

Developing an integrated approach to graduates' transition into the workforce

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Abstract

Australian graduates generally do well with respect to overall employment outcomes; however, their performance in the workplace has come under significant scrutiny in recent years with some industries complaining that many graduates lack the necessary practical skills to perform in the early years of transition into employment. This paper reports on an innovative program which adopts a three streamed approach to the transition process to help develop employability skills within business graduates to further address the needs of Australian industry.

Introduction

Within the educational environment of Australian universities, the relationship between the curriculum of undergraduate studies and learning for the purposes of the world-of-work, has for some time, been an issue for the sector (e.g. Candy, Crebert & O'Leary 1994). This complex relationship between learning and the world-of-work inherently pertains to graduates' employability. The notion of employability represents a matrix of what industry demands and what employees have to offer, and, moreover, the confluence of the two. Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth (2004 pp. 15-6) defined employability as:

“Employability is a psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect, and enhance the individual-work interface. This person-centred emphasis coincides with the major shift in responsibility for career management and development from employers to employees..... In short, the onus is on employees to acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics valued by current and prospective employers”.

Given this definition, it would seem germane that students and graduates need to remain flexible and prepared throughout their working careers for any particular trend or change of circumstances, and that nations concomitantly need to establish education and training systems that support individuals' attempts to remain viable within the employment market (McKenzie & Wurzburg 1997; Robinson 2000). This proposition reflects the notions of protean career (Hall, D 2004; Hall, D & Moss 1998) which theoretically emphasizes the individual's capacity and responsibility to rapidly evolve in order to sustain employability over the duration of lifetime career.

On a broader policy level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has highlighted the relationship between lifelong learning and employability over the lifespan of an individual (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2004). As an OECD member, Australia has pursued a position of a leading economy which is founded upon a flexible workforce with skills required by industry (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002). Australian enterprises have been challenged to maintain their commercial viability within the context of an international 'knowledge economy' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Australian Council for Educational Research 2002; Whicker & Andrews 2004). Within this context, Australian industry has increasingly voiced its demand for university graduates who can demonstrate their generic skills (ACNielson Research Services 2000; Candy et al., 1994; Curtis & McKenzie 2001; Field 2001; McLeish 2002), in addition to specific trade or professional skills and knowledge. These generic skills have been variously described as 'graduate attributes', 'graduate qualities', 'employability skills', 'core skills', 'key

competencies', or 'transferable skills'. The definition of employability skills varies (Australian Council for Educational Research 2002) along with its perception of importance held by students, academics and employers (Bennett 2002; Leggett, Kinnear & Boyce 2004; Nicholson & Cushman 2000). Nevertheless, northern hemisphere nations including the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and European States, have likewise emphasized the importance of generic skills within employees (Curtis & McKenzie 2001). The issues are no different in the within the Asia-Pacific region; with Malaysian employers, for example, demonstrating an interest in the expression of generic skills within their graduate employees (Quek 2005).

A major investigation into the employability skills demanded by Australian industry (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002, pp. 57-8) set the following as the Employability Skills Framework: communication; teamwork; problem-solving; initiative and enterprise; planning and organizing; self-management; learning; and technology. In addition, the Employability Skills Framework included the following personal attributes: loyalty; commitment; honesty and integrity; enthusiasm; reliability; personal presentation; commonsense; positive self-esteem; sense of humour; balanced attitude to work and home life; ability to deal with pressure; motivation; and adaptability. This Framework was recommended for adoption by the higher education sector in addition to the school and vocational education training sectors of Australia. Whilst no Australian university has adopted the Framework as recommended, all universities have historically developed, to varying qualities and quantities, their own positions on employability skills under the imprimatur of 'graduate attributes'. So whilst employability skills are not new within the higher education sector, in recent years they have been brought into focus through Commonwealth's interest in furthering the relationships between higher education and industry (Department of Education Science and Training 2005).

Consistent with this industry aim, the Australian higher education sector has made some considerable progress toward establishing graduate attributes within the curricula of various institutions and academic programs (Australian Council for Educational Research 2002; Barrie 2004; Bath, Smith, Stein & Swann 2004; Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragolini 2004a, 2004b). These attributes inherently pertain to employability. Crebert et al. (2004a) found that students valued the inclusion of generic skills in the curriculum with respect to their employment prospects, but also sought greater opportunities through which they could learn the skills in practical settings and exposure to industry. Notwithstanding the move toward integrating graduate attributes, how should Australian universities prepare their students for the challenges of lifelong learning and lifelong employability, especially during the crucial formative years of transition into the workplace? Naturally the curriculum and content of degree programs would be the primary locus of response. This paper presents a working model relating to lifelong employability; one that generates an interface between the university and the world-of-work.

