

TRANSLATING EXPERIENCE: A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

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Employability is generally considered to be a set of achievements that provide the *potential* for graduates to obtain employment and be successful in their careers. Employers expect graduates to have the knowledge, skills and understandings of a professional field but they also expect graduates to be able to *do a job*. This is largely about the personal attributes that guide performance in the workplace which are best developed through experiential learning. This paper examines the creation of a framework for employability at the University of Queensland which supports the development of work-ready graduates who can add value to an organisation and make a significant contribution to society and the economy throughout their careers. The framework has been developed out of a pilot project with students in a range of extra-curricular activities. It includes a self-reflection process that allows students to translate learning from various experiences into improved employability. The pilot project has been evaluated using qualitative surveys of student participation in employability workshops. Results show that students value the self-reflective process to realise and articulate their employability and thus it has formed the basis of the framework that will guide the university's student employability strategy.

Introduction

Conversations about graduate employability have emerged out of rapid changes to the higher education landscape over the past thirty years. The global economy has changed to be more knowledge-intensive and this has had an impact on the way that human resources have been conceptualised and the way people think about and manage their working futures (Tomlinson, 2010). Driving the emphasis on graduate employability has been the push for universities to demonstrate achievement of “relevant and worthwhile” outcomes from the large public investment in higher education and to produce the kinds of graduates that are required for the country's economic and social progression (Barrie, 2006, p. 218). The graduate employability agenda is also inherently linked to the notion of quality in higher education, where institutional reputations and rankings have largely become dependent on employment rates and the success of graduates in the workplace. Moreover, student expectations of successful career outcomes from their higher education experiences have continued to rise and there is more pressure on graduates to ‘stand out from the crowd’ in increasingly competitive labour markets that are flooded with candidates who have benefitted from more open access to higher education and a demand-driven system. Just as governments demand a return on investment in higher education of the institutions that operate in this space, students demand – as consumers of higher education - a return on their investment in a university degree.

The corollary of this is that employers expect graduates to possess both the knowledge and skills of a professional field *and* be able to perform effectively in a given role. Workplace performance is largely about the personal attributes (and attitudes) that guide the way that graduates apply their discipline knowledge and skills in professional roles and generally go about the business of work. Personal attributes are not a proxy for discipline knowledge and skills, but they do, however,

differentiate between having subject expertise and the capacity to function effectively in a job (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009). Employability is largely developed through experience, whether by engaging with the curriculum or with development activities outside of the classroom. Additionally, students need to be presented with opportunities to learn from their experiences, identify their achievements and realise their individual employability so that it can be communicated and demonstrated in the workplace.

This paper will report on the creation of a framework for employability at the University of Queensland that is based on the principle of learning that comes from life-wide experiences (Barnett, 2010). The framework supports the development of employable graduates who can add value to an organisation and make a significant contribution to society and the economy throughout their careers. The focus of the framework is on building awareness in students of the need to add value to their degree through engaging in a range of experiences, and it provides them with a self-reflective process for translating learning from those experiences into improved employability. It has been developed out of a pilot project in a range of extra-curricular activities which been evaluated using qualitative surveys of student participation in post-activity employability workshops. The results demonstrate the value of the self-reflective process to students in translating their experiences into realised employability. The framework is part of a strategic initiative at The University of Queensland to foster employability and the success of the pilot project ensures it will form the basis of the institution's student employability strategy that will be implemented from 2016.

Employability in context

It is now generally acknowledged globally by governments, employers, industry bodies and higher education institutions themselves that university graduates will have developed skills and attributes that prepare them for employment during their higher education experiences. This has become widely accepted as a desirable outcome of higher education as a key contributor to national prosperity (Bennett, Dunne & Carre, 2000; De la Harpe et al, 2009). Discussion of graduate outcomes is not a new; what is new is a greater focus on graduate skills and attributes in relation to employability. This focus has fuelled the expansion of the employability agenda which is framed by an ongoing general debate into the purpose and nature of a university education (Barrie, 2006; Bathmaker, 2003).

