Bridging the Knowledge Gap between Study and Professional Practice: An Australian Case Example

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Abstract

This paper is seeking to gain an enhanced understanding of influences of employability are having on graduating students preparing to work in their profession. The paper reviews literature that helps to define graduate attributes and graduate employability. It also analyses the contribution by higher education to students being ready for work and what the identified gaps are. A case study review for an annual cross-institutional student forum that aims to make tertiary and higher education graduates more work-ready for professions in communication is presented. A key driver for the development and refinement of this student forum was the anxiety students have expressed when transitioning from a further education institution into the work force.

Keywords: Work Integrated Learning, Graduate Outcomes, Graduate Employability, Real World Learning

Introduction

As an educator in an Australian higher education institution, the author has become aware of the high levels of anxiety in many students who are about to leave their study and transition into the professional workforce. After discussions with fellow lecturers from various institutions that were experiencing the similar student concerns, a committee of academics decided to try and bridge some of the knowledge gap between advanced education and the workforce.

Bridgstock (2009) stated that the recent shifts in education and labour market policy have resulted in universities being placed under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates. Employers are increasingly demanding universities and higher education institutions graduate students with workplace-ready skills. They want employees with job skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving (Innovative Research Universities, 2011). But how is this shift managed without weakening the theoretical and principle-base to non-role specific education? Through consultation, a group of cross-institution academics developed a one-day intensive student forum that enabled current students to: access knowledge from recently employed graduates; engage with industry employers; visit worksites for communication professionals and; network with fellow students in similar situations. To date,

the student forum has been a resounding success based on student and industry feedback (see appendix one).

In Australia, the transition from advanced education to professional employment is typically managed through work-integrated learning (WIL) such as work experience internships and professional projects. Internships can be voluntary or credit-based through and are part of the study programs offered by the tertiary and higher education institutions, which has become a major marketing tool when promoting the worth of the programs (Universities Australia, 2013). However, these experiences can be limited and the roles and responsibilities of the interns can be at a basic level (O'Neill, 2010). The Australian government through policy with the Department of Education and Training has introduced protection legislation for students who engage in WIL so as to avoid students being exploited by their employers as cheap (and often free) labour (Australian Government, 2015). Many of these organisation offering WIL positions for advanced education have business objectives that are built into the WIL brief. Also, many institutions have a limited opportunity for WIL to be included in the degree program. Therefore, as suggested by a recent graduate at the 2015 forum, students should examine every opportunity to get a feel for the workplace in order to better understand what roles one enjoys and aspires to (guest speaker statement at Student Forum, 2015).

WIL is another means for higher education to advance the development of graduate attributes of their students. It is also a means for students to advance their own employability, as they have gained real-world experiences in their chosen professions, sometimes referred to as real-life learning at the 'coal-face' (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, and Watts, 2000). WIL provides students with an authentic learning experience that may not be able to be replicated in a traditional classroom setting (Boden, 2010). Many students in Australia are also involved with their own employment structures as they are studying. This provides students with authentic learning environments, but often the responsibilities of such working environments do not involve the risk factors requiring problem-solving and strategic planning associated with higher-level learning that employers demand from graduates in many professions (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Murray, 2000; Newman and Archbald, 1992).

The introduction and development of the Victorian Public Relations, Media and Communication Student Forum discussed in this case study aims to address some of these knowledge gaps in order to better prepare graduating students for the higher-level demands of professional communication roles.

Defining Terms
Work-integrated learning (WIL)
Universities Australia (2013) defines WIL as integrating study and work experience in a systematic way. Innovative Universities Australia (2011) define WIL as a term used to describe a range of approaches that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum, typically involving student placements or contributions to projects within a workplace. WIL provides opportunities for higher education students to apply the theory and

skills they learn at university in a workplace, but still under the protection of being an active student.

