

Internet Career Fairs in Australian Higher Education

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Abstract

Internet Career Fairs have become a feature of the Australian graduate employment recruitment market. Internet Career Fairs offer considerable benefits in terms of resources and marketing by employers. They also offer an additional form of access to employment information that is used by students to explore their graduate employment opportunities. With the advent of Web.2 technology and sophisticated platforms such as Second Life, there is far greater potential to expand the interactivity and appeal of internet Career Fairs. In context of a description of the broader use of internet technology used for the delivery of career development services in Australia and its universities, this briefly paper describes the first 3-dimensional internet Career Fair established on the Second Life platform by an Australian university Career Service.

Internet Career Fairs in Australian Higher Education

Australia is vast: a continental landmass equivalent to that of the United States (excluding Hawaii and Alaska), twice that of Europe, and 32 times the size of the United Kingdom; consisting of more than 12 000 islands, territories, and a significant portion of Antarctica (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Yet, despite its geographical size, the nation, the Commonwealth of Australia, is relatively small, with a population just exceeding 21 million being widely separated with concentrations on one side of the land mass in the south-west and on the other in the south-east and east (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). It is the differential between population spread, density, sheer landmass, and Australia's public and private commitment to education which brings into sharp focus the notion of *tyranny of distance*. Somehow the distance must be overcome. Internet technology has provided a major platform for the delivery of career development in Australia (Herr, 2008). To describe how the tyranny of distance has been addressed, in this paper we extend upon Herr's summary by describing examples of technology-enhanced career development practices occurring on a national level. We then briefly describe examples of the online work occurring in Australian universities' Career Services; and finally, we present an example of our own online internet Career Fairs which serve to close the ostensible gaps between our distributed university campuses, our students, and their future employers. We begin with a brief overview of issues pertinent to career development in the Australia and its higher education landscape, and the broad issues of distance and isolation which necessitate the design and delivery of specialized career development services which are delivered online.

An Overview of the Australian Career Development Industry

In 2000, the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) commenced comparative reviews of career information, guidance, and counseling policies in 14 of its member nations; whilst the European Commission and the World Bank ran parallel

reviews in European Union member states and seven middle income countries (Watts, 2006). Together, 37 countries participated in the reviews (Watts). The reviews sought to determine how the organisation, management and delivery of those services could help to advance some key public policy objectives, such as the provision of lifelong learning for all and active labour market policies. Australia was one of 14 OECD nations to accept an invitation to participate in the review. A report on the OECD review team's impressions of career guidance in Australia was released in 2002 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2002), and the full report for all participating nations (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004) was released in 2004. The OECD final report echoed the belief of all participating countries that career guidance contributes to public policy in terms of helping to create a more efficient labor market, improving the efficiency of education systems, and contributing to improved social equity. The OECD review revealed several weaknesses in the national career guidance services of its member nations, such as limited access to services, particularly for adults, a focus on immediate career decisions rather than on developing individual's career management skills, inadequate training and qualifications for service providers, and poor coordination between key ministries and stakeholders, and insufficient use of information and communication technologies (ICT)—the focus of this paper being how that weakness ICT has been addressed in some quarters at least.

According to Watts (2006), Australia has taken action on many of the key recommendations and "...has been an exemplary model of how to take full advantage of an OECD review." (p. 13). For example, in recognition of the need to provide a national body to represent the career industry in Australia, the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) was founded in 2003. CICA is a not-for-profit consortium of 12 practitioner associations that promotes career development in Australia and liaises and collaborates with policy makers and

other stakeholders. CICA is somewhat equivalent to the American Counselling Association with its subsidiary professional associations, but CICA is specific to the career development industry. CICA has established agreed-upon national standards and principles for career development practices in Australia—all affecting the delivery of services via ICT.

Firstly, the CICA has set down the national *Guiding Principles for Career Development Services & Information Products* (CICA, 2007a). This framework for the quality of services and information extends to the online domain and provides users with a self-assessment tool to support design and construction, and to monitor the process of delivery and quality. In addition, Australian universities may also follow the guidelines for career counseling by email, which were developed by a university Career Service (Brown, 2006). Secondly, the CICA established the *Professional Standards for Australian Career Development Practitioners* (CICA, 2007b). The standards for practice cover professional qualifications, ethics, and competencies, and makes reference to the delivery of services in the online mode.

