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Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Careers services

Kirsty Mitchell

Bond University, Kirsty_Mitchell@bond.edu.au

Madelaine Judd

Bond University, madelaine_001@hotmail.com

Shelley Kinash

Bond University, shelley.kinash@gmail.com

Linda Crane

Bond University, Linda_Crane@bond.edu.au

Cecily Knight

James Cook University

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Kirsty Mitchell, Madelaine Judd, Shelley Kinash, Linda Crane, Cecily Knight, Matthew McLean, David Dowling, Ros Schwerdt, and Caroline Lovell



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CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Career Services



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Office for Learning and Teaching Department of Education
GPO Box 9880,
Location code N255EL10
Sydney NSW 2001

<learningandteaching@education.gov.au>

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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:

- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres

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)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- 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 higher education career development centres is based on interviews and focus groups with 20 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students and career development professionals from seven university career services. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.





INTRODUCTION

Careers Services are typically student-focused services based in universities operating in a range of models from a centralised model to a *hub and spoke*¹ model. They range in size, funding, staffing, resourcing, reporting lines, associated portfolios and institutional support. Careers Services offer a broad range of services and programs to support diverse stakeholder groups – students and alumni, industry and employers, faculties, academics and university management.

Typical services fall under a number of the following categories:

- Student services: career counselling, career coaching, application and interview support, career workshops and clinics (face-to-face and online).
- Events and activities: employers-on-campus, careers fairs and networking events.
- Careers programs: mentoring, first year support, employability awards, specialist programs to support target groups.
- Embedded careers programs within curriculum: for and not-for-credit subjects offered as electives or compulsory units.
- Resources: online, employment opportunities, careers libraries.

1 Hub and spoke refers to a model of careers service delivery, involving a central unit which is connected (either formally or informally) to another distinct career service. Neither report directly to each other; rather it indicates an approach where there is a generalist service, coupled with another service that provides more tailored and specialised services.

- Employer engagement: industry events and activities on campus, careers fairs, networking, facilitation of academic engagement, community outreach, internships, work experience and simulation programs.

Several distinct advantages of Career Services from the perspective of graduate employees are that:

- Careers Services provide direct services to students at the point where they are learning about employability.
- Careers Services are at the forefront of service delivery across the stakeholder groups (students, employers and educators) and as such have a holistic perspective of graduate employability, and provide a range of programs and services.
- Provide an opportunity for comprehensive engagement across all stakeholders.

Careers Services have moved from the periphery of student support into the mainstream of services to assist universities and graduates to ensure return on investment for education. Trends from the United Kingdom demonstrate a shift in the higher education sector to include employability as a key element of strategic plans and initiatives including employability awards to improve employment outcomes, student satisfaction and enrolments. Research to date indicates that universities that have adopted these measures are improving on employability indicators and rankings.

A number of consistent themes emerged from the research interviews and focus groups.

- Graduate employability is a shared responsibility.
- There is a priority need for employability to be structurally implemented in higher education. This incorporates the inclusion of strategic planning and funding commitment, through to embedding employability within and across curriculum, thus developing a whole-of-university employability culture.
- Structural impacts are necessary as there continues to be challenges engaging with students in regards to careers.
- There needs to be a concerted effort and resourcing placed into engaging with industry and employers, not just at the graduate recruitment stage but throughout the student experience. This will inform curriculum development and provide the context for learning.
- Students must not only have the technical and subject knowledge from their studies, but also an enhanced toolkit of skills ranging from resilience, leadership, self-identity, organisational awareness, and communication and project management skills.

This whole-of-university commitment to graduate employability is known as *graduateness*, which means that it is a formal part of university strategy enacted through a collaborative partnership model.

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 a culture of employability through strategic plan alignment, commitment and range of measures across and within curriculum.
- Careers Practitioners – To align services with strategic goals, to offer a depth and range of programs and engage and collaborate with all stakeholders.
- Employers – To showcase a variety of approaches to engaging with students and universities at all points in a student's lifecycle.