Internships

An "internship" is defined by the National Society for Experiential Education (2015) as a carefully monitored work or volunteer experience for which an individual has intentional learning goals reflected actively through what he or she is learning during the experience. Australia Internships (2015) further expands this definition to include internships as the transition from study to work and as a necessary component to gain exposure in the professional workplace in order to develop a student's skills, making them more advanced and diligent when they finally have the opportunity to be a part of the working world. Interns are looking for "hands on" work experience in the real world aligned to their academic studies and internships can integrate career related experience into an undergraduate education through participation in planned, supervised work (O'Neill, 2010).

Graduate Attributes

Generic graduate attributes can be described as being the skills, personal attributes and values which are intended to be acquired by graduates regardless of their discipline or field of study (Smith and Bath, 2006). Bowden (in Bridgstock, 2009) refers to the definition that graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution. According to Smith and Bath (2006) these attributes or outcomes typically include a combination of qualities such as: critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, logical and independent thought, communication and information management skills, intellectual rigour, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity and tolerance. Some programs list specific attributes aligned with the industry or professional degree.

Graduate Employability

Employability can be defined as a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, benefiting themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004). Cranmer (2006) explores the employability skills incorporated into teaching and learning to enhance graduates' ability to secure jobs. The amount of development and nurtured skills making graduates ready for work is defined as the level of graduate employability, according (Boden, 2010).

Current Focus on being "Work-Ready"

Graduate Employment

Traditionally, universities regarded graduate employment as an aspect of institutions' relationship with the labour market, and one where they enjoyed a significant degree of discretion. Now, employability has become a performative function of universities, according to Boden (2010), and is shaped and directed by the state, which is seeking to supplant labour markets through education. Therefore the onus of responsibility for acquiring employability skills

has shifted away from on-the-job experience towards advanced education learning. Universities are being driven towards promoting broader career management competence in students (Bridgstock, 2006).

According to Smith and Bath (2006) curriculum emphasis has traditionally been on the development of discipline-specific knowledge and skills, and the development of other skills, such as intellectual and social competencies, have been learned implicitly and informally. However, there appears to be a general consensus in current literature that there should be a balance between the body of knowledge that forms the curriculum of traditional higher education and an approach which values skills development as part of the teaching and learning process. Higher education institutions are being required to broaden the outcomes to encompass making students more work-ready. Governments (particularly in the UK, Australia and Canada) have made public funding for universities partially contingent upon demonstrable graduate outcomes, with an emphasis on the production of work-ready graduates who are competent within their disciplinary fields and possess the abilities necessary to negotiate a world of work that is in constant change (Bridgstock, 2009).

There is increasing evidence to suggest that in many fields 'traditional' career structures involving stable linear progression through one organisation are becoming less common and workers require a broader and more adaptive set of skills (Australian Government, 2015; Bridgstock, 2009). Labour markets in Western economies are changing and organisations are 'slimming down and speeding up' in response to globalisation, technology and competitive pressures (Bridgstock, 2009). There is now an increasing need for mobile, adaptable workers who are able to productively integrate a combination of discipline-specific, professional and generic skills into their employability level (Tomlinson, 2008; Universities Australia, 2013). According to many theorists, the belief that these skills will be acquired on the job have evaporated and employers are now expecting graduates to have the desk-skills to work independently from the first day (see for example: Tomlinson, 2008; Bridgstock, 2009; Andrews and Higson, 2008; Boden, 2010; Smith and Bath, 2006).

Adding value to formal credentials is seen as an important issue of student employability, there is a very strong sense among current students for the need to develop and deploy credentials that fall outside their formal learning (Andrews and Higson, 2008). A strong emphasis is placed upon soft credentials not usually directly related to formal achievements in higher education (Andrews and Higson, 2008). The evidence suggests that higher education students are using experience in the workplace, or the "economy of experience", in understanding their future employability and labour market outcomes (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004). Such narratives therefore not only involve formal educational achievements, but also the development of extra-curricular activities and skills, as determinants of value in the employment market.

