Why Does Employability Matter To Me And My Students?

THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYABILITY

Most current higher education students aim to develop a career once they finish their studies. To do so successfully – both in the short and long term – they require a set of skills and attributes which can be referred to as ‘employability’. This is true regardless of whether they follow a clear pathway after graduation, one that bears a clear link to their field of study, or whether they move into different areas of work.

There is increasing recognition that a core role of institutions is to help students enhance their employability while they are studying. But what does this mean? And where are the gaps at present?

In this document you will learn about what higher education students think employability is and how well they think their institutions are helping them improve their employability.

WHAT IS EMPLOYABILITY?

In a recent project (Bennett et al., 2015), 415 current university students from around Australia responded to a survey on employability. Their responses were combined with responses from prior data collection. Five key themes were developed based on prior research, literature, and student responses:
WHAT DO STUDENTS THINK?

What Do Employers Look For In Graduates?

Students were asked to consider what employers look for in graduates shown at Table 1, student responses focused on discipline-specific skills and knowledge. 75 per cent of students mentioned ‘develop skills and knowledge’, 53 per cent of students mentioned ‘develop career awareness’, 46 per cent of students mentioned ‘develop self’, and 40 per cent mentioned ‘interact with others’. Only 1 per cent mentioned ‘navigate the world of work’.

Table 1: Percentage of students who referred to the employability categories (survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employability categories (%)</th>
<th>What employers look for in graduates</th>
<th>Professional characteristics</th>
<th>Differences between self &amp; professional</th>
<th>Contribution of degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop skills and knowledge</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop career awareness</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact with others</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop self</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigate the world of work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid responses</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>886 (1043)*</td>
<td>584 (935)*</td>
<td>242 (415)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes data drawn from repeated items in team members’ previous studies

What Are The Characteristics Of Professionals In My Field?

When students were asked to consider the characteristics of professionals in their field, ‘interact with others’ and ‘develop career awareness’ were regarded as more important than ‘skills and knowledge’.

When asked to point to differences between themselves and professionals in their fields, students highlighted two key areas – ‘skills and knowledge’ as well as ‘career awareness’.

What Is The Contribution Of A Degree?

Finally, students were asked to indicate how their degrees were contributing to their employability. 53 per cent highlighted ‘skills and knowledge’ but – and despite the importance which students placed on these areas – just 30 per cent of students felt that their degree was helping them to ‘interact with others’, just 21 per cent felt that their degree was helping them develop ‘career awareness’, and just 19 per cent thought that their degree was helping them ‘develop self’.

Students made little reference to ‘navigating the world of work’ in any of the questions, even though the literature highlights this as being really important for employability.

Graduate case study participants confirmed this finding. As one established graduate suggested, the relevance of coursework to the real world of work is often not realised by, or made clear to students:

“Where my degree … failed, has been, sort of, relevance to the real world, in that people don’t draw the parallels for you so you don’t necessarily start drawing them yourself.”
WHERE DO STUDENTS GET INFORMATION ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY?

When asked to identify the information sources used to develop an awareness of possible careers and their characteristics, 63 per cent of students reported that they had looked to educators – their lecturers and tutors. This was more than double their use of other information sources, including friends, family, and careers services.

It emphasises the central role of educators and the corresponding need for all educators to be industry aware. As one student suggested:

“It would be helpful to bring into the mix the ability to talk about career options and pathways. Like a coach who knows the options and knows how to navigate and who to connect with according to the pathway.”

HOW DO STUDENTS PLAN TO ENHANCE THEIR EMPLOYABILITY?

Students were asked how they planned to enhance their employability. Their responses indicated that they were searching for solutions. Most referred to ‘study’ or ‘practice’ but they did not indicate what they would study or how they would practice.

Less than 1 per cent of students indicated that they would make use of university resources. Asked why, case study graduates were adamant that students need support beyond practical assistance such as résumé writing. As a graduate stated:

“What is missing is enough time to empower individuals with generating a plan or seriously looking at options in a supportive environment … developing an integrated practice that both acutely hones personal interest and pushes beyond comfort zones to demand a greater portfolio of potential creative employment avenues.”

WHAT CAN INSTITUTIONS DO DIFFERENTLY?

Students highlighted a number of ways in which they thought their educators could help them enhance their employability.

Connection with employment

Students stated that they wanted to see more connection with employment in their degree. As one stated:

“Though the degree is providing the most basic requirements of this profession, it is lacking a teaching style that imitates one for the real world, thus it is not maximising the preparation required to work in the real world.”

This finding reflects work done by Scott et al. (2010) and by Scott and Yates (2002), whose work with graduates emphasised the need for integrated, problem-based, real-world learning, and assessment.

Practice what we learn

Students also wanted to have more opportunities to practice what they had learnt. Only 11 per cent of students referred to experience within or related to industry as a strategy for enhancing employability, but several commented that this would have been helpful. As one student explained:

“While nearly at the end of my degree I still have very little confidence in techniques and skills that would be required for future work. I think more opportunities to practise what we learn is hugely important.”

Ferns (2014, p. 84) has stressed that partnerships between university, industry, and community are crucial to ensuring “a relevant and authentic student experience”. Having demonstrated the positive impact of WIL on student work-readiness, Smith, Ferns and Russell (2014) recommended that WIL opportunities be built into curricula.
Support to identify career and work options

Students who responded to the survey whilst in their final two years of study were asked how they would identify career and work options, find work and develop necessary skills and knowledge.

These questions were derived from a self-assessment within the Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework (2013).

Students reported that they lacked confidence in their ability to find work and to present their skills and knowledge to potential employers or clients. Overall, 56 per cent of students reported the need for explicit help and support. As one student said:

“I strongly believe there should be an elective/optional unit of study that helps deal with the transition from student to full-time employee.”

This data raises questions about the responsibility, forms, and timing of employability support, as well as the capacity of higher education institutions to provide it. Of interest, one higher education leader commented on the need for post-graduation services for graduates. This has become increasingly common in the UK and merits further exploration in Australia.