The development of a global economy has brought with it challenges to the traditional fabric of higher education. Rapid and continual change characterised by uncertainty, disorder and fragmentation has dominated modern society and this has impacted on how people live and work, which has in turn impacted on what is expected by society from a university education (Bathmaker, 2003). A new kind of workforce is required; workers need to be flexible and able to cope with change and to apply knowledge and skills in diverse and ever-changing ways (Harvey, 2000). Organisations have

undergone major changes and there is an expectation that organisational structures and strategic objectives will continue to change in the future (Bridgstock, 2009; Crebert, Bates & Bell, 2004). Graduates are expected to have developed the skills to contribute to their organisations' prosperity in a globalised, highly-competitive world, and this includes communication, technological, higher order thinking and problem solving skills, along with an awareness of social, cultural and religious diversity (Barrie, 2006). There is less clarity and certainty around 'graduate jobs', graduates are required to be more flexible and work increasingly in project teams, and upon recruitment, they need to be able to 'hit the ground running' (Harvey, 2000; Washer, 2007).

Generally, the emergence of the 'knowledge economy' has placed new demands on higher education, as an integral part of national productivity in supplying new graduates for the workforce. This is seen by many in higher education as a challenge to its traditional sense of freedom and self-direction and a 'change' in the purpose of a university degree (Barrie, 2006; Bathmaker, 2003; Fallows & Steven, 2000). However, despite no guarantees of employment for graduates, there is shared agreement amongst policy makers and those in higher education that universities "can and should promote graduate employability" (Holmes, 2006, p. 1).

Perspectives on employability

Employability is generally considered to be a set of achievements that provide the *potential* for graduates to obtain employment and experience successful careers (Yorke, 2004). It should not be confused with the *actual attainment* of a graduate job; rather, it is about the process of personal and professional development that provides an *ability* to be employed and to be effective in the workplace. Professor Mantz Yorke (2004, p. 6), a key British researcher in the field, provides the most widely-accepted definition of employability:

Employability is a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy

Whilst the Yorke definition refers to employability as a 'set of achievements', it is vital that graduates are able *do* what employers expect them to and apply the learning they have gained from classroom and personal experiences in the workplace. Therefore, irrespective of the 'end result' of employability as the attainment of a job, employability is about *learning*; the development of competencies through engagement in and reflection on experiences should empower and grow the learner where "employment is a by-product of this enabling process" (Harvey, 2005, p. 13).

Sir Mike Rake, Chairman of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, provides some perspective on the importance to employability of actual workplace performance:

Employability skills are not a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills: but they make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009, p.9).

This suggests that graduate employability should be concerned with degree knowledge *plus* workplace effectiveness. Research by Brown et al (2002, p. 19) found that employers take degree knowledge and skills as a baseline: “academic qualifications are the first tick in the box and then we move on. Today we simply take them for granted.” This sounds like a reasonable assumption to make, given that generally all applicants for graduate roles will have a degree and that specialised knowledge and skills are required for most professional roles. By and large, employers are looking to build on existing knowledge and skills and train graduates to work in their organisations as they see fit (Yorke, 2004). What this may mean for employability is a greater focus on the skills and attributes that enable effective performance, although students need to understand what they have developed and how it contributes to their employability from curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

Yorke (2004) suggests that there are three constructs of employability around (i) graduates obtaining jobs, (ii) student development of employability through higher education experiences, and (iii) possession of employability achievements (and therefore potential for job performance). In relation to student development of employability through higher education experiences, it should be acknowledged that ‘experiences’ relates to degree study *and* students’ extra-curricular activities. Yorke’s third construct fits with employer expectations of graduates possessing both professional knowledge and a range of skills and attributes that enable effective workplace performance. Universities generally provide a multiple opportunities outside of the classroom for students to develop their employability, however, there are no guarantees that any experience, both within the higher education context and outside of it, will develop what is required for successful employment and career progression. Studying abroad for a semester or gaining work experience through an internship are not assurances of employability, just as the curriculum process is not (Yorke, 2004). Experiencing something alone is not enough – employability is about what is *learnt* from that experience and how that learning can be articulated in relation to the individual and the role that they are seeking. “The curricular process may *facilitate* the development of prerequisites appropriate to employment, but it does not guarantee it” (Yorke, 2004, p. 7). This could also be applied to activities outside of the classroom. Therefore, an assumption that students are employable on the grounds of curricular (or extra-curricular) provision alone is incorrect; it may be an indication but it is not a guarantee (Yorke, 2004). Learning should be a transformative process where an experience of something new or challenging provides the opportunity for change, both in terms of the development of new capabilities and the enhancement of existing ones. Until students have the chance to draw on the qualities that employers value by experiencing new and challenging situations and then reflecting on their attitudes and behaviours in response to these situations, it is very difficult to develop them.

