what employers seek.**

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“I think that it would be helpful if we had a clearer outline of what would be useful. But it’s hard to know as a university student what employers actually care about and what experience really matters. Sometimes really odd jobs you’ve had or done will seem to count for a lot more than I would have thought they should.... So if possible I guess more guidance and direction on where we should be focusing our time.”

### **Develop holistic graduates - not just graduates that specialise in numbers or words.**

#### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“I think we have done graduates a disservice by saying that you are either numerate or literate; graduates who are both numerate and literate will have the most opportunities available to them. By numerate I mean can read a table, can look at a table and tell me what it means, can present information really quickly and visually, can know how to summarise something really quickly and have those synthesis skills, and you only get those by practice. So to the extent that a tertiary education can provide practice in those skills which are fairly much bread and butter, it’s a really useful thing.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Build relationships with employers.**

#### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“In my current role I have a lot to do with various academics, so that if one of my staff wanted to do a PhD, I can introduce them to people who are working in the area who might give them some information about ways to negotiate that, or things that they might do. It seems to me that universities could build some more of those relationships, where they’d say ‘Well we’re working in a cooperative research centre with department X or Y, we’d actually like to get some PhD students so can we come and present’. Those sorts of things [would be beneficial].”

### **Consider embedding extra-curricular engagement within degrees.**

#### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“It’s very obvious when someone has been involved in a range of extra-curricular activities at university, that have built their ability to form and influence teams. I suspect for people who are not as involved in extra-curricular activities they don’t develop those skills at quite the same level. It could be a whole range of things, and I’ve toyed with the idea of whether university should require some kind of extra-curricular engagement in particular degrees. It’s not unusual when people do law to have to do moots or to have debating or something [similar], and possibly there would be some value in something like that [for other degrees].”

### **Teach students how to think.**

#### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“Some people have very narrow degrees that have not taught them how to think, or if the university did believe they taught them how to think, there is no evidence that it [succeeded] in their case, and they struggle because the public sector is about contestable policy. They will struggle much more than other groups. In general, a good broad liberal arts education doesn’t go astray, law doesn’t go astray, economics is good, languages are good, all things that teach people ... [Graduates from] some of the very technical degrees [become] quite narrow in their thinking. But you can find exceptions to that, and some people who have done a degree because they knew that they would find it relatively easy, and to maximise their marks rather than because they’ve got an interest in it, that shows somewhere about the fourth month in the job.”

### **Increase flexibility for students.**

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“Universities perhaps could become a little bit more flexible, perhaps reflecting the nature of employment itself, it (perhaps) needs to be a bit more flexible in terms of you being able to choose different ways that you’re going to demonstrate your skills. I think that there are limited amount of jobs that you would go into and just have to research and write essays, which is what I found the majority of my university [studies] to be. So, I think perhaps that having an employability support system that reflected that, was a little bit more dynamic, and where students could piece together a puzzle of how they wanted their résumé to look at the end of their experience [would be beneficial].”

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Is the employment offered by government a solution to graduate employability? The answer is that it is a part of the solution but it is not the *whole* of the solution. The public sector will continue to employ a considerable portion of the Australian population. While machinery of government changes and election of governing parties alters the size of Australian Public Service, it does now and will foreseeably in the future, continue to employ many thousands of public servants.

While this case study has focused on the APS, all state and territory governments employ graduates in various ways. Many local governments also provide employment opportunities to graduates. There are many hundreds of thousands of government employees in large service sectors including education, health and transport. Strong employment growth is also projected in related sectors to cater to an ageing population and provide disability services under a National Disability Insurance Scheme. Together, these trends underline the contribution government makes to graduate employment in particular, and general employment at large.

Graduate employment in this sector is most sustainable through proven practices of recruitment, training and development. While the current fiscal environment for government is constrained, this should not restrict the investment in, and the development of, graduate public servants. The productivity benefits of such training and graduate programs are well-understood.

It is promising that the one exemption to a 2013 APS-wide recruitment freeze was to allow for graduate employment. While numbers have declined from an earlier high watermark, the opportunities for around a thousand graduates remain. Government graduate programs also offer particular promise to students in generalist degrees. Government employment is not a complete panacea to low employment outcomes for generalist graduates. It is however, a sustainable part of the solution.

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

# WHAT'S NEXT?

## SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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**

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. In the context of government employment, there is scope for development in this space. Top-tier law firms, the *big four* accountancy firms and countless other enterprises use work experience opportunities, internships and clerkships as a pathway to employment. Despite employing a comparable proportion of graduates, few public service agencies offer similar opportunities.

The benefits of these placements are well regarded by students, graduates, employers and educators. They need not, however, be confined to the private sector. The expansion of work experience, internships and placements to the public sector offers value to all stakeholders. Employers benefit from an early engagement with future public servants, students receive valuable insights and hands-on experience, educators are offering a graduate-ready educational experience and graduates will reap the benefits of prior knowledge and experience upon entry to the workforce.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

**Thank you to the individuals who contributed to this case study.**

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Which of the expressed views are universal employability principles and which are particular to the context of government as an employer?
- Could internships and work experience opportunities be extended more broadly in the public sector?
- How can educators and employers work together to increase internship opportunities for students?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Private Institutions



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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:

- Private higher education and employability implications

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
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- 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 private higher education and employability implications is based on interviews and focus groups with 15 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, educators, and employers from two vocational education and training institutions and six theological institutions. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



“AT THE END OF THE DAY, YOUR PRODUCT FROM TRAINING IS ACTUALLY A JOB, SO YOU REALLY WANT TO MAKE SURE THAT YOUR STUDENTS ARE EMPLOYABLE.” (FROM AN EDUCATOR)



# INTRODUCTION

Private institutions are organisations that are not publically funded through the federal government. They are unique in terms of graduate employability as without subsidies, the quality of the education provided by these institutions, the confidence of employers in the product and the connection between educators and employers is paramount. The sustainability of these private institutions relies heavily on quality graduates outcomes, thus feedback and involvement from stakeholders is crucial in helping create these employability strategies and keeping them viable.

Some of the research participants expressed a belief that private institutions are providing leadership in formalising strategic approaches to employability supports and industry engagement. In comparison to other higher education institutions, the vocational education and training (VET) programs that are offered by many private institutions require a standard set of employability skills to be embedded within each course. In this case study, six of the interviews/focus groups were with educators and students from theological institutions, and two from other vocational education and training providers. Amongst other disciplinary areas, including theological and philosophical disciplines, the theological institutions include a strong emphasis on teacher education. The majority of the institutions interviewed tended to have a disproportionate number of mature-aged students. In comparison to other graduate cohorts, this is unique in that students tend to already have a good-working knowledge in place and have chosen to extend their studies and build upon already developed vocational skills. For one theological college, it is essential that students have life experience,

“because high school leavers are often not formed well enough in their own direction, life direction and thinking, and they lack the maturity to take on the sort of input that we’re giving them.”

## 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 within private institutions.

## Keywords

- Relationships
- Vocational skills
- Mature students
- Personal discovery
- Cross-cultural
- Formation

## A TRUE STORY OF A GRADUATE FROM A PRIVATE INSTITUTION

### Recount of an interview with a mature-aged graduate - Currently a Fellow of four Universities

“A whole lot of my time is dedicated to helping homeless people and providing palliative care. I have also worked on projects in more than 100 countries. I don’t receive any salary for this work because I get *paid* by contributions. So I earn my money through possibly three or four employers at the moment - soon to be five as I’m going to London. A lot of it is really because I have done the degree. I mean, while you have a lifetime of expertise in certain areas, suddenly you just get another level added to your credibility. From my perspective, employment is changing. You used to have a job for life but from what I know now, I think that would be incredibly boring. I have many strings to my bow and the biggest problem is to juggle them all off against each other. I’m very lucky that I have very sympathetic people who give me work, because they want to see me fully occupied.”

## WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS?

This research indicated that compared to publicly funded institutions, private institutions tend to be more focused on the employability of their graduates. They tend to have strong relationships with the key employers of their graduates, and will often structure their programs to meet the needs of those employers, particularly those who hire the most graduates. As one educator stated, “most theological colleges live and die on the quality of the links with employers.” Stakeholder surveys, invitations to events and conferences, feedback and involvement in course design are all ways in which employers become involved.

Because many of the private institutions students tend to be mature-aged, employability skills tend to be developed in different ways that are relevant to their work. Often students are already professionals who wish to move into a higher role. At the end of their program, they are able to perform at a much higher level. International students, too, are increasingly choosing private institutions to improve employability skills. One vocational education and training provider described how online learning has become mainstream and a popular choice for international students. They can download software to their computer system, regardless of the system they use, and course co-ordinators are available as a point of contact if required.

Employability through theological institutions is unique because many are not only preparing their students for ministry, but also for a much broader range of careers such as cross-cultural work with churches and mission organisations. A different set of employability skills is required here. Life

experience prior to undertaking the program is essential in most cases and a broad range of intentional, institutionally supported programs are offered, including an overseas cross-cultural field education unit at one college. The notion of *character development* as an important element in these programs is clear in this case study. This includes mentoring and engaging students with employers and immersing them in real-world experiences. Personal characteristics such as integrity and perseverance are particularly valuable for cross-cultural experiences. One academic from a theological institution said, “I think, unlike a secular university or tertiary college, a large part of our aim is not just to provide data, information and employability preparation, but also contribute to character development and interpersonal skills, cultural experiences and perceptiveness.” Communication and presentation skills play an important part of the curriculum. “All of our students are taught to preach, or speak publically, deliver an address. They are taught both content and presentation techniques. That applies to all our students so you can’t go through here without learning this, through lectures and also practical workshops which we call ‘Expounding the Bible Workshops’. They take place with staff members critiquing and other students critiquing.”

For some students attending theological institutions, the programs are undertaken for personal development and private interest rather than to gain paid employment. However, the chance that this may lead a graduate to working in the field, or a related field, is strong. One educator gave the example of a “Sunday school teacher who wants to be able to teach better, starts off with a unit and



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS?

ends up doing a four-year degree. And maybe does a PhD in the end. Maybe gets a job, but that wasn't the purpose."

## 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.**

There was strong thematic evidence that practical strategies and co-curricular opportunities provided by private institutions are vital to graduate employability. Students are strongly encouraged to undertake placements, attend stakeholder conferences and gain as much experience as possible.

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

In this case study, there was a strong emphasis on informal and formal relationships between staff and students. In theological institutions, pastoral care includes shared prayer times, reading religious material together and general networking. Knowledge should complement more personal characteristics and private institutions should foster these. One educator from a private theological institution pointed out the "changing nature of the church and work and the world. From what I would have said was once a traditionally theological academic focus which is limited in its relatedness to the practicalities of being a minister, now to an increasing multicultural context. Dealing with a range of ages,

from children to old people, dealing with ministry and a whole range of situations at an interpersonal level, at a group level, at a church level, administratively, pastorally, theologically." One educator illustrated the importance of having educators truly understand what employability means for the individual student. "Once you actually understand why the student is doing the course, then there is a whole lot of additional employability skill sets that you can actually wrap around it."

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within private institutions.**

One graduate stated that it is important that placements with potential employers be provided within programs and that students take advantage of them. "When I was doing my honours I was given the opportunity to teach some classes and do some marking. I also worked as a research assistant for some of the faculty as well, during my undergraduate study."

## Challenges

One academic noted the difficulty in finding quality teaching staff. It was suggested that the government has provided more places for teachers at university, but in doing so, the quality of the teacher has dramatically reduced. "Principals are finding it hard to find teachers who are qualified or would fit the bill and be able to teach well. It is an issue in terms of the basic literacy skills. I've had to recommend to some teachers to get some help with the English language. That's an issue."

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS?

Many of the theological educators that were interviewed recognised the need to interact more with employers so that their graduates are better prepared for their chosen ministry. One educator conceded, “If we could aim to have a more clearly defined partnership between our teaching staff here and leaders (team leaders of churches that students attend), I think that would be a way of enhancing and honing the skills of students for future employment.”

Another challenge was in high employer expectations which can lead to an overloaded curriculum. An educator stated, “The challenges for first-year teachers is huge. They’ve got to translate their theory to practice and even though they have had their practical experience, the workload is huge as they struggle to teach well and meet the expectations of their students, supervisors and parents.”

In terms of scalability, while some of the successful relationship building and employability strategies work well with small class sizes that are the norm in many theological colleges, they would be difficult to scale-up for larger classes. For example, the facilitation of strong professional relationships between staff and students would prove more difficult.

## Successes

- In this research, there was recognition that to be successful, fee-for-service institutions have extra pressures to meet the needs of their students and their future employers. Many of the private institutions that participated in this study have operated for many years, and in some cases for decades. To do this, they have had to develop a sustainable business model that is based on their understanding of the needs of their students and the requirements of the employers who employ their graduates. It is important that private institutions differentiate themselves in the marketplace so that they can achieve brand recognition.
- It is noted that a challenge with online courses as an academic alternative is the high rate of attrition. At one institution, a successful solution to this has been to introduce live webinars to ensure that students are actively involved in their units throughout the semester. The webinars are held weekly in each unit and there is a requirement that students must participate in 70 percent of the webinars. Students are able to have live interactions with the instructor and can ask questions as they go. One of the other benefits of the webinars is that students can re-watch them. This is particularly useful for international students who are less proficient in English, and many students watch multiple webinars on the same topic to familiarise themselves with key content. The introduction of webinars has led to a large reduction in attrition rates, as has the introduction of course co-ordinators for each online course.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS?

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Strong networks with employers
- Graduates with well-formed characters and strong interpersonal skills
- Citizens of the world/cross-cultural
- Ability to form and build solid relationships

## How have private institutions developed employability?

Some of the theological institutions have adopted five key graduate outcomes to guide their curriculum. These are:

- Learn
- Articulate
- Communicate
- Engage
- Serve

All of the units must contribute to at least one of those outcomes. One educator commented that these outcomes work well together. “It’s integrated, but we live in it and it fits, but it also stretches us.”

Private institutions have also recognised the importance of professional experiences and networking with prospective employers as fundamental to graduate employability, especially in theological colleges where graduates are serving a diverse range of people and dealing with a broad range of situations. One educator said that their “college brings representatives from three different employer groups onto campus every Tuesday. They’re introduced and each of them gives an indication of what they are going to be presenting, and then the student chooses one and spends the rest of the hour hearing about the work and the employment opportunities with that organisation.”

Field placements are embedded within the curriculum so that students can apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. An educator said, “Our full-time students spend at least a week, sometimes longer, every year in an intentional programmed practical experience week. A variety of options and locations are provided: capital city options, rural options, interstate and central Australian options and cross-cultural experiences overseas.”



## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### **Recognise the importance of approaching employment with a 'good attitude'.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"It is really hard to define what a skill is and what is an attitude, but it's all really about attitude. Employers will say to us, 'as long as I can get the right person, I can teach them what I want them to do on the job, but I need somebody who is going to be able to turn up on time, follow instructions, have a passion for learning new things.' So it's very much about attitude."

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"I'd like to see that they loved kids. You can teach someone to teach better, you can teach someone better maths and english. You can't teach them to love kids. Unfortunately sometimes you get teachers who are there because unfortunately it's a profession that attracts people who like to be in control. I want people who love kids and want to give back."

### **Engage in as many practical initiatives as possible.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

"Our programs are more than just application of skills, but actually understanding more context-related skills and knowledge. Students need skills not just in understanding sacramental theology, but in living it out, utilising it in their ministry."

"For young students I would say that McDonalds is very good training. To me, if they have just had to rely on Mum and Dad financially and they'd never had to do any part-time work then I would say 'Gee, even babysitting and working with kids is good.'"

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

**Graduate teachers should match themselves to areas of teaching shortage and teach in partnership with the parent community.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“A school that has a good partnership with the parent community is a much more effective school. And I find it very hard to get my teachers to accept that. The parents are the client. They are giving their opinion and we need to listen. It is sound, it is from a different angle. You don’t have to be an academic to know.”

**Listen to feedback from employers.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“We ask them for feedback on the performance of our graduate they have employed and the level of appropriateness our preparation has given the graduate. We want feedback on areas they think we could better prepare graduates, and also in areas they think we do very well.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Take the time to get to know the students.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“A lot of the time educators will focus just on the subject they are delivering and they don’t take time to actually ask the student why they are actually doing the course and where they want to go, or what their expectations are.”

### **Communicate with the Careers Office.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I believe that career advisors in secondary schools should really be savvy, especially in Catholic schools, because you would assume that most of those students, if they have an interest in teaching, would want to work in Catholic schools, and I just find it very interesting that this hasn’t happened, because students don’t know the requirements.”

### **Employ practical initiatives from the beginning of the program.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“My understanding is that it is not until second or third year that [student teachers] do their practical. I would think even if they did an observation round, that they then don’t waste their time. We rely on teachers to boost literacy; I am really concerned that with teachers, I have to correct grammar.”

### **Initiate a mentoring program.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The Dean of Students oversees student welfare, living, personal development. And then the students are also divided among sub-deans under that. So there is one responsible for day-students in particular, one responsible for residential single women, and one for residential single men, and one for married students. So those are the structures for support and mentoring.”

# 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 & 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?

### Volunteering/community engagement

This strategy is particularly prominent due to the nature of the programs offered by the mainly theological private institutions interviewed for this case study. Good communication skills, social responsibility and positive relationships with a diverse community are a measure of the job. Ethical characteristics are called into play and attributes such as compassion, integrity, perseverance and mindfulness are personal qualities that are prerequisites for employment. The majority of interviewed educators from private institutions emphasised the importance of communication and high levels of written and spoken competency as essential attributes towards achievement. A level of maturity was assumed. As one educator in a teaching program noted, a way of enhancing graduate employability through a private institution would be to have life experience and maturity. “You need to be mature-aged, have done other things and then made a conscious choice to go back to teaching. I love the idea of even going around the world [because] it gives you the capacity to offer more to your students.”



## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Some of the main strategies recommended included gaining feedback from parents and stakeholders in relation to graduate outcomes. One Catholic educator in teaching suggested increasing salaries for religious teachers to match the extra workload and in accordance with skill level, although this was recognised as being a challenge in itself. Another theme of this case study was the relevance of field placements in order for students to experience *real-life* community issues in preparation for work-readiness. Support for students in finding their own experiences was also highly recommended.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Australian College of Theology
- Bond University
- Engineering Institute of Technology
- Evocca College
- Sydney Missionary and Bible College
- University of Divinity

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 does your institution facilitate the development of employability skills?
- Do you engage with your students so you understand the reasons why they are undertaking your course and their career aspirations?
- Do you provide opportunities for your students to meet with employers and develop professional networks?
- Does your institution have formal processes that recognize the prior (and concurrent) workplace learning that students have gained through full- and part-time work experiences or community service?
- If you are from a public institution, what can be learned from private institutions that will fit your content?
- What is the profile of your *typical* student and how does this change the way you support employability?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Career Services



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## Preface

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- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres

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- Graduates
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- 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 higher education career development centres is based on interviews and focus groups with 20 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students and career development professionals from seven university career services. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.







# INTRODUCTION

Careers Services are typically student-focused services based in universities operating in a range of models from a centralised model to a *hub and spoke*<sup>1</sup> model. They range in size, funding, staffing, resourcing, reporting lines, associated portfolios and institutional support. Careers Services offer a broad range of services and programs to support diverse stakeholder groups – students and alumni, industry and employers, faculties, academics and university management.

Typical services fall under a number of the following categories:

- Student services: career counselling, career coaching, application and interview support, career workshops and clinics (face-to-face and online).
- Events and activities: employers-on-campus, careers fairs and networking events.
- Careers programs: mentoring, first year support, employability awards, specialist programs to support target groups.
- Embedded careers programs within curriculum: for and not-for-credit subjects offered as electives or compulsory units.
- Resources: online, employment opportunities, careers libraries.

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1 Hub and spoke refers to a model of careers service delivery, involving a central unit which is connected (either formally or informally) to another distinct career service. Neither report directly to each other; rather it indicates an approach where there is a generalist service, coupled with another service that provides more tailored and specialised services.

- Employer engagement: industry events and activities on campus, careers fairs, networking, facilitation of academic engagement, community outreach, internships, work experience and simulation programs.

Several distinct advantages of Career Services from the perspective of graduate employees are that:

- Careers Services provide direct services to students at the point where they are learning about employability.
- Careers Services are at the forefront of service delivery across the stakeholder groups (students, employers and educators) and as such have a holistic perspective of graduate employability, and provide a range of programs and services.
- Provide an opportunity for comprehensive engagement across all stakeholders.

Careers Services have moved from the periphery of student support into the mainstream of services to assist universities and graduates to ensure return on investment for education. Trends from the United Kingdom demonstrate a shift in the higher education sector to include employability as a key element of strategic plans and initiatives including employability awards to improve employment outcomes, student satisfaction and enrolments. Research to date indicates that universities that have adopted these measures are improving on employability indicators and rankings.

A number of consistent themes emerged from the research interviews and focus groups.

- Graduate employability is a shared responsibility.
- There is a priority need for employability to be structurally implemented in higher education. This incorporates the inclusion of strategic planning and funding commitment, through to embedding employability within and across curriculum, thus developing a whole-of-university employability culture.
- Structural impacts are necessary as there continues to be challenges engaging with students in regards to careers.
- There needs to be a concerted effort and resourcing placed into engaging with industry and employers, not just at the graduate recruitment stage but throughout the student experience. This will inform curriculum development and provide the context for learning.
- Students must not only have the technical and subject knowledge from their studies, but also an enhanced toolkit of skills ranging from resilience, leadership, self-identity, organisational awareness, and communication and project management skills.

This whole-of-university commitment to graduate employability is known as *graduateness*, which means that it is a formal part of university strategy enacted through a collaborative partnership model.

## 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 a culture of employability through strategic plan alignment, commitment and range of measures across and within curriculum.
- Careers Practitioners – To align services with strategic goals, to offer a depth and range of programs and engage and collaborate with all stakeholders.
- Employers – To showcase a variety of approaches to engaging with students and universities at all points in a student's lifecycle.

## Keywords

- Shared responsibility
- Embedded employability within curriculum
- Internships, work experience, extra-curricular
- Employability skills
- Resilience, self-awareness, organisational awareness
- Collaborative partnerships
- Graduate-ness
- World of Work Projects
- Employability awards

# TWO TRUE STORIES OF CAREERS SERVICES GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## A career success story

James Cook University Careers and Employment has worked closely with the Bachelor of Dentistry for a number of years to embed career development activities. Career development is now embedded throughout the degree through curricular and co-curricular activities.

Careers and Employment and the College of Medicine and Dentistry initially worked together to support the transition of the first graduate cohort of students in 2013. The program focussed on developing the personal and professional capabilities required to successfully transition into a highly competitive employment market.