Another strategy towards enhancing the quality of career development across Australia was the development of the *Australian Blueprint for Career Development* (Miles Morgan Australia, 2006), which outlines the competencies that people need to manage their careers and specifies career-specific learning outcomes for individuals across four developmental phases. The Blueprint has undergone national trials and is currently in its final stages of refinement. The framework outlined in the *Blueprint* includes 3 main areas, including Personal Management, Learning and Work Exploration, and Career Building, 11 main career competencies, 4 developmental phases across the lifespan, and learning stages and performance indicators (Miles Morgan Australia, 2006). This landmark document and its subsidiary resource materials which may be used by career development practitioners or

allied professionals working in educational, employment, or communities settings, is available online for downloading and free use.

In 2002, the National Career Information Service, *My Future* (www.myfuture.edu.au) was launched to provide free online career information to all Australians. Furthermore, in 2005, three online learning programs were introduced in the *Australian Career Development Studies* (www.career.edu.au) (Australian Government, 2008). These three modules range from a basic introduction to career development for non-practitioners (e.g., parents, school coaches), to a module for professionals working in employment services, upward to a full university course. The final two modules can be assessed formally as part of recognized qualifications.

Career development services can support public policy through providing services to groups who are underutilized and under-represented in the workforce, such as the unemployed, migrants and refugees, indigenous people, people with disabilities and mental illness, and women re-entering the workforce (Watts, Sweet, Haines, & McMahon, 2006). In Australia, specialist assistance is provided to such groups through a network of around 200 private, community, and government organization (Department of Education Science and Training, 2006). Similarly, the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) has dedicated an employment information website, called *Jobwise* (www.jobwise.gov.au) (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) to promoting employment opportunities for mature-age citizens. Another initiative has been the establishment in 2005 of a national career and transition support network, *Career Advice Australia* (www.careeradviceaustralia.gov.au) to assist young Australians aged 13 to 19 years to move through school and into further, study, training or work. This network is supported by a major website loaded with key resources.

This brief overview of the background of career development in Australia indicates a link between lifelong career development and public policies aimed at addressing learning, labor market, and social equity goals in Australia using internet technology. We now turn to the delivery of career development in Australia's higher education system.

Career Development in Australian Higher Education

There are 38 official universities in Australia. All are under various legislative controls of Federal or State jurisdictions with the Federal Government being responsible for the partial provision of funding to universities. Each has high levels of autonomy and is relatively independent of government however, with universities free to seek private funding from students or other sources. "Diversity and autonomy are central features of Australian universities. Each university has the freedom to specify its own mission and purpose, modes of teaching and research, constitution of the student body and the range and content of educational programs" (Universities Australia, 2009).

Every Australian university has a Career Service for its students and graduates; however there are no national mandates on service delivery to which they must comply and the size of each Career Service varies across institutions (Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2008). A definitive feature of the career development sector in Australian higher education is a strong sense of national cooperation and collegiality through the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS), which is a member association of the CICA. NAGCAS is constituted by the Career Services of universities and their practitioners. International visitors to the annual conference of NAGCAS often comment on the spirit of cooperation and sharing that defines the organization. Whilst the description of this particular organizational culture may not immediately seem relevant to the purpose of this paper, it goes to the point of how university Career Services in Australia have overcome much of the tyranny of distance through their

mature cooperation with one another, and willingness to learn from and share with one another. For example, NAGCAS, in collaboration with employers, coordinates a national schedule of on campus Career Fair dates to ensure an equitable arrangement for universities and employers. Furthermore, on behalf of NAGCAS, a group of universities is conducting a national project to scope and produce career development learning resources which will enhance the delivery of work-integrated learning in higher education (McIlveen et al., 2008). Again, in the spirit of cooperation, these resources will be made freely available to all university Career Services, academics, and employers who participate in the delivery of work-integrated learning.

