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Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Government as employer

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CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Government as Employer



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Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Government as employer

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)
- Private higher education and employability implications
- 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 government as a graduate employer is based on the experience of an author currently employed by government as a graduate, and interviews with fellow public servants. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



INTRODUCTION

Governments of all levels are significant providers of employment in Australia. With staff nearing 160,000, the Australian Public Service (APS) stands out as one of the nation's largest employers (Australian Public Service Commission, 2014). Not only this, the APS is among Australia's most significant providers of graduate employment.

The number of graduates joining the APS peaked in 2011-12 at 917 (Towell, 2014). While this number has reduced to 784 in 2012-13 and 712 in 2013-14, the APS remains a mainstay in the annual recruitment of university graduates (Towell, 2014).

Given this commissioned project's focus on the employment of graduates from generalist degrees, the role of the APS in employing generalist graduates is pertinent. To this end, it is arguable that the APS is Australia's largest employer of graduates from generalist degrees each year.

Meanwhile, the 700 plus graduates employed by the APS do not stand-alone as graduates employed by government. While this case study focuses on the Australian Government as an employer, state, territory and local governments are employing graduates all around the country.

Every graduate has a story of how their employment came about. For graduates employed by government, this is no different. This case study is, in large part, my story (Matthew McLean) as a graduate employed in the APS in 2014. It is supported by the stories of two of my close colleagues, who are also 2014 APS graduates.

The story of every graduate is necessarily shared by a story of their employer. My story is no different. My employer, a member of the APS Senior Executive Service also helps share my story in this case study.

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 government.

Keywords

- Opportunities
- Confidence
- Commitment
- Extracurricular engagement
- Communication
- Experience
- Independence
- Transferable skills
- Service

A TRUE STORY OF GOVERNMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Matthew McLean, Bond University graduate

I received a Vice-Chancellor's Scholarship to study Law at Bond University in 2010. For as long as I can recall, I harboured ambitions to be a solicitor. While I relished in learning the law, it soon became apparent that I was not passionate about its practise.

Throughout my studies I was involved in some interesting work. Initially working for a senior Queensland politician and later in research roles for the University's Office of Learning and Teaching and the Centre for Law, Governance and Public Policy.

Meanwhile, I became actively involved in student politics. From 2011-2012, I served as the Vice-President for Education on the Bond University Student Association. The following term, from 2012-2013, I led the Student Association as its President.

My studies continued in good stead and I completed my Bachelor of Law with Honours. At that point, at just 21 years of age, I felt unprepared to graduate. Still thirsty to study law, but remaining uncommitted to practise it, I enrolled in a Masters of Law with a Major in Corporate and Commercial Law.

Around this time, my research work involved some consultancy work on the design of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This landmark social policy reform was led by the then Department of Families, Communities, Housing and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA). I relished the policy work, particularly its focus on delivering social benefits to the disadvantaged. While my

previous work for Members of Parliament had given me a taste of politics, I now had a thirst instead for policy.

At this point in time, I knew I had to focus more closely on securing graduate employment. After meeting with our dedicated Career Development Centre staff, I became aware of Australian Public Service (APS) graduate programs. Still immersed in their work on the NDIS, I applied for FAHCSIA.

The recruitment process was rigorous. Like many other APS graduate programs, thousands of applications were received for only a few dozen positions. The sheer volume of applications required the following stages of recruitment:

- Individual registration including submission of Curriculum Vitae and Academic Transcript.
- Written statement against selection criteria.
- Online cognitive testing.
- Formal telephone interview.
- Face-to-face Assessment Centre including:
 - Assessed group activity
 - Time-limited written assessment
 - One-on-one interview
- Online psychometric testing.
- Phone interview with departmental official.
- Reference and referee checks.

At the conclusion of this robust process, I received an official offer to join the Department as part of their graduate program for 2014. Throughout each stage of this process, I found my experiences at university were key to my advancement.

A TRUE STORY OF GOVERNMENT GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

The counselling I received from the career advisors made me aware of the graduate opportunity, but also ensured I could put my best foot forward in the process. In the interviews, I could offer my extra-curricular involvement as behavioural examples.

All the while, my practical work experience offered relevant subject matter experience I could share throughout the assessment process. The mentors I picked up along the way generously offered to serve as my referees. One went so far as to relay how the then minister responsible for FAHCSIA had praised the consultancy work I contributed to around the NDIS.

In January 2014 I relocated to Canberra. In February 2014, as a result of machinery of government, changes to the Department of Social Services (DSS), my work began.