The program included personal development skills through completion of targeted online JCU Career Development Modules, enhanced awareness of industry requirements through presentations from private and public practice representatives and workshops to improve the skills, knowledge and attributes for success in today's labour market.

While the cohort was academically competent and motivated to gain successful graduate outcomes, they did require support in developing and fine tuning their career management skills.

It should be noted that the Bachelor of Dentistry student cohort has a significant number of students from a non-English speaking background.

The first year cohort had 100% success in their transition to graduate positions. The College of Medicine and Dentistry receive regular feedback from industry and graduates about the importance of the career development skills in their success. The adoption of simple strategies such as the use of the STARL model (Situation, Task, Action, Result, Learning) for applications and interviews proved highly successful.

The program continues to develop through a strong commitment between JCU Careers and Employment and the College of Medicine and Dentistry to ensure graduates are ready to transition into their professional lives.

# TWO TRUE STORIES OF CAREERS SERVICES GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## Recount of an interview with an educator

At the most recent Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) National Forum, many of the students and graduates from James Cook University (JCU) had come through the Indigenous Health Careers Access Program (IHCAP). IHCAP is designed to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' success in pursuing a health career. It is offered to all health students who identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on enrolment at JCU. IHCAP supports students through a unique orientation program that assists students enrolled in a health degree to negotiate their way through study and into a health career. Students who complete the Program have gone on to work in a variety of areas of allied health practice. For example, one of the recent graduates has secured a job in Alice Springs working in paediatrics as an occupational therapist.

These students are participating in the National Forum's Health Team Fusion Challenge, where students work through clinical case studies in multidisciplinary teams, exposing them to the breadth of allied health careers and work. One student is sitting her second term on the IAHA National Board and JCU graduates I met at the Forum are working in a variety of therapy roles in communities across northern and rural Australia. The opportunity to develop an understanding of the range of careers in allied health helps them make choices when it comes to employment.



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

Careers Services are uniquely positioned at the forefront of service provision with all stakeholders involved in graduate employability, and thus are able to provide a nexus point of all parties and a source of opportunity to build from. Careers Services often mirror key career development theories in practice – Happenstance Theory (opportunity orientation), Systems Theory (all things are interconnected and have influence), Narrative Constructivist approaches (storytelling) and Positive Uncertainty (embracing uncertainty) through the various fluctuations over the years in service models and funding arrangements across the sector.

There are many examples from the project interviews of innovative programs that are being delivered across universities. These include: embedded curriculum content, employability awards, outreach programs, simulations, and specialist programs.

The question is not where do we start, but how can we do more of this and expand opportunities within, and across, institutions using careers services as the drivers of change? Some very bright spots exist in each institution and across the sector – strategy alignment, funding, industry partnerships and collaborations, student engagement and a broad range of programs. The challenge is how can we build on these successes with a focus on shared responsibility by all stakeholders and create a whole-of-university strategic approach to enable this to be truly shared?

A 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Report on Career Development Learning summarised the benefits of work-integrated learning (umbrella term for employability experiences within and

outside curriculum) as, “enhanced thinking, motivation to learn, problem solving skills, ability to apply theory to practice, academic grades; and personal benefits: increased self-esteem and confidence, and improvements in communication, interpersonal and professional skills” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 24).

## 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.**

Engage early with careers support and services. Seek out opportunities, such as internships, work experience, mentoring, and co-curricular engagement. Build career management skills, including self and organisational awareness. Develop resilience and leadership abilities. This can be developed through engagement in co-curricular activities.

- **Higher Education – To develop a culture of employability through strategic plan alignment, commitment and range of measures across, and within, curriculum.**

Embed employability into strategic planning, and support careers services through resourcing and raising student awareness of available supports. Embed career development and employability within curriculum. Expand engagement and collaboration with industry at all levels.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

- **Careers Practitioners – To align services with strategic goals, to offer a depth and range of programs and engage and collaborate with all stakeholders.**

Increase visibility of service. Develop and deliver broad range of careers services and programs to students. Collaborate with industry and incorporate industry into programs and services, with a particular focus on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Facilitate engagement with faculty and industry.

- **Employers – To showcase a variety of approaches to engaging with students and universities at all points in a student's lifecycle.**

Engage with universities in campus activities and programs. Offer opportunities for *real-world* engagement through internships, work experience and in-class projects and simulations.

## Challenges

The challenges described by research participants can be summarised into three key themes:

- Economic factors,
- Higher education reform, and
- Technology and disruption of higher education.

In an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, research participants asserted that students need to have a broad range of experiences built into their degrees in order to stand out. However, according to Careers Services personnel, engaging students when they are most in need of support has become increasingly difficult, especially with respect to distance-education students.

The current higher education reform agenda is shifting the focus to a return on investment for education, particularly with higher fees. Students and parents may therefore question the value of this investment without clear information about outcomes and available supports.

It was noted in several interviews that industry engagement is a long-term process and takes both time and resources. The same can be said for the delivery of all employability-related activities involving industry engagement.

But at heart the key question concerns how to create education and career aspirations for students and deliver through education? Research participants questioned how to inspire and engage students within an uncertain economic climate and how to foster skills and approaches for success? In addition, they wandered aloud, how to develop and create a shared responsibility for employability across all stakeholders?



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

## Successes

One of the hallmark features of Careers Services is their approach to innovation in the support of students, regardless of the challenges encountered. Some of these *bright spots* were described in interviews:

- **Internship and work experience programs.**

Several of the Careers Services interviewed conduct internship and work experience programs. Prior to students participating in these programs, the interviewed Career Services provide students with preparation programs to ensure students maximise the opportunity, in addition to reflecting on key skills developed during the experience.

- **Employer initiatives on campus.**

Career Services interviews indicated that there is widespread engagement with employers through traditional careers fairs, networking events, industry panels, industry-taught workshops and mentoring programs.

- **Curriculum embedded employability.**

Several initiatives across the sector include Careers Services delivering content within curriculum, either as elective units or subjects within programs. This is typically achieved through longstanding engagement with academic champions.

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Enhanced graduate outcomes,
- Enhanced student experience,
- Increased productivity within industry via university engagement and collaborations,

- Development of agile and responsive talent pool,
- Preparing students for emerging careers and opportunities,
- Increasing career capital of students, and
- Enhanced curriculum.

## How has the approach developed employability?

These interviews have provided a source of opportunities from which to expand and improve graduate employability, ranging from small-scale individual impacts to broader systemic approaches within institutions.

The primary strategy that emerged was integrating *real-world* projects within curriculum, inviting industry into the classroom and taking students out of the classroom into industry contexts. These programs and activities seek to build career readiness, subject knowledge and transferable skills. Additionally, these projects are scalable and are adaptable to a broad range of factors.

Through exposing students to the *real-world* of employment, students are better equipped and develop realistic expectations of the workplace. As stated by a career development professional, "I believe this course helps students to be prepared for the *workplace*, whereas their academic courses prepare them for the *work*."



## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### **Get involved early to access careers support, services and programs.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“One of the things to remember is that unless you get support inside your university through careers services or within your program, there is nowhere to get it after that unless you are going to pay a private practitioner to bring you up to speed.”

“It is important to make sure that students are studying the right course. So what that means is that someone is engaged in what they are learning and is passionate about their area of study.”

### **Broaden career thinking.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Students need to think laterally and need to understand that jobs often take components of what you are studying into account. I think it is about educating students as to what they can expect and changing their expectations so that they can understand Human Resource  *speak* and understand the industry.”

### **Undertake a broad range of extra-curricular and/or co-curricular activities parallel to degree studies.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“It is so many different activities that build a person that gets the job, not just the typical one that everyone thinks.”

*FROM A STUDENT:*

“I have always thought extra-curricular activities are something employers are big on because if you had an applicant who just studied, and then an applicant who completed their studies plus some student club experience, employers will lean towards the student who participated in extra-curricular activities because they are well-rounded, and better at working with people.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“It is important to have more than a degree and part-time work experience to be competitive. In order to stand out from the crowd, employers are looking for you not to be a little different, but very different.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“If you get the right kind of attributes, skills and experiences and a robust academic experience at a good institution there is no reason why the biggest and best employers will not consider you.”

### **Seek out practical development opportunities – internships and work experience.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“There is a very strong correlation between graduate outcomes and internships/work experience programs.”

# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

## **Build a broad range of skills in addition to degree knowledge.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Students require a higher level of work skills. These include self-awareness, or emotional intelligence, being able to deal with difficult, stressful or demanding people. Second was organisational awareness - understanding what it is organisations do. The third area is project management.”

*FROM A STUDENT:*

“Innovation and creativity sets you apart from the competition. If an employer asks ‘we want you to resolve this problem, how are you going to resolve this?’ You can give them a black and white answer, or you can work around it and show employers something that is different.”

## **Develop resilience and career management skills.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Students need to be resilient because finding a job can be a very demanding, tough and a deflating experience.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Students have got to be able to map and manage their own career.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“The notion of self-reliance and resilience is becoming increasingly important because of the uncertain labour market.”

## **Develop an entrepreneurial mindset.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Entrepreneurship is the new idiom. The new world of work is embracing the entrepreneurial spirit, where the job or role you have in the future may not exist. This requires graduates to create that for themselves, as opposed to the old world of work where you get a job and are with the company for 25 years.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“As the economic climate tightens, it becomes less about ‘where do I find the vacancies?’ and more about ‘how do I become ready when the opportunity presents itself?’ and ‘how do I recognise the opportunity in the first place?’”

## **Go Global.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Global experience is highly valued. The problem solving skills and personal growth that students experience when they become independent from their family is great in terms of discovering who they are and how they cope with stress.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Strategic inclusion of employability.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“The importance of being an integral part of the university’s strategy with appropriate resourcing; employability is engaged, it is strategic and incorporated within the university framework, similar to a collaborative partnership model.”

### **Institutional commitment to employability via funding, resources and location of careers services.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Students have ranked careers and employability their number one priority three years in a row, and as a result, the university has supported an increase in our funding to essentially double the size of our unit which has enabled us to go forward.”

### **Embed employability within and across curriculum.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“An approach that is purely focused on student work placement will not be nearly as effective as an integrated and embedded approach woven into the learning and teaching fabric. It is important to develop the quality of the student as they go through the learning experience.”

### **Develop an entrepreneurial focus.**

“The notion of self-reliance and resilience is becoming increasingly important because of the uncertain labour market. In order to develop this, the university has decided to embed the approach within the programs.”

### **Involve industry in university life.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“It should be integral to incorporate industry. Industry should be engaged to teach some aspects of the course, and be involved on a day-to-day basis to improve organisational awareness in students.”

# ADVICE FOR CAREER PROFESSIONALS

## **Increase visibility and communications.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Place employer testimonies around the campus as an aspiration and to show students that the university is connected to the outside world.”

*FROM A STUDENT:*

“Using Facebook to advertise to students is effective, and it zeroes in to a generation that is always online.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Promoting opportunities across the university website, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and student newsletters, in addition to digital signage is vital. Without communicating in this manner to students, careers services are invisible.”

## **Offer a broad range of programs and services.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“It is important to develop programs that have a partnership approach with personalised learning and teaching, personalised student experience and personalised outcomes.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“One of the points of the world-of-work program is to bring our staff and students closer to the world-of-work.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Employers are seeking communication skills and it does not matter how many high distinctions the student achieved. Graduates must have the nuance to know how to pitch an idea, when to do the pitch, have an understanding of the political pressures within the organisation and have the courage, motivation and confidence within themselves to do the pitch in the first place.”

## **Development of scalable industry projects/programs.**

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Univate provides students with an opportunity to work in multicultural teams, working with a host employer, solving a real challenge, and create teams that have a balance of discipline, gender and ethnicity. You get all of those sorts of intercultural aspects and bonding that happens across cultures that a lot of international and domestic students have aspirations. It is scalable and agile and can be adjusted.”

# ADVICE FOR CAREER PROFESSIONALS AND EMPLOYERS

## For Career Professionals

### Engage and support SMEs.

“You have to engage SMEs. We don’t have 1000 staff to go out to hundreds and thousands of SMEs and this is difficult territory. SMEs need incentivisation, they need financial help and support. Where that funding comes from is a challenge. SMEs need to be made aware of the benefits graduates can bring to their businesses, and challenge the myth that graduates are expensive to employ.”

### Engage all stakeholders.

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Careers Services must engage academics and students. We must engage students and make them aware of what we do, but we equally have to engage and make academics aware of what we do because one will influence the other.”

### Resourcing industry engagement.

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“If you are going to create meaningful relationships with employers you must put sufficient resources into it. This is time consuming. These are hard yards, and these relationships take time.”

## For Employers

### Provide advice and input on course content.

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“There needs to be greater feedback mechanisms from industry to course coordinators.”

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“We meet with employer groups, *critical friends*, quarterly to debate and develop the program. This gives us a very important mandate and understanding of what industry is looking for.”

### Provide industry experience.

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“The power of engaging students in the *real-world* - placement learning, work related learning. The most employable graduates as we see them around the world are those, in fact, that have done a one-year placement in the industry. They come back as better learners and they are also more employable.”

### Broaden campus engagement.

*FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“Industry panels provide an opportunity to fill gaps in industry presence at other career events, such as careers fairs and valuable question-and-answer sessions for students.”

# WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

An emerging impact, being explored by research participants, is the current legal challenge to unpaid internships and work experience following the trends from similar cases in the United States and the United Kingdom. The challenge is how to build and deliver genuine learning experiences in industry that add value to all stakeholders without exploiting students eager to get their foot in the door.

Interviewed stakeholders asserted that 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 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.



## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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. In the context of Careers Services, there was widespread support for internships to be supported with professional development and reflective practice, to ensure that students develop their reflective capacity and have a clear understanding of their developed skill set.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Griffith University
- James Cook University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- The University of Adelaide
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of Wollongong

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 careers services and employers work collaboratively in the design and delivery of internship and work experience programs?
- How can academics be brought into industry engagement that is based around curriculum?
- How can universities develop employability cultures and embed this into strategic planning, program development and delivery?
- How can employability programs and initiatives be sufficiently scaled to provide high touch learning experiences for students and increase student participation?
- Can Careers Services close-the-gap for diverse students/graduates with particular employability challenges?
- Should employment outcomes be used as Careers Services quality assurance measures and should universities be ranked based on employment outcomes?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Indigenous Employment and Supports



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The artwork titled 'Coffee' displayed on the cover of this case study was kindly created by Bond University Nyombile Indigenous Support Officer and acclaimed local artist, Narelle Urquhart.



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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:

- Indigenous employment and supports

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

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- 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 context of Indigenous employment and supports is based on interviews and focus groups with 14 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students in internships, educators, career development professionals and employers from six different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.





# INTRODUCTION

Before putting a spotlight on Indigenous graduate employability, there is a requisite to acknowledge that Australia's Indigenous population is under-represented in the university system and consequently in the graduate body. Universities Australia (2014) reports: "According to the Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, Indigenous people comprise [sic] 2.2 per cent of the overall population, but only 1.4 per cent of student enrolments at university in 2010, including only 1.1 per cent of higher degree by research enrolments. Staffing levels are also low, with 0.8 per cent of all full-time equivalent academic staff and 1.2 per cent of general university staff in 2010 being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people." (Indigenous Higher Education section, paragraph 1).

One of the noteworthy facets of Indigenous employability highlighted in this case study is that there are two significant aspects of Indigenous employability. First, developing cultural competency to improve the employability of Indigenous graduates; and second, developing cultural competency to improve the employability of non-Indigenous graduates who wish to work in Indigenous communities. Each community is different and stakeholders interviewed agreed that a critical element of successful employability outcomes was where educators, employers and Indigenous communities worked together from the very beginning of initiatives.

Support for Indigenous cultural competency was a critical element of the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) by the Australian Government's Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations. The report stated, "It is critical that Indigenous knowledge is recognised as an important, unique element of higher education, contributing economic productivity by equipping graduates with the capacity to work across Australian society and in particular with Indigenous communities." (Bradley et. al, 2008, p.33)

In response to the Bradley Review, Universities Australia and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC) have collaborated to produce two documents: the *Best Practice Framework for Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (2011a)* and the accompanying *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (2011b)*.

The definition of cultural competency used in this case study is that used in the *Guiding Principles for Developing Indigenous Cultural Competency in Australian Universities (2011b, p. 3)*.

*"Student and staff knowledge and understanding of Indigenous Australian cultures, histories and contemporary realities and awareness of Indigenous protocols, combined with the proficiency to engage and work effectively in Indigenous contexts congruent to the expectations of Indigenous Australian peoples."* (p.3)

# INTRODUCTION

Universities are currently implementing the key guiding principles of the *Best Practice Framework*. This includes developing *Reconciliation Action Plans* to formalise their commitment to developing mutually beneficial partnerships that work towards closing the employment, health and education gaps for Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The 2012 *Behrendt Report* recommended universities use the *Best Practice Framework* in all spheres of a university connected to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including in discussions about graduate attributes. (Behrendt, Larkin, Griew, & Kelly, 2012)

This case study has drawn on the lived experiences of students, graduates, employers and educators to make connections between principles of the Universities Australia & Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (2011a) *Best Practice Framework* and graduate employability. Two of the five guiding principles have been highlighted by interviewees in this case study.

- “All graduates of Australian universities will have the knowledge and skills necessary to interact in a culturally competent way with Indigenous communities.”
- “Universities will operate in partnership with their Indigenous communities and will help disseminate culturally competent practices to the wider community.”

(Indigenous Cultural Competency Framework section, para. 2)

## 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 within Indigenous contexts.

## Keywords

- Community connection
- Power of place
- Cultural competency
- Networks and partnerships
- Internships
- Empowerment
- Real world knowledge and experience
- Links with industry

# TRUE STORIES OF INDIGENOUS GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

*In the interview data, there were a number of success stories of Indigenous employment. Some of these success stories are documented below.*

## Fred's story

"Fred (pseudonym) completed a Masters in Fisheries Management, and subsequently returned to his community to become the senior manager in the natural resource management area; now he is head of the Ranger Program. Fred is the first Indigenous person from that community to ever achieve this. It should be pointed out that he *returned* to his community – he had to actually *leave* his community in order to go back educated. The notion of having to leave communities to receive an education is the type of issue being faced." *An interviewed educator*

## Role models and family support

"Originally from South Australia, I was lucky to have my paternal grandmother as a positive role model in my life. She ensured I attended school every day, had the right educational capacity to attend and complete high school, undertake teacher training in Adelaide and become a role model for my own community. I have always had positive support and positive role models in my life who pushed me to be a teacher enabling me to go back and work with my own mob and empower them through education. It has been a life-long process for me, continuously upgrading my skills and qualifications from the diploma level to degree level to Masters level, and now hopefully, progressing into a PhD. But you always need the support of family around you and positive role models in your life; you'll find a lot of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are success stories generally have those positive influences in their life.

The support to get my PhD has also given me a lot of opportunities and challenged me, including the opportunity to complete a secondment and be mentored during my career. Ultimately, I think my ability to be cited as a success story is due to a combination of both study and the work opportunities I was able to experience." *Interviewed Indigenous postgraduate student*

## Oxford Scholarship

"A student completing an Aurora anthropology internship at a Native Title Representative Body (NTRB) learned of the Roberta-Sykes Indigenous Education Foundation Scholarships through The Aurora Project. She was ultimately awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to attend the University of Oxford. Rebecca's selection is a historic moment as she is the **first indigenous Australian** to win the preeminent scholarship for Australian graduates. So after starting her journey as an Aurora intern, she has successfully completed an MPhil in Material Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford in 2013." *Interviewed employer*

## A few numbers

"Aurora has placed 49 Indigenous interns (37 legal, five anthropology and seven social science) at various organisations working in the Indigenous sector. Ongoing we have 12 Indigenous Aurora alumni working in the field, currently or in the past, in a locum and/or fulltime capacity." *Interviewed employer*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

A theme that came out strongly in the interviews was the *power of place*. This was articulated in a number of ways. First, the importance of place-based pedagogy in understanding local communities and partnering with them; and second, the power of place in understanding the issues that are particular to the place you study and live.

Place-based pedagogy has its roots in John Dewey (1910) and the progressive education movement and seeks to ground learning in real world contexts. This may involve immersion in the community through internships, service learning or problem solving around local community issues. Interviewed educators provided various examples of this including the following.

- A remote training hospital is conducting considerable research, in particular health issues affecting the Indigenous community. Postgraduates working at the hospital are benefiting from their university studies and their work experiences at the hospital. This has the flow-on effect of enabling the regional university to offer niche placements.
- The links we have to the growth area of oil and gas mining means our students have greater opportunities to commence their practical from the start of their studies. For example, students have greater access to the reefs from Darwin; this differs from students in a major city like Sydney where those local links/networks may not exist.

The *power of place* in understanding the issues that are part of the place in which you study and live was highlighted in the interviews in various ways. Interviewees spoke of moving away from community for

study. Sometimes graduates wanted to return to their communities but lack of employment opportunities hampered this.

- “There is a long history of Aboriginal families in central Australia having a relationship or links with places like Adelaide and that impacts on children when they grow up. They return for a period of time but if they want to pursue employment opportunities or further study, invariably a lot of them go back down south; that’s just the history of the place.” *Interviewed Indigenous graduate*
- “One of the big unemployment factors in Australia at present is the inability of the younger generation to go to regional remote areas in pursuit of employment. However, if a student enrolls with a regional university, they make a commitment to shift themselves out of their comfort zone and expose themselves to the realities of relocation.” *Interviewed educator*

Networking and collaborating as a component of *power of place* was viewed as important by higher education staff, industry links and employers.

- “There has to be a reason why people want to stay in remote communities. There are no jobs there. If there is no local economy in these remote areas, people will move to larger towns so there is the need to invest in remote communities; develop an industry or a job market; get out in those communities and tailor the education and training around those needs; create those employment opportunities.” *Interviewed educator*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

- “Programs like RATEP<sup>1</sup> have very strict agreements regarding the employability of their graduates. This teacher education program has been designed to ensure that employment opportunities in a remote community are aligned with a student from that remote community. This allows the Education Department to work with the university to find out when students will graduate and ensure that a position is available in these very small communities for the graduates when they complete their Bachelor of Education. This is a perfect example of how we work with the stakeholders.” *Interviewed educator.*

## 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.**

There were some key messages provided by students and graduates. One of these was the importance of internships and the opportunities they afforded. Academic staff were seen by some to play an important role in mentoring students and providing access to networks that promote employability.

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1 “RATEP is a community-based education pathway” which “enables Indigenous people to remain within their local community whilst completing the requirements of the Bachelor of Education at a RATEP site or Thursday Island campus.” (James Cook University, 2013)

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

Higher education institutions are developing Reconciliation Action Plans to create respectful and supportive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. They also have a critical role in fostering links to communities and employers.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within Indigenous contexts.**

Employers who were prepared to partner with higher education institutions developed partnerships within communities that fostered meaningful relationships.

