Teaching the Bond Way

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

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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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