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Lessons from National OLT research

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What students and graduates need to know about graduate employability: Lessons from National OLT research

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Based on 2013 data, Graduate Careers Australia reported that graduate employability rates are the lowest they have been in twenty years. This paper applies outcomes from a National OLT project commissioned in 2013 (completed in 2015) in response to this employment crisis. This paper presents research outcomes from analysis of in-depth one-hour interviews and focus groups with 147 people from across four stakeholder groups: students, graduates, higher education personnel (educators and career development personnel) and employers. Validated narrative analysis was conducted on full transcripts. Eleven themes emerged: multi-national corporations; competitive sport, athletes and employability; entrepreneurship; private institutions; career development centres; indigenous employment; commercial employment enterprises; government; emerging careers; generalist disciplines; and graduate attributes. Each theme is elaborated in the paper. Based on the research results, in order to enhance employability upon graduation, students are encouraged to: start early, such as in their 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); and get to know their educators and their career development centre personnel. Based on the research, stakeholders from across groups perceive that employability is enhanced when graduates: actively participate in their learning, particularly engaging in placement/internship opportunities when available; choose a few prospective employers, do their research and tailor their applications; participate in industry graduate initiatives when offered; and know themselves and practice articulating their personal employability brands.

Keywords: Graduate employability; graduate outcomes; stakeholder perspectives

Introduction

There is widespread international concern over the employment outcomes of higher education graduates (Smith, 2010; Tran, 2012; Wilton, 2008). In Australia, Graduate Career Australia's (GCA 2014a) report revealed that the number of 2013 bachelor degree alumni, employed full-time four months post-graduation, was the lowest in 20 years. In October 2014, *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that, since 2012, graduate recruitment to the Australian Public Service Commission had dropped by nearly 25 per cent (Towell, 2014). There is little dispute that the factor most affecting graduate employment outcomes is the state of the economy (Graduate Careers Australia, 2014a, 2014b; Yorke, 2006). There is also widespread agreement regarding changes that can be made to higher education which may shift the metaphoric scales to weigh more heavily in the graduates' favour (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; Oliver & Whelan, 2011). Graduate Careers Australia, (2014b) reported that more than 1/5 of the surveyed employers stated they would have hired additional employees, depending on "quality, experience and skill of graduate[s]" (p. 8). The graduate employability factors reported to matter most to employers are *soft* and *technical skills* (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013; Jackson, 2010, Muhamad, 2012). Many authors raised a concern about a mismatch between the skills graduates have developed through higher education and what they need to succeed in the workforce (Jing, Patel, & Chalk, 2011; Tymon, 2013; Wilton, 2008). Others advocate for large-scale changes to what higher education teaches, how it is taught and how students' achievements are measured (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Fullan & Scott, 2014; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Yorke, 2010).

The problem appearing with regularity in the literature is low graduate employment and the accompanying solution is enhanced *graduate employability* (Holmes, 2013; Tran, 2012). Graduate employability means that higher education alumni have the developed capacity to obtain and/or create work. Furthermore, employability means that institutions and employers have supported the 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). There is evidence that with leadership and support (including standards, guidelines and professional development), higher education institutions can embed employability activities within curriculum to improve graduate outcomes (Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli, & Wilson, 2013; Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014; Oliver & Whelan, 2011).

The research literature provides evidence that students are expected to do more than study and complete their courses in order to be employable upon graduation; additional employability strategies are necessary in order to secure suitable work (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014; Rae, 2007; Yorke, 2010). Employability requires collaboration between four stakeholder groups; higher education personnel and employers make strategies available, and students and graduates (alumni) actively initiate and make the most of these strategies (Harvey & Shahjahan, 2013; Walkington, 2014).

Method

The aims of this 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 full 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). This paper reports the methods, results and recommendations for students and graduates derived from the interview and focus group phase of the research. Other results will be reported in subsequent publications.