## Challenges and their impact

- Obtaining sufficient numbers of placements to provide *real world* experiences.

While interviewees espoused the benefits of internships, a universal challenge is sourcing enough industry placements, internships and work-integrated learning opportunities. The resultant impact can create an inequitable situation for students as not all can be provided with these opportunities. Interviewees had some suggestions for how this could be addressed.

- “Each round, we rely on the demand that comes to us from the various host organisations, so we actually go into a round never knowing how many interns are required.” *Interviewed employer*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

- “I do think there should be more interrelationships between the universities and the workforce. I was part of a study some years ago that was about having a further connection with the communities, in particular our Indigenous communities. An audit of what’s needed in the community should be conducted followed by communication with the university about how we’re going to recruit students to the university to fill those gaps, and finally, the relationship between the community and the employers in that community. So a three-way relationship where all have responsibility for ensuring that we have graduates along with important opportunities.” *Interviewed Indigenous educator*
- “I think it comes back to communication. Going out and communicating in an open, transparent manner in regards to what the aspirations of the community are; universities need to be inclusive in that process as well as government and industry.” *Interviewed Indigenous graduate*
- Educators suggested that better links between career opportunities in the region and what the university can actually provide are necessary. Furthermore, research participants suggested heightened industry input to help develop appropriate career paths at university. The oil and gas sector was used as an example where there is potential for a partnership that could make use of facilities in these areas.

## Establishing and maintaining networks

A challenge mentioned by students and graduates was how to find out what opportunities were available for internships and future employment options. They spoke about how the message is communicated. Career fairs were not always seen as helpful. The use of social media and the opportunities and information provided by interested lecturers *were* considered helpful.

- “I generally found career fairs to be very unhelpful. If you want to go into the military, then they were useful but it would have been really nice to have a social science career fair with department specific areas to see what people are actually doing.” *Interviewed graduate*
- “For students doing the Development Studies major we had a Facebook group. The creator of the page really supported that Facebook group by linking articles to people and linking opportunities. We were able to connect, to have forums and discussions which I found to be really helpful. Someone that you know would advertise something and you felt comfortable talking to them directly, and they’d hear about things to pass on. Particularly people who had graduated and were trying to reach out to people who were undergraduates in terms of upcoming graduate programs that were specific for people studying particular majors, that was helpful. But it would nice if the university facilitated something like that on their websites.” *Interviewed graduate*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

## Empowerment and self-determination

According to interviewees, a critical factor in employability success was the attitude of the individual student. Those students who volunteer, are willing to learn, and are open to new opportunities and therefore are more successful. Students and higher education staff spoke of the importance of these transferrable skills and the challenges associated with developing them if students are not prepared to be proactive.

- “I guess it comes back to our philosophy about how we interact with students, and our main message is that sure, you might be Indigenous, you might face some things differently to non-Indigenous students, but when it comes down to it in the *real world* out there, you’re expected to come to work on time, get your work finished on time and learn to take responsibility for yourself.” *Interviewed Indigenous educator*

## Successes and their impact

### Internships

Internship programs offered by universities were seen as critical to graduate employability. Internships were provided in a number of different ways. Some were embedded in degree programs while others were provided by organisations, such as those run by the Aurora Internship Program which offers opportunities for interns to gain on the ground experience in the Indigenous sector. In other instances, students were encouraged to volunteer to develop skills through internships.

- “In some areas it works really well where there are internships or there are opportunities for students to go and work in the mid-year break or the big break. That fosters a pathway for them to get experience and then some relationship happens; there is some responsibility for the employers to make sure that happens. They’re feathering their own nest by hoping graduates are able to come work for them.” *Interviewed educator*
- “I didn’t think about it much before I graduated, and then realised ‘Oh there’s a recession happening. I haven’t done any internships.’ I had just been focused on financially supporting myself through university, working in casual jobs.” *Interviewed graduate*

Graduates and employers spoke about the particular types of internships they considered that had made them successful. They noted internships that were structured, provided sufficient guidance, and were well supported and monitored as contributing to success.

- “Prior to commencing their placement, all interns receive a copy of the *Handbook for Interns* which contains the *Intern obligations and code of conduct and professional ethics for interns* (now completed online) outlining what is expected whilst on placement; discipline-specific sections for interns as well as broader native titles issues; and cross-cultural communication. Prior to departure, the Placements team briefs interns by telephone/Skype on our expectations of them and appropriate protocol to observe while on placement. Through this process, we manage the expectations of the interns.” *Interviewed employer*



# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

## Experience within community

Graduates who had experience living and/or working in particular communities were seen as more employable in those communities.

- “It is crucial that graduates have an understanding of the community and Indigenous culture when applying for jobs in Indigenous regions which is also an important employability factor. For example, a hiring school may say ‘No, I know I don’t want that teacher who came up from the Gold Coast who doesn’t know our community. I want that teacher who knows ‘Aunty Connie’, someone who is aware of the protocols of this community.’ This is an employability factor for our students; that they know that they can apply for a position in Town X, and when they meet with the Principal they can say ‘Aunty Connie taught me last year’ or ‘I spent a lot of time in Town Y and I understand what is expected of the community and the protocols that are expected’.” *Interviewed educator*

## Partnerships with industry

Specific activities that fostered partnerships with industry and employers were seen as contributing to successful outcomes.

- “With the help of a specific organisation, we are growing our engineering faculty - it’s growing very steadily and consistently and I’d like to say that the quality is there thanks to the industrial input.” *Interviewed educator*
- “Several of our top students visited a remote community last year with their subject and subsequently applied to teach

there in their first year – this was not the norm previously. We are inviting them back to speak to us as well as visiting their classrooms this year. They understood what was expected of them while they were a student, and now they can share with current students its significance now they’re an employee.” *Interviewed educator*

## Role models, mentors and networks

Role models and mentors were cited as contributing to success. Role models and mentors may be based at higher education institutions, in communities, volunteer organisations or programs such as The Aurora Internship Program.

- “It certainly helps to have an Indigenous area where people can come and talk and talk to Indigenous academics.” *Interviewed Indigenous educator*
- “It seems to go full circle. A more discrete part of my role is to assist graduates of the program once they have finished. We help them if they are employable and perhaps have not received a job offer. We support them by introducing them to a lot of our contacts within the area. It’s just part of being an alumni of the program, and trying to match them up with the right contacts. We don’t formally offer that as a service, but we certainly help to try to connect them with the right people, because we’re not an employment agency as such, but I’m constantly giving advice and often referring graduates onto the right people to get a foot in the door.” *Interviewed employer*

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT AND SUPPORTS?

## Empowerment

- “I think it’s also about helping students to understand the power of themselves. I don’t know how to say this because we come from a community where no one is higher than the other. You don’t stand out. Whereas if you are going out there to get a job, you’ve got to sell yourself. So it’s empowering them with the language skills and all those things that are needed to sell yourself out there.”  
*Interviewed Indigenous educator*
- “It’s changing the whole culture of how a lot of our people think. To have an understanding of really what the power base is and that’s about being responsible and having the confidence, and the knowledge and skills, to be able to do what you want to do.” *Interviewed Indigenous educator*
- “I think our approach, being one of empowering, works well. It’s difficult but we’re here to support students, but basically the students are the ones that have to do it. If it’s not the right time for you, then you go away and return when ready. Make people really think about taking that responsibility for taking up the opportunity or whatever they need to do.”  
*Interviewed educator*
- “The Aspiration Initiative’s (TAI’s) Academic Enrichment program is a very innovative and special program designed to enhance academic achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, simultaneously paving the way to university. It focuses on teaching them about life skills, resilience and an understanding of the education system and the world, so they can become empowered by knowledge and make informed decisions. The Aspiration Initiative website is a really powerful tool encouraging Indigenous students to succeed by connecting them to inspiring stories of other students’ journeys into higher education and opportunities, such as Scholarships, that can allow them to achieve their career aspirations.”  
*Interviewed marketing coordinator*

## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### Look for internship opportunities.

#### INTERVIEWED MARKETING COORDINATOR

- “I always encourage students who are coming to the end of their degrees to consider undertaking an internship, because it will allow them to develop new skills on the ground, get a taste of the work environment and will connect them to a network of people working in their area of interest: all of these factors can potentially help recent graduates get a paid position. Our internships provide a legitimate career or study-based learning experience in a vocational placement that enhances learning and will inform and inspire their future study and work life.”

### Seek positive mentoring.

#### INTERVIEWED INDIGENOUS GRADUATE

- “It is those positive experiences that put these young Aboriginal people on the right path. If they have positive experiences, are introduced to positive people who can support them, then they’re well on the way to achieving their aspirational goals.”

### Transferrable skills.

#### INTERVIEWED MARKETING COORDINATOR

- “My advice for graduates about to enter the work environment, and people thinking about doing an internship, is to have an open mind, a *can do attitude* and always be willing to learn. Organisations recognise value when they see that interns are open to learning new skills, especially practical ones. In my own experience, having a business and development studies background, I never thought I would be doing technical website work. But I can say I have learnt and gotten a lot of value and knowledge from working in this area. Don’t be scared of trying new things or combining different degrees, even if they don’t seem related. Having a mix can allow you to have a more holistic view and can open new job opportunities. It’s all about following your passion and developing and learning skills that will allow you to make a difference in the areas that you are passionate about.”

#### INTERVIEWED EDUCATOR

- “It is also about helping students to understand the power of themselves.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES AND EDUCATORS

## Advice for Graduates

### Maintain connections with alumni and university staff.

#### INDIGENOUS EDUCATOR

- “I know I’m still in contact with students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, so it’s informal but it’s happening.”

### Make use of social media to source opportunities.

#### INTERVIEWED GRADUATE

- “I’ve worked for an organisation, which links volunteer programs and communities. There’s a Facebook group that shows opportunities. I know about four or five friends that have ended up in jobs in remote communities because of that network.”

## Advice for Educators

### Seek reciprocal relationships with communities.

#### INTERVIEWED INDIGENOUS EDUCATOR

- “Having Elders on campus is a great resource for students to gain support and increase awareness of Indigenous community work. *Aunties* and *Uncles* on campus is also cost effective as they generally want to do this off their own backs. Having these people, face-to-face, that can actually be a wonderful tool, a resource for all of our universities to help people understand what is required to go and teach in an Indigenous community. They want to now come and use the space where they can teach their own mob. They can teach our mob, the students, and they can teach non-Indigenous mob about culture, using the space.”

## 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 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. In the context of Indigenous employment and support, this case study has shown some of the unique aspects of internships in community contexts.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and resources:

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience (AIME)
- The Aurora Project
- Charles Darwin University
- James Cook University

## READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

### Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- How does your institution utilise the *power of place* to enhance employability?
- Access the *Reconciliation Action Plan* for your institution. What are the links between reconciliation and graduate employability? What can you do to promote reconciliation?
- How can educators, communities and employers foster networks and partnerships for students that improve employability?
- What strategies can be used to increase the participation of Indigenous knowledge holders in higher education?









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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Commercial Employment Enterprises



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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](http://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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Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28, 31–44. doi: 10.1080/07294360802444347

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Bond University
- Milaana
- Readygrad
- University of Nottingham
- The Village, NAB

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?







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Generalist Disciplines



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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:

- Generalist disciplines and employability

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

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Indigenous employment and supports
- 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 context of generalist disciplines is based on interviews and focus groups with 22 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students in internships, educators, career development professionals and employers from one business, three private institutions and five different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.





# INTRODUCTION

In a survey conducted by Graduate Careers Australia (2013), it was highlighted that graduates from the generalist disciplines including “visual\performing arts, life sciences, social sciences, psychology, humanities, architecture, physical sciences, languages, and chemistry were the most likely to have been seeking full-time employment” at the time of the survey. However Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) noted that “graduates of some fields of education can always take longer to find full-time employment than those from other fields, and this slower labour market reflects more the state of the labour market and not the quality of graduates or their study of choice.” (p. 5)

Graduates from generalist disciplines are exposed to several disciplinary frameworks throughout their degree. In turn, graduates can be emboldened with a multi-disciplinary framework through which they experience and perceive others. As articulated by an educator, graduates who undertake a Bachelor of Arts “understand sociology, politics, international relations and policy. Graduates understand the complexity of issues such as domestic violence or Indigenous affairs. Even to the level of having conversations with people in the community where you will encounter stereotypes, our graduates know how to think about why people are like that in a more complex way without passing judgment, and in a way that is sensitive and important, and important in a world-changing way. These stereotypes are easily dismantled with more education.”

Yet graduates do not always recognise the importance and distinctive nature of this mindset. “In a world that is changing so rapidly, to be able to think in a broader way, beyond

just being trained in one area, to understand that these people are part of complicated issues, helps us address how to serve them, and our graduates are well-equipped to do that. But as I said, those are issues that I think students might not realise themselves until they find themselves in a position where they realise they have a wider, broader understanding of context than other people do” (from an interviewed educator). Thus, the interviewed educator stated that the role of generalist discipline educators is to “instill a sense of responsibility. But I guess that just speaks to our responsibilities not just to equip them with the skills that they need, but with the character that will help them succeed too.”

## 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 from generalist disciplines.

## Keywords

- Communication
- Confidence
- Business awareness
- Placements
- Experience
- Networking
- Partnerships

# GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT RATES

Figure 1

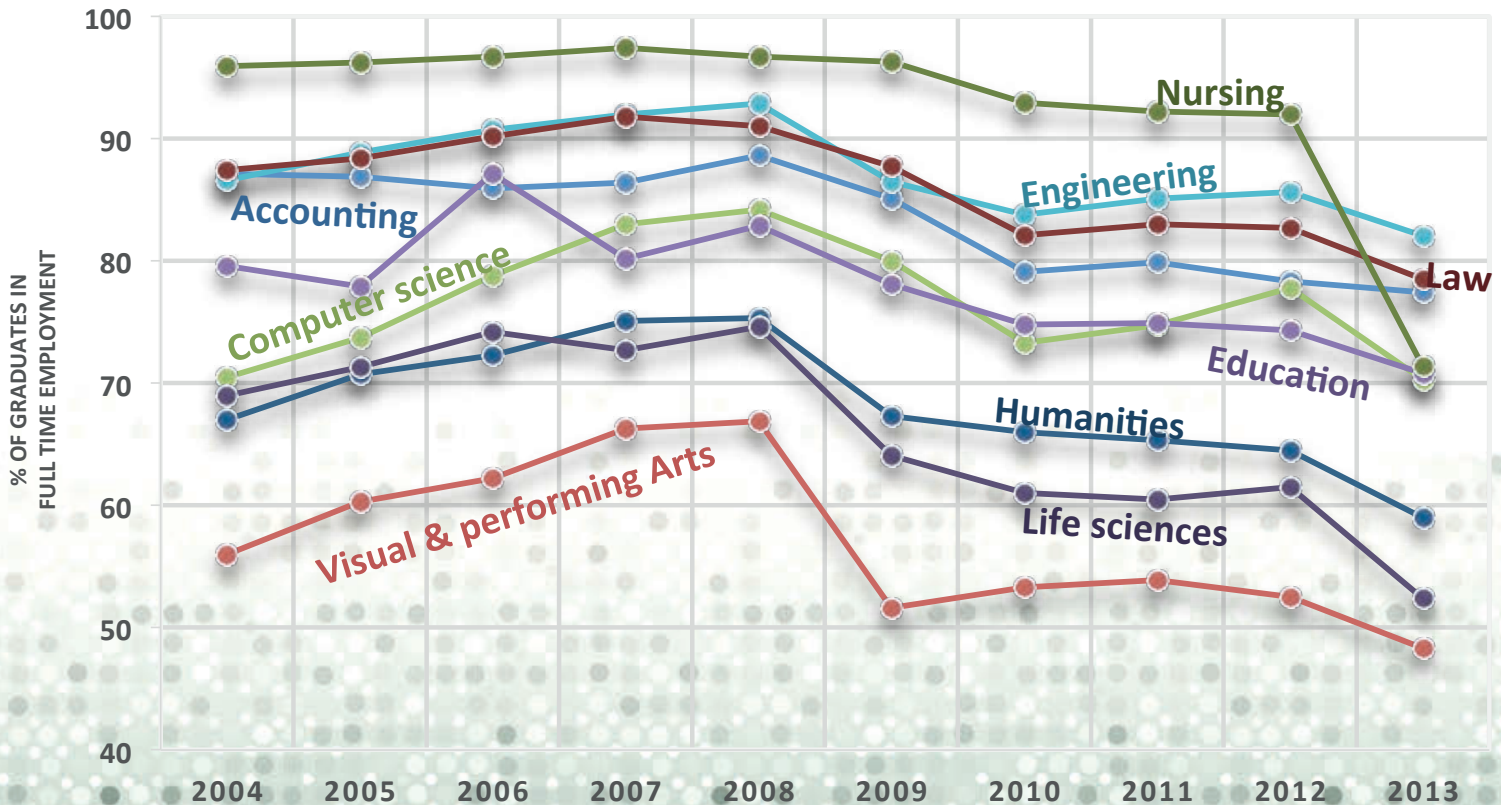


Figure 1 was designed by Professor David Dowling and is based on data that was extracted from the results of graduate surveys undertaken each year by GCA from 2004. It represents information from those graduates who responded to the survey.

GCA lists results for more than forty disciplines. However, for ease of interpretation, data for only ten disciplines is reproduced in the graph. It should be noted that data for some disciplines (e.g. engineering) is aggregated data for the sub-disciplines.

Figure 1 shows consistent trends for all ten disciplines, although the employment rates for each discipline vary. There has been a drop in employment rates since the global financial

crisis and again between 2012 and 2013. Two of the disciplines (architecture and education) exhibit some variation from year to year compared to the other eight disciplines, and nursing dipped further than the other disciplines in 2013.

Figure 1 highlights the employment rates for graduates in the four generalist disciplines as consistently lower than those of the other disciplines.

Research grounding this case study includes engagement with educators, students and graduates in order to determine the successful strategies that can be deployed both within curriculum and beyond to enhance the employability of generalist graduates.

# A TRUE STORY OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES AND EMPLOYABILITY

## How internships and authentic assessment can make graduates employable

My name is Jamie Parfitt and I am a Strategic Planner at AJF Partnership, an advertising agency in Sydney. In this position, I collaborate with the Head of Strategy to lead and assist in the development and implementation of brand and communication strategies for clients. I was the Bond University Valedictorian in 2012. I completed a Bachelor of Multimedia Design 2008-2010 and a Master of Communications 2010-2012, both of which were in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

I appreciated the opportunities of generalist degrees in that a wide range of subjects were available to me, and the broad knowledge, skills and attributes kept my work options open. However, because I wasn't able to claim professional accreditation as would an engineer or a doctor, I had to work harder to define myself, including to employers. There were two factors that helped me stand out among my peers. First, I developed my skill set by completing two internships – one of which was in a New York advertising agency. The second strategy was a book I self-published on Amazon in 2012, while still a student. The book is called – *The Multidimensional Agency: How Marketing 3.0 is Changing the Face of the Advertising Industry*. One of my professors felt that writing traditional university essays was not going to give us the employability skill set we would need to fulfil our graduate goals, especially in a creative field. She

challenged us to scope out a real project that would make a contribution to our chosen fields, help define our graduate identity and help us stand out to employers. This book helped me define myself in work applications and demonstrate that I was serious and committed to this industry. Consequently, as a fresh graduate with no paid work experience, I was able to secure a position typically given to employees with 4-5 years' experience in the field.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

Two major themes emerged with respect to the unique nature of employability for students and graduates within the generalist disciplines. The first theme that emerged concerned students choosing their disciplines based upon personal interests, rather than enhancing their employability outcomes. As stated by a student, “my studies reflect my personal interests more than anything, because there is really nothing available in that industry.” Another interviewed student, undertaking a major in business and a major in languages stated, “my study in languages is more of a personal interest. It would be good to get a job in something related to that, but I am aiming to get a job related to my business degree.”

The second theme emerging from interviews was the diversity of graduates undertaking generalist degrees. The Australian government’s widening participation agenda has seen a more diverse group of students enter higher education, and this was reflected among the interviewees as evidenced in this comment from a student: “Getting career advice was daunting because I have been a mother all my life and have not worked, other than part-time jobs here and there. So I wonder, ‘how do I adapt what I have just learned, and how do I apply for these jobs as I have not really had any relevant experience?’”

Employers appeared to understand that students sometimes have to maintain work while studying. As stated by an employer: “Personally I look at whether the student is trying to support themselves and study because often the cost of living, the cost of university, it dictates that people have to work. It is not working ten hours a week, it is working 30 hours a week, and completing a

full-time course. So, a student’s ability to hold down a position that has a reasonable strain on their time, and complete their degree should be taken into consideration when looking at a grade point average. And then you couple that with the effort they put into their application.”

The transferability of the skillset obtained within the generalist disciplines is an important factor when graduates are seeking employment.

## 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.**

It is important for students to engage with the university employability supports that are made available to them. This may include a host of programs and services such as mentorships from academic staff or industry, internships and work placements, and the careers services available on campus. All of these supports and programs aim to develop the reflective capacity of students in order to highlight the transferable skills that are developed throughout their degree.

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

Research participants emphasised the importance of engaging with careers services and industry to expand the range of opportunities available to students. Communicate the available opportunities to students, and contextualise the skills

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

that are developed through engaging in co-curricular activities, career engagement, capstones and e-portfolios. Embed reflective practice throughout capstone subjects, to ensure there is a clear link between theory and practice in the real-world.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees from generalist disciplines.**

Engage with universities through careers fairs, industry panels, mentorships and class presentations. Engage with students within the generalist disciplines and communicate the opportunities/positions that are available to them.

## Challenges and their impact

There are three main challenges that persist within the generalist disciplines: the polarity of views regarding the purpose of universities; the disenchantment of students; and initial student resentment of capstone subjects.