Keywords

- Shared responsibility
- Embedded employability within curriculum
- Internships, work experience, extra-curricular
- Employability skills
- Resilience, self-awareness, organisational awareness
- Collaborative partnerships
- Graduate-ness
- World of Work Projects
- Employability awards

TWO TRUE STORIES OF CAREERS SERVICES GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

A career success story

James Cook University Careers and Employment has worked closely with the Bachelor of Dentistry for a number of years to embed career development activities. Career development is now embedded throughout the degree through curricular and co-curricular activities.

Careers and Employment and the College of Medicine and Dentistry initially worked together to support the transition of the first graduate cohort of students in 2013. The program focussed on developing the personal and professional capabilities required to successfully transition into a highly competitive employment market.

The program included personal development skills through completion of targeted online JCU Career Development Modules, enhanced awareness of industry requirements through presentations from private and public practice representatives and workshops to improve the skills, knowledge and attributes for success in today's labour market.

While the cohort was academically competent and motivated to gain successful graduate outcomes, they did require support in developing and fine tuning their career management skills.

It should be noted that the Bachelor of Dentistry student cohort has a significant number of students from a non-English speaking background.

The first year cohort had 100% success in their transition to graduate positions. The College of Medicine and Dentistry receive regular feedback from industry and graduates about the importance of the career development skills in their success. The adoption of simple strategies such as the use of the STARL model (Situation, Task, Action, Result, Learning) for applications and interviews proved highly successful.

The program continues to develop through a strong commitment between JCU Careers and Employment and the College of Medicine and Dentistry to ensure graduates are ready to transition into their professional lives.

TWO TRUE STORIES OF CAREERS SERVICES GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

Recount of an interview with an educator

At the most recent Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) National Forum, many of the students and graduates from James Cook University (JCU) had come through the Indigenous Health Careers Access Program (IHCAP). IHCAP is designed to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' success in pursuing a health career. It is offered to all health students who identify as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on enrolment at JCU. IHCAP supports students through a unique orientation program that assists students enrolled in a health degree to negotiate their way through study and into a health career. Students who complete the Program have gone on to work in a variety of areas of allied health practice. For example, one of the recent graduates has secured a job in Alice Springs working in paediatrics as an occupational therapist.

These students are participating in the National Forum's Health Team Fusion Challenge, where students work through clinical case studies in multidisciplinary teams, exposing them to the breadth of allied health careers and work. One student is sitting her second term on the IAHA National Board and JCU graduates I met at the Forum are working in a variety of therapy roles in communities across northern and rural Australia. The opportunity to develop an understanding of the range of careers in allied health helps them make choices when it comes to employment.



WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

Careers Services are uniquely positioned at the forefront of service provision with all stakeholders involved in graduate employability, and thus are able to provide a nexus point of all parties and a source of opportunity to build from. Careers Services often mirror key career development theories in practice – Happenstance Theory (opportunity orientation), Systems Theory (all things are interconnected and have influence), Narrative Constructivist approaches (storytelling) and Positive Uncertainty (embracing uncertainty) through the various fluctuations over the years in service models and funding arrangements across the sector.

There are many examples from the project interviews of innovative programs that are being delivered across universities. These include: embedded curriculum content, employability awards, outreach programs, simulations, and specialist programs.

The question is not where do we start, but how can we do more of this and expand opportunities within, and across, institutions using careers services as the drivers of change? Some very bright spots exist in each institution and across the sector – strategy alignment, funding, industry partnerships and collaborations, student engagement and a broad range of programs. The challenge is how can we build on these successes with a focus on shared responsibility by all stakeholders and create a whole-of-university strategic approach to enable this to be truly shared?

A 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council Report on Career Development Learning summarised the benefits of work-integrated learning (umbrella term for employability experiences within and

outside curriculum) as, “enhanced thinking, motivation to learn, problem solving skills, ability to apply theory to practice, academic grades; and personal benefits: increased self-esteem and confidence, and improvements in communication, interpersonal and professional skills” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 24).