In-depth one-hour interviews and focus groups (147 participants) were conducted. The participants were primarily identified from the survey respondents. If a respondent had addressed a relevant theme in their narrative survey comments and indicated on their consent form that they were willing to be contacted, then an interview or focus group was scheduled. Participants were also identified through team member networks, snowball referrals and literature searches. Interviews and focus groups were intentionally scheduled in all eight Australian States and Territories in urban, rural, remote and regional contexts.

Table 1: Interview and focus group participation

Stakeholder	Interviews	Focus groups	Focus group participants	Total participants
Students	5	5	22	27
Graduates	8	3	16	24
Higher Education	32	17	48	80
Employers	16	x	x	16
Totals	61	25	86	147

Interviews and focus groups were conducted by the project leaders and project manager using standard sets of questions (Appendix A – Student Questions provided as example). There were four sets of questions – one for each stakeholder group. The number of questions ranged from 15 on the student set to 23 on the employer set. All question sets included a variety of question types including demographic, context specific and general impressions/experiential. The questions were derived by the full project team (which included a graduate and a General Manager of a University Career Development Centre). Questions were created using prompts

from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching's original call for proposals, empirical research literature, careers theory and the shared experience of team members. Interviewers and focus group facilitators probed responses where appropriate.

All interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed. A minimum of two team members independently analysed the transcripts, using a worksheet (Appendix B). Shaddock's (2014) approach to analysis was applied whereby team members repeatedly re-read the transcripts, highlighted key themes and quotes and completed the worksheet, inserting verbatim quotes as well as summaries in their own words. The Project Manager confirmed qualitative validity through comparing and contrasting the submitted worksheets. Where there was 80% agreement, she created a unified worksheet and submitted this and the independent worksheets to case study authors. Where 80% agreement was not achieved, she assigned analysis to further team members.

Results

Eleven key themes emerged from the interviews and focus groups. An extensive case study was written for each. A description of the key finding and illustrative quotes 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. One of the interviewed employers stated, "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."

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. An interviewed career development professional said, "I can't think of many graduates that I am aware of that have been truly successful who haven't had a broader experience than just being a student. Generally, those students that we recognise as elite athletes are high achievers in all they do, and sport is just part of it. Students who are engaged with those activities while they are studying are getting jobs more easily, better quality jobs and are contributing more so to society thereafter."

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. An illustrative quote from an interviewed entrepreneur was, "I think going forward, it's going to be very hard to find a job that you're going to be able to sit in for a long time. I think most jobs are going to maybe have a two-year life span, max. It's going to be more like contracting all the time. Which means that as this generation of kids finish school, they're going to need to be able to up-skill regularly. They're going to need to have to constantly pitch their skills and apply for new roles. I think there will be some enjoyment in it because I think there will be more opportunity for a work-life balance, but certainly you'll need to have – I think

they call it grit – that grit to just keep going. Because along with those sorts of things, without having that stability that our previous generation have known in the workforce, there's going to be some heartbreaks there as well."

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. An educator from a private institution 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."

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. An illustrative comment from a university career development professional was, "An approach that is purely focused on student work placement will not be nearly as effective as an integrated and embedded approach woven into the learning and teaching fabric. It is important to develop the quality of the student as they go through the 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. An educator said, "It is crucial that graduates have an understanding of the community and Indigenous culture when applying for jobs in Indigenous regions which is also an important employability factor. For example, a hiring school may say, 'No, I know I don't want that teacher who came up from [an urban centre] who doesn't know our community. I want that teacher who knows Aunty X, someone who is aware of the protocols of this community.' This is an employability factor for our students; that they know that they can apply for a position in Town X, and when they meet with the principal, they can say, 'Aunty X taught me last year' or 'I spent a lot of time in Town Y and I understand what is expected of the community and the protocols that are expected.'"

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. Illustrative advice to graduates from educators was, "Ensure that you understand yourself and the range of skills/experiences you have to offer and that you can clearly describe these to a potential employer. Use the full range of services to assist you in this – the educators who taught you, career development services offered by your alma mater, employer websites/job vacancy postings describing what they seek, and the range of commercial employment services."