Student Jobs and Future Employment
Many students currently hold down jobs while they proceed through their studies, but this is not necessarily providing them with the "soft credentials" (such as initiative, problem-solving skills

and emotional intelligence) the employers' desire in their chosen professions (Boden, 2010; Smith and Bath, 2006). Employment during tertiary studies appears to be an ever-increasing trend for students, as they battle higher education fees and increasing costs of living, with more than 55% doing full-time or part-time work while studying in Australia (ABS, 2010). More than 81 per cent of tertiary students have at least one part-time job during semesters according to a New Zealand study by (Manthei and Gilmore, 2005). In the case of this cohort, an informal survey of the third-year students indicated the vast majority worked more than 15 hours a week (it should be noted that eight students were completing their degree and were considered to be working full-time). Hours spent at work over the week are on average double the amount of hours spent in class (Manthei and Gilmore, 2005). Around 50 per cent of students believe that their employment had a detrimental effect on their academic work (Manthei and Gilmore, 2005).

The students' current employment is emerging as a strong influence on their available time, their experiences, their responsibilities, and therefore the ability to build credentials related to jobs in their field of study (Herrington, 2006). A trend for Australian university undergraduates, as with many other countries, is to spend less time on-campus and more time in employed work (McInnes, 2001; Richardson, Evans and Gbadamosi, 2009). This is changing their whole perception of the university experience as employment competes directly with their studies, resulting in the students having less time to access teaching and learning resources (McInnes, 2001).

The students' employment is having a growing influence on their concrete experiences. Such experiences influence problem-solving cognition, as opposed to students drawing from the theory and resources located within the university (McInnes, 2001). Experiences at work are escalating the students' cognitive processes, which are dominated by concrete knowledge.

Having work responsibilities also restricts some students from taking on valuable internships or work-experience that would build soft credentials for their desired job. Such educational experiences include coaching and scaffolding needed for learning through authentic tasks (Herrington, 2006). Many students are entering the job-market with less than desirable employability skills as a result of limited opportunity due to their current work commitments outside the discipline (Tomlinson, 2008).

The first clear theme to emerge from the above literature was the importance students ascribe to their higher education curriculums to provide appropriate knowledge and skill for their future labour market outcomes. As Tomlinson (2008) argues in the paper *"The Degree is Not Enough": Students' Perceptions of the Role of Higher Education Credentials for Graduate Work and Employability* that students viewed the acquisition of higher education qualifications as a significant boost to their level of human capital, and should provide them with advantages in the labour market. They considered higher education credentials as positional goods and a key dimension for their future employability. Strongly implicit in students' views was the sense that a rounded higher education qualification would open up a wider range of economic, occupational and social opportunities that might otherwise be limited. But included in higher education

credentials is a sense of knowing what the expectations are and the skills needed to successfully operate in a higher-level working environment (Cranmer, 2006; Yorke, 2004; Tomlinson, 2008).

As the literature has indicated, advanced education (particularly at a Higher Education level) is not preparing many students holistically to present in the workplace with the soft credentials employers desire from graduates. Their graduate employability is limited by a combination of limited work experience, low-level work done to finance their study and lifestyle, and the lack of nurtured skills making graduates ready for work. The following is a review of a cross-institutional student forum developed to decrease the anxiety experienced by students and knowledge gap that appears to exist for current graduate moving from study into their chosen profession.

Case Study – PR, Media and Communication Forum
Since 2011, an annual Student Forum has been strategically developed and managed between the universities of Swinburne, Deakin and Victoria University that enables graduating Communication students to engage and network directly with industry in order to improve employability and raise their professional profile. This one-day forum tutors students to prepare for the workforce and to network directly with industry captains. The Forum was initially developed as a result of identified gaps between graduate attributes aligned with the program's curriculum and the employability skills identified by potential employers of graduates. The Forum invites graduating students from across all Victorian higher education and tertiary institutions that have programs in public relations, communication and media industry degrees to be delegates on the day.

The Student Forum was conceptualised due to many insightful observations discussed at the 2010 Public Relations Academic Forum regarding graduating students and their "work-readiness". Many gaps in student knowledge and confidence were identified by the participating academics based on observations and interactions with graduating students covering structuring job application, selection criteria put forward by prospective employers, feedback from the industry.