One of the contentious issues for generalist disciplines is the disagreement regarding what constitutes *useful knowledge*. Simply put, what is the role and purpose of universities? Some argue that universities are not about producing graduates who can *do a job*, but about promoting life-long learning that transcends the heritage of time as much as it shapes the future. The overall hope is that students conclude their studies as skilled and knowledgeable individuals who can contribute to innovation, be agents of social change and contribute to social vitality. However, some research participants stated their views that education has become a commodity in which students develop a set of skills to prepare them for the workforce. To date, clear links to employability are sometimes

not made within the generalist disciplines. Generalist disciplines seek “not just to equip students with the skills that they need but with the character that will help them succeed too.” (from an interviewed educator)

The second challenge is the overall disempowerment of generalist degree students. According to an educator, “I had to inspire the students, because there was a real sense of disenchantment by the time they were in their third year. There was a sense of real disempowerment as they did not think that they were going to get anywhere.” As articulated by an interviewed graduate, “you are sending out an application and you do not even get a phone call or an interview.” In order to develop and enhance the confidence of students, a graduate expressed that an onus should be placed on educators to assist students in identifying the value of the skills they develop, and their inherent transferability. “I think the university needs to embed skills and confidence into the student. The university needs to be able to provide enough support for a graduate to successfully enter the workforce. These include basic skills, how to write selection criteria, how to interview, how to identify what skills are transferable. The rest is then up to the employer to build and professionally develop that graduate for their organisation.” (from an interviewed graduate)

The final stated challenge within the generalist disciplines is the initial resentment by students of capstone subjects. Some interviewed students expressed resentment over completing capstone subjects as they did not find them relevant to their specific discipline. An educator stated, “when we first introduced the capstone subjects there was a culture whereby students

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

were quite resistant to them. And then once it is established I find that the attitude completely changes, and partly that is because the subjects are refined and developed.”

## Successes and their impact

Across the interviews, six strategies were implemented as a means to enhance graduate employability within the generalist disciplines. These strategies are: core and capstone subjects; internships and work placements; class simulations; networking; mentoring; and the use of e-portfolios to develop reflective capacity and to provide tangible evidence of graduate achievement.

### Core and capstone subjects

Core and capstone subjects are an effective means to contextualise theory and provide a ‘transition’ for students. An example of a successful first-year compulsory subject established the aim “to transition students into university”, with final-year capstone subjects seeking to transition students out of the university (from an interviewed educator).

In regards to the capstone subject, the educator stated that “students create a portfolio of what they have done across their degree and reflect on their experiences as a liberal arts student.” These capstone subjects further enhance the students’ abilities “in terms of how to think, personal relationships, team work, critical thinking, reasoning, all of those elements that hold you in good stead in any job” (from an interviewed educator).

Some questions for reflective journals may include; “What has this course given you in terms of transferable skills? Where do you see yourself going next? What further training do you need?” (from an educator).

### Internships/work placements

With graduate positions becoming increasingly competitive, internships/work placements were said to provide a valuable opportunity to obtain industry-relevant experience and help establish networks and contacts within the industry. In recounting a graduate’s experience, an educator stated that through participating in the work placement, the graduate “developed the contacts and the networks” which led to successful employment.

Embedding work-experience modules within curriculum can provide students with greater opportunities and give relevance to the theory taught in classes. Coupled with a reflective portfolio, students may enhance their communication skills and gain a greater understanding of what is required within industry.

### Class simulations

One of the most successful strategies discussed in interviews was a class-simulation that was designed by educators in association with one of the professional bodies in their chosen industry. The aim was to simulate “a typical business environment” in which students were divided “into different groups, given roles such as marketing or finance and are informed of the rules and regulations. Students then bought *raw materials* from each other, took orders from their customers, and produced goods

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF GENERALIST DISCIPLINES?

based on the specifications of the customer. The goal of the simulation was to increase awareness among students of how these different departments of business function together to make the whole business a success. Not only are students developing a business awareness, “but they are learning how to work with each other.” (from an educator)

These simulations also mimic what graduates encounter at assessment centres whereby graduates “have no clue what you are going to be asked to do, no idea what it is going to be like. You work with people that you have never met before and you have got to make a good impression.” (from an educator)

## Networking

Engagement with professional bodies and industry members is an effective way to provide networking opportunities for students. Such strategies may include inviting professional society members to “deliver a talk to first or second-year students to make them realise the importance of understanding the existence of these societies, and then to take part in their events.” (from an educator)

## Mentoring

Engagement with professionals from industry and the community as mentors was recommended. An educator stated, “There are lots of professionals out there who have given time off work to have a cup of coffee once a fortnight with a student.” Mentors may include councillors, members from professional bodies and industries.

## E-Portfolio

An e-portfolio allows students to reflect upon their achievements and provides a tangible resource to highlight these accomplishments. An e-portfolio may enable students “to reflect across the different domains of their lives” and progressively add to their abilities (from an educator).



## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### **Connect with a mentor and be involved in professional associations.**

#### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“I would definitely say the onus was on me to develop employability skills, but my supervisors were really great in terms of networking and providing work-based opportunities. This included my connection to the professional association for which my supervisor was the Vice President. From there I was able to get a research assistant position which then gave me that work experience which led me to my current position.”

### **Presentation and communication skills are important.**

#### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Presentation skills are important, because if a student can overcome all of the anxieties around speaking up in a group it helps in an interview, in can help in meetings, it can help engage colleagues. It is a very difficult skill to teach but it is quite a good skill.”

“I think their personality as well in general, it is vital for employers. You might be a first-class student, very intelligent, but if your personality is not appropriate, you are not going to get the job.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

## Written communication is key.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I think writing as well is very important and we often underestimate its importance. We often assume it is something that students learn in the first-year composition class. I think the difference between a first-year student who has successfully completed, and a graduate who has learned how to synthesise, analyse, express succinctly and edit in a polished way is just enormous.”

## Communication and problem-solving.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Graduates have got to have the confidence. I mean that seems to me to be the number one thing. After that they also need to tick the other boxes. Employers of math graduates will ask about problem solving, they will ask about excel skills, programming. But if they do not have good communication skills, then they are sadly not going to get their foot in the door.”

## Employable characteristics.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“To my mind, some of the characteristics that employers look for is the ability to think independently, the ability to act with integrity and professionalism, the ability to respect and identify with other cultures. The top skills tend to revolve around written and oral communication, problem solving, teamwork, and the ability to manage time.”

# ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

## **Develop a systematic approach to providing opportunities.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Our students have done amazing things. Every year for the last three years we’ve sent a student on Global Voices, where they have gone to the United Nations and they have met world leaders. We have sent students on to Oxford, we have sent students on to the Australian National University for the prestigious summer research scholarships, and they often stumble into those things. We tell students of these opportunities, but I think a more systematic exposure to the types of amazing opportunities that are out there would be great.”

## **Start early.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I do not think that we do enough earlier on to get students to think about what sorts of jobs a generalist can do, and the sorts of postgraduate diploma options that are available to them.”

## **Engage with community organisations.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“We also hold a volunteer expo. So that includes community organisations that need volunteers, and members will come in and talk to our students about how they could work with them. Our own students go out and set up their own agency, for want of a better word. One of our alumni set up an organisation, and because she is an alumni she will take our students into the program as well.”

## **Highlight professional practice.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I have recently made a video, with a colleague of mine, on interviews. We recorded two videos: a good interview and a bad interview. My colleague interviews me, including questions which tend to be asked at graduate job interviews. Students realise, ‘Oh yeah, that is the sort of thing I might have said, or not have realised that is a trap I could have fallen into’. This helps show students how they can prepare for an interview.”

## **Engage with alumni.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Alumni are really important. Alumni links develop relationships with organisations that post placements, and as a practical way forward I think that it is where some of the generalist fields may look to.”

# ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

## Engage with universities.

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The employers’ responsibility begins a lot earlier than most employers recognise. If employers are looking for work-ready graduates, and I am speaking in general, recognising that some particular employers do this very well already, they should be engaging with universities to ensure that they are providing opportunities for students to participate in their workplaces, to have structured learning opportunities and that could be through a range of different programs. That could be adapted into different disciplines, different industry contexts but the full gamut of work placements, internships, summer school projects. Having said that, there should be an acknowledgment and a respect that the purpose of the university degree is not to just provide a work-ready graduate but there are other aspects of what makes a complete graduate. Universities have a responsibility to instill these graduate aspects in their students and so it should not be the case that course content is determined solely by what skills are needed in a workplace at a particular point in time.”

# 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 & 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 to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

### **Work experience/internships/placements**

One of the strongest themes within the generalist disciplines case study was the importance of core and capstone subjects as a means to contextualise and link to real-world practice. This incorporates assessment items such as reflective journals and e-portfolios which enhance the reflective capacity of students, and provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon their experiences and developed skill set. As articulated by an educator, “it is not just adding it into a program, and calling it embedded into the curriculum, it is actually embedding it into the curriculum and making it relevant to the subject that the students are studying.”

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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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.

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- What impact has the move in Australia to a demand-driven system for universities had on the nature of generalist degrees?

Discuss in relation to this quote:  
“Increasing and broadening Australians’ opportunities to attend university is central to Universities Australia’s vision for a smarter Australia. Increasing participation in higher education is not only necessary for restructuring the economy, meeting

the need for a more highly educated workforce, and diversifying our industrial base, but also contributes to a fairer society.”

- A generalist degree is believed to provide graduates with flexibility to create opportunities. What are some of the ways graduates can maximise the skills of generalist degrees to enhance employability?
- What strengths can a generalist degree contribute in a globalised world where international experience informs future potential?

Discuss in relation to the following quote: “Australian universities need to develop a more global curriculum. They need to improve the support offered to international students in both English language skills and campus safety. Universities should aim to increase the number of Australian students who study overseas for part of their course, making Australian graduates and universities more global in orientation. Capturing this opportunity requires continued effort from universities and facilitative policy from government. International higher education is at a critical juncture and competition is increasing rapidly.”







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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Graduate Attributes



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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:

- Focus on graduate attributes

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

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Indigenous employment and supports
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- 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/context of graduate attributes is based on interviews and focus groups with 18 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students and educators from four universities. This particular case study attempts to capture and share the insights of leading higher education thinkers/change agents. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.

Australia is internationally recognised as leading the worldwide higher education paradigm shift to enact graduate attributes. Some of the seminal authors in this area are: James Arvanitakis, Simon Barrie, Denise Chalmers, Mark Freeman, Beverley Oliver and Geoffrey Scott, all of whom were interviewed to inform this case study. Mantz Yorke is the UK-based author of multiple publications converging the concepts of graduate employability and graduate attributes, and he also was interviewed to ground this case study.



# INTRODUCTION

Graduate attributes are an important way for universities to explain the outcomes of the education programs they offer. Although uses and definitions vary, one widely quoted definition is that:

Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students should develop during their time with the institution. These attributes include but go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses. They are qualities that also prepare graduates as agents of social good in an unknown future. (Bowden et al., 2000)

Most Australian universities now include a list of graduate attributes in their mission statements and strategic plans. Examples of university-listed graduate attributes include: knowledge and critical thinking; leadership, initiative and teamwork; communication skills; and responsibility. In Australian higher education, graduate attributes were articulated as a solution to a pervasive employability challenge. There was growing evidence that through their university education, students were not developing the transferable (or in other words) *soft* skills that they would need to succeed as graduates. In part, higher education institutions defined their distinctive difference through articulating particular sets of graduate attributes. As a whole, there was widespread recognition that the defined attributes applied to *all* graduates despite their generalist or professional disciplines of study.

Graduate attributes have been the focus of much research and debate over a prolonged period (see Oliver, 2011). This work on generic attributes is reinforced by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), compliance with which is not compulsory. The AQF includes award level descriptors appropriate for each level of qualifications expressed as what graduates are expected to know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning. More recently, complementary work funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), has extended this to define Threshold Learning Outcomes (TLOs) for a range of disciplines which provide reference points for expectations within those disciplines.

Beyond defining the graduate attributes, higher education institutions created and enacted strategy plans and processes to support, develop and assure their impact. Many of these institutions developed stand-alone subjects, each of which was based around one or more of the graduate attributes. Others published lists of electives, of which a certain number were mandatory. Most Australian institutions have now been working in the space of graduate attributes for a decade or more. Strategies and initiatives are now well developed. Higher education has largely moved beyond a project approach to embedded, cohesive enactment. Evaluations have been conducted, formative and summative feedback applied and innovations documented.

This case study is of particular significance now that the higher education experience has evolved from initial implementation of graduate attributes to embedded contextualisation within *graduate employability*. It is compelling to return to

# INTRODUCTION

the leaders of graduate attribute thinking and action leadership to hear their updated and emerging ideas, plans and successes. *Graduate employability* has been defined by Knight and Yorke (2004) as “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p.9). Professor Mantz Yorke expanded upon this definition in an interview conducted as part of this research project. Yorke stated that, “employability is actually not only about jobs. It’s about life as well. So the thing about being a good citizen would fit into our view of what employability would be.” Yorke noted the polarity of opinions concerning employability. “I think it’s what our perception of employability is. It’s such a variable feast. There isn’t a perceived wisdom, but if you ask different people, you’ll get different types of interpretation.”

Widespread change within the economy and marketplace, catalysed by factors such as technological innovation, has affected graduate outcomes. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, graduates should be “able to not only tolerate change, but to thrive on change.” For example, an educator stated that graduates should have the ability “to apply their skills to different contexts, draw on different expertise, so they are not stumped by something that’s slightly different, or out of routine.”

Higher education institutions have evolved in response to these economic, technological, cultural and labour force changes. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, “every article a student reads is in direct competition with Wikipedia. It’s a changing environment; universities in reality

are merely one provider of an education service.” Another educator stated that higher education has responsibility for supporting emergence of the “character of the people that we think employers are looking for.” An example was highlighted by an academic in a leadership position. “We want graduates to be ethical citizens. We want them to be global citizens, and we want them to be culturally aware.” Another educator explained that these qualities contribute to an “excellent, well-developed, well-rounded person.”

## Case Study aims & objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of developing graduate attributes and engaging with higher education support.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees to further enhance their graduate attributes.

## Keywords

- Graduate attributes
- Embedded within curriculum
- Plus factor
- Cultural fit, understanding and competence
- Emotional intelligence
- Ethical citizen
- Adaptability, resilience and agility
- Reflection
- Critical thinking
- Networking

# A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## Excerpts from, *Diary of a French girl*

The following is a true story as told by Marie-Claire Patron (2009) in her book, *Diary of a French Girl: Surviving Intercultural Encounters*. The excerpts are verbatim passages from the book, used with the permission of the author.

Natalie was born and raised in a privileged middle-class suburb of Lyon in France and is part of a close-knit family circle. Her father and older brother are graphic designers and her mother a secretary in a Junior High School. She has had a wonderful upbringing comprising an excellent education and exciting opportunities that have advanced her career. Dabbling in the arts, Natalie discovered her passion for comedy and drama. From her experiences in theatre there emerged a talented comic in spite of her shyness. Her family supported her endeavours even when she decided that one needed to be more passionate about the theatre to turn it into a career. Turning down offers from elitist schools, Natalie chose instead to study in a business school that is part of a university in Strasbourg, primarily for the program that included a compulsory year abroad and also had a friendly ambience.

Natalie was twenty-two years of age when she embarked on her international student exchange at a university in Sydney, Australia. Her year abroad was carefully orchestrated to allow for study, work and travel in the host country before resuming her studies in France. 'Life begins for me' is a highly charged statement for Natalie who attempts to fathom the changes that immersion in a foreign culture signified for her, particularly as she was so far from home. The experience would test her mettle and her future path would be determined by the way she approached the experience.

Although Natalie was becoming quite proficient in English, the new course tutorials in 'Australian Cultural Studies' provoked anguish when it came to class discussions. French students rarely participate in class discussions in France, but in Australia their grades depend on their adherence to the rules; the focus on participation is consequently stressful. Classroom practices of the French and the Australians are highly contrastive. French students rarely raise their hand to participate in class, for it is simply not part of their academic culture, whereas Australian students are encouraged to be more interactive, as it is usually part of their assessment. In France, the lecturers are seen as tantamount to Gods. They stand on their pedestal imparting their wisdom and knowledge and promptly leave the lecture theatre afterwards with no interjection from students and rarely know their names.



## A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Upon returning home, she espoused the role of a proactive individual and she succeeded in prolonging the growth experience acquired abroad in order to maximise the learning curve. This involves adaptation by the sojourner and the society to the changes that have transpired during the exchange.

Natalie had accepted the offer of a position as software editor for an export and marketing company in the capital because, although this position was not entirely in her chosen field, her pragmatic approach to life saw her prioritise her needs, repayment of her educational grant on top of her agenda. Her English was invaluable in this position, especially as her Curriculum Vitae showed a lack of technical background. It was gratifying to know that her experience in Australia had been the primary reason for obtaining this position. Intercultural competence is invaluable as this represents an added bonus for the company that recognises that their cognitive skills have been honed through second language acquisition. They are able to find creative ways of solving complex problems, their reasoning skills are enhanced and they are able to conceptualise new ideas.

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96399	1.1843	.01225	1.5094	.98611	.95505			.16100	.20495	.18017
.0094	1.2400	.01282	1.5804	1.0325		1.0471	.80830	.12428	.15821	.13908
97757	1.2010	.01242	1.5306		.96850	1.0141	.78284	.13013	.16566	.14563
13867	.78462	.00811		.65333	.63275	.66253	.51145	.08234	.16044	.14104
8.718	96.706		123.25	80.524	77.987	81.658	63.037	10.149	.10482	.09215
31399		.01034	1.2745	.83266	.80643	.84439	.65185	.10494	.13359	.11744
	1.2285	.01270	1.5658	1.0229	.99072	1.0374	.80080	.12893	.16412	.14428

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# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

“The world will not be run by geniuses, but rather people you can count on” (Fullan & Scott, 2014, p. 6).

The key theme, emerging from the interviews and focus groups, concerned recommendations that the reflective capacity of students be enhanced. As highlighted by an academic, “students should be asked to reflect on what they’ve learned and how it might help them in their potential careers, rather than labelling it ‘now here’s a bit of employability folks, don’t forget it,’ because that won’t work well.” The majority of interviewees emphasised that reflective practice should be embedded and expected, hence “plac[ing] the onus back on students. The *program* is about getting the student to become a rounded person who can function well in the world, academically, socially and collectively.” A key recommendation, emerging from interviews, was to provide opportunities for students to reflect upon the employability skills and personal attributes that are developed throughout their studies. This may include asking students such questions as, “to what extent have you fulfilled these expectations?”

Another theme, emerging from interviews, was the importance of encouraging students to learn from failure. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, “We need to talk about failure. We only talk about the successes. We never say, ‘We started off down this path. I was totally wrong, but I learned this lesson.’ We never teach the journey, we only teach from point A to point B.” The importance of learning from failure was articulated by another academic in a leadership position. “Learning from your mistakes teaches resilience. It teaches emotional intelligence and it is how the world operates.”

## Approach to achieve aims & objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of developing graduate attributes and engaging with higher education support.**

It was recommended in the majority of interviews that students participate in employability opportunities as early into their degrees as possible and that they are open to reflection throughout every subject and co-curricular pursuit. As stated by an educator, employability prospects should not become “a conversation in the last few weeks of a student’s time.”

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

The importance of breadth as well as discipline-specific technical knowledge and skills was emphasised. As stated by an educator, “talk to big businesses and they want broad capability. They don’t care that you don’t know this particular software or how to run this particular spreadsheet, they are looking for people who are bright, who are able to communicate and able to work in a team.” An educator elaborated, “I think the most effective strategies are providing them thinking and problem-solving skills; those really broad skills and communication.”

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees to further enhance their graduate attributes.**

An academic in a leadership position recommended that employers in small and medium businesses include a development program at the beginning of a graduate’s

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

employment, and to provide opportunities for graduates to successfully transition to the workforce.

## Challenges

A key challenge emerging across interviews concerned the difficulty of integrating academic disciplinary-based knowledge and employability skills in a cohesive manner. An academic stated that “part of the argument has been two-fold; one is making a case for employability, that it’s not un-amicable to academic values but actually complementary to it. And secondly, finding ways of teaching students; getting them to learn, [so] that the academic and the employability related aspects, although separated, are brought together rather than seeing them as being in separate camps.”

Another challenge identified by an academic concerned “the problem that careers centres are relatively small and universities are relatively large.” It was questioned, “how do you spread their expertise across a large university?” It was recommended in interviews that careers centres should be “engaged in curricula at appropriate points” and “not just provide the menu of what they do, but actually respond to the needs of what the institution wants.” A number of interviewees shared their strategic vision that the primary roles of university-based career centres evolve to: spreading the word about graduate attributes and employability; coaching academics to embed employability and accompanying reflection throughout curriculum and the whole of the student experience; workshopping strategies with students, graduates, educators

and employers; and building bridges and networking opportunities between stakeholder groups.

## Successes

- Interviewed students recommended the importance of Faculty Placement Managers as a source for industry contacts, and commended them for providing valuable advice on work-experience opportunities. As one student articulated, “the Faculty Placement Manager is a great asset. She has all those contacts - you can go and see her and she can help you.” Another student stated, “It’s good that we have people like that who will help. We can just ask and say ‘I want to do an Internship’ and they will help us find one. So that’s really important.”
- Research participants emphasised that implementation of work-integrated learning within the curriculum promotes reflection and supports overall student development. A strong emerging theme was the impact of an employability framework on learning outcomes and character enrichment. An academic in a leadership position stated, “We are not assuming that every single one of our students is doing our degree because they want to get a job, there may be some who [want] to become better citizens or become volunteers for example.” Another educator suggested exposing students to integrative capstone experiences early. “Why shouldn’t students be running a start-up business over a semester and getting angel investors or crowd sourcing to fund it? It takes universities to take some risks.”

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SUPPORTING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES?

- A success strategy highlighted by an academic in a leadership position related to enhancing the alumni network as a source of industry engagement. “The alumni comes back and engages with the students. They let the students know some of the practical experiences and expectations of industry. Particularly when they transition from university into the workforce.”

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Highly intuitive and creative graduates
- Strong connections with industry
- Reflective learners
- Improved first-round employment rates
- Adaptable employees
- Leaders
- Citizens in a global world
- Graduates who partake in the ethics of life

## How has the approach developed employability?

The success strategies shared through interviews emphasised the importance of developing and maintaining connections between the higher education sector and industry. Strengthened relationships between higher education and industry were perceived to heighten opportunities for students to obtain relevant work experience and thereby further develop graduate attributes.

Specific personal attributes that were highlighted as important for graduate employability, overwhelmingly included *emotional intelligence* and *self-awareness*. In the article *The Key to Employability: Developing a Practical Model of Graduate Employability*, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) held that emotional intelligence “deserves a much higher profile” in terms of enhancing graduate employability and a graduate’s future contribution to society (p. 283). While research participants had varying views on whether emotional intelligence is inherent within the individual or can be developed as sets of learned behaviours, there was widespread agreement across research participants that educators must be aware of the value of emotional intelligence in a graduate’s disposition.



# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

## **Be aware that breadth is as important as discipline-specific skills.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“It varies a little from field to field, but there are these broader citizenry, communication and critical thinking skills that apply regardless of what field you are in. So having students being more aware of the big picture instead of just focussed on their own cocoon.”

## **Networking is vital.**

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN  
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“It’s connecting students in social and business contexts. I think this is quite critical and that it’s done in lots of ways. Students will do a project for a company in Engineering or Business, they’ll identify a particular issue or aspect and these students will work in teams and come up with solutions. They are already connected; they’re already working with [industry]. Industry want them because they’re bright and they’re doing really good stuff and they see them naturally within their company, so I think building that network and relationships is really critical.”