A Strategy for Lifelong Employability: Beyond Education Project

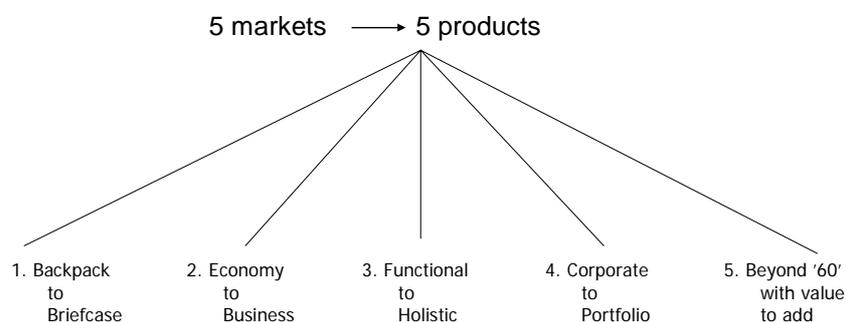
In conjunction with the Australian Government's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) under the Higher Education Initiatives Program (HEIP), an Australian University, has been working for the past 3 years on an innovative program entitled *Beyond Education* (Reynolds 2004). The program is examining, among other issues, the skills necessary for the effective transition of graduates to the workforce and also whether universities are effectively meeting corporate/business needs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate areas.

The Beyond Education project is an integrated working model of career transition and provides a framework upon which the movements between career phases across an individual's lifetime can be pragmatically conceptualized. The program contains a range of modules that pertain to an individual's transition through major developmental milestones of his or her career. These milestones are roughly equivalent to the career stages espoused by Super (1957, 1980, 1992). Transition phases include: *Backpack to Briefcase*, *Economy to Business*; *Functional to Holistic*; *Corporate to Portfolio*; and *Beyond 60 with Value to Add*; these stages are metaphors for a 'typical' corporate career for a graduate. Figure 1 below represents these five transition phases. A brief explanation of these five phases is presented hereafter.

Figure 1. Beyond Education lifelong learning and employability model.



Beyond Education Model – Five transition phases



USQ to focus on (1) initially and then others progressively.

*Original model developed by Mr John Reynolds

Backpack to Briefcase. The Backpack to Briefcase phase is the first identified in the Beyond Education project and is primarily aimed at, though not necessarily restricted to, the transition from student to graduate employee. This introductory phase may well be seen as many students first introduction to full time corporate life after their University based studies. The initial impressions of not only the graduate but also the employers to which they move towards will necessarily have a fundamental influence on subsequent career and educational aspirations. Further, it is crucial that the technical and personal skills that the graduate possesses allow a smooth and rapid transition into a productive employee from the employers' perspective.

Economy to Briefcase. The second phase—Economy to Briefcase—is primarily aimed at the “rising stars” to assist graduates in “getting a seat up front”. Thus, the graduate has had the opportunity to settle in and adjust to their working environment but now needs a different set of educational and work skills to move ahead in their chosen careers (or even to shift into fundamentally different directions). Conversely, the employers themselves may require a differing set of developing skills from their employees, skills which the University should still be able to provide in consultation with the employer.

Functional to Holistic. The third phase—Functional to Holistic—is primarily designed as cultural lessons for business leaders. While the technical, business and to an extent lifestyle skills of the graduate may have developed to a considerable degree at this stage of their career, there may well also be the need to develop corresponding “social graces” and refinement of specific skills in order for the employee to be able to continue progressing in their chosen field.

Corporate to Portfolio. The Corporate to Portfolio phase is designed for the (by now mature) graduate who wants to stay in the game and to make it on their own when its “all over”. A fundamental aspect of this phase is equipping the employee with the skills necessary in order to clearly define what they envisage as their portfolio and how best to “transfer” that portfolio to changing job and educational needs.