The intended strategies behind creating the one-day Forum included
• Providing an environment for collaboration between the institutions allowing undergraduate and post-graduate communication scholarship in order to share resources, knowledge and networks to benefit higher education students
• Providing direct access to industry management to advance facilitating employment, industry-based learning roles and internships
• Creating opportunities to engage with recent graduates for discourse regarding their experiences with job-seeking and the working environment
• Providing insight and first-hand views into real-world workplace environments, roles and responsibilities
• Enacting on learning in real-world situations that are difficult to simulate in the classroom

• Giving students from across all State institutions the opportunity to understand that many of their insecurities and anxieties involving work in their chosen profession are typically shared among their peers.

The one-day Forum exposes communication students to a labyrinth of networks, including: students from other institutions; industry experts and practitioners who work with cutting-edge strategies and technologies in the communication discipline; industry management at their workplace; and, practitioners with award-winning campaigns. This serves the students by providing this work-ready engagement and exposure directly to the students, and as a means to establish working relationships between tertiary institutions and industry in terms of creating work experiences, internships, industry-based learning and professional degrees placements.

The Forum's format has evolved based on industry and student feedback over the five years it has operated to typically include: high-level management from industry explaining the skill sets employers are looking; recent graduates relaying their experiences and challenges in securing professional work; case examples of exemplary work; internship and work experience opportunities; visits to operating work environments; and, scheduled networking with industry and other students. The Forum's agenda allows for collaborative and inquisitive enquiry, as students are placed in situations where they network amongst themselves, are in small group workshops and interact throughout the Forum with questions and answer sessions. As the delegates for the Forum come from multiple institutions, and interact with industry personnel from diverse skill sets (including other academics and tertiary teachers), the discourse over the day is varied and unique to the Forum's environment – opportunities that students would not usually encounter at their university or at conferences. Giving all students the opportunity to make a contribution to the conversation is a key intention to the Forum agenda.

An exit survey in 2015 the students highlighted the following key reasons for attending (see appendix one)
  I.   Meet senior staff from industry (72%)
 II.   Contacts for internships (68%)
III.   Contacts for possible jobs (68%)
IV.   To see how workplaces operate (48%)

The Forum outcomes are intended to up-skill students in areas more specific to the communication and PR industry practicalities, achieved through sharing workforce insight not customarily focussed upon in the academic environment. Practical forum outcomes have focussed on:

• Building an online professional profile that resonates with future employees and colleagues
• Establishing professional networks at a peer and management level
• Time management and professional standards peculiar to communication professions
• Emerging trends, responsibilities and skills associated with specific roles in the PR and communication industry

Intended objectives as a direct consequence of the Forum are directly fostering strategic alliances with industry partners that have the capacity to provide work-integrated learning placements and ongoing employment for participating students. The Forum purposefully engages the resourceful knowledge and help from University Alumni through deliberately targeting and inviting Alumni from all member-universities to present, conduct open-houses, and/or be panel members on behalf of the Forum. This also enables past students to re-engage with their university and the study programs.

The Forum has been successful in providing solutions to some of the knowledge gaps identified by students approaching graduation and looking to secure employment in their chosen professional communication field. This is indicated by positive feedback provided by students in exit surveys for the Forum, with 79% stating they really enjoyed the Forum and found it very useful and 63% stating the most useful part of the Forum was the (newly introduced in 2015) speed information sessions relating to preparing yourself for job applications (see appendix one).

Discussion
As the above literature and the feedback from students attending the Student Forum have indicated that many students approaching graduation need further guidance and up-skilling regarding identifying employability skills that will make them work-ready for employment in their chosen professional communication roles. There are a number of identified characteristics that advanced education institutions should promote through their curriculums, and students should have a measure of competency in, so as to satisfy graduate employability expectations of employers. These are discussed below.

