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DDCA advocacy and collaboration: Leveraging the data to influence policy and practice

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By Professor Dawn Bennett

Employability is a buzz word and likely to remain so as performance-based funding comes into force, so what *is* employability in the context of design and the creative arts, and is it beyond the remit of a degree in these disciplines?

There is no short answer because employability as reported within the media, graduate outcomes surveys and so in is almost never employ*ability*; rather, it is employ*ment.* As Wilton (2011, p. 87) writes, this is nonsensical because it "is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed".

Employability within the context of HE relates to the process by which we prepare students to negotiate graduate life and work. This is particularly true in times of economic recession, increased graduate competition and labour market change. For many design and creative arts disciplines, complex and precarious work has been a feature of careers for centuries; we are the experts! And yet we do not perform well in the metrics.

Following discussion at the recent DDCA meeting, this short article sets out strategies with which to challenge current policy, reporting and inaccurate perceptions of creative discipline graduate outcomes

through renewed graduate outcomes data and evidence-based advocacy.

1. Deliver collaborative research

The prevalence of part-time, project-based work, often managed as a portfolio of multiple inconsistent roles, gives creative disciplines a significant advantage when it comes to understanding so-called "new" careers and the future of work. The existing graduate outcomes survey privileges full-time jobs with a single employer. Collaborative research with alumni could enable us to provide the evidence base with which to rewrite the graduate metrics and advocate for their delivery 15 months after graduation as in the UK. We could also change the ways in which we engage students and academics in career conversations, normalising portfolio work and creating developmental agency among students.

How? I propose that we agree to two collaborative research projects, enabled through a combination of cash and in-kind support. Given the membership of DDCA, we could deliver both projects within 18 months with a contribution of $1,000 per member.

2. Challenge media and Government reporting about creative disciplines

The consistent messaging about creative disciplines is that they do not give a return on investment. The research proposed above would enable us to create a more nuanced, evidence-based narrative. We need to be ready with media pieces which are released each time negative media achieves a headline (see for example Australia's useless university degrees).

 These pieces should go to the media, to institutions, to industry, to faculty and directly to students.

3. Change the language

The language of employment/employability is outdated and largely irrelevant for many students. See, for example, university workshops on getting a "job", or being hired by a "firm" in a "graduate program". We can change (translate) the language within schools and faculties by replacing every-day language as follows:

- Job becomes work or role

- Internship becomes placement or experience

- Skill becomes capability

- Employers become employers and clients

- Firm becomes business.

Another way to normalise the complex nature of work in the creative disciplines is to renew the images on institutional websites and in marketing and recruitment materials. Most existing images will illustrate an outcome or output. How many images illustrate work that is administrative, work embedded within the process of development, technical roles, teaching roles, work in community etc? These images are more accurate of a creative practice and they also serve to normalise complex roles.

Similarly, program reviews or programming the following year's creative works is a good opportunity to review for inclusivity. Do concert programs include works by women? Do set works and texts include people from diverse cultural backgrounds? Do guest lecturers and artists represent diversity?

4. HE advocacy: Economic vs societal benefit

There is no doubt that government policy is focussed on purely economic outcomes. This is at odds with the nature of contemporary work and the social mission of higher education.

Rankings exercises and intrusive steering mechanisms promote self-interest and status competition ahead of public good. Given the inherent societal links of creative disciplines, the DDCA is in an excellent position to action what Marginson (2011, p. 422) describes as a "networked and potentially more egalitarian university world patterned by communications, collegiality, linkages, partnerships and global consortia". One way of doing this is to bring into view the careers of practising artists and designers through a series of career stories. Two of these per DDCA member would create an invaluable resource.

5. Make it relevant

Creating curricular relevance does not mean making everything vocational! Students are interested in developing their employability if it is relayed as developing the futures to which they aspire. We need to help students find the relevance between the learning we assign them and their future lives and work. Students and faculty need to rethink employability as something that requires work throughout the career lifespan and is mindful of self, profession and society: for example, as "the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan and in multiple contexts" (Bennett, 2018, p. i).

All learning should have relevance to possible disciplinary, societal, personal, creative and/or professional futures of students. "If the learning we ask of students is relevant, we should articulate its relevance. If it is not relevant, we should stop teaching it. This is a challenge not to make every program vocational, but to make every program developmental and relevant" (Bennett, 2019).

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Further information

The employABILITY Initiative features websites for both educators and students. The work includes student resources, educator guides, faculty and student workshops and a validated socio-cognitive measure known as *Literacies for Life* (L4L). A dedicated educator site features plain language employABILITY thinking student resources, educator guides and expert guides. Educators can also request aggregated cohort-wide data and engage with the research. Activities, research and writing

from the Initiative are regularly updated in the EmployABILITY research lab and in the Community of Practice.

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