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Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Multi-national corporations

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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

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

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For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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

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?