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.**

Engage early with careers support and services. Seek out opportunities, such as internships, work experience, mentoring, and co-curricular engagement. Build career management skills, including self and organisational awareness. Develop resilience and leadership abilities. This can be developed through engagement in co-curricular activities.

- **Higher Education – To develop a culture of employability through strategic plan alignment, commitment and range of measures across, and within, curriculum.**

Embed employability into strategic planning, and support careers services through resourcing and raising student awareness of available supports. Embed career development and employability within curriculum. Expand engagement and collaboration with industry at all levels.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

- **Careers Practitioners – To align services with strategic goals, to offer a depth and range of programs and engage and collaborate with all stakeholders.**

Increase visibility of service. Develop and deliver broad range of careers services and programs to students. Collaborate with industry and incorporate industry into programs and services, with a particular focus on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Facilitate engagement with faculty and industry.

- **Employers – To showcase a variety of approaches to engaging with students and universities at all points in a student's lifecycle.**

Engage with universities in campus activities and programs. Offer opportunities for *real-world* engagement through internships, work experience and in-class projects and simulations.

Challenges

The challenges described by research participants can be summarised into three key themes:

- Economic factors,
- Higher education reform, and
- Technology and disruption of higher education.

In an increasingly competitive graduate labour market, research participants asserted that students need to have a broad range of experiences built into their degrees in order to stand out. However, according to Careers Services personnel, engaging students when they are most in need of support has become increasingly difficult, especially with respect to distance-education students.

The current higher education reform agenda is shifting the focus to a return on investment for education, particularly with higher fees. Students and parents may therefore question the value of this investment without clear information about outcomes and available supports.

It was noted in several interviews that industry engagement is a long-term process and takes both time and resources. The same can be said for the delivery of all employability-related activities involving industry engagement.

But at heart the key question concerns how to create education and career aspirations for students and deliver through education? Research participants questioned how to inspire and engage students within an uncertain economic climate and how to foster skills and approaches for success? In addition, they wandered aloud, how to develop and create a shared responsibility for employability across all stakeholders?

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH CAREERS SERVICES?

Successes

One of the hallmark features of Careers Services is their approach to innovation in the support of students, regardless of the challenges encountered. Some of these *bright spots* were described in interviews:

- **Internship and work experience programs.**

Several of the Careers Services interviewed conduct internship and work experience programs. Prior to students participating in these programs, the interviewed Career Services provide students with preparation programs to ensure students maximise the opportunity, in addition to reflecting on key skills developed during the experience.

- **Employer initiatives on campus.**

Career Services interviews indicated that there is widespread engagement with employers through traditional careers fairs, networking events, industry panels, industry-taught workshops and mentoring programs.

- **Curriculum embedded employability.**

Several initiatives across the sector include Careers Services delivering content within curriculum, either as elective units or subjects within programs. This is typically achieved through longstanding engagement with academic champions.

What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described above include:

- Enhanced graduate outcomes,
- Enhanced student experience,
- Increased productivity within industry via university engagement and collaborations,

- Development of agile and responsive talent pool,
- Preparing students for emerging careers and opportunities,
- Increasing career capital of students, and
- Enhanced curriculum.

How has the approach developed employability?

These interviews have provided a source of opportunities from which to expand and improve graduate employability, ranging from small-scale individual impacts to broader systemic approaches within institutions.

The primary strategy that emerged was integrating *real-world* projects within curriculum, inviting industry into the classroom and taking students out of the classroom into industry contexts. These programs and activities seek to build career readiness, subject knowledge and transferable skills. Additionally, these projects are scalable and are adaptable to a broad range of factors.

Through exposing students to the *real-world* of employment, students are better equipped and develop realistic expectations of the workplace. As stated by a career development professional, "I believe this course helps students to be prepared for the *workplace*, whereas their academic courses prepare them for the *work*."



ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Get involved early to access careers support, services and programs.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“One of the things to remember is that unless you get support inside your university through careers services or within your program, there is nowhere to get it after that unless you are going to pay a private practitioner to bring you up to speed.”

“It is important to make sure that students are studying the right course. So what that means is that someone is engaged in what they are learning and is passionate about their area of study.”

Broaden career thinking.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Students need to think laterally and need to understand that jobs often take components of what you are studying into account. I think it is about educating students as to what they can expect and changing their expectations so that they can understand Human Resource *speak* and understand the industry.”

Undertake a broad range of extra-curricular and/or co-curricular activities parallel to degree studies.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“It is so many different activities that build a person that gets the job, not just the typical one that everyone thinks.”

FROM A STUDENT:

“I have always thought extra-curricular activities are something employers are big on because if you had an applicant who just studied, and then an applicant who completed their studies plus some student club experience, employers will lean towards the student who participated in extra-curricular activities because they are well-rounded, and better at working with people.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“It is important to have more than a degree and part-time work experience to be competitive. In order to stand out from the crowd, employers are looking for you not to be a little different, but very different.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“If you get the right kind of attributes, skills and experiences and a robust academic experience at a good institution there is no reason why the biggest and best employers will not consider you.”

Seek out practical development opportunities – internships and work experience.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“There is a very strong correlation between graduate outcomes and internships/work experience programs.”

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS

Build a broad range of skills in addition to degree knowledge.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Students require a higher level of work skills. These include self-awareness, or emotional intelligence, being able to deal with difficult, stressful or demanding people. Second was organisational awareness - understanding what it is organisations do. The third area is project management.”

FROM A STUDENT:

“Innovation and creativity sets you apart from the competition. If an employer asks ‘we want you to resolve this problem, how are you going to resolve this?’ You can give them a black and white answer, or you can work around it and show employers something that is different.”

Develop resilience and career management skills.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Students need to be resilient because finding a job can be a very demanding, tough and a deflating experience.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Students have got to be able to map and manage their own career.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“The notion of self-reliance and resilience is becoming increasingly important because of the uncertain labour market.”

Develop an entrepreneurial mindset.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Entrepreneurship is the new idiom. The new world of work is embracing the entrepreneurial spirit, where the job or role you have in the future may not exist. This requires graduates to create that for themselves, as opposed to the old world of work where you get a job and are with the company for 25 years.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“As the economic climate tightens, it becomes less about ‘where do I find the vacancies?’ and more about ‘how do I become ready when the opportunity presents itself?’ and ‘how do I recognise the opportunity in the first place?’”

Go Global.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Global experience is highly valued. The problem solving skills and personal growth that students experience when they become independent from their family is great in terms of discovering who they are and how they cope with stress.”

ADVICE FOR EDUCATORS

Strategic inclusion of employability.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“The importance of being an integral part of the university’s strategy with appropriate resourcing; employability is engaged, it is strategic and incorporated within the university framework, similar to a collaborative partnership model.”

Institutional commitment to employability via funding, resources and location of careers services.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Students have ranked careers and employability their number one priority three years in a row, and as a result, the university has supported an increase in our funding to essentially double the size of our unit which has enabled us to go forward.”

Embed employability within and across curriculum.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“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.”

Develop an entrepreneurial focus.

“The notion of self-reliance and resilience is becoming increasingly important because of the uncertain labour market. In order to develop this, the university has decided to embed the approach within the programs.”

Involve industry in university life.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“It should be integral to incorporate industry. Industry should be engaged to teach some aspects of the course, and be involved on a day-to-day basis to improve organisational awareness in students.”

ADVICE FOR CAREER PROFESSIONALS

Increase visibility and communications.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Place employer testimonies around the campus as an aspiration and to show students that the university is connected to the outside world.”

FROM A STUDENT:

“Using Facebook to advertise to students is effective, and it zeroes in to a generation that is always online.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Promoting opportunities across the university website, Facebook, Twitter, blogs and student newsletters, in addition to digital signage is vital. Without communicating in this manner to students, careers services are invisible.”