## **Be aware of the required practical outcomes from the outset of the course.**

*FROM STUDENTS:*

“Because [employability skills] are not on that same level as actually being educated, I think people [can] push it to the side.”

“I think universities expect us to approach it in a mature way, to realise that this is really

going to benefit us, but I think students [seem to] feel like they can’t spend time on that right now because they actually need a HD in this subject and if they spend four hours on employability skills that’s not actually going to show anywhere.”

## **Undertake work experience and placements.**

*FROM EDUCATORS:*

“It would allow the students who don’t know what they want to do, to [gain] a bit of an interest. The more students can experience authentic tasks where theory, education and systematic approaches are brought to bear, the more well-rounded they are going to [become].”

“The internships are very helpful for students because [universities] are just the first step in the door and we cannot show them everything that they are going to learn in the workplace. It’s up to the employers to do that next step, so we may be able to help them to become employable, but the employer cannot shirk their duty in looking after the new employee, and they are shirking it ethically when new employees are not brought in properly.”

## **Engage in the community by volunteering.**

*FROM A STUDENT:*

“The odds are that for most degrees, it is quite difficult to get a job after you graduate. But that would come down to how much networking you’ve done and how much volunteering.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

## **Be able to discern the current market and sell yourself successfully.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Don’t just see [your Curriculum Vitae] as some sort of blanket statement that could be for any or all employers, because it needs to be tailored to fit what the employer is looking for.”

## **Recognise the importance of empathy, emotional knowledge and self-awareness.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Somebody who’s managing might somehow be faced with someone who’s having a real paddy about something, really angry. So you’ve got to find ways of dealing with it. You’ve got to have the skills to do it. Or if you’re in a social work situation and you have very upset people, then you’ve got to deal with them. So then you have issues there that require something that is said to be sensitivity.”

*FROM AN EDUCATOR IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“Students have to have the capacity to think, capacity to learn, systematic analysis [skills] so that they analyse and then make judgements, and be human focused. They are not machines, they need to have interpersonal [skills], empathy and so on. They should be nice people and people would want to work with them. It’s the capacity to do hard work.”



## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

**Review, evaluate and quality-assure core programs so that they can be renewed and redesigned as necessary.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“We arranged informal focus groups, just conversations with students to possibly pre-empt the results from the [student evaluations]. We’ve then implemented some changes, just small ones, to run in the next semester - for ongoing quality control.”

**Ongoing commitment from universities to provide sufficient resources in order to keep systems running efficiently.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Whether this works or not will depend on how well it’s resourced. It’s very easy to set up a system that looks great on paper but having people available to actually make internships work -that’s the key to resourcing it properly. It is the key to its success.”

**Effective communication between universities and industry.**

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“[Educators] have had industry working with them right through the course and the employers were involved in the development of the course. They weren’t just an external reference group but involved in the development. It really stood out compared to what’s happening [elsewhere] in Australia and [to] what other countries are doing in relation to graduate employability. Those students all [obtained] jobs because they knew the system, they were working with their employers right through [their course].”

**Feedback from employers is important.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR IN A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“There has got to be some communication going on between the employers who are taking on today’s graduates.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

**Provide more information on career options to students and include career centre support within the curriculum at appropriate points.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I think the problem is that [career centres] are relatively small and universities are relatively large. So how do you spread their expertise across a large university? They need to go beyond just doing the routine things. There are ways in which they can perhaps be engaged in curricula at appropriate points, do whatever it is that needs to be done at that particular time and not essentially just provide a menu of what they do, but actually respond to the needs of what that part of the institution wants. So they need to be properly briefed to [develop strategic outcomes].”

**Teach students how to present well on paper and at interviews.**

*FROM EDUCATORS:*

“There are two kinds of strategies; there’s the up-skilling for what you will do in your job and there’s the up-skilling to get that job. Employability is about both.”

“Through the portfolio and workshops they are running on résumés and interview skills, they’ve seen students who have done all these wonderful things but are not conveying or presenting it in a way that’s grabbing the attention of employers as it should, given their experiences.”

# 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?

One of the strategies that strongly emerged in this particular case study was:

### **Careers advice and employment skill development**

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

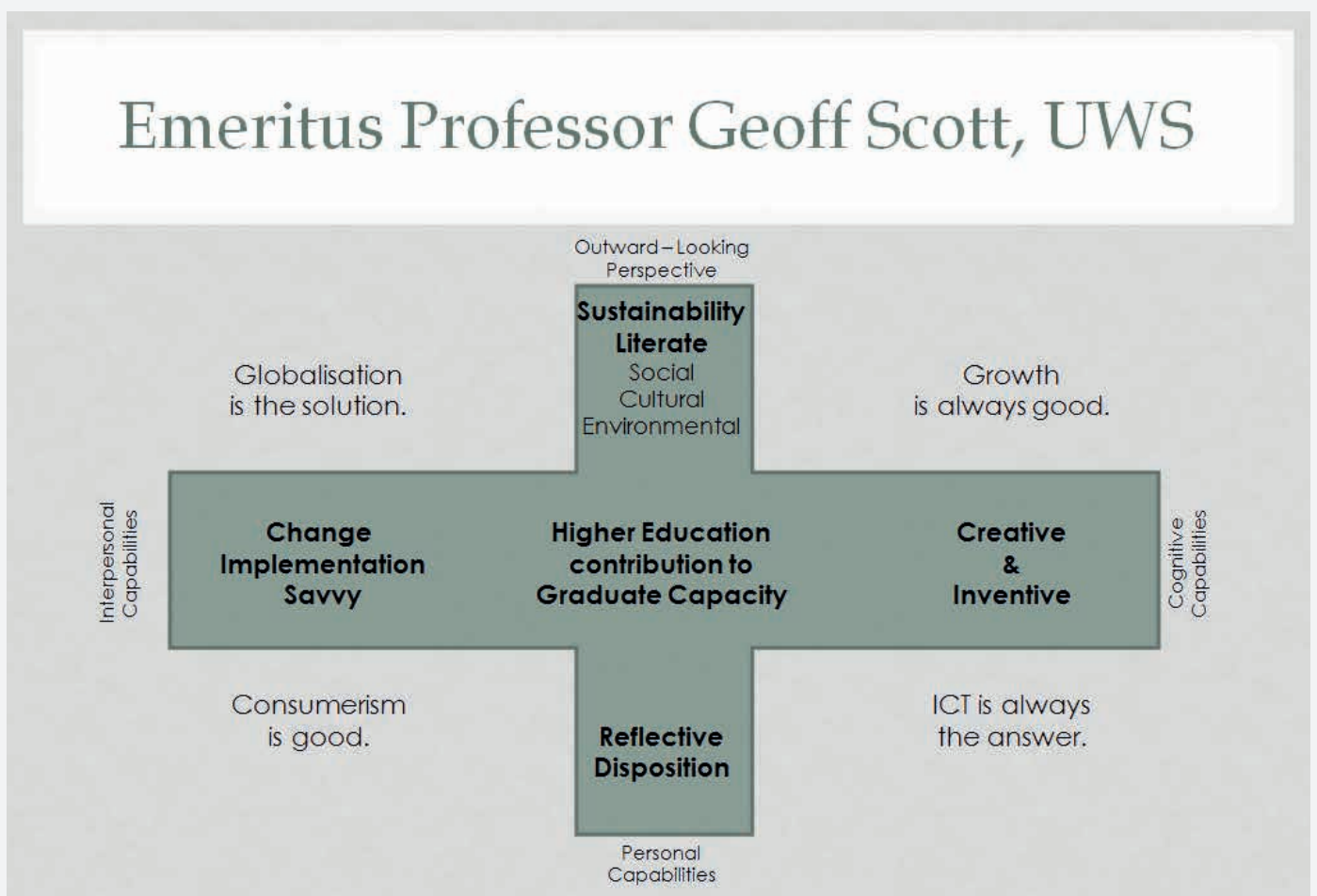
The majority of research participants described higher education and industry as increasingly *ethics-based*, meaning that graduates need to be able to connect on a deeper level and on a wider scale. According to Fullan and Scott (2014) students are “building a sustainable future and safeguarding the evolution of the planet” (p. 3). They need to be able to stimulate a positive impact in a difficult and challenging environment. The benefits of these personal and cognitive capabilities and graduate attributes are long-term and wide-reaching. They touch not only the workplace, but communities, societies and cultures within the global context. Graduates are not just students who have attended higher education and thereby learned a range of practical graduate competencies; they are global citizens who are intrinsically involved in and responsible for promoting societal values.

In order for this type of graduate to be sustained and developed, this project used Fullan and Scott’s (2014) propositions as an analytic framework to organise emerging themes. The resounding result was the proposition that reflection is imperative for students to develop as ethical citizens. The result of that analysis is depicted in Figure 1.

A theme emerging from the interviews was how best to implement this framework of employment skills development within higher education. An academic in a leadership position stated, “Now everyone can have input into the quality, content and development of the employability. A key to [being successful] is that everybody has to have joint ownership of it and buy into it.”

A number of research participants suggested developing a reward system for students, or making employability programs compulsory. A student said, “If you know you’re going to be penalised for not handing something in, you hand it in. If you know that you’re going to be penalised for not doing it properly, you do it properly. Whereas with the [employability] skills program - it’s not compulsory – I’m just floating around, just looking at it, [but] not really having to do it so there’s not that kind of risk-reward system going on.” Students also emphasised the importance of tailoring employability skills in the context of particular degrees/disciplines/industries. A student explained, “We would feel so much more obliged and also enthusiastic to partake in it.” Students identified themselves as diverse and asked that consideration be given to building programs to accommodate all types of students. An educator shared, “The other resource sensitive issue is to have the flexibility to accommodate people with very different backgrounds, ambitions, and stages of development. The person who has come into the university already from industry has very different needs from a person straight out of high school, and we need a program that accommodates both. I don’t think you can do that without resourcing the [program] very strongly because you need different things for different people.”

**Figure 1: The project’s interpretation of Fullan and Scott’s Education Plus Framework**



# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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Yorke, M. (2004). Employability in higher education: What it is – what it is not. *Higher Education Academy/ESECT, Learning and Employability, 1*, 2-21.

## 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

- Should graduate attributes be taught as stand-alone subjects, embedded within curriculum, or some combination of both?
- How can graduate attributes be embedded within curriculum?
- What are the disciplinary differences in the context of graduate attributes? Should higher education offer different types of support for students in generalist versus professional disciplines?
- In what manner can career centres become more actively involved within faculties and be embraced as stakeholders in overall university strategy?
- Can interpersonal skills such as empathy and emotional intelligence be learned?
- In what ways can employers be involved in the student experience? What are the benefits of supporting industry engagement?









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# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Emerging Careers



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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:

- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

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

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Indigenous employment and supports
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- Focus on graduate attributes

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 and context of emerging careers is based on interviews and focus groups with nine people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, educators and employers from four universities, and three businesses. This particular case study attempts to capture and share the insights of leading higher education thinkers/change agents. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



# INTRODUCTION

With the dawn of the information age resulting in widespread disruption and change, how can educators prepare students and graduates for careers that do not yet exist? The Australian Government's online career service, myfuture, emphasised the importance of student engagement with developing technology as a means to prepare students for employment. "Emerging occupations require new skills, knowledge and expertise in response to changes in the world created by new technologies, ideas, processes, services or products as well as the evolving needs of society" (myfuture, 2013).

As a result, the focus of education has altered. As articulated by an academic in a leadership position, "discipline knowledge used to be defined in terms of the content that was in a textbook," whereas knowledge in the 21st century "is evolving faster than textbooks can keep pace with." Consequently, there has been a focus on teaching skills that encourage students to find new forms of knowledge and to deal with uncertainty. An academic in a leadership position stated that graduates must be capable of dealing with an uncertain marketplace as employable contexts are "characterised by uncertainty more than anything else."

Three areas of opportunities for educators to prepare students and graduates for emerging careers include:

- Embedding authentic assessment within subjects. Authentic assessment is assessment embedded in real-world practice, whereby students develop and enhance soft and technical skillsets.
- Expanding the range of employability opportunities available to students.
- Equipping students with a strong skills platform – technical and soft in addition to lifelong learning and ability to cope with uncertainty.

The marketplace of the 21st century and beyond is comprised of uncertainty. Technological and software advancements are inherently unpredictable, and alter the range of careers options. For this reason, students should be equipped with the understanding that traditional and stable jobs may be a thing of the past. The reflective capacity of the student should be developed, so that the graduate can effectively recognise their personal strengths and have the confidence to articulate this to employers.

## 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 within entrepreneurial start-ups.

## Keywords

- Humility
- Courage
- Uncertainty
- Adapt
- Ability to deal with multiple perspectives
- Authentic assessment

# A TRUE STORY OF GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## **Nkosana Mafico, Co-Founder and Co-CEO Peep Digital**

I am a twenty year old entrepreneur intensely focused on helping solve the world's grand challenges. At present, I am the co-founder and CEO of Peep Digital, Founder of the Council for Young Africans Living Abroad (CYALA) and Chief Empowerment Officer at Shanda Enterprises. Peep is my focus at the moment; we have developed a multi-sensory digital English pronunciation platform that is embeddable into any digital text.

Throughout my university years, I have been involved in numerous societies namely the International Association of Students in Economic and Commercial Science (referred to as AIESEC), the world's largest youth run organisation and the IDEA Network, a student entrepreneurship society. These organisations have allowed me to meet with like-minded people as well as increase my knowledge and expertise in certain areas. I have also become greatly self-aware through the travel I have been able to undertake as a result of my involvement with these societies. I have attended international entrepreneurship conferences in Dublin, Beijing, Singapore and Silicon Valley and was part of the executive team that successfully ran the 2014 Global Innovative Youth Conference in Brisbane, Australia. I have also been a participant of a government sponsored trade mission to San Francisco and in July 2014, I was selected as an Australian Delegate for the G20 Young Entrepreneurs Alliance Summit in Sydney.

I believe extra-curricular activities are crucial as they allow you to learn more about your respective field as well as meet people in the industry that you want to work in. University alone will not get you your dream job. University plus extra-curricular activities however, likely will.





# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN EMERGING CAREERS?

Predicting employability and emerging career trends is an inherently complex issue. A clear example of rapid change is in the area of technology and its uses.

As stated by an employer, “Universities need to be more aware of the labyrinth-like nature of careers for graduates these days. As an example, there is no ‘defined’ career path for graduates; rather they need to utilise their networking skills to navigate their way into positions of influence. Some may need to take steps sideways, some may need to move overseas – it is not the linear, traditional career that I got a sense a lot of people believed it to be, and we need to be preparing graduates for ambiguity, change and uncertainty.”

In order to combat this challenge, educators are encouraged to highlight the uncertain employment environment and focus attention away from traditional careers, to investing in the development of students’ skillsets. As stated by an educator, “educators need to provide from the get-go to students, the idea of the breadth of roles out there, and encourage them to think about *skills* rather than *jobs* because the jobs that students are going to end up with in ten years’ time do not exist yet.” As a result, educators have had to be more flexible and adaptable in their teaching methods.

Technology and human knowledge continues to evolve on a daily basis, in turn outpacing education. Technology has altered not just the methods of education, but also provides unparalleled opportunities for students and graduates alike. An educator shared his opinion that, “I think every generation has wanted to make the world a better place, but

I think this generation is more accommodated through social media and through a sense of connectedness through the internet.”

## 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.**

Research participants urged students to reflect on the skillsets developed both at university, and through co-curricular activities. Participate in co-curricular activities that interest you, with an awareness of enhancing your employability.

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

Educators successfully advanced graduate employability through embedding authentic assessments into curricula, in turn linking theory to *real-world* employment contexts. This will require further engagement with industry and community, and may take the form of in-class simulation exercises or internships/work experiences.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within emerging careers.**

Employers are encouraged to engage further with higher educational institutions by presenting in lectures, or mentoring students and graduates. Engage with students through internships, and encourage students to work with emerging technology.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN EMERGING CAREERS?

## Challenges

The main challenge facing students and educators alike stems from the rapid speed of emerging technology. An educator stated that graduates may “come out of university with a set of skills that may no longer be required because of the speed in which industry moves.” In order to mitigate this challenge, it is imperative for educators “to engage much more closely in society, because they no longer have a monopoly on education” (from an academic in a leadership position). By building this community, industry also benefits as “it is a way for the professions to keep new and vibrant” (from an academic in a leadership position).

Another challenge facing students is the lack of time to complete co-curricular activities. As stated by an academic in a leadership position, “We need better resourcing to support students in engaging in the co-curricular work that is available to them. That could be in terms of providing students with time to complete these co-curricular activities within their degree. They are very crowded degree structures at the moment.” Industry engagement activities, such as internships, are encouraged as part of a student’s degree and their professional development. Employers shared their observation that internships develop soft skillsets, and help them develop greater understanding of what is required for employment.

## Successes

- **Host inter-disciplinary competitions.**

Educators participating in the research experienced heightened graduate employability through including university-wide competitions whereby students team-up with a peer from a different faculty. This enables students to meet like-minded peers who have a different set of skills, while developing their own skillsets.

- **Host Industry networking events for highest ranking students.**

Through networking, students are given the opportunity to present themselves to industry employers. Research participants said that this strategy helps support connections between students, industry and the university, while also granting students the opportunity to engage with industry prior to submitting graduate applications.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY IN EMERGING CAREERS?

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Reflective and life-long learners
- Strong networks with industry
- Enhanced business acumen
- Development of leadership skills
- Ability to work effectively in team environments

## How has the approach developed employability?

According to an interviewed student, inter-disciplinary competitions foster the development of networks and expand the knowledge-base of students. Exposing students to peers from other faculties imitates the workplace, whereby colleagues from different specialisations work together to produce a product, or deliver a service.



## ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

### **Students should consider undertaking co-curricular activities.**

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN  
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“The university will provide opportunities through its courses, through the rich array of co-curricular work that is possible at university. It will encourage students to participate in these activities, and will make it possible for them with support in terms of scholarships and funding. But the student still has to decide if she or he wants to do it.”

### **Critically analyse information.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The ability to critically analyse new information. Don’t take things at face value because it is written on the internet. But also be able to make comparisons between one type of technology or software and another.”

### **Know the basics and recognise the link between theory and practice.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR*

“Having the base understanding in our field of how computers, logic, discreet mathematics comes back to traditional university subjects such as mathematics, logic and physics.”

# ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

## Finding the right fit.

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN  
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“It is about a personal fit between the graduate and the context. My particular strengths will be different to my counterpart at another university, but maybe I am well suited to this context. So there is something about the connection between the person and the context, which has to work for both parties.”

## Interpersonal skills.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The most important thing in the world is people skills, because no matter what you are doing and who you know, you are always going to be working with people and with fellow employees. So those interpersonal skills are crucial.”

## Emotional Intelligence.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“I am a big believer in the importance of emotional intelligence and empathy. I think we need a lot more empathy in this world. I think that also helps from a negotiation perspective to see other people’s points of view.”

## Failure is important.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The interesting thing with graduate employability, especially participating in interviews, is that you almost need to fail several times in order to develop the skills.”

## Listen and then act.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The most fundamental skill is the ability to listen and understand what is required at the moment. Put it into context so that a strategy is built around the day’s or the week’s activities, so that the graduate has the capacity to process the information in the environment about what is required and get on with the job with a minimum amount of assistance.”

## Look beyond grades.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“Employers don’t just look at grades, but look at the graduate’s attitude and their ability to be involved and contribute to a business.”

## Do not wait for the dream job to find you.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“When you complete your degree don’t hang around and wait for that job to come up.”

“It does not matter what job you have after graduation. If you already have a job when you go for that interview you just have another peg on someone who hasn’t because you are willing to do the tough jobs because you are a hard worker. Regardless of what field the job is within, you are showing a positive and strong part of your personality.”

## ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

### **Bridge the gap between university, community and industry.**

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN  
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“So some of it is about universities developing a much more permeable barrier between the institution and the community that they work in, and that includes employers in that community.”

### **Develop student capacity to deal with uncertainty.**

*FROM AN ACADEMIC IN  
A LEADERSHIP POSITION:*

“Universities need to teach graduates how to cope with that uncertainty, how to be able to learn those new skills; in fact how to create those new skills.”

### **More interactions.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“The best predictors for student success are more peer-to-peer and more peer-to-instructor interaction. The more we can facilitate these interactions, the more we can fit in, and the more learning goes on.”

### **Have a clear understanding of student expectations.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“It is a changing world and we have to realise that increasingly students want not that piece of paper but they want that conduit, that ticket that could open doors for employability or increase the opportunities for employability.”

### **Be creative and adaptable to change.**

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Employers are looking for a graduate that can show that they can adapt, think, and be creative.”

### **Widely publicise supports to students.**

*FROM A STUDENT:*

“I definitely think the employability support programs need to be more publicised, and there needs to be more of them.”

# ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

## **Further engage with higher education institutions.**

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Educators are always hungry for industry because that is that voice of authenticity, it’s that voice of context from industry.”

## **Have realistic expectations of graduate capabilities.**

### *FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“A lot of employers are pushing the universities to produce graduates who can fall on their feet and be ready to go, but it has never been the role of the university to do that type of thing, and we can never teach someone so specifically that they will fit in with a specific organisation.”

## **Students want experience.**

### *FROM A GRADUATE:*

“Money is not why students participate in extra-curricular activities. They are doing it because they want the experience, they want to be involved in something bigger than themselves and they are hoping to learn something that can apply in their own lives.”

## **Invest in training graduate employees.**

### *FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“Training is enormously important. For the companies that do have the resources, definitely allocate them towards training, you cannot lose money on that. If you are worried about training employees so well that they can then just go elsewhere, still do it because if you don’t the graduates are still going to go elsewhere.”



## 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 percent of student surveys, 74 percent of graduate surveys and 87 percent 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.

A key recommendation that emerged within the interviews was for more resources to be invested in work experience, internships and placements. This will ensure a more sustainable impact on graduate employability development. In the context of emerging careers, there was widespread support for expansion of industry relevant projects and activities embedded and authentically assessed in curriculum in addition to expanded relationships with industry, community and alumni networks.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and Resources

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Knight, P. T., & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

myfuture. (2013). *Emerging Occupations*. Department of Education, Australian Government. Retrieved from <http://www.myfuture.edu.au/explore-careers/occupation-showcase/emerging-occupations#>

## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

## Thank you to:

- James Alexander
- Simon Barrie
- James Birt
- Jeff Brand
- Penny de Byl
- Nkosana Mafico
- Teigan Margetts
- Peter Mellow
- Hugh Minson
- Emma Sherry
- Bond University
- Ericsson
- La Trobe University
- Nexus Notes
- Peep Digital
- The University of Melbourne
- The University of Sydney

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

- In what manner can educators enable a broadening of industry projects into curriculum?
- Should the higher education sector be more responsive to industry shifts, and if so how can this be implemented?
- How can students and graduates seek out opportunities that enhance and support their own skills in managing uncertainty and change and developing resilience?