Experiential learning and employability

If provision of experiences alone is not sufficient for employability, then it is vital that students are able to reflect on the learning from their experiences, which is a key part of experiential learning. As first put forward by John Dewey, experiential learning is “learning by doing” but more specifically “learning by reflection on doing” (Felicia, 2011, p. 1003). Based on the early work by Dewey, Kolb’s (1984, p. 21) four-step experiential learning model includes concrete experience (the experience in the “here and now”), reflective observation (examination of what works and what does not), abstract conceptualisation (consideration of ways to improve in the future) and active experimentation (future actions and behaviour informed by previous experience, thought and reflection). This is particularly valuable for the development of employability as students can use a range of experiences to evaluate their behaviour in terms of what worked in a situation and what did not, and consider how they may do things differently in the future. Through engaging with the four steps of Kolb’s model, students are able to use their experiences, even though they may not be work-related ones, to develop the attributes that employers look for that guide effective performance in the workplace. For example, if a student encounters a challenge while navigating a new study environment abroad, they can reflect on how they reacted to that situation, why they took certain actions and how this action may guide future behaviour. This allows students to examine a situation for its learning opportunities and for the identification of the skills or attributes they may have developed as part of the transformative process of learning from a new or challenging situation. A further step then, is translating that learning into the workplace context given that the development occurred in a non-work setting. Experiential learning also affords students the opportunity to take their own particular learning from an experience, rather than being guided by an instructor specifying the learning that *should have taken place*. As Gentry (1990, p. 9) states, “what the students takes away from a particular experience is often idiosyncratic to his/her perceptions of the experience, and is somewhat outside the control of the instructor” and it provides a participative and interactive platform for personal and professional development, particularly as there is variability and often uncertainty in students’ experiences. This helps students develop their own ‘type’ of employability that draws on their particular strengths.

The University of Colorado (2015) recognises the value of experiential learning to develop knowledge, skills and values from experiences outside of the classroom such as internships, service learning, undergraduate research, study abroad and other professional work experiences. These are common activities that universities provide for students that are taken up from both an engagement perspective and for the opportunities for development. Activities can be designed to include the possibility of transformative learning from the natural process of learning from mishaps and successes but this can also occur in everyday life experiences such as travel, playing sport, volunteering, or belonging to a club or society. What is important is not so much the experience itself but that it

includes self-reflection, self-awareness and accountability for actions taken, and identification of learning gained from an experience which can be carried forward into the future. In line with Kolb's (1984) theories, it is vital that students gain genuine knowledge from an experience, and to do this requires both active engagement with the experience and the skills to conceptualise it in a way that articulates cognitive and behavioural development. In relation to employability development, this is more valuable than attempting to teach students in a classroom situation how to be, for example, more confident and resilient— both attributes that are highly valued by employers. Placing students in situations where they learn to develop these qualities is more authentic and provides deeper learning opportunities if the experience is reflected upon and connected to the employment context.

Initial work on the development of the UQ student employability framework

The development of The University of Queensland (UQ) student employability framework, as part of an overall institutional strategy, began in 2014 with a review of the employability literature. In referencing the work of Brown et al (2002, p. 19), the notion that the degree is something that is “taken for granted” by employers formed the starting point for understanding employability. Project team members then held meetings with human resource professionals in two areas (i) recruitment and selection and (ii) facilitation of both student placement and graduate programs, to ascertain their expectations of new graduates. A range of professional fields were covered although the meetings were mostly with staff from large or public service organisations. The claim by Brown et al (2002) that the degree is a baseline was supported by the data gained from the meetings, with a strong acknowledgement by employers that what they seek over and above professional knowledge are personal attributes that guide behaviour in the workplace. The meetings showed that these expectations are perceived as determining effective performance in the workplace - the ‘ability’ part of employability – and the findings confirm Mike Rake’s statement on employability being about “being good at doing a job” (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009, p.9).