Beyond 60 with Value-to-Add. The final phase rounds out the Beyond Education lifelong learning approach by developing skills for networking, reconnecting in many instances to not only work but also social groups, and portfolio adjustment/refinement. This phase has enormous potential to contribute to not only the individuals' growth but also the needs of the general community as well. Many people may mistakenly approach this phase of their career/life development with the erroneous assumption that they have little left to offer. All that may be required is a simple “retooling” and once again, Universities have a part to play in providing people with the necessary skills to do so.

The lifelong scope of the model in Figure 1 above confirms its allegiance to the concepts of lifelong learning and lifelong employability. The five distinct

transition phases not only reflect five distinct markets but also the progression of an individual through significant lifestyle changes, each with its own educational needs. Furthermore, as graduates progress throughout their working careers (and indeed change the direction or focus of their careers) their educational requirements will also necessarily change and a “one size fits all” approach to education will obviously not be appropriate to these distinct and different markets.

Phase 1 of Beyond Education Project: Backpack to Briefcase

This paper reports only the Backpack to Briefcase component of Beyond Education and the development of employability skills necessary for the effective transition of graduates to the workforce and also whether Universities are effectively meeting corporate/business needs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate areas.

While the five career-life phases of the Beyond Education project are not necessarily restricted to specific age groupings, it would not be unusual for the majority of Backpack to Briefcase graduates to include those students who entered university study directly following or not long after completing their secondary studies. At the conceptual and developmental stage, strategies developed in the pilot stage of Backpack to Briefcase included:

1. Boot camp: An intensive workshop towards end of undergraduate courses
2. Student Services: Range of ongoing development, career and employment services for both students and employers
3. Mentoring: Commitment to an outstanding USQ “Job ready and Career mentoring Scheme”
4. Stand alone courses: Certificate in work skills
5. Embedded in the curriculum: Integrated into the main academic curriculum toward the development of the holistic student.

The Backpack to Briefcase component focuses primarily upon the early stage of a young adult’s working life; specifically as he or she leaves formal training and into the world of work.

Following the conceptualization phase, the project team sought government and industry support. Seed funding was obtained in late 2004 under the Commonwealth Government's HEIP scheme; with the remaining funding successfully obtained through the Collaboration and Structural Reform Fund (CASR) following acceptance by DEST of the interim progress report. This grant process was supported by the university higher management and peak representatives of industry sectors with a stake in graduate employability (e.g., corporate accounting).

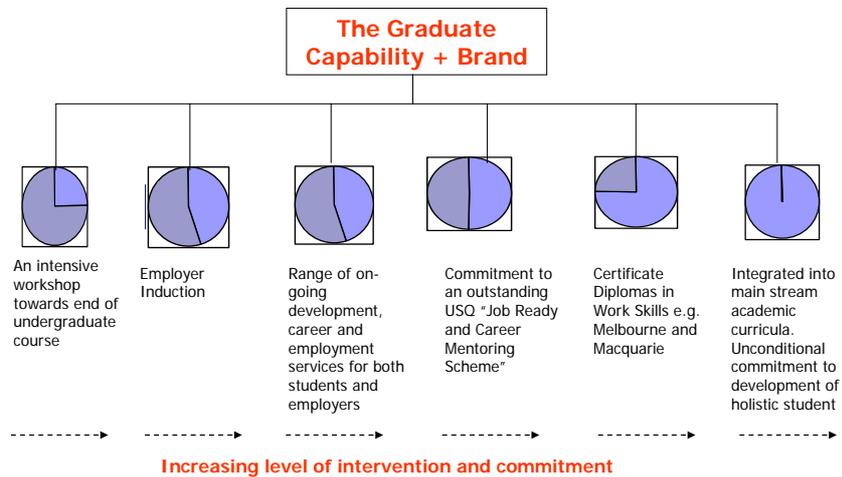
To assist in delivering these schemes and to maintain Beyond Education's focus on listening to graduate employers, two employer reference groups were established—one based in the University cities main campus (a regional University within Australia) and the other in the State's political and financial capital. One group comprised SME representatives and the other representatives from large corporations across various industry sectors including local councils, community non profit services, state government organisations, accounting, human resource, engineering, legal and energy industry representatives, educational organisations as well as service and marketing industry groups. These reference groups continue to meet regularly to examine issues of importance. Further, extensive networks have been developed between the University and the regional community as a direct result of the Beyond Education initiatives.

