

4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Shelley Kinash, Linda Crane, Mark Schulz, David Dowling, and Cecily Knight. (2014) "Improving graduate employability: Strategies from three Universities" Ireland International Conference on Education (IICE). Ireland. Apr. 2014.

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Improving Graduate Employability: Strategies from Three Universities

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Abstract

This paper addresses how educators can best support graduate employability. Employability means that higher education institutions and employers have supported student acquisition of the knowledge, skills and attributes that lead to career success for graduates. Three Australian universities disseminated a pilot call for graduate employability success stories. Educators responded from multiple disciplines and with diverse strategies. Qualitative analysis derived common themes in the strategies employed. The strategy emerging with the greatest frequency was supporting the development of graduate portfolios. The pilot project allowed the research team to refine the data collection methodology from a general call for success stories to the use of directed surveys and interviews.

1. Introduction

In 2008, the Australian government called for a comprehensive review of the higher education system [1]. The final report reveals the dominant discourse of Australian higher education, themes of which include: economics, global competition, career outcomes and skill development [2]. In the review, the authors articulate a vision for higher education in 2020 as one which “produces graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society as it anticipates and meets the needs of the Australian and international labour markets” [1]. This vision speaks to the concept of employability, which can be defined as institutions and employers supporting student acquisition of the knowledge, skills and attributes that will lead to career success for graduates [3].

A favoured employability strategy in Australian higher education is that of graduate attribute development [4]. Employability skills are generally seen as a sub-set of graduate attributes, and are the

characteristics that make people effective employees. It is believed that university has a role and responsibility in developing these capacities [5]. Graduate attributes are not specifically aligned to disciplines; they are the qualities that are valued by most graduate employers, such as creative and critical thinking, and problem solving [6]. There is increasing recognition that specific strategies, such as eportfolios and particular approaches to assessment, must accompany the concept and principles of graduate attributes in order to achieve the desired outcomes [7].

2. Graduate employability strategies

Prior research reveals nine key strategies for which there is evidence of successful outcomes in graduate employability. One is work experience [3], [8], [9] and another is providing modules in entrepreneurship [3]. Another is coordinating a capstone project for students [10]. Research revealed that a combination of careers advice and specific employment skill development are important strategies [3], [8]. *Teach them and they will get jobs* approaches are ineffective; the concept of employability must be made explicit for students, employers and educators [11]. Graduates also became more employable when their educators supported them to develop graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement [3], [7], [9]. Authors acknowledged the importance of strengthened relationships between universities and employers [9], [12]. Another effective strategy is to establish mentorship networks between successfully employed graduates and currently enrolled students [9]. Finally, forward looking universities support graduates to engage electronic social networks for ongoing communication and awareness of job vacancies [8], [9].

3. Questions

This paper presents results from a pilot study to initiate a larger programme of research into graduate employability. In the extended study, the researchers will be building on the current body of published graduate employability research by pursuing the following questions: are there differences between those graduates from professionally accredited courses and those graduating from generalist degrees and are there differences across disciplines; how do private higher education providers assist students to obtain workplace skills; what are the generic skills to be assumed of a graduate and what do they encompass; what knowledge, skills and attributes is it reasonable for employers to expect universities to teach; are students leaving universities with the generic skills they need; if not, what are the skills that graduates are not currently attaining through their degree programs; and is there a disjunction between what employers say they want and what they mean.

4. Methodology

For the purposes of the pilot study reported here, only a subset of the partners participated. The full research team includes: academics from one private and two public universities, a representative from a professional association of private education providers, two successful graduates / former student association presidents, and a manager of a career development centre. However, only the university delegates ran the pilot project in order to keep it focused and achievable.

There were two goals for the pilot. The first was to confirm the content of the literature and thereby query the propositions set forward in the project design. The second was to test a data recruitment strategy in order to strengthen and refine the approach. The project is a large, national grant with substantive targets. It is important that as the research progresses, it is conducted with robust methods.

Recruitment was open for a period of two weeks. Participants were recruited through print and electronic formats. The study aims and abstract were presented on a two-sided graphically designed postcard format and sent for distribution to the three universities of the authors' affiliations. At the home institution, where there are three team members, the postcards were taken to each faculty and placed in academics' mailboxes. On the reverse side to the study aims and abstract, the post card stated:

"Do you have evidence that you have made a strong contribution to employability, or in other words, that you have supported the knowledge, skills and attributes that lead to career success for

graduates? OR are you a graduate who has a success story to share? While we want to hear about all strategies, the grant particularly concerns graduates from non-professional disciplines especially those in the humanities, visual/performing arts, life sciences and computer science. We would like to hear about your innovations that have resulted in a dream job for you or one graduate, or in employability skills for a large cohort. Your contributions will be acknowledged within the website resulting from the project and potentially may also lead to publications."