7-6-2015

# What students and graduates need to know about graduate employability: Lessons from National OLT research

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# What students and graduates need to know about graduate employability: Lessons from National OLT research

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Based on 2013 data, Graduate Careers Australia reported that graduate employability rates are the lowest they have been in twenty years. This paper applies outcomes from a National OLT project commissioned in 2013 (completed in 2015) in response to this employment crisis. This paper presents research outcomes from analysis of in-depth one-hour interviews and focus groups with 147 people from across four stakeholder groups: students, graduates, higher education personnel (educators and career development personnel) and employers. Validated narrative analysis was conducted on full transcripts. Eleven themes emerged: multi-national corporations; competitive sport, athletes and employability; entrepreneurship; private institutions; career development centres; indigenous employment; commercial employment enterprises; government; emerging careers; generalist disciplines; and graduate attributes. Each theme is elaborated in the paper. Based on the research results, in order to enhance employability upon graduation, students are encouraged to: start early, such as in their first semester; participate in work experience, placements and internships; join in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (e.g. student societies, clubs and competitive sport); and get to know their educators and their career development centre personnel. Based on the research, stakeholders from across groups perceive that employability is enhanced when graduates: actively participate in their learning, particularly engaging in placement/internship opportunities when available; choose a few prospective employers, do their research and tailor their applications; participate in industry graduate initiatives when offered; and know themselves and practice articulating their personal employability brands.

**Keywords:** Graduate employability; graduate outcomes; stakeholder perspectives

## Introduction

There is widespread international concern over the employment outcomes of higher education graduates (Smith, 2010; Tran, 2012; Wilton, 2008). In Australia, Graduate Career Australia's (GCA 2014a) report revealed that the number of 2013 bachelor degree alumni, employed full-time four months post-graduation, was the lowest in 20 years. In October 2014, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that, since 2012, graduate recruitment to the Australian Public Service Commission had dropped by nearly 25 per cent (Towell, 2014). There is little dispute that the factor most affecting graduate employment outcomes is the state of the economy (Graduate Careers Australia, 2014a, 2014b; Yorke, 2006). There is also widespread agreement regarding changes that can be made to higher education which may shift the metaphoric scales to weigh more heavily in the graduates' favour (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; Oliver & Whelan, 2011). Graduate Careers Australia, (2014b) reported that more than 1/5 of the surveyed employers stated they would have hired additional employees, depending on "quality, experience and skill of graduate[s]" (p. 8). The graduate employability factors reported to matter most to employers are *soft* and *technical skills* (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013; Jackson, 2010, Muhamad, 2012). Many authors raised a concern about a mismatch between the skills graduates have developed through higher education and what they need to succeed in the workforce (Jing, Patel, & Chalk, 2011; Tymon, 2013; Wilton, 2008). Others advocate for large-scale changes to what higher education teaches, how it is taught and how students' achievements are measured (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Fullan & Scott, 2014; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke, 2010).

The problem appearing with regularity in the literature is low graduate employment and the accompanying solution is enhanced *graduate employability* (Holmes, 2013; Tran, 2012). Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006). There is evidence that with leadership and support (including standards, guidelines and professional development), higher education institutions can embed employability activities within curriculum to improve graduate outcomes (Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli, & Wilson, 2013; Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Oliver & Whelan, 2011).

The research literature provides evidence that students are expected to do more than study and complete their courses in order to be employable upon graduation; additional employability strategies are necessary in order to secure suitable work (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014; Rae, 2007; Yorke, 2010). Employability requires collaboration between four stakeholder groups; higher education personnel and employers make strategies available, and students and graduates (alumni) actively initiate and make the most of these strategies (Harvey & Shahjahan, 2013; Walkington, 2014).

## Method

The aims of this project were to:

- achieve a greater clarity on the issues, challenges and contexts of graduate employability;

- identify and review the strategies that have been successfully used to address these challenges;
- create opportunities for the diverse stakeholder groups to share their perspectives; and
- promote strategies that may be used by the various stakeholders to collaborate on improving graduate outcomes.

The full project activities included: reviewing the literature; surveying students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers (705 valid surveys received); conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups (147 participants); and hosting a multi-stakeholder national graduate employability symposium (150 delegates). This paper reports the methods, results and recommendations for students and graduates derived from the interview and focus group phase of the research. Other results will be reported in subsequent publications.

In-depth one-hour interviews and focus groups (147 participants) were conducted. The participants were primarily identified from the survey respondents. If a respondent had addressed a relevant theme in their narrative survey comments and indicated on their consent form that they were willing to be contacted, then an interview or focus group was scheduled. Participants were also identified through team member networks, snowball referrals and literature searches. Interviews and focus groups were intentionally scheduled in all eight Australian States and Territories in urban, rural, remote and regional contexts.

**Table 1: Interview and focus group participation**

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Focus groups</b>	<b>Focus group participants</b>	<b>Total participants</b>
<b>Students</b>	5	5	22	27
<b>Graduates</b>	8	3	16	24
<b>Higher Education</b>	32	17	48	80
<b>Employers</b>	16	x	x	16
<b>Totals</b>	61	25	86	147

Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the project leaders and project manager using standard sets of questions (Appendix A – Student Questions provided as example). There were four sets of questions – one for each stakeholder group. The number of questions ranged from 15 on the student set to 23 on the employer set. All question sets included a variety of question types including demographic, context specific and general impressions/experiential. The questions were derived by the full project team (which included a graduate and a General Manager of a University Career Development Centre). Questions were created using prompts



from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching's original call for proposals, empirical research literature, careers theory and the shared experience of team members. Interviewers and focus group facilitators probed responses where appropriate.

All interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed. A minimum of two team members independently analysed the transcripts, using a worksheet (Appendix B). Shaddock's (2014) approach to analysis was applied whereby team members repeatedly re-read the transcripts, highlighted key themes and quotes and completed the worksheet, inserting verbatim quotes as well as summaries in their own words. The Project Manager confirmed qualitative validity through comparing and contrasting the submitted worksheets. Where there was 80% agreement, she created a unified worksheet and submitted this and the independent worksheets to case study authors. Where 80% agreement was not achieved, she assigned analysis to further team members.

## Results

Eleven key themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups. An extensive case study was written for each. A description of the key finding and illustrative quotes for each theme is provided below.

1. **Multi-national corporations** – Graduate employment through multi-national corporations offers the unique work-based learning experience of formal graduate development programs, which are highly esteemed by project participants. One of the interviewed employers stated, “Last year we ran an internship program where we got a number of people to join us on a temporary contract basis over December and January. Then after that point, those that were considered high performers by their manager were made offers. It was an extended interview. Managers were familiar with the graduates that they were hiring and they also managed to build that rapport before they started.”
2. **Competitive sport, athletes & employability** – It was the experience of project participants that students who engage in extra-curricular activity, such as sport, experience advantages in graduate employability. An interviewed career development professional said, “I can't think of many graduates that I am aware of that have been truly successful who haven't had a broader experience than just being a student. Generally, those students that we recognise as elite athletes are high achievers in all they do, and sport is just part of it. Students who are engaged with those activities while they are studying are getting jobs more easily, better quality jobs and are contributing more so to society thereafter.”
3. **Entrepreneurship** – Project participants expressed a belief that entrepreneurship is an increasingly viable and valuable career pathway for higher education graduates. Project participants stated that higher education support of entrepreneurship is a productive response to changing traditional employment vacancies. An illustrative quote from an interviewed entrepreneur was, “I think going forward, it's going to be very hard to find a job that you're going to be able to sit in for a long time. I think most jobs are going to maybe have a two-year life span, max. It's going to be more like contracting all the time. Which means that as this generation of kids finish school, they're going to need to be able to up-skill regularly. They're going to need to have to constantly pitch their skills and apply for new roles. I think there will be some enjoyment in it because I think there will be more opportunity for a work-life balance, but certainly you'll need to have – I think

they call it grit – that grit to just keep going. Because along with those sorts of things, without having that stability that our previous generation have known in the workforce, there’s going to be some heartbreaks there as well.”

4. **Private institutions** – The importance of establishing strong links with industry through the adoption of both formal and informal approaches was articulated as a key to enhancing graduate employability. Project participants expressed a belief that private institutions are providing leadership through example in this domain. An educator from a private institution said, “Our full-time students spend at least a week, sometimes longer, every year in an intentional programmed practical experience week. A variety of options and locations are provided: capital city options, rural options, interstate and central Australian options and cross-cultural experiences overseas.”
5. **Career development centres** – The experience of many higher education institutions, as expressed by project participants, is that students visit career development centres too late in their program of studies. Project participants shared examples of higher education institutions strategically embedding career development supports throughout the student learning experience. An illustrative comment from a university career development professional was, “An approach that is purely focused on student work placement will not be nearly as effective as an integrated and embedded approach woven into the learning and teaching fabric. It is important to develop the quality of the student as they go through the learning experience.”
6. **Indigenous employment** – Quality learning, teaching and employment outcomes of indigenous students were key concerns of project participants. A salient theme was that heightened employability of indigenous graduates can only be realised when community stakeholders authentically work collaboratively to build initiatives. An educator said, “It is crucial that graduates have an understanding of the community and Indigenous culture when applying for jobs in Indigenous regions which is also an important employability factor. For example, a hiring school may say, ‘No, I know I don’t want that teacher who came up from [an urban centre] who doesn’t know our community. I want that teacher who knows Auntie X, someone who is aware of the protocols of this community.’ This is an employability factor for our students; that they know that they can apply for a position in Town X, and when they meet with the principal, they can say, ‘Auntie X taught me last year’ or ‘I spent a lot of time in Town Y and I understand what is expected of the community and the protocols that are expected.’”
7. **Commercial employment enterprises** – Project participants stated that for-profit and fee-for-service career supports can support institutions and/or individual graduates to heighten employability outcomes. Illustrative advice to graduates from educators was, “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. 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.”
8. **Government** – According to project participants, government departments and agencies are significant employers of Australian graduates. Project participants articulated the importance of preparing students for recruitment and application processes unique to government positions. A government employer said, “Knowledge of the Australian

Government and the civil service that supports it will help students gain graduate employment in government. Furthermore, once commencing in the Australian Public Service, it will allow [graduates] to put their best foot forward and to do so quickly. There is much that has been written about government in Australia, from the daily newspaper to the endless resources online and archived. A genuine interest in politics and policy will be invaluable.”

9. **Emerging careers** – Project participants observed new careers emerging from technological innovation and change. They articulated the importance of preparing students for careers that do not yet exist, or are not in their fully evolved form. An educator said that graduates may “come out of university with a set of skills that may no longer be required because of the speed in which industry moves.” In order to mitigate this challenge, a senior university executive said that it is imperative for educators “to engage much more closely in society, because they no longer have a monopoly on education.”
10. **Generalist disciplines** – Project participants stated that generalist disciplines lead to a broad range of graduate career options. They expressed a belief that generalist disciplines are a viable option for students/graduates. An educator within a generalist program said that their graduates “understand sociology, politics, international relations and policy. Graduates understand the complexity of issues such as domestic violence or Indigenous affairs. Even to the level of having conversations with people in the community where you will encounter stereotypes, our graduates know how to think about why people are like that in a more complex way without passing judgment, and in a way that is sensitive and important, and important in a world-changing way. These stereotypes are easily dismantled with more education.”
11. **Graduate attributes** – Project participants stated that graduate attributes are an important domain of the student learning experience, as employability appears to be advanced through a balanced developmental focus on attributes, knowledge, skills and communicated identity. An illustrative comment from an educator was, “It varies a little from field to field, but there are these broader citizenry, communication and critical thinking skills that apply regardless of what field you are in. So having students being more aware of the big picture instead of just focused on their own cocoon.”

## **Discussion**

The overall findings of this project, based on analysis of interviews and focus groups, were:

- multiple stakeholders stated that the most employable graduates are those who have a broad-based experience, and are able to identify and articulate their own personal identity, brand and profile;
- transferable skills and a broad-based student experience are often more important than the particular discipline of study for impacting employability;
- higher education personnel (private and public) believe they can bolster graduate employability by promoting/supporting extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and skill development (technical and transferable) through work experience, internships and

placements and other types of employability strategies;

- students have a variety of needs, resources and capacities, such that extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and experiences may not be realistic and accessible to all; and
- there are barriers to employment, such as gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background that may override employability strategies and supports.

Some stakeholders participating in interviews and focus groups used the terms *extra-curricular* and *co-curricular* interchangeably and others explicitly articulated the distinction. To many research participants, extra-curricular and co-curricular activities mean student recreational and/or leisure pursuits that take place outside of regular curriculum or program of disciplinary learning outcomes. These activities are pursued beyond the classroom and/or online learning. Activity examples include university sport, club/society membership and student leadership. Whereas extra-curricular activities are separate and apart from the formal learning program, higher education institutions align co-curricular activities with formal schooling so that such activities are part of the overall learning experience. Co-curricular activities are designed to work in conjunction with the discipline curriculum to support employable graduates.

Overall, interviewed employers were pleased with the graduates they had hired, but felt that they had to sort through numerous applications to find the suitable recruits. Interviewed graduates varied in their perspective. Two statements were repeatedly heard. One was that internships were often a prescribed part of their university study, but there were inadequate support services to help students secure suitable placements and then negotiate a quality experience. The second recurring statement was that many higher education institutions provide employability supports to promote well-rounded experiences, but students do not realise they need these services until it is too late. Those graduates who did pursue early access to quality supports reported leaving university with the generic skills they needed.

## **Conclusion**

Most of the 147 people interviewed or participating in focus groups (students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers) offered employability advice to students and to graduates. This advice was analysed for thematic salience and synthesised into four key recommendations for each of these stakeholder groups.

### *Students*

- Start early, such as in your first semester.
- Participate in work experience, placements and internships.
- Join in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities (e.g. student societies, clubs and competitive sport).
- Get to know your educators and your career development centre personnel.

### *Graduates*

- Choose a few prospective employers, do your research and tailor your applications.
- Carefully proof read and edit all application forms.
- Participate in industry graduate initiatives when offered.
- Know yourself and practice articulating your personal employability brand.

The key design strength of this project was that a diverse project team contributed to the research. This included educators, a recent graduate, a career development professional, and employers on the reference group. There were a large number of interviewees and focus group participants, and data collection took place in all eight Australian States and Territories in urban, rural, remote and regional contexts. The limitation, and impetus for further research, was the relatively small size of the employer stakeholder group.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview & Focus Group Questions**

#### **Graduate Employability OLT Project Questions for Students (Interviews & Focus Groups)**

1. Describe your current student experience.  
University? Faculty? Program? Undergraduate or Postgraduate? Full-time or Part-time? Semester in Program? When do you expect to graduate?
2. What opportunities does your university provide you to enhance your graduate employability (i.e. get a good job and keep it after graduation from university)?
3. Is the onus mostly on you to develop your own graduate employability skills (i.e. self-initiated and independent) or is this a well-developed and/or formal part of your university experience?
4. What is good about the graduate employability supports your university offers?
5. What should be improved about these graduate employability supports?
6. If you were to create a new university-driven graduate employability support system, what would it be like?
7. What are the key strategies that you believe will help you with graduate employment?
8. Do you think that the graduate employability supports and strategies that your university provides will help you to get a good job?
9. To date, what approaches have you taken to enhancing your employability?  
(e.g. attending career fairs, participating in internships...)
10. When did you start participating in graduate employability supports and strategies? (i.e. in your first semester, in your final semester ...)
11. Do you expect to get a job directly related to your degree? Describe.
12. What attributes, characteristics and transferable skills do you think are important to your employment success?
13. Did your university play an active role in helping you develop these attributes, characteristics and transferable skills? What did they do?
14. What would you describe as the employer's role in helping you learn your new job and developing with the organisation? Where and when does the university's responsibility end and the employer's begin?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about graduate employability supports at your university or those you expect through your future employer?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview & Focus Group Analysis Worksheet**

#### **OLT Commissioned Project Grant RR-B-143 Graduate Employability**

#### **Transcript analysis**

##### **Interview details**

Date:

Interviewee(s):

Stakeholder group represented:

Interviewer(s)

Reviewer:

Date of analysis:

##### **Process Overview**

*Each interview and focus group has been transcribed verbatim. Each transcript will be reviewed by a minimum of two team members using this proforma. The Project Manager (PM) will compare and contrast responses. If there is 80% or higher agreement across reviews, the PM will collate the responses into a master proforma. If there is less than 80% agreement, the PM will send the transcript out to additional reviewers until a minimum 80% agreement is reached.*

*Each team member can expect to receive approximately 30 transcripts to review in total. Each review takes approximately one hour. All reviews are due 30 September 2014. Please submit to the PM as each is completed.*

##### **General comments**

*Write a short paragraph after reading the entire transcript. This is a synopsis or executive summary. In the paragraph, provide information about the context of the matter discussed. e.g. Was the interview about a particular employer or about a university program of studies? Describe the role of the person being interviewed. Are there notable overall features of their experience and/or perspective?*

[Insert paragraph here.]

##### **Key Words**

*Provide a dot-point list of verbatim key words that frequently occur and/or are emphasised throughout the transcript. e.g. real-world, stand out, self-motivation, distinctive difference, misinformed*

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

##### **Major themes**

*Note 3-6 central themes that are prominent throughout and/or strongly emphasised in sub-sections of the transcript. After each sentence, provide some elaboration and/or a key quote verbatim from the transcript.*

[Insert themes and supporting data here.]

##### **Challenges and Solutions**

*Were any specific challenges emphasised and accompanying solutions described? For example, did an interviewee describe a particular graduate employability problem and then describe what they put in place to resolve that problem?*

[Insert challenges and solutions here.]



## **Practical Strategies**

*Were there any practical strategies that should be noted and included in the final report? i.e. Are there innovations and ideas that may be useful to others?*

[Describe practical strategies here.]

## **Enhancement of Graduate Employability**

*If the interviewee / focus group attendees specifically addressed their views about actions, supports and strategies that enhance graduate employability, summarise these here.*

[Describe enhancement of graduate employability here.]

## **Graduate Attributes**

*Insert a dot-point list of adjectives used to describe employable graduates. To be relevant, all terms should complete the sentence, "This graduate shows \_\_\_." Sample terms are "confidence, passion and resilience." These terms must be verbatim from the transcripts.*

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

## **Core Work Skills**

*These are commonly known as transferable skills or soft skills. These are the employability skills that are situated across disciplines. Examples include, "leadership, communication, negotiation, advocacy, decision making and problem solving." Include the words verbatim from the transcript.*

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

## **Technical or Discipline-Specific Skills**

*List and/or describe the technical and/or discipline-specific skills that are discussed in the transcripts. Also include comments made about hiring from generalist versus degree-specific programs and whether there is greater emphasis placed on technical / discipline-specific or core work skills. Quote the transcript e.g. "we believe in developing the whole person not just having technical skills."*

[List / Describe data on technical or discipline-specific skills here.]

## **Literacy**

*Does the transcript address literacy? Numerical? English-language? Digital? Technical / Professional? If so describe here. e.g. "It is critically important that graduates demonstrate their literacy on resumes and cover letters. What message does it send to employers if they can't spell?"*

[Describe literacy data here.]

## **Sustainability**

*Did the transcripts specifically reference "sustainability" or long-term continuance or protection of our planet and resources? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."*

[Describe sustainability data here.]

## **Change Implementation Savvy**

*Did the transcripts specifically reference the need for graduates to address and/or have skills in managing / implementing change and/or address how students / graduates have to be comfortable with rapid change? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."*

[Describe change data here.]

**Reflective Position on Tacit Assumptions**

*Did the transcripts specifically reference the need for students /graduates to be reflective and/or develop a position / perspective / stance on current and contemporary issues? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase “did not emerge in transcripts.”*

[Describe reflective position data here.]

**Creative and Inventive**

*Did the transcripts specifically reference creativity and / or inventiveness and / or synonyms? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase “did not emerge in transcripts.”*

[Describe creativity / inventiveness data here.]

5-22-2015

# Enhancing graduate employability of the 21st century learner

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# Proceedings of the International Mobile Learning Festival 2015:

## *Mobile Learning, MOOCs and 21st Century Learning*

Editors

**Daniel Churchill**, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR China  
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International Mobile Learning Festival 2015, 21-23 May, Hong Kong SAR China



## **Enhancing graduate employability of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner**

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Today's higher education students want choice, personalisation, efficiency and relevance leading to maximal outcomes, including employment. They need heightened media literacy and advanced higher order thinking, which can be facilitated through technology-enhanced pedagogies. The reported research inquired into how higher education can heighten graduate employability in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. Analysed Australian national data from 705 completed surveys, and interviews/focus groups with 147 people revealed that there are discrepancies between stakeholder groups (students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers) that must be acknowledged and rectified if the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner is to maximise employability. Research results indicated that the primary strategy towards improving graduate employability is supported participation in work experience, internships and placements. Furthermore, interviewed stakeholders advocated that employability in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires that students pursue a well-rounded experience including extra- and co-curricular activities.

Keywords: employability; higher education graduates; 21<sup>st</sup> century learners

### **Introduction**

Quality is a predominant theme in higher education, and one of the primary concerns is that the particular wants and needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are not being met (Hung, Shu-

Shing, & Lim, 2012; Irvine, Code, & Richards, 2013). Why are the words – *21<sup>st</sup> century learner* – so prevalent in the literature? In other words, what is different about this generation of learner from those who came before? The primary difference appears to be created by their lifelong access to the internet (Kinash, 2011; Lambert, & Cuper, 2008; Prensky, 2012). As a result, 21<sup>st</sup> century learners are described as more connected and empowered than previous student generations (Green, 2012; Prensky, 2012). Today's students acknowledge feeling *entitled* to quality education (Kinash, Wood, & Knight, 2013) and researchers have reported that contemporary students want choices as to their mode of study (on-campus, online or blended) so that learning is accessible and personalised (Green, 2012; Irvine, Code, & Richards, 2013). Students also insist that learning be relevant, practical and efficient (Freeman, & Wash, 2013; Green, 2012). In addition to what 21<sup>st</sup> century learners seem to *want*, the changing contexts of technology, higher education and the employment marketplace have also created new learning *needs*. One of the most prevalent needs is that of media literacy (Mundt, & Medaille, 2011). Students seem to compartmentalise *literacy* and *communication*, unlinking day-to-day practices such as texting from study-based assessment so that functional literacy (clear self-expression, professionalism, spelling, punctuation and grammar) are declining (Amicucci, 2014; Nichols, 2012; Young, 2012). While some authors map the 21<sup>st</sup> century educational experience to the wants and needs of learners, others identify opportunities and affordances previously unavailable to learners. Due to technology-enhanced pedagogies, there is heightened capacity to develop graduates' critical, complex and connected thinking (Hung, Shu-Shing, & Lim, 2012; Lambert, & Cuper, 2008; O'Connor, McDonald, & Ruggiero, 2014).