The response from these reference groups has subsequently been incorporated into the project with a commitment from all parties to continue dialogue on this project on a regular basis over the next few years. Some of the responses received to date include: work experience and people skills; better cooperation between local business and USQ; scholarships; the changing characteristics of graduates needs and perceptions (generational issues); the changing demographics of the workforce; and induction programs or workshops to assist not only graduates but employers. The latter point of employer induction programs received such strong support that it has now been incorporated as a "sixth" strategy along with the previous five strategies outlined in the Beyond Education project. As a result of the input from these reference groups the strategies identified were incorporated into a model as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Backpack to Briefcase Strategies.



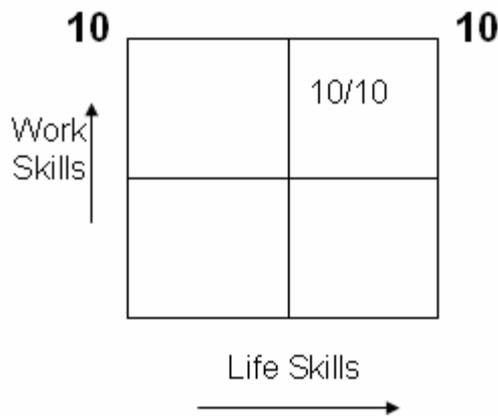
The Job-Ready and Holistic Graduate - Possible Strategies for Backpack to Briefcase



The notion of a 'holistic' graduate is not new but is defined for the purposes of this project as shown in Figure 3 below. The concept of a matrix showing the achievement of optimal 'work skills' and 'life skills' was developed by John Reynolds who served as an industry consultant to the Beyond Education project. It could be seen that life skills translates to the generic skills identified in previous studies as work skills translate broadly to specific trade or professional skills and knowledge (ACNielsen Research Services 2000; Candy et al, 1994; Curtis & McKenzie 2001; Field 2001; McLeish 2002). The 10/10 upper right quadrant is seen as the ideal final placement of a graduate following the successful outcome of the Backpack to Briefcase program.

Figure 3. The idealized holistic graduate employee.

Holistic Individual



Source: John Reynolds 2004

The Backpack to Briefcase project seeks to address the University's position as a provider of quality graduates and to enhance small-to-medium size enterprises' (SME) uptake of graduates. Using Figure 2 as a base, a three pronged approach was initially adopted including: employability skills scheme, career mentoring scheme, graduate induction initiative. The final two aspects of the Backpack to Briefcase model were not specifically undertaken as part of this project as the University is already committed to embedding graduate attributes into its curriculum.

To date, the University has implemented the above mentioned three schemes through: (a) employability skills workshops with content delivered by industry representatives; (b) career mentoring networks and a range of support services (including newsletters and websites dedicated to Beyond Education) with the aim of assisting students to not only successfully compete for jobs but also to have a better understanding of the skills that employers themselves are looking for in graduates; (c) services to SME employers that support their recruitment and induction of new graduates into the workforce; and (d), the integration of features with the services delivered by the University's Careers Employment & Equity Service for students and graduates. Additional components, of developing a formal course for academic credit and broad integration with other academic courses, were not trialed in this stage of the project's life.

Employability Skills Workshops. Within the Australian context of higher education, there have been some useful pilot interventions aiming at alignment of pragmatic learning exercises with discipline curriculum (Candy et al. 1994). Crebert et al. (2004a) investigated work experience, associated with academic coursework, and concluded that workplace learning was an appropriate for undergraduate students' development of generic skills. Lewis and Ruchel (1993)

established a work experience program for students of arts and science degrees; who, because of the theoretical and non-vocational nature of their programs, tend not to engage in the learning of 'professional skills' which are inherently integrated into professional programs such as nursing, medicine, law, and, management (Heam, Smith, Southey & Close 1995). Harvey (1999) differentiated between embedding skill learning into the curriculum or bolting learning on as an adjunct to the core curriculum. Bolting-on learning experiences has received some criticism purported on the basis that it is de-contextualised from the discipline under instruction (Bath et al. 2004). Notwithstanding this laudable criticism, the learning and development of generic skills through alternative settings and experiences does not necessarily imply divorce from the aims and objectives of degree curriculum. The purpose of the Employability Skills Workshops was to draw industry representatives into the learning experience of students.