Australian university Career Services have developed a range of technology-enhanced career development services (see Department of Education Employment & Workplace Relations, 2008). Using a set of criteria pertaining to “good practice”, the national review identified 16 unique types of online products developed by university Career Services. These services were developed in response to the needs of university students studying by distance education, or for those who were unable to attend campus during normal campus hours due to work, family, or community commitments. In addition, they were developed as a means of providing curriculum-related career education resources linked to students’ academic courses (e.g., e-portfolios, employment databases, career exploration tools).

Internet Career Fairs

Whilst the traditional on campus Career Fairs and employer events continue as the mainstream approach to student-employer meetings and networking, recent national surveys of Australian university students indicated that online resources have become the predominant source of career-related information for their preparation and search for graduate employment opportunities (Graduate Careers Australia, 2007, 2008). Those research findings were consistent with surveys of Australia employers’ views on the

recruitment processes used for graduates, indicating the value of online resources (High Fliers Research, 2008).

In the early 2000s, the Career Services of the University of Southern Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of New England created the first Australian models for online Career Fairs used to promote graduate employment opportunities to their students. Graduate Careers Australia (a not-for-profit company aligned to Australian universities and NAGCAS) subsequently operated the national *Virtual Career Fair* for all Australian universities. This initiative was particularly valuable for Career Services which had not developed their own online Fairs. Nevertheless, individual institutions continued with or later developed their own localized online Career Fairs so as to focus upon their students' and employers' specific needs: to deliver unique employment-information services in an institutionally-branded environment and platform; and to provide a level of service differentiated from the mainstream, commercial employment databases already available online through major human resources firms.

These earlier online Career Fairs complemented the traditional on-campus events and allowed students far greater access to employment-related information and application procedures and documents, particularly for those students whose access to campus was limited due to social and economic circumstances—conditions which have been well documented (Long & Hayden, 2001). Firstly, rural and regional students' access to campus is limited geographically, simply because the time and distance to travel to campus is prohibitive. Secondly, many Australian students are working part-time or caring for another person and cannot readily take time away from duties to attend on campus events. Thirdly, whilst public transport systems are sophisticated in some metropolitan centers', the quality of access is not uniform. Individually, or in combination, these conditions conspire to limit students' access to campus, and therefore curtails their access to employment-related

information; which ultimately amounts to an issue of social justice and equity for university Career Services to address (cf. McIlveen, Everton, & Clarke, 2005). Furthermore, a group of universities cooperated to produce an online International Career Fair—again complementing the on campus version—for international students who were seeking graduate employment opportunities in their home countries or domestic students seeking international experiences.

The internet Career Fairs were also of benefit to employers who were unable or unwilling to fund multiple delegations to represent their organizations at on campus fairs occurring across the nation, all within a very close period of time requiring significant staffing and travel commitments. For many employers the online approach presented a solution to a difficult logistical problem of moving staff across the country. Literally, some delegates working in the central offices of national or international organizations based in major Australian cities (e.g., Melbourne, Sydney) would travel from one side of Australia to the other in order to attend an on campus Career Fair. This is roughly equivalent to sending delegates from New York to Los Angeles, or London to Moscow—a resource-intensive program on any terms.

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) evaluated its original *USQ e-Career Fair* (held in 2001) with respect to students' and employers' perspectives on its utility (McIlveen, Gibson, Fallon, & Ross, 2002). That initial evaluation indicated that employers were interested in seeing an expansion of the facility across all universities (and the advent of the national *Virtual Career Fair* attests to the successful uptake by users). However, at the time of the original evaluation conducted by USQ, many employers did not express a deep interest in technical embellishments, instead preferring a simple, “flat”, information-only approach. This model of delivery meant little more than presenting a company's profile and logo, positions available for particular degree disciplines, instructions and documents for applications, the contact details of the human resources department, and a link to the

company website—thoroughly effective and efficient. Internet technology has changed throughout the intervening period along with the views and expectations of users in the contemporary Web.2 environment. Subsequent annual internal evaluations of the *USQ e-Career Fair* have indicated that students and employers prefer interactivity and graphical interface. Throughout the process of these annual reviews USQ produced principles for iterations for future online versions, most recently culminating in the first Australian 3-dimensional e-Career Fair; which we now describe.

