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Case studies to enhance graduate employability

Emerging careers

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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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For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- 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?



