# Embedding Employability in the Curriculum – Strategies to Improve Outcomes for University Graduates

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## Abstract

*It is imperative that university graduates are prepared for work and employment. They need to gain appropriate skills and knowledge for the sector in which they intend to work, both disciplinary and generic. Many employers (and clients) place significant emphasis on the latter, whereas the focus of universities is arguably the inverse. As a consequence there are significant gaps between what employers expect graduates to know and to be able to do, and their actual graduate attributes. These issues are magnified in disciplines in which graduate destinations are highly diverse, with a lack of obvious career paths, intense competition for work and complex models of work.*
*This paper draws on research with students, graduates, education leaders and careers professionals in Australia, Brazil and Mexico. It reports students' perceptions of the skills they need to gain prior to graduation and contrasts these with insights from graduates. It reports on the development of a framework for employability skills development, including best practice in employability skills education. It then highlights strategies which can be used in the university classroom to help students enhance their employability. Drawing on practical initiatives which have proven to be successful, it illustrates approaches which students, educators and education leaders can put into action. The paper will conclude by providing participants with links to an online toolbox which can be utilised in a wide range of contexts.*

Graduate employability is a thorny issue for higher education institutions (HEIs). One the one hand the employment rate of graduates is increasingly being used as a yardstick against which to measure HEI performance. It is increasingly argued that HEIs are responsible for helping students gain the skills, knowledge and attributes they will need in the early stages of their careers. In addition, HEIs are called on to ensure that graduates can adapt their skills as workforce needs evolve over time. This is reflected in a commonly used definition of employability as a "set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful" [1]. Students expect that their higher education will provide them with an appropriate set of skills and attributes to be able to gain employment after graduation. Employers are demanding that HEIs consider the needs of the modern workforce in educating students. There is a large amount of evidence on what is required from graduates by employers. As a consequence most HEIs have developed graduate attribute statements and there is an extensive scholarly literature on graduate employability. Despite this, many commentators feel that HEIs are failing to properly prepare their students [2]. And a number of international studies suggest that HEIs think they are doing a better job than employers believe [3].
These demands arise in a context in which HEIs have little control over the supply of jobs and are therefore unsure of what they are supposed to be preparing their students for. This is particularly difficult in degree program where connections to employment are less linear [4], and when an ever-growing number of graduates have portfolio careers in which they balance a number of roles [5]. As such, institutions need to ensure that students can gain "a set of attributes that makes one appealing to a heterogeneous range of employers" [6]. Yet many educators feel ill-equipped to help students gain employability skills. They may have spent their entire career in academia and have little to no insight into the broader world of work. They may be confident in teaching in their discipline but have little idea of how to introduce employability. Equally, a large number of educators do not regard employability as their responsibility, instead focusing on covering the contents of the curriculum and considering that employability is the responsibility of employers. This is affirmed by research which suggests that much of the learning of these skills does not occur until graduates are in a workplace [7]. There is also disagreement about the transferability of graduate skills to new contexts [8].

Many HEIs do use strategies to help their students enhance their employability. These may be integrated into the curriculum or considered as an add-on and often begin as pilot programmes introduced by one or more educators. Examples include extra- or co-curricular activities such as volunteering or involvement in student organisations; explicit support for finding graduate employment such as practice interviews and application writing; professional work placements; and programs to develop employability skills such as teamwork. Examples from Australia include Bond University's Beyond Bond program [9], Deakin University's Job Shop [10], La Trobe University's Career Ready program [11], RMIT University's LEAD program [12] and The University of Western Sydney's CareervUWS [13]. But embedding employability into the curriculum means that strategies are required that all educators can implement with their students. This is essential if graduates are able to successfully commence their careers and also manage each stage of career transition [14].

This Australian study set out to determine the employability needs which students have and ways in which HEIs can meet these needs. It investigated students' attainment of employability skills through survey research with students and case study research with students, graduates, educational leaders and careers professionals. It then went on to develop a toolkit of employability resources for educators to use with their students. Survey research collected data from undergraduate students across a number of disciplines in Australia, Mexico and Brazil. This was then combined with previous survey data which included common questions in order to create a data set of 1,095 responses. In addition case study interviews were conducted with 24 graduates, 15 students, 10 HEI leaders and 2 careers professionals.

In the survey students were asked to identify employability characteristics in a number of different ways: the attributes employers look for in graduates; the attributes which a professional in their major's study area possesses; the differences between them and these professional characteristics; and how what they learn in their degree will prepare them for their future work and career. These were framed as open questions, which generated a vast quantity of rich data. Several common themes emerged from the initial coding. These were then compared with extant categories identified within the Core Skills for Work Framework [15], The Australian Blueprint for Career Development [16] and Dacre-Pool and Sewell's [17] employability framework. This process led to the development of five key categories: skills and knowledge, becoming a professional; interacting with others; managing self; and navigating the world of work. Students reported a particular focus on skills and knowledge and felt that their degrees were preparing them with these. But students also placed a great deal of focus on becoming a professional, interacting with others and managing self and were much less confident that their degrees would prepare them for these elements. When asked what strategies they would adopt themselves to enhance these elements, students commonly referred to 'study' and 'practice'. They gave little indication of what they would study or how they would practice, suggesting that they are simply referring to what are accepted understandings about how to acquire skills and knowledge. Another insight is that students placed almost no emphasis on navigating the world of work, despite this being an important element in the employability skills literature. Finally, students reported a desire for more help from their institutions in enhancing their employability and finding out about employment options.

The case studies undertaken supported the insights from students that undergraduate degrees are only partially preparing students for future employment, with a need for greater emphasis on addressing the specific skills required to successfully enter, and transition through, the world of work. HEI leaders reported a focus on industry engagement as the best way to enhance student employability and a concern that many educators were disconnected from industry relevant to their discipline, particularly at research-intensive institutions. Leaders also felt that students should focus on enhancing their generic or transferable skills in order to improve their employability, with a focus on what they could do outside of the curriculum. Graduates reported that they had been unaware of opportunities to enhance their employability at their institution during their studies, either indicating that these had not been available or that information about them had not filtered through to students. They had instead focused on gaining the skills and knowledge in their discipline. Only when they commenced employment had they become aware of the limitations of this approach and the need for a much broader set of skills, knowledge and attributes. This was particularly the case as many graduates were working outside of the professional area most linked to the discipline they had studied.

Taken together the insights from prior literature and the survey and case-study data collected in this project point to the need for HEIs to have systematic approaches in place to help students enhance their employability during their studies. This requires a multi-pronged approach. HEIs can implement institutional-wide strategies. These can include elements such as an audit of existing approaches to identify good practice and disseminate this throughout institutions and across the sector; building and reinforcing connections between institutions and industry partners; close collaboration between

academic leaders and careers professionals to embed employability in the curriculum; and professional development and support for educators to help them support the development of employability skills among students. The latter point is critical as students look to educators to help them gain better employability skills. Beyond professional development, it is valuable to make resources available for educators to implement with their students. These should be grounded in best practice and include strategies for integrating resources into classroom practices and pedagogical practice. A number of examples will be shared during the presentation of this paper.

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