In summary, there are three predominant educational propositions in the literature about the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner. Each of these has associated corollaries in the context of

graduate employment. First, contemporary students want higher education that is flexible and personalised (i.e. layered choices about online and face-to-face study) and learning that is practical, relevant and efficient. These educational preferences are linked to employment outcomes in that one of the reasons why students want access to online learning is so that they are able to engage in activity other than study while enrolled in university such as working part-time jobs and participating in extra-curricular activities (Horspool, & Lange, 2012; Pastore, & Carr-Chellman, 2009), and that the operational definition of *practical*, *relevant* and *efficient* is that the university degree is structured around employability skills (Daily, Farewell, & Kumar, 2010; Tate, Klein-Collins, & Steinberg, 2011). Second, the predominance of social media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has both heightened the need for media literacy and weakened overall literacy, as youth tend not to acknowledge the importance of consistent written conventions such as spelling and punctuation across all forms of communication. The associated employment proposition is that it is incumbent upon higher education to instil media (and comprehensive) literacy so that graduates are employable (Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002). Third, the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes heightened learning possible, in that students have access to nearly limitless information and can access it prior to reporting to class, so that teaching time can focus on strengthening application and connected knowledge. Priority and development of higher order thinking skills heightens graduate employability (Aman, & Sitotaw, 2014; Kim Lian Chan, 2011).

Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have developed the capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the student knowledge, skills, attributes, reflective disposition and identity that graduates need to succeed in the workforce (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Holmes, 2013; Knight & Yorke, 2004; Yorke, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006).

## **Methods**

This research project was commissioned by the Australian Government, Office for Learning and Teaching (December 2013). The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of this government department. The research was conducted through collaboration between three universities and the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET). The lead institution was Bond University. The partner institutions were James Cook University and University of Southern Queensland. The main campuses of all three institutions are in Queensland, Australia.

The research commenced in January 2014 and the final report was submitted in February 2015. All project activities were conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines as reviewed and approved by Bond University and through gatekeeper clearance at the partner institutions.

The aims of the research were to: achieve a greater clarity on the issues, challenges and contexts (including the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning experience) of graduate employability; identify and review the strategies that have been successfully used to address these challenges; create opportunities for the diverse stakeholder groups to share their perspectives; and promote strategies that may be used by the various stakeholders to collaborate on improving graduate outcomes. Data collection was conducted in three phases. First, the literature was reviewed to identify and report on higher education strategies for which there was heightened evidence of improved graduate employability. Second, four stakeholder groups (students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers) were surveyed to capture their experiences of the strategies identified through the literature review. Third, people from the four stakeholder groups were individually interviewed and focus groups were facilitated to qualitatively research their experiences.



## **Literature Review: Empirically evidenced employability strategies**

A structured literature review was conducted using the approach of Kinash (2008). The literature review identified strategies for which there was empirical evidence of heightened employability. Overall, the literature provided evidence that students are expected to do more than study and complete their courses in order to be employable upon graduation; additional employability strategies are necessary in order to secure suitable work (Nagarajan, & Edwards, 2014; Rae, 2007; Yorke, 2010). Authors were clear that employability requires collaboration between four stakeholder groups; higher education personnel and employers make strategies available, and students and graduates (alumni) must actively initiate and make the most of these strategies for them to be effective (Harvey & Shahjahan, 2013; Walkington, 2014). The full results of the literature review are reported in a separate publication. Upon approval for distribution, research publications from the full project will be available through <http://graduateemployability.com> For the purposes of this current publication, the twelve strategies for which there was published empirical evidence of a positive relationship between the approaches and graduate employability are listed below. The abbreviated form in parentheses is inserted to reference the results tables inserted below.

- (1) Capstone/final semester projects (Capstone)
- (2) Careers advice and employment skill development (Careers Advice)
- (3) Engaging in extra-curricular activities (Extra-curricular)
- (4) International exchanges (Int Exchange)
- (5) Mentoring (Mentoring)
- (6) Attending networking or industry information events (Networking)
- (7) Part-time employment (PT Work)

- (8) Developing graduate profiles, portfolios & records of achievement (Portfolios)
- (9) Professional association membership/engagement (Prof Assocs)
- (10) Social media/networks (Social Media)
- (11) Volunteering/community engagement (Volunteering)
- (12) Work experience/internships/placements (Work Experience)

Notably, the literature predominantly used the term “extra-curricular” activity as an employability strategy and this was therefore the term used on the surveys. However, a clarification emerged in the subsequent interviews whereby many educators prefer the term co-curricular, implying that experiences are not separate and apart from the formal curriculum, but aligned and supported in conjunction.

### **Surveys: Employability strategies**

The research team designed four complementary versions of a brief survey. A separate colour-coded version of the survey was designed for each of four stakeholder groups of: students; graduates; higher education personnel (educators, career development professionals, other); and employers. The surveys were designed to take a maximum of five minutes to complete and were available online and in paper format (a single back-to-back A4 page). The surveys were accompanied by an Explanatory Statement and a Consent Form, in order to maintain ethical protocol. The first section of the survey instrument included questions relating to demographics and perspectives about employability. The main component of the four survey instruments asked participants to respond to a checklist of the twelve employability strategies listed on the previous page. Respondents were directed to tick each of the strategies that satisfied the respective survey question below and invited to provide any additional written comments they felt were relevant.

- Students –  
What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- Graduates -  
What strategies did you use to improve your employability?

- Employers -

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

- Higher Education Personnel -

Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

In total, more than 1500 individuals received a personal invitation to participate in the project and complete a questionnaire through recruitment strategies such as operating booths at graduate career fairs, sending messages through LinkedIn and visiting universities. A total of 821 responses were received (55% response rate). There were more online (70%) than paper surveys submitted. Of submitted surveys, 705 were valid (86%). The 116 invalid responses were surveys with missing fields and/or repeated submissions from the same respondents. Response numbers in the four stakeholder groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey responses.

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Valid surveys completed</b>	<b>Percentage of total number of surveys</b>	<b>Response numbers and rates (including invalid surveys)</b>
<b>Students</b>	442	63%	800/58%
<b>Graduates</b>	102	14%	350/39%
<b>Higher Education</b>	108	15%	250/59%
<b>Employers</b>	53	8%	100/73%
<b>Total</b>	705	100%	1500/55%

The survey responses were categorised on a spread sheet. Descriptive and inferential quantitative analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Thematic qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo, which is a computer software package used to sort, classify and reveal salient themes from qualitative data such as survey comments. NVivo was used in conjunction with a thematic matrix. The project team created a matrix from full literature analysis. NVivo functions allow researchers to test the qualitative validity of theories against the collected

data. Employability theory, as represented in the matrix, was compared with the themes emerging from the survey comments. The primary challenge of the survey phase was overcoming the analytic constraints resulting from limited sample sizes. While the overall response rate was commendable, some of the specific statistical fields were relatively small and only achieved the requisite size for valid statistical measures of significance, at minimum confidence intervals. The discrepant group sizes also limited the statistical measures that could be applied. The phased project design compensated for the limitations of the survey sample size in that findings emerging from the survey data were explicitly followed-up through interviews and focus groups.

### **Interviews**

Participants for interviews were identified through multiple methods. If respondents addressed a relevant theme in their narrative survey comments and indicated on their consent form that they were willing to be contacted, an interview or focus group was scheduled. Participants were also identified through team member networks, snowball referrals and literature searches. Interviews and focus groups were intentionally scheduled in all eight Australian States and Territories in urban, rural, remote and regional contexts. The total number of participants in interviews and focus groups was 147; the distribution of participants across stakeholder groups is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview and focus group participation

<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Focus Groups</b>	<b>Focus Group Participants</b>	<b>Total Participants</b>
<b>Students</b>	5	5	22	27
<b>Graduates</b>	8	3	16	24

<b>Higher Education</b>	32	17	48	80
<b>Employers</b>	16	0	0	16
<b>Totals</b>	61	25	86	147

Maximum one hour semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted using key, common questions probing participant's demographic details and contexts, their use of the employability strategies identified in the survey phase and the roles/responsibilities of the four stakeholder groups in enhancing employability. The methodological interview approach was adapted and applied from van Manen (1997). In accordance with this phenomenological hermeneutic approach, interviewees were asked open questions about their employability-related experiences. Questions started with such phrases as, "What is it like to" and "Describe your experience of." All interviews and focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed. A minimum of two researchers independently analysed the transcripts, identifying keywords, themes and strategies/challenges/solutions to employability issues expressed by the participants. A third researcher confirmed qualitative validity through applying the narrative analysis approach of Shaddock (2014).

## **Results**

### **Proposition one: Employability strategies**

Responses of the four stakeholder groups were analysed to determine comparative responses to the survey questions addressing key employability strategies identified in the literature. The data was queried to determine, on average, how many of the twelve

strategies were ticked by students, graduates and higher education personnel. Overall, surveyed students and graduates indicated participating in an average of nearly five of these employability strategies and higher education personnel indicated providing/supporting an average of four of them. Seven of the twelve strategies received responses from at least 50% of respondents in one or more stakeholder groups as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Identification of Key Employability Strategies

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>Employers</b>
<b>Careers Advice</b>	59%	47%	64%	28%
<b>Extracurricular</b>	48%	47%	65%	60%
<b>Networking</b>	49%	52%	51%	40%
<b>PT Work</b>	53%	53%	36%	38%
<b>Prof Assocs</b>	29%	37%	54%	34%
<b>Volunte ering</b>	47%	50%	48%	53%
<b>Work Experience</b>	74%	74%	40%	87%

The contributions of these strategies and how they might be realized within and across the stakeholder groups to enhance employability in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century experience were further interrogated by analysis of the survey written comments and during the interview phase of the research.

Thematic analysis of written comments on surveys and analysis of the interview/focus group transcriptions identified emergence of eleven themes that had impact on employability: Multi-national corporations ; Competitive sport, athletes &

employability ; Entrepreneurship; Private institutions; Career development centres;  
Indigenous employment; Employability endeavours; Government; Emerging careers;  
Generalist disciplines; and Graduate attributes.

As analysis proceeded it was clear that these were not entirely independent constructs but are inter-reliant in respect to their relationship(s) to the three propositions about the 21<sup>st</sup> century student experience outlined in the *Introduction*. Of particular relevance are the responses to strategies that address a student's engagement with "real" employment contexts including work experience, internships and placements. This was a highly rated strategy with 74% of students indicating on surveys that they used it and 87% of employers indicating they valued it. Although a minority of higher education personnel chose this strategy on the surveys, it must be noted that the question asked which strategies they currently use rather than those they believe to be effective. Further exploration during interviews provided evidence that higher education personnel support these strategies but often lack the resources to consistently apply them within their programs of study.

Not all engagement with employment is equally as supported – part-time work, for instance, whilst being seen as a useful strategy by students and graduates, is not seen as positively by higher education personnel and employers. These groups appear to distinguish between employment contexts that relate to the student's discipline area and provide extension of their studies in that area and those that are unrelated to their discipline. The former are more highly valued particularly if they include evidence that the student has displayed initiative in obtaining/completing the work as is evident by the high ratings of extracurricular and co-curricular activities that are voluntary in nature.

### **Proposition two: Literacy and communication**

The use and value of social media which had been highlighted in the literature review as a potential employability strategy did not feature prominently in the stakeholder responses in the survey phase. There was no group in which a majority of respondents listed it as being important (Table 3).

Table 3. Stakeholder perspectives on the use of Social Media as an employability strategy.

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Graduates</b>	<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>Employers</b>
<b>Social Media</b>	33%	37%	40%	15%

Throughout the interviews, however, there were signals of growing awareness of the ubiquity of social media and the need for higher education to prepare students in ways that enable them to maximise the benefit of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. For example, an illustrative quote from an educator was,

“[There is a] need to train students in new skills rather than the old skills because students have to differentiate themselves from the old market.” Quote from an educator

Whereas media literacy did not emerge as a salient theme in the surveys or interviews, there were many mentions of the importance of effective, comprehensive communication skills. Related comments were articulated across stakeholder groups. The communications theme emerged most strongly among educators and then among employers. Communication was operationally defined as including written and presentation skills. The four comments inserted verbatim below are illustrative of the content of the numerous mentions of communication skills in the context of employability.



“I understand that nowadays, with social media, people just type things out and they have lower case [the word] ‘I’ – if you put lower case [the word] ‘I’ – it’s honestly not correct. Attention to detail; it’s an important part of it.” Quote from an employer

“I think writing, as well, is very important and we often underestimate its importance. We often assume it is something that students learn in the first-year composition class. I think the difference between a first-year student who has successfully completed, and a graduate who has learned how to synthesise, analyse, express succinctly and edit in a polished way is just enormous.” Quote 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.’” Quote from an educator

“Presentation skills are important, because if a student can overcome all of the anxieties around speaking up in a group it helps in an interview, it can help in meetings, it can help engage colleagues. It is a very difficult skill to teach but it is quite a good skill.”  
Quote from an educator

### **Proposition three: Technology-enhanced learning and higher order thinking skills**

The importance of “new skills” and students being able to differentiate themselves were articulated as important aspects of developing and demonstrating higher order and critical thinking skills. The importance of concepts such as critical analysis, transferable skills, innovation and capacity to learn were salient themes throughout the interviews across all stakeholder groups. The linking of technology-enhanced learning (in the context of

emergent technology provoking industry and thus career change) and the need for higher order thinking skills was most prominent among the educators. Whereas a salient theme in the literature was that education technology provided affordances that strengthened teaching capacity of critical thinking, this did not strongly emerge in this research. An illustrative quote is provided verbatim from each of the four stakeholder groups.

“Innovation and creativity sets you apart from the competition. If an employer asks ‘we want you to resolve this problem, how are you going to resolve this?’ You can give them a black and white answer, or you can work around it and show employers something that is different.” Quote from a student

“We had a compulsory subject, as part of a university industry-based learning program, that was all about information technology for communication. It was things that the employers told the university that ‘we needed to know’ for them to take us on in an internship.” Quote from a graduate

“The ability to critically analyse new information. Don’t take things at face value because it is written on the internet. But also be able to make comparisons between one type of technology or software and another.” Quote from an educator

“You need to teach them transferable skills; how to think and how to write, how to form an argument, weigh evidence. I think as an industry we are losing that. There is a lot of focus on academe of just being job-ready, and I agree with that, but you need the caveat of ‘What job?!’ because the job that you are ready for now exists, but the job you have in ten years might not [currently exist]. There needs to be an acknowledgement that the broader skills and creativity are what makes stuff happen.” Quote from an employer

## **Discussion**

The relationship between 21<sup>st</sup> century employability and the learning experience is a key

higher education quality assurance factor. Unique attributes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century context were salient throughout the research data. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the graduate employment marketplace is thematically linked to what is referred to throughout international literature as the economic or financial crisis (e.g. Huayong, Zhurong, Jikun, Rozelle, & Mason, 2013). Just as there are buyers' and sellers' markets in real estate, contemporary university graduates are entering a hirers' rather than an applicants' market (Rae, 2014). Based on 2013 survey data, Graduate Careers Australia (2014) reported that graduate employability rates are the lowest they have been in twenty years. In other words, it is necessary to understand the 21<sup>st</sup> century employment context in order to support students / graduates for success. The concept of heightening employability of university students is a salient concept in the modern day university. In a context whereby graduates are not assured employment by virtue of successfully completing a university degree, the university's personalised value-add component of employability supports is particularly relevant. Furthermore, until higher education leaders identify and address the wants and needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student and graduate, graduate employability will not be lifted. Employers and employment are different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; so too are graduates. The three sets of propositions emerging from a review of the literature and presented in the introduction to the paper are reconsidered here, in light of the results from the research surveys, interviews and focus groups conducted within this national Australian project.

**Proposition One: Flexible, personalised education with practical, relevant, efficient learning**

A review of the literature indicated that contemporary students want higher education that is flexible and personalised (i.e. layered choices about online and face-to-face study) and learning that is practical, relevant and efficient. The literature links these educational

preferences to employment outcomes in that one of the reasons why students want access to online learning is so that they are able to engage in activity other than study while enrolled in university such as working part-time jobs and participating in extra-curricular activities, and that the operational definition of *practical*, *relevant* and *efficient* is that the university degree leads to employability skills.

This proposition was strongly supported by the research data. Across the four stakeholder groups, the pervasive theme was that the purpose of university in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to prepare graduates for employment. No challenges to this perception were articulated. The rationale for flexibility and personalisation articulated across all four stakeholder groups was that technological advancements are changing the nature of the labour market and universities must therefore be agile and responsive in order to practically prepare graduates for career success. Students were clear that they want personalised supports to identify career pathways. They do not want to be confined to bundled degrees with set curricular units and confining time-tables. They want to be able to take only the specific units they will need to prepare them for graduate employment. Across the stakeholder groups, there was vocal support for flexibility. Numerous employers expressed a belief that universities are confined by long-standing structures and systems and are not “keeping up with the times” to adequately prepare students for graduate employability. While educators agreed, they also expressed worry about the barriers to broad-reaching systemic change. Furthermore, students want personalised offerings so that they can take some of their subjects through a regular time-tabled semester and others through intensives and/or online. Course delivery flexibility also means that students have time to engage in pursuits beyond the formal curriculum.

A salient theme across all four stakeholder groups was a belief that a degree on its own is not adequate preparation for employment. There was widespread agreement that to

be employable, students must have pursued other experiential avenues beyond course-based study. There was united support for internships, placements and work experience as a primary means of gaining employability experience while in the role of student.

Educators expressed a concern over the resources (human and financial) required to support this strategy, but expressed a belief that overcoming these constraints is a higher education priority because of this strategy's employability efficacy. Perceptual discrepancies between stakeholder groups were revealed in regard to other employability strategies. For example, whereas a majority of students and graduates expressed a belief that part-time work is a worthwhile employability pursuit, higher education personnel (educators and career development professionals) and employers believe that students are better advised to participate in extra-curricular activities such as sport, clubs and societies and to reflect on the ways in which these activities experientially support the development of employability soft-skills. A salient theme overall was that employability needs to be a higher education priority and that all stakeholders have a role to play in ensuring that graduates are well-placed to meet the needs, adapt, change and thrive in a challenging and changing 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market.

**Proposition Two: Importance of literacy (including media) and communication**

The second identified theme in the published literature is that the predominance of social media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has both heightened the need for media literacy and weakened overall literacy, as youth tend not to acknowledge the importance of consistent written conventions such as spelling and punctuation across all forms of communication. The associated employment proposition is that it is incumbent upon higher education to instil media (and comprehensive) literacy so that graduates are employable.

Notably, a minority of survey respondents (across all four stakeholder groups) ticked the provided social media employability strategy. This research result was queried with experts, particularly career development professionals. The main interpretation was that social media such as LinkedIn are only starting to be accepted as viable and valuable employability tools. Experts believe that this research result would be different if the survey were to be replicated in a few years.

Whereas the specific use of social media did not emerge as a strongly supported employability strategy, the communication attributes associated with social media were saliently vocalised. Educators and employers expressed a shared worry that students and graduates largely communicate in informal ways, giving little thought to spelling, grammar and punctuation. These stakeholders believe that there has been a corresponding slide in communication skills which impairs the quality of job applications and an inability and/or lack of appreciation for the importance of formal professional communication. Notably, some employers and educators acknowledged that definitions of “effective communication” are fluid and changing. Others addressed communication in the context of digital foot-prints, worrying that too many students put themselves in compromising situations and that associated images will have a deleterious effect on these graduates’ employability. The students and graduates themselves did not speak about formal and informal communication in the context of social media. They did, however, give frequent mention to the importance of learning practical employability skills such as report writing and presentations.

**Proposition Three: Technology-enhanced learning and higher order thinking skills**

The third proposition emerging from the literature was that the 21<sup>st</sup> century makes

heightened learning possible, in that students have access to nearly limitless information and can access it prior to reporting to class, so that teaching time can focus on strengthening application and connected knowledge. Priority and development of higher order thinking skills heightens graduate employability. The importance of these skills is highlighted by all stakeholder groups and consequently there is scope to explore strategies using technology-enhanced learning to facilitate embedding of approaches to developing these skills within higher education programs.

This proposition was strongly supported through the research. Employers were particularly vocal about the importance of broad-based employment preparation. Multiple employers used the metaphor of the uppercase letter T. These research participants said that it is important that universities avoid a narrow, disciplinary focus (represented by the vertical portion of the letter T). Instead, graduates should be supported to achieve a broad-based and far-reaching experience (represented by the top horizontal portion of the letter T). Across stakeholder groups, participants acknowledged that particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the workplace and the overall employment contexts are changing. Research participants were unified in the belief that students need experiential variety to draw-upon to be resilient and to be able to think on their feet to adjust and adapt.

## **Conclusion**

The Australian national research reported in this paper supports the 21<sup>st</sup> century propositions that have emerged in the published literature. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a dominant employability focus creating heightened expectation of higher education. Research participants acknowledged a continued economic and financial crisis which means that university graduates experience increased difficulty securing suitable employment. Furthermore, technological developments mean changes to career types,

trends, roles, responsibilities and expectations. There is widespread recognition that participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century labour market requires resilience and agility. Research informants across stakeholder groups, including educators, expressed a belief that it is incumbent upon universities to creatively and enthusiastically support graduate employability. The strategy set that emerged with the strongest support were internships, placements and work experience. Participants expressed that these strategies provide students with industry connected experiences to draw-upon. Furthermore, across stakeholder groups, a salient theme was that in order to support employability, the university experience must be broad-based and far-reaching; students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must be encouraged to do more than study in order to prepare for graduate employability.

The acknowledged limitation of this research was the lower proportion of surveyed and interviewed employers as compared to the other stakeholder groups (students, graduates and higher education personnel including both educators and career development professionals). Further research is recommended to confirm employer agreement with the identified themes.