My graduate year has been a genuine learning curve and an exciting start to my public service career. Rich with training opportunities, replete with new friendship and experiences, I have enjoyed every moment of it.

Under the leadership of a remarkable Branch Manager who has been generous with her time, advice and experience, I have had the opportunities to tackle significant policy issues and set my sights on a long-term public service career.

While in 2015 I will no longer formally be a graduate in the Department, the graduate employment skills I gained at university and throughout my graduate program, will remain with me in years to come.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

Public sector employment is distinct from private sector employment. While work may take similar forms and involve equivalent functions, employment by government is different from employment by a corporation. The regulations involved in government employment, including the Public Service Act, APS Value and a binding Code of Conduct, render the employment contract of a public servant unique.

In recent decades, the number of university graduates employed by government has increased exponentially. While historically, entry to the public service could occur by way of a school-leaver exam or various traineeships and cadetships, the typical entry level position in the APS now requires a tertiary degree.

At time of authorship, there exists an APS-wide recruitment freeze for new positions in the public service. Departmental graduate programs have been singled-out as an exception to this freeze. As a result, from September 2013 the primary means through which an individual could enter ongoing employment with the Federal Government is through a graduate program.

The size of government departments and the scope of the various levels of government have broad benefits for employment in the public sector. Agency resources allow for structured and comprehensive graduate programs including competitive salaries, formalised training and any number of professional development opportunities.

The ongoing shift towards a professionalised public service characterised by tertiary qualification has opened up further

employment opportunities for graduates from generalist degrees. The vast majority of APS graduate programs require at least a bachelor-level qualification but do not eliminate applicants based on the discipline of that degree.

In brief, employability through government is unique in size, scope and potential for generalist graduates. The better equipped prospective graduates are to apply for, engage in and pursue government employment opportunities, the better their graduate outcomes will be.

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.**

Ensure students are aware of the opportunities provided by government from an early point in their studies. Many departmental recruitment processes share similar elements including interviews, assessment centres and public sector-centric workshops. These should be made available to students, particularly those from generalist degrees.

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

A large proportion of government graduates are engaged as generalist recruits. Higher education providers need to therefore provide training to students with general employability skills in leadership, communications and strategic thinking. This can be provided for by appropriate supports

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

and credit for extra-curricular involvement and degree-relevant work experience.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees within government.**

Government departments themselves can benefit from an open dialogue with both students and higher education providers. There is considerable demand for university graduates and they should begin a conversation with educators around what characteristics and skills government employers seek and how universities can develop and/or enhance employability support systems.

Challenges

The promising opportunities of governmental graduate employment are not without their challenges. Many students will enter tertiary education with an employment goal that does not match the public service. Students in professional service degrees including Law, Commerce and Business are likely to have their sights set first on top-tier professional service law firms, investment banks and consulting entities.

Students in major Australian metropolitan areas such as Sydney and Melbourne may be reluctant to consider a move to the nation's seat of government, the Australian Capital Territory. While government as an employer offers attractive and competitive remuneration opportunities, multi-national corporations and top-tier professional firms often have the flexibility to offer higher initial wage packages or the prospects of partnership and equity in the future.

There are challenges for government employers as well. As expressed by a manager interviewed for this case study, "Employers have to be realistic that they're getting someone who has a range of skills and needs to be inculcated into workplace culture." Just as graduates in the private sector will struggle to be all things to their employer on their first day in the job, graduates in the public sector will require ongoing training and support.

Graduates also face the general issue of their own employability. One government graduate interviewed for this case study noted that the main challenge was to re-create herself into an *employable* person. Fresh out of university, an undergraduate degree under her belt, she applied for graduate employment and did not succeed. It was then she realised, "a university degree is not enough these days." Employability is greater than qualification.

Another government graduate cites the difficulty for students to know what employers are looking for in terms of overall employability. This is a challenge shared by graduates across industry, demographic and qualification. Without a crystal clear idea of what employers seek, graduates struggle to hit a target they do not understand with precision.

Successes

The challenges outlined in this case study are not problems without solutions. Government-based graduate employment continues to thrive in Australia and each year, hundreds of living, breathing case studies illustrate this. Each year, the list of success stories increases as more graduates work their way through government graduate programs.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH GOVERNMENT AS EMPLOYER?

The ongoing employment prospects of graduates are bright. The upper echelon of the Australian Public Service is replete with former graduates. Many Departmental Secretaries and Agency Heads themselves entered the public service through graduate programs. Meanwhile, many titans of industry and leaders in science and medical research have applied their government graduate training on entry to the private sector.

