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Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Private institutions

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CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Private Institutions



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CONTENTS

86	Introduction
87	A true story of a graduate from a private institution
88	What is unique about employability through private institutions?
93	Advice for students
94	Advice for graduates
95	Advice for educators
96	What's next? Sustainability and development
98	Reading, resources and discussion questions

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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- Bond University
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- 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?