Generic Skills Existing beyond Discipline Skills
It has been argued by many (see for example: Boden, 2010; Bridgstock, 2009; Cranmer, 2006; Smith and Bath, 2006) that while disciplinary knowledge is well-serviced in academic theory typically included in tertiary and higher education curriculums, the development of more generic skills involving human capital value are often identified by employers as missing from many graduating students. Smith and Bath (2006) state there is a distinction between specific disciplinary skills (i.e., vocational skills) and general or generic skills (i.e., transferable skills) (Smith and Bath, 2006). The opportunity to develop generic work skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership, analytical and critical thinking is an important aspect in any undergraduate curriculum (Candy 2000). Traditionally, the emphasis has been on the development of discipline-specific knowledge and skills, and the development of other skills, intellectual and social, are often considered 'a bonus' (Hare and Powrie, 1992). But employer expectations and competitive application processes have highlighted the need for well-rounded and work-ready graduates.

The Victorian Communication Student Forum provides the opportunity for graduating students to see a variety of professional communication work environments first hand and to discuss directly with employers concerning their expectations for new graduate employees through the

open-house work visits and the guest presentations (including question and answer, and networking possibilities).

Graduate Attributes/Outcomes
Generic graduate attributes have been defined by the Higher Education Council (in Smith and Bath, 2006) as the skills, personal attributes and values which should be acquired by all graduates regardless of their discipline or field of study and can be considered as central to achievements of the higher education process. These attributes or qualities, identified by many theorists as soft credentials or intangible assets, include such characteristics as: critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, logical and independent thought, communication and information management skills, intellectual rigour, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity and tolerance (Smith and Bath, 2006; Universities Australia, 2013; Andrews and Higson, 2008). Cranmer (2006) suggests current graduates reflect a degree of "mismatch" for some between the skills acquired at university and the skills they are required to use in employment. In the current environment, therefore, it is increasingly important for universities to develop methods for measuring and monitoring their achievement of the learning and other outcomes they undertake educational steps to produce generic attributes in graduates (Smith and Bath, 2006).

The Student Forum has played a significant role in alerting both students and curriculum developers to the insight into the generic skill sets employers are looking for in employees beyond the discipline knowledge. The nature of the forum exposes delegates and academics to current thinking by employers on what are important considerations when applying for professional communication roles. It has also highlighted what graduates will need to consider when moving from study to full-time work as a result of recent-graduates' Q and A sessions.

Graduate Employability
A contentious point made by many researchers in this area (including Cranmer, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Andrews and Higson, 2008; Gilworth, 2013) is that creating the environment to implement generic skills representing employability in a fabricated and educational environment is difficult to authentically replicate. This has raised questions about the quality of the graduate labour market and the ability of graduates to meet the needs of employers (Andrews and Higson, 2008). It is argued that, despite the best intentions of academics to enhance graduates' employability in the higher education environment, the limitations inherent within the university agenda will consistently produce mixed outcomes (Cranmer, 2006). However, there appears to be a general consensus in the literature that there should be a balance between the body of knowledge that forms the curriculum of traditional higher education and an approach which values skills development as part of the teaching and learning process and institution should strive to address this balance (Smith and Bath, 2006).

According to Boden (2010) academics are held responsible for achieving the learning outcomes of their courses but generally, because pedagogy and curriculum are driven by employability, have very little authority to decide what these outcomes ought to be or even the micro-politics of their formulation. Whereas, Butterwick and Benjamin (2006) state individual workers have an

individual responsibility to manage their adaption to rapidly changing work environments and requirements, including emerging technologies, and not rely solely on their educational institutions to prepare "work-ready" graduates. Of course, no power is absolute, and there is limited evidence currently available on the extent to which imposed curriculum content on employability skills actually filters down to the classroom, according to Boden (2010).

The experiences shared by recent graduates who have been presenters at the Student Forum regarding those skills they have deemed to be invaluable when working in the professional communication field has provided valuable insight to graduating students, as indicated by the feedback remarks recorded in exit surveys (see appendix one). As technology and work practices evolve, so do the currency of particular generic and technical skills highlighted by employers as important qualities for their staff (Smith and Bath, 2006). The Forum, by nature of its discourse, emphasises directly from employers the type of skills they presently seek from their staff.