USQ 3-D Career Fair

USQ has been exploring the potential of a broad range of 3D virtual environments and serious games to support students in their learning since 2005. It is a natural development to extend this research to include other services for students such as career information and networking. In 2008, an interactive, online Careers Fair was established in the 3D virtual world Second Life™. This environment allows the user to construct objects on virtual land and interact with other people and the objects in the world via an onscreen animated character called an “avatar” that represents you in the world. On USQ Island, a 3D version of the on-campus event was created with booths for all the participating employers. Each booth had photographs as posters, links to the company’s web site and graduate career information. This highly immersive environment gives a strong sense of physical presence (with the user feeling as if he/she is in a place) and social presence (feeling like the other people are there too). Students were able to access the 3D environment from their home computers and gather information and links for further exploration via the web.

As the employers had not used Second Life before and timelines prevented training opportunities, they were not involved in staffing the booths during the fair. This is possible for future events but will require training and scheduling of times for access to staff to make this manageable. By making the booths interactive and linked to the web and email, the

online careers fair was able to run for several weeks, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week compared to the single day on campus.

Access to the fair via Second software is a free download from <http://secondlife.com> and there is no charge to make an avatar to participate. The university purchased virtual land as the location for the fair but this site is also used for many other teaching and marketing activities. The booths were built by a staff member but there are many building services available in Second Life for a very reasonable price. A range of five booth styles allowed for variety without a large overhead. Photographs and content were provided by the employers often repurposed from web materials. The booths can be reused or retextured for future fairs if needed.

To promote the 3D fair, the career fair web page linked to information and help and a demonstration was conducted during the on-campus event to show the employers and the participating students what was happening online. “Cool” and “awesome” were the common descriptors by the students and many dashed home to log in and visit the 3D fair. Employers who saw the demonstration were thrilled with the quality of the booths, the connection with the younger generation and the opportunity to extend the contact beyond the single on-campus event.

Unfortunately a problem with the tracking software prevented us from gaining accurate statistics on the numbers of visitors to the original 2008 version, but this problem will be addressed for the 2009 version. Preliminary feedback from graduate employers attending the National Careers Forum (Sydney, June 2008) indicated that this new model of e-Career Fair was positively received by recruitment staff, who saw it as having all of the benefits of the flat two-dimensional internet Career Fair, but brought a far greater level of capacity for interactivity with their potential employees and opportunities for their market differentiation. As for the perspective of career development practitioners, the model was

voted by delegates as the winner of a best-practice award at the annual national conference of the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services held in Sydney in 2008.

With respect to benefits for students, Second Life™ provides more interactivity and challenge for the technically savvy students and Generation Y students. The standard website version of the e-Career Fair is still available for less technically-minded students or those with slower download speeds. Students can interact live with employers and other students as they would at an on-campus Career Fair. Students can continue to access the information 24/7 after the on-campus fair is finished. Employers enjoyed the benefits of expanding the exposure of their organization brand and career opportunities to a wider audience demographic and locations of students. Students are global rather than campus centered (i.e., overseas and regional students can participate in the event without attending the campus). Employers can interact online with students, further adding to their recruitment communications and branding. The fair is also a cost effective promotion due to a reduction in staff time, travel costs and promotional materials. The 3D fair also brought institutional benefits such as increasing interaction with distance and international students. Moreover, the 3D presentation enhances the university's reputation as a flexible and accessible university. It also provides benefits in terms of being cost effective compared to the on campus fair.

Conclusion

Changes in technology as well as student interest and learning styles require changes in delivery of career and employment products and services to students and employers. Furthermore, environmental and societal changes impact upon student involvement with campus and study patterns. The traditional on campus Career Fair will likely remain an important event in the annual cycle of graduate recruitment; however the advent of internet Career Fairs has brought new levels of service and accessibility to students and employers.

In their short time of existence, the internet Career Fair has evolved considerably with new web platforms. The University of Southern Queensland is the first Australian university to conduct an online Career Fair in Second Life™ or any 3D virtual world. We look forward to observing how other universities around the world can bring this new technology to life to suit their own particular institutional needs, and share their learning with other career development practitioners and employers.

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