Offer a broad range of programs and services.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“It is important to develop programs that have a partnership approach with personalised learning and teaching, personalised student experience and personalised outcomes.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“One of the points of the world-of-work program is to bring our staff and students closer to the world-of-work.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Employers are seeking communication skills and it does not matter how many high distinctions the student achieved. Graduates must have the nuance to know how to pitch an idea, when to do the pitch, have an understanding of the political pressures within the organisation and have the courage, motivation and confidence within themselves to do the pitch in the first place.”

Development of scalable industry projects/programs.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Univate provides students with an opportunity to work in multicultural teams, working with a host employer, solving a real challenge, and create teams that have a balance of discipline, gender and ethnicity. You get all of those sorts of intercultural aspects and bonding that happens across cultures that a lot of international and domestic students have aspirations. It is scalable and agile and can be adjusted.”

ADVICE FOR CAREER PROFESSIONALS AND EMPLOYERS

For Career Professionals

Engage and support SMEs.

“You have to engage SMEs. We don’t have 1000 staff to go out to hundreds and thousands of SMEs and this is difficult territory. SMEs need incentivisation, they need financial help and support. Where that funding comes from is a challenge. SMEs need to be made aware of the benefits graduates can bring to their businesses, and challenge the myth that graduates are expensive to employ.”

Engage all stakeholders.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Careers Services must engage academics and students. We must engage students and make them aware of what we do, but we equally have to engage and make academics aware of what we do because one will influence the other.”

Resourcing industry engagement.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“If you are going to create meaningful relationships with employers you must put sufficient resources into it. This is time consuming. These are hard yards, and these relationships take time.”

For Employers

Provide advice and input on course content.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“There needs to be greater feedback mechanisms from industry to course coordinators.”

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“We meet with employer groups, *critical friends*, quarterly to debate and develop the program. This gives us a very important mandate and understanding of what industry is looking for.”

Provide industry experience.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“The power of engaging students in the *real-world* - placement learning, work related learning. The most employable graduates as we see them around the world are those, in fact, that have done a one-year placement in the industry. They come back as better learners and they are also more employable.”

Broaden campus engagement.

FROM A CAREER DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:

“Industry panels provide an opportunity to fill gaps in industry presence at other career events, such as careers fairs and valuable question-and-answer sessions for students.”

WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

An emerging impact, being explored by research participants, is the current legal challenge to unpaid internships and work experience following the trends from similar cases in the United States and the United Kingdom. The challenge is how to build and deliver genuine learning experiences in industry that add value to all stakeholders without exploiting students eager to get their foot in the door.

Interviewed stakeholders asserted that 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

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 to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

Work experience/internships/ placements

This strategy set was indicated on 74 per cent of student surveys, 74 per cent of graduate surveys and 87 per cent of employer surveys. It was selected on a minority of higher education personnel surveys. This difference between stakeholder groups was addressed in many of the 86 in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted after the surveys. All of the interviewed higher education personnel support the idea and value of work experience, internships and placements. However, these employability strategies are expensive and time consuming.

WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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 Careers Services, there was widespread support for internships to be supported with professional development and reflective practice, to ensure that students develop their reflective capacity and have a clear understanding of their developed skill set.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Reading and Resources

Knight P., & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

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For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

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- Martin Smith
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- Tara Vardanian
- Bond University
- Griffith University
- James Cook University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- The University of Adelaide
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of Wollongong

The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- How can careers services and employers work collaboratively in the design and delivery of internship and work experience programs?
- How can academics be brought into industry engagement that is based around curriculum?
- How can universities develop employability cultures and embed this into strategic planning, program development and delivery?
- How can employability programs and initiatives be sufficiently scaled to provide high touch learning experiences for students and increase student participation?
- Can Careers Services close-the-gap for diverse students/graduates with particular employability challenges?
- Should employment outcomes be used as Careers Services quality assurance measures and should universities be ranked based on employment outcomes?