Participants were asked to share the details of their experiences by responding via email to one of the two co-leaders of the research project. In addition to the postcard, regular emails and other electronic postings with the same content were sent out university-wide at each participating university. Participants were incentivised with the offer of an iTunes card or an Amazon gift card.

Responses were collated and individually coded according to eight frames. 1) The source of submission. Was it a student, graduate, employer, or institution and private or public university? 2) The subject of the submission. Was it about students, graduates, employers or institutions and private or public university? 3) The type of employment. Was it government, professional, private, vocational, other or undisclosed? 4) The strategy, which was coded according to the nine key strategies described on the previous page, or undisclosed. 5) The innovation. Was there something about the strategy that was described by the source as innovative? What?

6) Impact. How many people were described as gaining employment through the described strategy? [None of the submissions addressed impact and this coding was thereby not possible.] 7) Discipline of study (humanities, visual/performing arts, life sciences, computer science), other, or undisclosed. 8) Evidence, or in other words, what clear performance indicators were provided that this strategy supports graduate employability outcomes?

Pilot data was then thematically analysed using NVivo version 10, a software program for qualitative data analysis. One participant's data was not analysed further than demographic details as the response was unrelated to the aims and objectives of the study. Two broad themes emerged from the data: the strategy utilised to gain employment and the evidence to support the efficacy of the chosen strategy. At the broadest level, the strategy theme was called 'level one' with the evidence theme emerging below it as 'level two,' and further sub-themes branching at 'level three.'

5. Results

A total of twelve graduate employability submissions were received in this pilot study. Out of the twelve participants, there were five students, six institutional participants (two from a private institution and four from public institutions), and one graduate. Of these participants, four were in the humanities discipline of study, two in life sciences, two in visual / performing arts, one from a law firm, and three participants who did not disclose their discipline of study. Four of the participants were employed in private institutions, one in a government organisation, one in a professional capacity and six did not disclose their type of employment.

Six of the nine strategies identified in the literature emerged as themes in the submissions. Notably, the specific strategy count adds up to more than twelve because a number of the submissions articulated more than one strategy. The strategy with the highest prevalence was *developing a graduate portfolio* with five entries. The strategy with the second highest prevalence was *engaging in electronic social networks*. One of the accompanying comments was that this is useful in that students establish their digital profile and build it through their career. There were two strategies that each received three mentions. These were *establishing mentoring networks* and *careers advice*. One of the submissions regarding mentoring networks highlighted the importance of universities building networks in the country of origin for international students who planned to return home. There were two strategies each referenced twice. One was *coordinating a capstone project* and the other was *internships*. One respondent elaborated by explaining that students in his program “obtain live experience through multiple internships.”

The three strategies appearing in the literature that did not emerge in the pilot were *making employability explicit*, *entrepreneurship modules* and *building stronger relationships between university and employers*. One strategy emerged in the pilot that was not discovered as explicitly linked to graduate employability in the literature and this was *empirical research*. This graduate described being told by the employer that she was being hired specifically because of the skills she had gained and demonstrated through conducting a published research study while at university.

The second level theme that emerged with sufficient salience to warrant further analysis was evidence to support the efficacy of the chosen strategy. Eight of the submissions provided evidence for the success of their graduate employability strategy. For four of the respondents, the cited evidence was the nature of the job attained by the graduate. For example, one respondent enthusiastically revealed that as a result of the

strategies, a graduate was employed as a Communications Coordinator and then named a prestigious organisation. Four other types of evidence were each provided by one respondent. One stated that the graduate was employed even prior to graduation. Another used the number of job offers to graduates as evidence. Two others addressed the nature of their program of studies, one describing program evaluation as evidence and the other addressing the popularity of the program as measured by student enrolments, as well as the completion rate.