The human capital commodity of a university graduate has inspired many government agencies to develop tailor-made and evidence-based graduate programs. While many entrants enter graduate programs rich with employability skills, their government employers invest further in these skills and allow for training opportunities to refine their development.

What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Skilled and highly-employable graduates
- Labour and social mobility
- Increased employer and employee satisfaction
- A highly professional public service
- Efficient use of taxpayer funds
- Improved public sector culture
- Heightened career prospects
- Driven national leaders
- Learned graduate experience

How has the approach developed employability?

The approach has developed employability by delivering the following employability skills identified by graduates and employers:

- Developed ability to think
- Ability to work well in teams
- Ability to maximise opportunities
- Confidence
- Emotional intelligence
- Communication skills
- Research ability
- Analytical skills
- Leadership
- Attention to detail



ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Volunteer far and wide.

FROM A GRADUATE:

“I did a number of different work experience programs throughout my university degree. In particular my volunteering experiences were good for demonstrating the areas that I was interested in, but I think that this can [also] show the areas in which I’m not interested. So when I was interviewing with former FACSIA, it was quite easy to demonstrate that I was interested in working with the people-groups that they do policy and programs for, compared to when I would interview at commercial law firms and I couldn’t demonstrate any real interest in commercial law from my extra-curricular or volunteering roles.”

Engage in extra-curricular activities.

FROM A GRADUATE:

“I remember after I finished my undergraduate degree I had no experience. I had just worked at Bakers Delight and gone to university. I applied for a volunteering job at Oxfam and didn’t get it. I thought I’ve got to lift the bar, lift my game a little bit. So I did an internship in a homeless shelter, I got a job at Centrelink and I really started to target what I was doing in my time outside university in that direction. From there my employability suddenly became reasonably high in this sector; [subsequently] getting the job that I’m in now. I think it was definitely worth doing a lot of extra-curricular activities - I really believe that just doing your university degree is not enough these days.”

Develop your understanding of government and the public service.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“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 APS 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.”



ADVICE FOR GRADUATES

Be confident and have a go.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“One of the things that lots of graduates need to work on is their confidence. And I don’t mean by that an overinflated view of your confidence, but the ability to know what you’re good at and to be able to present that. The other strategy that I see in graduates is when they are asked if they’d like to do something, say ‘I’ll have a go.’”

Ask questions and seek advice.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“I offer every graduate who works in my branch the opportunity to spend an hour a month picking my brain about whatever they want. A reasonably good predictor of success is whether they are willing to do that or not. Some just say ‘I don’t see the value in doing that’, and that’s fair enough - I’m happy for people to do that, but they also tend to not seek out any other mentors. It’s been interesting to watch that pattern. Those who take me up on that offer, even if just a couple of times, tend to also be the ones who seek out mentors, who want to do further study, who ask advice. My view is that people who have been around for a while tend to know different pathways through a career and so can give you options. So the graduates who succeed the best are good at asking questions, at seeking input from other people about how they might advance their career.”

Network with other graduates within your department across agencies.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“With around a thousand graduates commencing in the APS each year, networking opportunities are provided *en masse*. These valuable networks deliver many benefits. In the short term they offer new friendships and shared experiences, particularly for graduates relocating to Canberra for the first time. In the long term, these networks will serve you well as future colleagues emerge and your connections can assist you in securing jobs and performing your day-to-day responsibilities.”

ADVICE FOR EMPLOYERS

Employ people who can be mentors for future staff.

FROM A GRADUATE:

“Employers should look for people who are really good mentors, and give your very valuable resource of your graduates to them to develop. So that your first two experiences should be with really good mentors and then we’ll ‘let you loose’ on the general population.”

Guide students on what employers seek.

FROM A GRADUATE:

“I think that it would be helpful if we had a clearer outline of what would be useful. But it’s hard to know as a university student what employers actually care about and what experience really matters. Sometimes really odd jobs you’ve had or done will seem to count for a lot more than I would have thought they should.... So if possible I guess more guidance and direction on where we should be focusing our time.”

Develop holistic graduates - not just graduates that specialise in numbers or words.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“I think we have done graduates a disservice by saying that you are either numerate or literate; graduates who are both numerate and literate will have the most opportunities available to them. By numerate I mean can read a table, can look at a table and tell me what it means, can present information really quickly and visually, can know how to summarise something really quickly and have those synthesis skills, and you only get those by practice. So to the extent that a tertiary education can provide practice in those skills which are fairly much bread and butter, it’s a really useful thing.”