The employability skills workshops were delivered for students at the Universities main campus and one of its satellite campuses. Further workshops are prepared for subsequent years. These workshops involved presentations by employers from a range of private and government organizations. Content of the workshops focused upon those skills needed for transition into and success in the workplace. The workshops emphasized, moreover, the employability skills for the future (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002).

Career Mentoring Network. Mentorship is an increasingly popular form of learning support for undergraduate students. There is a considerable body of evidence that mentoring has positive benefits for both mentors, mentees, and organisations; with the journal Career Development International, for example, devoting three special issues to mentoring (2000, 2002, 2005). In a generic sense, mentoring occurs when individuals meet and spontaneously form an alliance or deliberately seek a partner for development and growth.

The Career Mentoring Network component of Backpack to Briefcase has linked employers and students, to develop an understanding of the key skills required for success and to establish networks that may assist their career development. Employers benefit by having the opportunity to develop relationships with students who may then become employees, as well as creating closer linkages to USQ. The scheme differs from similar mentorship programs offered through Australian Universities (e.g. Theobald, Nancarrow & McCowan 1999) through its emphasis upon development and assessment of the employability skills (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002). Throughout the life of the mentoring relationship, both parties were to focus upon the student's employability skills. Upon termination of the relationship, the mentor completed an evaluation of the student's skills and offered recommendations for their development.

Graduate Induction Support. Graduate programs are usually the preserve of large corporations and government departments with considerable capacity to invest in human resources and recruitment. Unlike their larger counterparts, small businesses are often unable to compete in such a competitive recruitment environment and lack the intensive human resources expertise needed to establish a graduate program.

Despite the difficulties associated with recruitment there are benefits for SME in employing university graduates who are 'work ready'. Graduates have much to offer small business and case studies have shown that they can have a very positive impact on business outcomes. SME's can engage University students in solution focused work experience placements that provide clear benefits for both employers and students. Graduates can assist SME's to grow and develop an edge over the competition. Universities should be committed to helping employers get the best out of their graduates, by providing the resources and expertise necessary to manage a graduate program that will enhance business development.

This scheme assists SME to develop recruitment and transition programs that will enable them to maximise the performance of their new graduates and improve staff retention rates. Smaller organisations may not have the resources to develop specific graduate induction programs and through research and modelling on existing programs utilised by larger organisations we will transfer this

knowledge to these employers. A specific aim of this scheme was to assist graduates express their employability skills within the work situation. To this stage, the Beyond Education project has focused on supporting a small business to develop its own graduate program for its new accountants. As a case study, this has so far demonstrated that small business, with the support of the university resources, can in fact operate a graduate recruitment and transition program akin to those offered by corporations. In addition, a series of workshops will be held that will cover the issue of best practice in graduate induction. Presenters at these seminars will be senior HR executives with extensive experience in developing graduate induction programs for SME's. One of the outcomes of this combined approach will be the production of a graduate induction manual, to be made available to employers who participate in this program.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Following the conclusion of this part of the Backpack to Briefcase component of this program, further work should be developed in the areas of curriculum development and integration into the mainstream curriculum as outlined in Figure 2. In addition, it is envisaged that work will shortly begin on the remaining four transition phases. Fundamental to this is the continued involvement of all stakeholders in this program including graduates, employers and educational institutions. The specific outcomes from the Backpack to Briefcase phase of the project will include: training documentation for employability transition training; mentorship scheme manual; and employer induction program manual for small businesses.

These training manuals will assist in the formulation and further development of the transitional phases identified in the Beyond Education program (refer Figure 1). Finally, identification of the characteristics that make up the remaining four transitional markets in the Beyond Education model needs to be undertaken before further development of this model can take place. Future

studies in the Beyond Education program will identify the characteristics of these distinct markets in order that appropriate educational approaches can be adopted to adequately service that market for not the needs of the graduates but also the needs of employers and society.

Appropriate research hypotheses that will eventuate from the Beyond Education program will include:

- Whether participants in the Beyond Education program perform demonstrably better in the performance of their work duties than non participants;
- Whether participants in the Beyond Education program have a faster / more productive career progression than non participants in the program or similar programs; and
- Whether employers who hire graduates from the Beyond Education program value these graduates more than graduates who do not participate in this or similar programs.

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