Real World Learning
Bringing real world learning into the classroom has been identified in the literature above as problematic. Also, achieving discipline-specific real world learning can be a challenge for students who may financially struggle to remain in higher education and take on paid work outside of their discipline, work which can be mundane, low-skilled and unrelated to their studies (Gill, 2012). Whilst, as the above evidence clearly suggests, adding value to formal credentials is seen as an important issue of their employability, there was also a very strong sense among these students for the need to develop and deploy credentials that fell outside their formal learning. Tomlinson (2008) emphasises soft credentials, built upon a prevalent view that their "graduateness" (potential as graduates) was no longer represented through their formal achievements in higher education, but through experience in the field. Work integrated learning has been shown to be critical to developing those "work-ready" skills that define graduate employability levels (Universities Australia, 2013; Gilworth, 2013). Cranmer (2006) suggests resources would be better utilised to increase employment-based training and experience, and/or employer involvement in courses, which were found to positively affect immediate graduate prospects in the labour market and, therefore, support graduates in the transitional stage into employment.

The role of highlighting the importance of work-experience through projects and internships by many guest speakers at the Student Forums over the years complements the above theorists beliefs that actual experience in the workplace best prepares students to apply for roles and successfully execute these roles. Also, many of the students have indicated their reason for attending the forum was to network and learn about the potential for work experience (see appendix one).

Concluding Statement
In this current tertiary education environment it is increasingly important for universities and advanced education institutions to develop methods for measuring and monitoring their achievements regarding student learning and other outcomes they undertake to produce in graduates (Smith and Bath, 2006). A common theme from literature reviewed for this paper is

the acknowledgement that discipline-specific skills conventional to advanced education in tertiary and higher education institutions (particularly in Australia) do not holistically prepare students for the professional workforce. Generic skills that make students more employable are skills typically gained from authentic learning experiences, i.e. in the actual workplace. Equally, students are looking for opportunities to develop their employability skills as part of their learning process. Such skills are difficult to nurture in a classroom environment. The Victorian Public Relations, Media and Communication Student Forum, in operation since 2011, provides communication students the opportunity to identify currency in skill sets that will make them more attractive to employers, and grants them access to networks that will enable students to gain valuable work-experience at the "coal-face".

Acknowledgement

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Appendix One
PR, Media and Communication Student Forum
Exit Survey 2015

1). What has motivated you to attend the Student Forum presentations (choose the most important reasons from the following):

- a. Hear from recent graduates - 7
- b. Understand the workplace and expectations - 14
- c. Hear what is contemporary in professional communication - 9
- d. Learn more about the job application process - 8
- e. Understand the industry better - 14
- f. Meet students from other institutions - 4
- g. Other reasons (please record)

2). What has motivated you to attend the Student Forum Industry Open Houses (choose the most important reasons from the following):

- a. Understand the workplace and expectations - 10
- b. Get a feel from employees about their role in the workplace - 12
- c. Actually see how the workplace operates - 14
- d. Make contacts for possible internships - 13
- e. Make contacts for possible work experience - 10
- f. Make contacts for possible jobs - 15
- g. Other reasons (please record)

3). What has motivated you to attend (or intend to attend) the Student Forum Networking session (choose the most important reasons from the following):

- a. Make contacts for possible internships - 16
- b. Make contacts for possible work experience - 10
- c. Make contacts for possible jobs - 13
- d. Meet students from other institutions - 6
- e. Meet senior staff from the industry - 13
- f. Other reasons (please record)

4). What would you like to see at future PR, Media and Communication Student Forums? Please record:
Internships – 6
Group activities
CV writing
Real cases post-grad info
Bios for speakers
More variety of speakers - 2
More senior staff presentations
Contact lists
Industry

More on SM
Workshops
Too much information
Needs to be longer

5). What do you think works really well at the Student Forums? Please record:
Speed sessions - 17
Professionals presenting – 3
Variety – 3
Case studies – 2
Graduate panel – 5
Open houses - 2

6). What do you think doesn't work well at the Student Forums? Please record:
Overlap of information – 2
Case studies – 3
Presentations too long – 2
Graduate panel
Putting a limit on open house attendance numbers
Putting a time limit on speed sessions

7). Final comments/statements/endorsements; Please record:
#tag for twitter
Put on LinkedIn
Greater QandA opportunities
Really liked (or similar wording) - 22