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Build relationships with employers.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“In my current role I have a lot to do with various academics, so that if one of my staff wanted to do a PhD, I can introduce them to people who are working in the area who might give them some information about ways to negotiate that, or things that they might do. It seems to me that universities could build some more of those relationships, where they’d say ‘Well we’re working in a cooperative research centre with department X or Y, we’d actually like to get some PhD students so can we come and present’. Those sorts of things [would be beneficial].”

Consider embedding extra-curricular engagement within degrees.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“It’s very obvious when someone has been involved in a range of extra-curricular activities at university, that have built their ability to form and influence teams. I suspect for people who are not as involved in extra-curricular activities they don’t develop those skills at quite the same level. It could be a whole range of things, and I’ve toyed with the idea of whether university should require some kind of extra-curricular engagement in particular degrees. It’s not unusual when people do law to have to do moots or to have debating or something [similar], and possibly there would be some value in something like that [for other degrees].”

Teach students how to think.

FROM AN EMPLOYER:

“Some people have very narrow degrees that have not taught them how to think, or if the university did believe they taught them how to think, there is no evidence that it [succeeded] in their case, and they struggle because the public sector is about contestable policy. They will struggle much more than other groups. In general, a good broad liberal arts education doesn’t go astray, law doesn’t go astray, economics is good, languages are good, all things that teach people ... [Graduates from] some of the very technical degrees [become] quite narrow in their thinking. But you can find exceptions to that, and some people who have done a degree because they knew that they would find it relatively easy, and to maximise their marks rather than because they’ve got an interest in it, that shows somewhere about the fourth month in the job.”

Increase flexibility for students.

FROM A GRADUATE:

“Universities perhaps could become a little bit more flexible, perhaps reflecting the nature of employment itself, it (perhaps) needs to be a bit more flexible in terms of you being able to choose different ways that you’re going to demonstrate your skills. I think that there are limited amount of jobs that you would go into and just have to research and write essays, which is what I found the majority of my university [studies] to be. So, I think perhaps that having an employability support system that reflected that, was a little bit more dynamic, and where students could piece together a puzzle of how they wanted their résumé to look at the end of their experience [would be beneficial].”

WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Is the employment offered by government a solution to graduate employability? The answer is that it is a part of the solution but it is not the *whole* of the solution. The public sector will continue to employ a considerable portion of the Australian population. While machinery of government changes and election of governing parties alters the size of Australian Public Service, it does now and will foreseeably in the future, continue to employ many thousands of public servants.

While this case study has focused on the APS, all state and territory governments employ graduates in various ways. Many local governments also provide employment opportunities to graduates. There are many hundreds of thousands of government employees in large service sectors including education, health and transport. Strong employment growth is also projected in related sectors to cater to an ageing population and provide disability services under a National Disability Insurance Scheme. Together, these trends underline the contribution government makes to graduate employment in particular, and general employment at large.

Graduate employment in this sector is most sustainable through proven practices of recruitment, training and development. While the current fiscal environment for government is constrained, this should not restrict the investment in, and the development of, graduate public servants. The productivity benefits of such training and graduate programs are well-understood.

It is promising that the one exemption to a 2013 APS-wide recruitment freeze was to allow for graduate employment. While numbers have declined from an earlier high watermark, the opportunities for around a thousand graduates remain. Government graduate programs also offer particular promise to students in generalist degrees. Government employment is not a complete panacea to low employment outcomes for generalist graduates. It is however, a sustainable part of the solution.

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 and 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

WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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?

By a substantive margin, the strategy set to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

Work experience/internships/ placements

One of the strongest themes across the project was that more resources should be invested in work experience, internships and placements, in order to have a sustainable impact on graduate employability development. In the context of government employment, there is scope for development in this space. Top-tier law firms, the *big four* accountancy firms and countless other enterprises use work experience opportunities, internships and clerkships as a pathway to employment. Despite employing a comparable proportion of graduates, few public service agencies offer similar opportunities.

The benefits of these placements are well regarded by students, graduates, employers and educators. They need not, however, be confined to the private sector. The expansion of work experience, internships and placements to the public sector offers value to all stakeholders. Employers benefit from an early engagement with future public servants, students receive valuable insights and hands-on experience, educators are offering a graduate-ready educational experience and graduates will reap the benefits of prior knowledge and experience upon entry to the workforce.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading and resources

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For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

Thank you to the individuals who contributed to this case study.

Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Which of the expressed views are universal employability principles and which are particular to the context of government as an employer?
- Could internships and work experience opportunities be extended more broadly in the public sector?
- How can educators and employers work together to increase internship opportunities for students?