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. A government employer said, "Knowledge of the Australian

Government and the civil service that supports it will help students gain graduate employment in government. Furthermore, once commencing in the Australian Public Service, it will allow [graduates] to put their best foot forward and to do so quickly. There is much that has been written about government in Australia, from the daily newspaper to the endless resources online and archived. A genuine interest in politics and policy will be invaluable."

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. An educator said 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, a senior university executive said that it is imperative for educators "to engage much more closely in society, because they no longer have a monopoly on education."

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. An educator within a generalist program said that their graduates "understand sociology, politics, international relations and policy. Graduates understand the complexity of issues such as domestic violence or Indigenous affairs. Even to the level of having conversations with people in the community where you will encounter stereotypes, our graduates know how to think about why people are like that in a more complex way without passing judgment, and in a way that is sensitive and important, and important in a world-changing way. These stereotypes are easily dismantled with more education."

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. An illustrative comment from an educator was, "It varies a little from field to field, but there are these broader citizenry, communication and critical thinking skills that apply regardless of what field you are in. So having students being more aware of the big picture instead of just focused on their own cocoon."

Discussion

The overall findings of this project, based on analysis of interviews and focus groups, were:

- multiple stakeholders stated that the most employable graduates are those who have a broad-based experience, and are able to identify and articulate their own personal identity, brand and profile;

- transferable skills and a broad-based student experience are often 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.

Some stakeholders participating in interviews and focus groups used the terms *extra-curricular* and *co-curricular* interchangeably and others explicitly articulated the distinction. To many research participants, 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.

Overall, interviewed employers were pleased with the graduates they had hired, but felt that they had to sort through numerous applications to find the suitable recruits. Interviewed graduates varied in their perspective. Two statements were repeatedly heard. One was that internships were often a prescribed part of their university study, but there were inadequate support services to help students secure suitable placements and then negotiate a quality experience. The second recurring statement was that many higher education institutions provide employability supports to promote well-rounded experiences, but students do not realise they need these services until it is too late. Those graduates who did pursue early access to quality supports reported leaving university with the generic skills they needed.

Conclusion

Most of the 147 people interviewed or participating in focus groups (students, graduates, higher education personnel and employers) offered employability advice to students and to graduates. This advice was analysed for thematic salience and synthesised into four key recommendations for each of these stakeholder groups.

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 educators 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.

The key design strength of this project was that a diverse project team contributed to the research. This included educators, a recent graduate, a career development professional, and employers on the reference group. There were a large number of interviewees and focus group participants, and data collection took place in all eight Australian States and Territories in urban, rural, remote and regional contexts. The limitation, and impetus for further research, was the relatively small size of the employer stakeholder group.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A
Interview & Focus Group Questions

Graduate Employability OLT Project
Questions for Students (Interviews & Focus Groups)

1. Describe your current student experience.
   University? Faculty? Program? Undergraduate or Postgraduate? Full-time or Part-time? Semester in Program? When do you expect to graduate?
2. What opportunities does your university provide you to enhance your graduate employability (i.e. get a good job and keep it after graduation from university)?
3. Is the onus mostly on you to develop your own graduate employability skills (i.e. self-initiated and independent) or is this a well-developed and/or formal part of your university experience?
4. What is good about the graduate employability supports your university offers?
5. What should be improved about these graduate employability supports?
6. If you were to create a new university-driven graduate employability support system, what would it be like?
7. What are the key strategies that you believe will help you with graduate employment?
8. Do you think that the graduate employability supports and strategies that your university provides will help you to get a good job?
9. To date, what approaches have you taken to enhancing your employability?
   (e.g. attending career fairs, participating in internships…)
10. When did you start participating in graduate employability supports and strategies? (i.e. in your first semester, in your final semester …)
11. Do you expect to get a job directly related to your degree? Describe.
12. What attributes, characteristics and transferable skills do you think are important to your employment success?
13. Did your university play an active role in helping you develop these attributes, characteristics and transferable skills? What did they do?
14. What would you describe as the employer's role in helping you learn your new job and developing with the organisation? Where and when does the university's responsibility end and the employer's begin?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about graduate employability supports at your university or those you expect through your future employer?