6. Discussion

Not surprisingly, most of the strategies that were described in the published literature emerged in this pilot study, even with a small number of submissions. The most sensible hypothesis as to why the three ‘missing’ strategies did not emerge is that the sample was simply not large enough. However, there are other possible explanations. *Making employability explicit* may not come to mind for respondents when they are asked to comment on “strategies.” Instead, this theme may emerge as an elaboration, a philosophy or a principle upon further probing. *Entrepreneurship*, as a strategy, is likely to occur when private providers are included in the call-out for success stories, related to where entrepreneurship tends to be taught. Finally, with a much larger sample size, it will be interesting to analyse whether it is employers or academics who feel that *stronger relationships need to be built*.

One new strategy emerged that had not been found in the literature previously, which was conducting empirical research alongside students. While it has long been established that this is a positive practice for postgraduate students planning to become academics, it is an intriguing entry as a graduate employability strategy outside of university jobs, particularly since this was a graduate from an Associate Degree in the humanities. It will be interesting to see whether this or other new strategic employability themes develop with continued data collection.

The lessons cautiously reinforced (due to sample size) of this pilot study are that universities seeking to enhance graduate employability are well-placed to support the development of graduate portfolios. In addition, students and graduates should be encouraged to engage in electronic social networks. With respect to how universities know that these strategies are successful, the most common type of evidence provided was the nature of the jobs attained by the graduates.

The other goal of this pilot was to test the data recruitment method. The researchers were dissatisfied with the quantity and quality of responses and will therefore revise the approaches to

obtaining graduate employability information in the next phases of the research programme. The call was only disseminated for two weeks and in a period when many educators had not returned from seasonal leave. However, during that two week period, the call was widely distributed, and if it is to be efficacious, should have drawn more responses than it did. At one university, the call was sent by email daily to the entire academic staff for the full two week period. The postcards were put in academics' mailboxes. Despite these efforts, this university only contributed one-third of the responses.

Beyond quantity, the nature of the responses was sketchy. It was difficult to analyse the emergent themes and it will be challenging to assess whether these narratives warrant further research as full cases. The content and meaning of some of the submissions were difficult to understand. Some respondents seemed to be alluding to something important, but the researchers were unsure.

There were a number of lessons learned. First, the pilot reinforced a well-known response rate phenomenon in higher education. Academics receive too many emails, and despite daily sends, academics remain unlikely to read those emails, or if they do, respond to the call. Second, the postcard approach does not seem to work, particularly if there is a lot of small type. Third, iTunes and Amazon cards do not appear to be a compelling incentive for academics to participate. Fourth, the researcher needs to ask the questions that will lead to the data that is necessary for the study. Asking for 'success stories' and hoping that themes will emerge is ineffective.

This pilot has been worthwhile. It has reinforced and confirmed the graduate employability themes of the literature. New information is emerging, such as how providers of graduate employability strategies measure success.

The other important outcome of the pilot is refinement of data collection methods. As the team moves forward, calls for participation will continue to be widely distributed, but this time the objective of the call will only be to make initial contact. The Project Manager, or other members of the Research Team, will offer the choice of written survey or interview. Specific questions will be asked, based on the coding frames described on the previous pages. The principle of emerging themes will be protected, in that the questions will begin general and provide a great deal of scope to share narrative and open accounts, as well as perceptions of what works and does not in graduate employability.

7. Conclusion and further directions

To students, families and governments, who invest heavily in higher education, the main motivation is graduate employability. It is therefore

incumbent upon institutions to apply evidence-based approaches to supporting students to obtain the knowledge, skills and attributes that are going to help them obtain and maintain satisfying careers and be lifelong learners. It is the main objective of this research programme to contribute to this mission.

The next step is to strengthen the data collection to cast a metaphoric wide net. The research team is seeking to hear about thousands of graduate employability strategies from private and public institutions, employers, students and graduates. The team will then assess these strategies according to a rubric of alignment, innovation, robustness, impact, discipline, sustainability and evidence. Those responses rating highest on the rubric will be pursued and developed as full cases. Through the cases, the team will return to the questions motivating the full study. For example, one of the questions to which there is not a definitive response in the literature is whether there needs to be significantly different strategies for those students in the disciplines of humanities, visual/performing arts, life sciences and computer science versus disciplines with more defined career paths such as engineering, medicine and law.

As described on the previous pages, this research was worthwhile as a pilot as it confirmed the literature and allowed the research team to refine the data collection plan. However, the limitations of the research are that the sample size is small and not representative. It did not include the full scope of research partners or stakeholders. Finally, the nature of the narratives was sketchy, thus limiting the possibilities for narrative analysis.

Acknowledgments

Support for this paper has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (Commission Project Grant SP13 – 3239). The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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