

When do university students and graduates know what careers they want? A research-derived framework

Background

Providing strategies and supports to ensure that graduates are employable has become a major priority of universities (Bennett, Richardson, & MacKinnon, 2015; Brewer, Flavell, Harris, Davis, & Bathgate, 2014; Brown & Carasso, 2013; Jollands et. al., 2015; Kinash et al., 2015; Oliver, 2015).

However from the students' perspective, perhaps universities are focusing on the wrong question.

How can the services, strategies and approaches to improving employability be effective if students do not know what they want to be?

Research questions

- Do university students know their own desired postcourse employment, or in other words, what they want to be after graduation?
- If so, at what point in their student experience do they come to this decision?
- What elements come into play in university student career decision-making?
- To what extent do students and graduates feel that their career decision-making is supported by their universities?

What we did

(students: $n=22$; graduates: $n=28$)

1. Both students and graduates were included to investigate multiple phases of the student/graduate/employee career journey.
2. Students and graduates from multiple institutions across Australia, a wide range of disciplines and industries and from both undergraduate and postgraduate courses participated in this research so that diversity and complexity could be considered.
3. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with students and graduates so that their experiences, thoughts and emotions were captured from their point of view.

The unique contribution of this research to the intersecting body of literature on graduate employability and career development is that the experiences, thoughts and emotions described by students and graduates have been interpreted and applied to map a framework of university student and graduate career-knowledge. This framework is firmly grounded in the 'chaos theory of careers' (Pryor & Bright, 2003).

What we found

The main findings were that at the enrolment-stage of university and during their studies, most students were pessimistic about their career outcomes and felt largely unsupported in identifying suitable career goals. However, the outcomes after graduation were unexpectedly positive in that, by this point most had identified career goals and were in careers they had desired.

Most of the research participants who had been in their careers for an extended length of time were casual academics who were dissatisfied with their career progression and status. Although they had identified academic career goals and secured employment in their chosen industry, they were disappointed by continuous short-term contracts and what they perceived as poor career supports extended by their university employers. A 'university student and graduate career knowledge framework' was derived.

The key takeaway from this research was a set of recommendations for universities regarding how to better support students to make career choices.

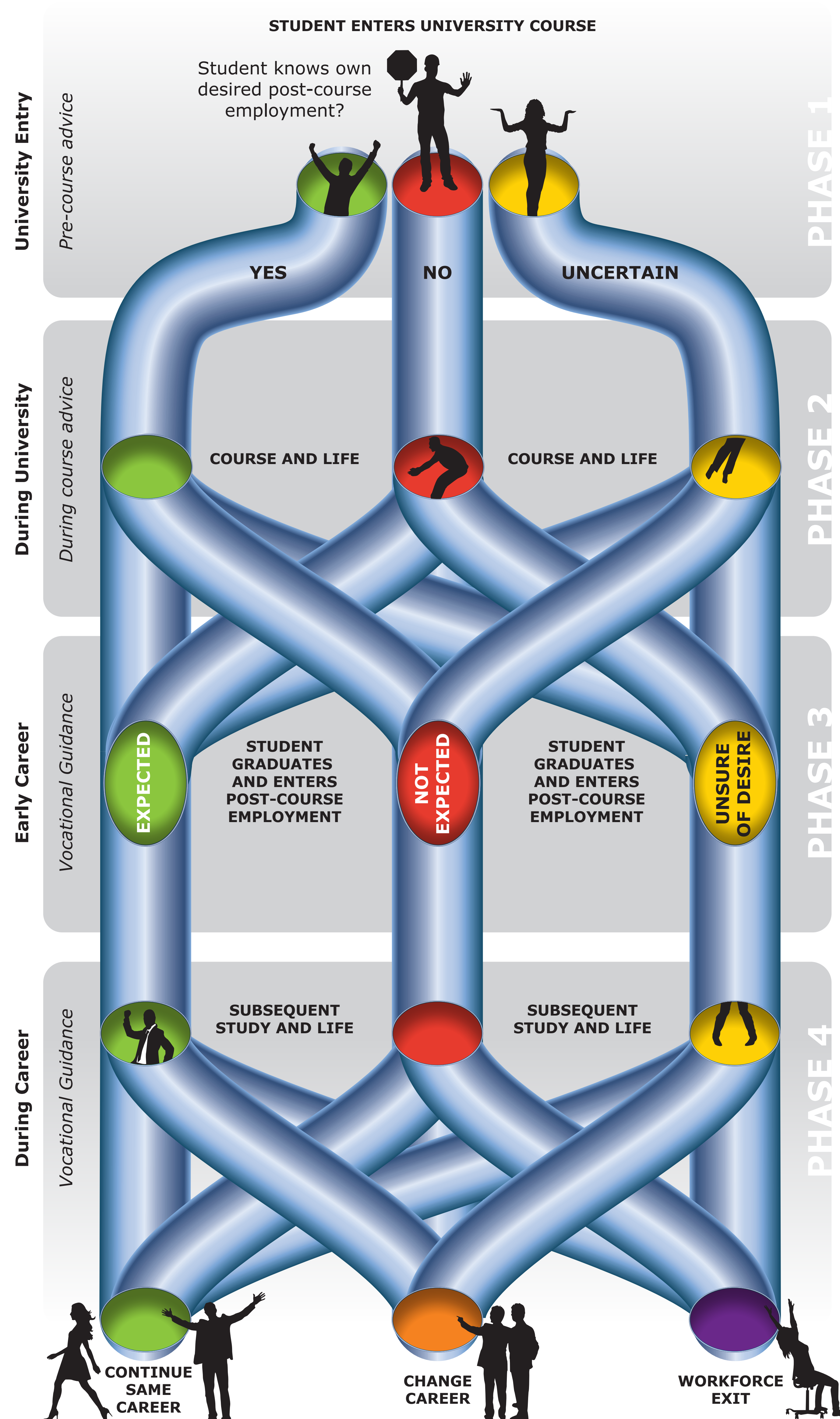
Recommendations

Based on the results and analysis, six recommendations have been articulated. The final recommendation was articulated to address the challenge of career supports to casual academics (regarding university as employer of graduates) and the other five address the other key student and graduate identified university student experience 'deficiencies' in the context of career development.

1. Create a Graduate Employability Portfolio whereby it is a leadership responsibility to build connections and capacity between: Marketing/Student Recruitment/Enrolment; Faculties and Programmes; University Services; and Alumni Offices.
2. Provide regular career development/update sessions including the staff from each of these areas.
3. Host regular networking functions between graduated, current and future students, mapping and beginning with the degrees/disciplines where graduate career outcomes are most problematic.
4. Create a digital repository of degree/discipline-specific career videos. For example, featuring law graduates – *'I graduated from Law in 20XX and here's what my career looks like. My key advice for Law students if you want to follow a similar path is....'*
5. Create a new position in the higher education sector for Career Learning Advisors (CLAs). The CLA's primary responsibility would be to meet with future students to help them connect the dots of the career/study journey. Furthermore, CLAs would have a case management function whereby they would check-in with current students and graduates and facilitate introductions and referrals to personalise further supports and services.
6. Formalise a career development support program with a strong component of mentoring to support early career academics and those attempting to transition from the casual stream to progress in quality academic careers.

The employability pathfinder:

a university student and graduate career knowledge framework



References
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