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# Using education technology in simple ways to improve assessment

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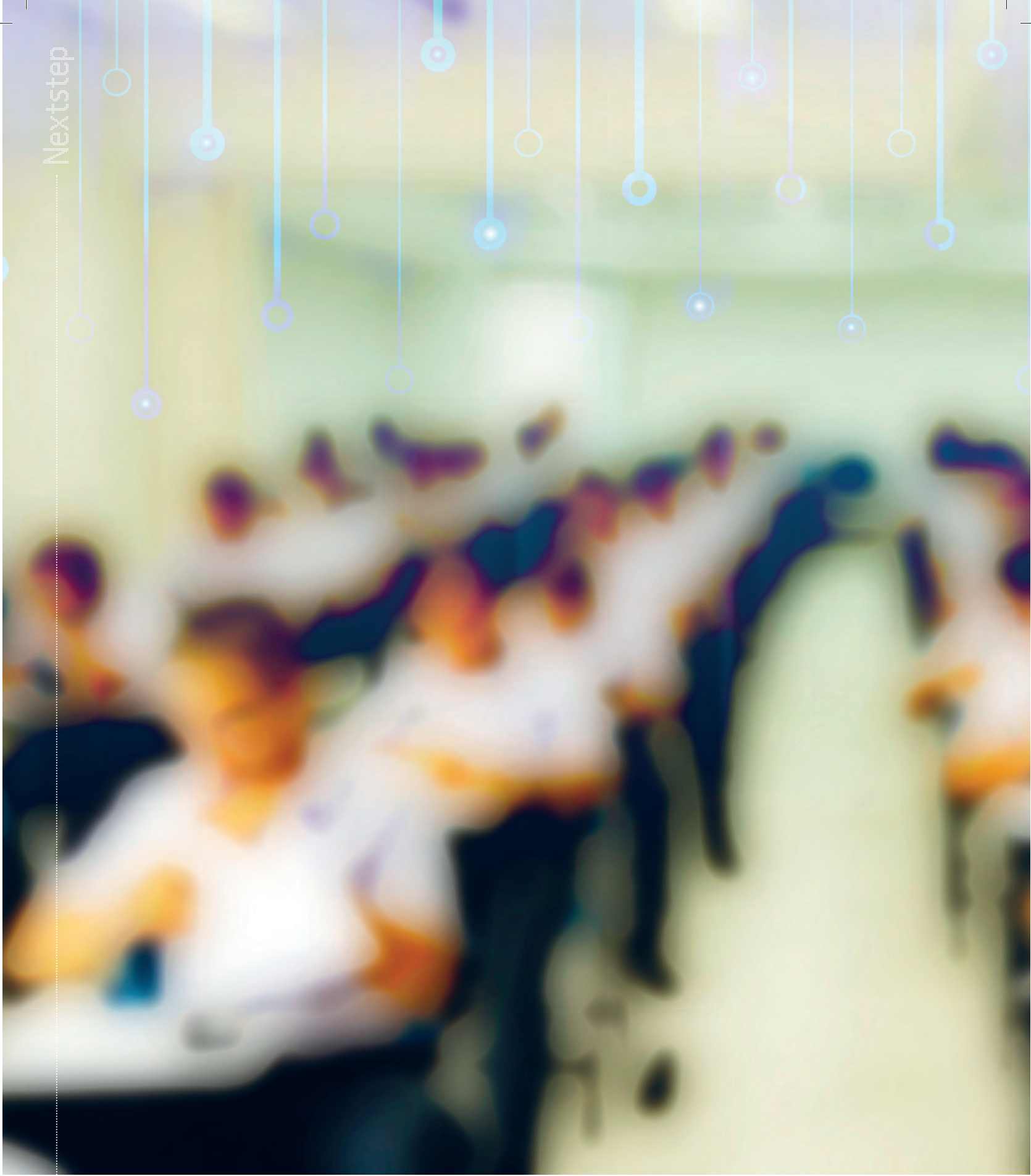
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# *Using Education Technology In Simple Ways To Improve Assessment*

| By Dr Shelley Kinash |

If I had to nominate one learning experience as the best across each of my primary and secondary schooling, the first example would be from my Year 9 Law class. One day, the principal came into our classroom. His face was red and he was frowning. He took Dwayne, one of the boys in my grade, out of the room. Dwayne was often in trouble, so this was not surprising, but the physical interaction was confronting. The teacher said, "Everyone, quick, pull a piece of paper out of your notebooks and describe what you just saw. This is important." We did so and handed them in. The energy in the room was electric and the rumour mill was rampant. A number of students were sure what Dwayne had done this time and it was *bad*. But then the principal and Dwayne came back into the room together and they were laughing. The teacher shared that he had set up the situation to teach us about the process and challenges of witnessing. The teacher read out a number of the descriptions. Most used verbs like *grabbed*, *squeezed* and *yanked* and judgements like *brutal*, *mean* and *unfair*. The teacher asked us to recall whether the principal actually *yanked* Dwayne and, based on what we saw, could we actually call the action *brutal*. I have never forgotten this learning experience and use the memory as a check to keep me honest whenever I am called to describe an experience – which is a common and transferable skill.

I can also easily nominate a single learning experience from across higher education. This was in a Communications class in my undergraduate degree. We were learning about technical writing and this unit was on proposals. The city in which I was living hosted the headquarters of many of the top oil companies. Rather than marking our proposals herself, our professor submitted them to a group of top executives from among these oil companies. We wrote the proposals as bids to these oil companies to secure our services. The executives then selected which proposal they would choose and thereby whose fictitious consulting company would win the bid. A large part of why I remember this exercise must certainly be because my proposal was selected. This was meaningful and treasured feedback because it came from industry. The reason *why* mine was selected has had lasting impact. The executives said that what made my proposal stand out was that I personalised it with faces and personality. I specified, by name (albeit fictitious), who I would assign to the job and why they were good fits for this company and work. I have remembered this feedback. I have since been successful at being awarded multiple research grants. I believe that one of the reasons is that I go beyond stating details such as that I will hire a project manager, to giving the name and describing her prior experience and suitability for this research.

Both of these experiences were about authentic assessment. Notably, of the many educational experiences I could have recalled when considering the pinnacles of my learning across my schooling, the two that stood out were both assessment. *Assessment* can be simply defined as the work that students produce to apply their learning and/or demonstrate their subject mastery. David Boud, an educational expert, has famously said, "Students can survive bad teaching, but NOT bad assessment."

There are five main principles that can be drawn from across the two

*Assessment* can be simply defined as the work that students produce to apply their learning and/or demonstrate their subject mastery.

learning experiences I shared. These are discussed below, along with education technologies that can be used to apply them. There are two common themes across these principles. First, assessment and learning are two sides of the same coin and inseparable. Second, there is a future orientation. While assessment matters to the student in the here-and-now of schooling, it is also framed so that it sets them up for future successes in their careers and lifelong learning.

**1. Good assessment is compelling, rich and memorable, and can be transferred beyond schooling to inform lifelong application.**


There are times when the educator has control over the assessment activities and times when the educator must run students through what has been prescribed. For example, teachers have no choice when it comes to standardised state or national tests. In university, tutors usually have to use the assessment that professors have listed in the subject outline. However, educators can be creative within these boundaries. For example, in supporting students to prepare for high-stakes tests, a quick Google search will reveal many online tests for practice. Choose some just-for-fun tests to playfully practise the skills of reading between the lines of questions. Use a Boyfriend-Girlfriend test and see if students can manipulate the outcome by answering the questions in certain ways. On a more serious note, choose a higher stakes test in the discipline of study. For example, biology students can try online versions of the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) and discuss how

to make it through all of the questions in the allotted time. Education technology can also be used to engage industry experts in assessment. Help students find active discipline-relevant online forums and engage in conversations with industry experts. Encourage them to start Twitter accounts and follow key industry personnel. Have them report back on their findings. Start discussion forums and invite industry executives in for relevant online conversations.

**2. Students are provided with meaningful and specific feedback that can be applied to future learning.**

Technology has enabled feedback opportunities that were not previously available. Ask students to submit electronic drafts of their papers. Specific and meaningful feedback can be easily provided using comments and Track Changes in programs such as Word. Students can see where a teacher has crossed out or inserted text. Consider having students peer-review each other's submissions using these tools. Invite graduates and/or industry experts to occasionally review papers. Numerous rubric creation tools are also now available online. These tools help teachers to explicitly articulate the components of an assessment submission, aligned with various grades. The rubric can be provided alongside the assignment and then handed back with the marked-up drafts, with the relevant quadrants on the rubric highlighted. Some educators have creatively used rubrics in designing them together with the students, so that there is co-ownership of the expectations.





### 3. Assessment is relevant and students perceive assessment as relevant to current and career learning.

Why is the assessment what it is? Why was that mode chosen? Why was that knowledge and were those skills and attributes assessed as opposed to others? How does this subject or unit fit together with the other subjects or units for this school year or course/degree? The educator is well-placed to ask this question in relation to each assessment task and then work through the answers with the students. There are some education technologies that can help. For example, if using a learning management system, analytics tools are readily available to see what assessment modes are being used across the curriculum and which learning outcomes are being assessed. There are a growing number of curriculum mapping and assuring learning tools available online to derive a bigger picture of how assessment works together. One of the specific, and simple, actions an educator can take is to guide the students to research the activities and type of work that people in relevant and related careers undertake. What kinds of reports do scientists write? How do they gather their data? What kinds of communications do engineers engage in? What makes these communications most effective? The internet is a powerful resource to find this information, as profiles of professionals and work artefacts can be readily located. Invite conversation about the relevance of the current assessment. Which specific and transferable skills can be learned through this school-based assessment that can be applied later?

### 4. Assessment is not a bolt-on or afterthought; it is woven into the fabric of the learning experience.

Assessment has mnemonic properties. It tends to stick in people's long-term memory because it has an emotional element. Denise Jackson wrote about the educational shift from 'inquisitive' to 'acquisitive' learners. Educators have all had frequent encounters with

students who want to know whether 'it is on the test' because if it is not, then they do not want to bother learning it. John Biggs wrote about the importance of 'constructive alignment' whereby educators must ensure that what they design as learning outcomes of the experience are closely married to the assessment activities. For all of these reasons, assessment *is* learning and for students, learning is about assessment. Education cannot be considered a two-step dance where first educators teach it

and then they assess it. As written above, *learning* and *assessment* are stamped on either side of the coin and cannot be separated. One way of using education technology to help make the connection between learning and assessment relevant to students is through the use of visual mind mapping software. Work together with students to create a visual map of the semester and beyond. Plot the learning outcomes, the assessment and their career goals, showing and reflecting on the relationships between these elements.

### 5. Students are taught how to master the type of assessment and how to apply these skills to activity beyond the classroom.


The power of the Year 9 Law experience in which we were directed to describe what we saw was that we learned observation/witness skills through experience. Writing clear, factual notes is a transferable assessment activity that is used throughout and across multiple domains of life. The lessons that we learned through this activity are lasting. Royce Sadler writes that relying too heavily on feedback means that the educational intervention is often too late. He asks educators to consider how many times they have been confronted by students who are confused

that they did not receive a high distinction on an assessment task because they had spit back every fact that the educator had taught them about a subject matter. The educator often replies with, "But you did not answer the question" or "But you did not demonstrate critical thinking". Educators must always be clear with students about their expectations. Do the students know how to differentiate between the unique types of assessment and are they able to fulfill the criteria for each? The internet is a valuable source of

Technology has enabled feedback opportunities that were not previously available.

artefacts to accomplish this task. At the time of assigning a piece of assessment, consider having a reflective conversation with students about the mode or genre of assessment and the accompanying expectations. Ask the students to take out their mobile devices and find examples of artefacts written in that mode. Which ones are exemplars? Why? Which ones would be exemplars for a different type of assessment, but not for this task?

### Conclusion

Applied use of education technology can vastly improve the quality of the student assessment experience and thereby improve learning. For further principles and ideas of how to improve assessment, the following authors are recommended. Each of these authors has a website and multiple books and articles. John Biggs writes about constructive alignment. David Boud writes about authentic assessment, feedback and quality standards. Royce Sadler writes about teaching students about assessment genre. 

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# Using technology to turn a University Degree into a job: Starting in secondary school

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# Using Technology To Turn A University Degree Into A Job: Starting In Secondary School

| By Shelley Kinash |

This article is written for all students who plan to go to university and then start a career. It is also written for the teachers, parents and friends who support these students. Students should begin thinking about their careers long before they graduate or even start university. Planning, preparations and strategies should begin shortly after primary school.

The strategies and approaches addressed in this article are all through the use of technology. Some of the strategies are not possible without internet-connected technologies, and other strategies become more effective through their use.

I have been given a tremendous opportunity to learn the secrets of turning a university degree into a successful and satisfying career through the use of technology-enhanced strategies. The Australian Office for Learning and Teaching has commissioned and funded a research project on graduate employability, and I am fortunate to be one of the leaders of the research. The research has taken me to careers fairs, universities and company head offices in Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra, Townsville, Hobart and Alice Springs. I have had the opportunity to have conversations with, and read surveys completed by, university graduates, students, employers, educators and career development professionals. In addition, I have had online correspondence about employability from Canada, USA, Singapore, Finland, India, Ireland, England, Scotland, Japan and South Africa.

People are keen to talk and even more interested to listen. Many of the university graduates are disappointed and frustrated. They thought that they could sign up for a university degree, study, complete their courses and finish with the ticket to a high-paying, prestigious career. However, for many, this outcome is not forthcoming. Many feel that employees are unfairly asking for experience they do not have and

that their degrees are not qualifying them for the jobs they want.

This is particularly discouraging and anger-provoking for international students. In most cases they paid much more for their degrees than domestic students. Many international students feel that migration agents and university recruiters made false promises that an Australian degree would automatically open doors to jobs, wealth and quality of life. Many are facing expiring visas and reluctantly returning to their home countries.

The employers also have stories to tell, some of success and some of disgust. A few messages from employers are heard repeatedly and with great emphasis. Employers assert that a degree alone is not enough. They want to know what the student did that made them rise above and stand out.

Did the student push boundaries and pursue an international opportunity where another language is spoken? Employers ask that applicants read instructions carefully, and follow them precisely, especially matching one's knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences to the selection criteria. Be confident but not cocky. Applicants must be careful not to display attitudes that they are entitled to jobs and realise that employers are not obligated to hire. In interviews, applicants must answer questions directly and succinctly in a confident, clear voice. Do not ramble. Be willing to start in a junior position or as an intern and work your way up. Do your research. At career fairs, do not ask representatives what their company is or does, or ask "what jobs do you have?" This question is too general and demonstrates poor focus. Know about the company, what they offer and ask specific questions for elaboration. In summary, make it easier for employers to help you become part of their team.

University degrees have proven to be the golden ticket. Overall, people who have degrees have higher quality of life, life expectancy and life satisfaction. Comparatively, income is also higher among university graduates.

However, the golden ticket is not simply awarded on the day of graduation with a degree parchment. There are dos and do nots of turning a university degree into a successful career journey. This article shares these strategies and tips.

### Not All Degrees Are Equal

This statement is intended generally and for individuals. The employment market ebbs, flows and changes. Before you enrol in university, use the internet to search which careers are hot and which are not. Search and find your dream jobs. What degrees do they call for? Are they generalist degrees like Humanities or Computer Science, or career specific like Accounting and Engineering?

Research shows that there are top strategies that increase a university graduate's chances of getting a good job. Pursuing a large number of these means starting early and following through in a well-planned manner alongside your studies. The top strategies, starting with the technology specific ones, are as follows:

- developing graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement
- social media and online networks (e.g. LinkedIn)
- work experience, internships and placements
- careers advice and employment skill development
- finding a mentor
- attending networking or industry information events
- engaging in extra-curricular activities
- professional association membership / engagement
- volunteering / community engagement
- part-time employment
- international exchange
- capstone / final semester projects.

You do not have to pursue these strategies on your own. Almost every university has a career development centre. The biggest complaint I heard from staff working in these centres is that students do not show up to them until their final semester, and by then it is too late to put most of the strategies in place.

Students are encouraged to visit the centre on their first semester on-campus. Use the expertise of the staff and listen to their advice.

Another pet-peeve of employers is that a large number of students assumed that good grades would be all they needed to get a job. The bell-curve ranks students from a pass to high-distinction. Some students assume that the career marketplace will do the same and that the students with the high-distinctions will get the best jobs and so on down the line. There is an element of the truth in this, in that grades are one factor in selection criteria. However, grades are only one factor. It is not enough to concentrate on grades to the exclusion of establishing networks, gaining practical experience, and developing the skills that a graduate needs to meet the selection criteria. Some skills will not be met in the degree study itself and must be pursued through enrolling in practical workshops and online tutorials such as those available on Lynda.com.

Careers fairs are a must for university students. It is recommended that secondary students start attending them at their local universities prior to enrolling to help decide what degree to pursue. University students should start attending in first year and all of the way through their degrees. In Australia, career fairs are held in March and this is when employees focus their recruitment efforts.

### Self-presentation At Career Fairs

Dress in business casual and be neat, tidy and well-groomed. Wear a big smile. Career fairs are always crowded and hot, so try to wear breathable clothes. If you get nervous, keep something in your pocket to wipe before shaking hands with employers so that you do not offer them a sweaty palm. Shake hands firmly and confidently. Provide your full name.

Research each booth before you approach it. Avoid asking the following four questions. Employers told me over and over that they hear these four questions all day long at the career fairs and each time, they cringe. You should cringe too because you have just sacrificed an employment opportunity.

- What is <x> company?
- What do you do?
- What jobs to you have?
- How do I get a job with you?

Do your research *before* the day of the career fair. Often you can pre-register and will then receive an online list of companies

in attendance. Read about them, go to their career postings and know what types of careers they have and the selection criteria. If an employer's booth catches you by surprise on the day of the fair, discreetly go away from the booth and do a quick search on your smartphone before you approach them. Now you are ready.

Here is what employers would like to hear and this is a direct quote from recruiters at a multi-national corporation.

*"Hi, my name is [insert first name and surname]. I am in my [year] year of studies at [name] university. I will graduate in [month, year] with a degree in [subject]. I see that you have a graduate development internship program relevant to my degree and I am in the process of preparing my application. Can you please answer a couple of questions to support my application? e.g. I noticed you have four regional offices. Do you offer the internship in [career] at all four? ..."*

### Graduate Development Plans

Many employers now realise that a successful and productive team member requires training and support from the university and on-the-job. Employers have started offering graduate development programs to up-skill new hires. Sometimes these programs commence in the summer sessions while students are still in the process of completing their degrees. The rationale is that early planning and preparation on the part of employers means that new hires are ready to hit the ground running. One large multi-national company reported that they would not be joining other companies at the March career fairs because they had already filled their numerous vacancies through their successful graduate development program. The key for those seeking jobs is to search early and apply for opportunities while still in university.

When I made the rounds to employers and asked them what was the key to standing out from the crowd in order to be hired, the most frequent response was 'carefully address the selection criteria'. It is extremely important not to gloss over this point. Candidates must carefully assess how they meet each criterion, answer succinctly and provide evidence. Writing a good application follows from actually having skills and experience to report. This is where early internet searches come into play. Search the dream jobs and be sure to enrol in experiences that enable you to meet the selection criteria.



Start in high school. Participate in an international exchange. Take on volunteer work. Run for student leadership. These activities will ensure that you meet the selection criteria when the time comes to apply.

#### International Experience

Another frequent response when I asked employers why they chose some applicants over others was international experience. They said that international experience demonstrates that people are willing to step outside their comfort zones and take risks. Employers reported that such experience is maturing and that the consequences are obvious in the attributes of those who have travelled. Employers added that the international experience is particularly impressive when conducted in a country where English is not the first language. This demonstrates an extra element of courage and personal investment.

#### Portfolios

Many employers value electronic portfolios. A portfolio is a collection of best works, presented together in a cohesive, professional and themed manner. Portfolios may be available to employers as a website or delivered with the application on USB or DVD. Do not include everything in your ePortfolio. Map your portfolio to the selection criteria. Make sure it is easy to navigate. Do not assume that the employer will open your portfolio. They simply may not have time. Your application should stand alone without it, and your portfolio should be a bonus.

#### Stay In Contact

One of the many advantages of modern communication is that we are never out of contact. Provide your email address and mobile number on each and every document, including your cover letter, criteria statement and resume. Watch your email and phone for messages and return them promptly and politely when they arrive.


#### Digital Footprint

Most of us have many social media accounts and, therefore, an available digital presence. Did you know that most employers search Google, Google Images, LinkedIn and other sites when deciding whether to shortlist you? Be aware of this digital footprint while in secondary school. It is difficult to remove reputation-damaging photos and blogs after they have been posted. They will not be perceived as funny to employers and will

result in applications moving to the do-not-interview pile. Next time you are caught in a compromising position that will leave a digital footprint, think about the consequences.

Do start a professional digital footprint early. Open an account in LinkedIn. Create a professional profile and start uploading positive evidence of your skills and experience. Secondary school is not too early to begin.

It has often been said that finding a job is a full-time job. In fact, it is more than that. Successful, satisfying employability is a lifelong journey that deserves heightened attention starting in secondary school. Waiting until after the university graduation ceremony is too late. Fortunately, we live in a time where

digital and connected technologies enable and enhance the career journey in ways never before possible. 

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#### DON'T

- Assume that degrees are all equal in terms of your future employability
- Think that all you need is the piece of paper with your degree confirmed as your ticket to employment
- Leave your employability preparations to your final semester
- Try to go it alone
- Spend 100 per cent of your time studying
- Spoil the opportunity of careers fairs through sweaty handshakes, asking representatives what their company does, or by seeming to demand a job as an entitlement
- Overlook company's Graduate Development Programs and Internships
- Rush through selection criterion in your job applications. NEVER write 'see above' as if you have already answered the given criteria
- Overlook the opportunity of international experience
- Forget to demonstrate your skills through an electronic portfolio. Do not include everything. Make sure there is a strong theme. Do not assume the employer will have the time to read it
- Go out of contact or take too long to respond
- Ignore or embarrass yourself through your digital footprints

#### DO

- Use the internet to search dream jobs and research which degrees are listed as essential criteria
- Take advantage of the full range of employability strategies your university supports
- Start early, taking advantage of technology-enhanced strategies from your first semester
- Sign up with your university career development centre in your first semester, taking advantage of their expertise
- Grades and the accompanying learning are important, but so too are community networks and extracurricular pursuits
- Career fairs are important employability events and must be handled well. Dry your hand and shake firmly. Move to another part of the fair, search each company on your smartphone before visiting the booth, and ask informed questions about opportunities
- Search the company's opportunities and apply for these spots to demonstrate your skills and attributes
- Spend the time carefully mapping your knowledge, skills, attributes and experiences to what the company is looking for; search their mission statement and other key documents to help
- Consider taking up an international experience that pushes your limits and opens up your thinking
- Put time into a focussed, professional electronic portfolio. Not all employers have time to view them, so your resume must still stand alone. In any case, preparing the portfolio is strong interview preparation
- Provide an email address and mobile number and watch both carefully for contact
- Have a strong digital presence through professional sites such as LinkedIn. Google yourself and take the time to attempt to remove compromising images and other such content