Appendix B
Interview & Focus Group Analysis Worksheet

OLT Commissioned Project Grant RR-B-143 Graduate Employability

Transcript analysis

Interview details

Date:

Interviewee(s):

Stakeholder group represented:

Interviewer(s)

Reviewer:

Date of analysis:

Process Overview

Each interview and focus group has been transcribed verbatim. Each transcript will be reviewed by a minimum of two team members using this proforma. The Project Manager (PM) will compare and contrast responses. If there is 80% or higher agreement across reviews, the PM will collate the responses into a master proforma. If there is less than 80% agreement, the PM will send the transcript out to additional reviewers until a minimum 80% agreement is reached.

Each team member can expect to receive approximately 30 transcripts to review in total. Each review takes approximately one hour. All reviews are due 30 September 2014. Please submit to the PM as each is completed.

General comments

Write a short paragraph after reading the entire transcript. This is a synopsis or executive summary. In the paragraph, provide information about the context of the matter discussed. e.g. Was the interview about a particular employer or about a university program of studies? Describe the role of the person being interviewed. Are there notable overall features of their experience and/or perspective?

[Insert paragraph here.]

Key Words

Provide a dot-point list of verbatim key words that frequently occur and/or are emphasised throughout the transcript. e.g. real-world, stand out, self-motivation, distinctive difference, misinformed

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

Major themes

Note 3-6 central themes that are prominent throughout and/or strongly emphasised in sub-sections of the transcript. After each sentence, provide some elaboration and/or a key quote verbatim from the transcript.

[Insert themes and supporting data here.]

Challenges and Solutions

Were any specific challenges emphasised and accompanying solutions described? For example, did an interviewee describe a particular graduate employability problem and then describe what they put in place to resolve that problem?

[Insert challenges and solutions here.]

Practical Strategies

Were there any practical strategies that should be noted and included in the final report? i.e. Are there innovations and ideas that may be useful to others?

[Describe practical strategies here.]

Enhancement of Graduate Employability

If the interviewee / focus group attendees specifically addressed their views about actions, supports and strategies that enhance graduate employability, summarise these here.

[Describe enhancement of graduate employability here.]

Graduate Attributes

Insert a dot-point list of adjectives used to describe employable graduates. To be relevant, all terms should complete the sentence, "This graduate shows __." Sample terms are "confidence, passion and resilience." These terms must be verbatim from the transcripts.

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

Core Work Skills

These are commonly known as transferable skills or soft skills. These are the employability skills that are situated across disciplines. Examples include, "leadership, communication, negotiation, advocacy, decision making and problem solving." Include the words verbatim from the transcript.

- [Insert dot-point list here.]

Technical or Discipline-Specific Skills

List and/or describe the technical and/or discipline- specific skills that are discussed in the transcripts. Also include comments made about hiring from generalist versus degree-specific programs and whether there is greater emphasis placed on technical / discipline-specific or core work skills. Quote the transcript e.g. "we believe in developing the whole person not just having technical skills."

[List / Describe data on technical or discipline-specific skills here.]

Literacy

Does the transcript address literacy? Numerical? English-language? Digital? Technical / Professional? If so describe here. e.g. "It is critically important that graduates demonstrate their literacy on resumes and cover letters. What message does it send to employers if they can't spell?"

[Describe literacy data here.]

Sustainability

Did the transcripts specifically reference "sustainability" or long-term continuance or protection of our planet and resources? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."

[Describe sustainability data here.]

Change Implementation Savvy

Did the transcripts specifically reference the need for graduates to address and/or have skills in managing / implementing change and/or address how students / graduates have to be comfortable with rapid change? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."

[Describe change data here.]

Reflective Position on Tacit Assumptions

Did the transcripts specifically reference the need for students /graduates to be reflective and/or develop a position / perspective / stance on current and contemporary issues? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."

[Describe reflective position data here.]

Creative and Inventive

Did the transcripts specifically reference creativity and / or inventiveness and / or synonyms? If YES, describe or quote here. If NO, insert the phrase "did not emerge in transcripts."

[Describe creativity / inventiveness data here.]