Another key theme emerging from the employer meetings was the importance of the activities and experiences that students have had during their degree studies as indicators of the character of the graduate and as a means of predicting future performance in the workplace. This confirms the research by Caballero and Walker (2010) who explain that graduate recruitment is different from other contexts as graduates lack professional work experience. Therefore, they are usually selected for their *perceived potential* rather than for demonstrable capacity to perform in a particular role. In any recruitment context, recruiters are utilising various selection techniques to connect past achievements and behaviour to the role they need to fill, where this past performance is seen as an indicator of future workplace performance. In the case of graduate recruitment, past performance is assessed mainly through behavioural interview questions where graduates need to draw on a range of experiences to

effectively address the questions, and by the judgements that recruiters make about the activities in which students have been involved and how they contributed to their personal and professional development. It is vital, therefore, that students involve themselves in a range of activities that provide opportunities for development and that they are able to articulate the value of their experiences and how this indicates future workplace potential. This supports the value of experiential learning in terms of student employability development.

The key findings from both the literature and the employer meetings around the importance of learning from experiences and the articulation of that learning led to the creation of a pilot project with current UQ students who were involved in a range of extra-curricular programs. These included study abroad, mentoring, undergraduate research, and various leadership activities, largely because the project team had access to these groups of students. Early focus group work with students in study abroad and mentoring activities indicated that many students did not give much consideration to the value of their experiences in terms of their personal and professional development and they had some difficulty connecting an experience to their employability, especially as the experiences were largely non-work-related. One participant stated that she “had no idea that establishing a relationship with my mentor had anything to do with my employability.” Another commented that he “hadn’t thought that travel experiences were as relatable in job interviews as past employment.” Based on the outcomes from the focus groups, the project team determined a need for a process whereby students are able to conceptualise and analyse their experiences in terms of their employability. Evidence from comments about the difficulty of translating experiences into employability such “I had no clue on how to do so” demonstrated that the need for a scaffolded process to help students to ‘make sense’ out of an experience.

The resulting process was conceptualised around four steps for self-reflection – Situation, Effect, Action and Learning, or SEAL. This approach attempted to replicate the thought process of unpacking an experience and the steps in the experiential learning process as articulated by Kolb (1984) around reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. The SEAL process allows students to consider the particular development opportunity (the Situation of SEAL, or task, activity, event, experience and why it was a learning opportunity), the challenges or new experiences faced and how they impacted on the person (the Effect of SEAL), what they did to deal with the challenge or new experience and why they did this (the Action of SEAL), and their reflection on learning gained from the experience (the Learning of SEAL). The emphasis in the learning part of the process is on how the experience contributed to the student’s personal and professional development and how it may guide the way they do things in the future. The Learning part of SEAL is then used as the basis for identifying the skills or attributes that were developed or enhanced as a result of the experience, and then how they relate to workplace performance.

Further work was undertaken in the pilot project where students were invited to post-activity employability workshops after having been advised during pre-activity information sessions to document their experiences. The post-activity employability workshops used the SEAL process of self-reflection as the key tool for teaching students how to translate experiences into employability. They also raised student awareness around the concept of employability as being about knowledge *and* an ability to do a job effectively. As each workshop was focussed on one particular activity (e.g. study abroad), students were able to share the development opportunities from particular experiences and the challenges or new situations that arose from them and reflect on learning and evaluate how their experiences contributed to personal and professional development. In order to further link the reflections to employability, students explored employer expectations and what they 'look like' in practice and considered how they may meet these expectations based on their experiences. This vital step of conceptualising their development in terms of actual workplace performance was designed to address the gap between the context of the learning and the context in which it is applied.

Evaluation of the pilot project workshops

The pilot project workshops were designed to test the value of the SEAL process in assisting students to reflect on experiences and link them to their personal and professional development and to the skills and attributes that employers expect for effective workplace performance. The aim was also to gather further evidence on the difficulties faced by students in understanding the value of experiences, particularly those that are non-work-related. The ability to apply the learning to future experiences, and throughout students' careers, was strongly emphasised in the workshops, to demonstrate that employability is about lifelong learning. Qualitative evaluations of the pilot project were undertaken with students who participated in the employability workshops across a range of activities over a 12 month period. The sample size was 165 students across the study who were at least in second year of their degree programs and from a range of disciplines. Students opted into the workshops after they were recommended to them during pre-activity information sessions. The anonymous evaluation forms that students completed at the end of the workshops included assessment of the value of the SEAL self-reflection process in the development and articulation of their individual employability. Students were also asked to comment on whether or not they found difficult the process of evaluating an experience and linking it to their employability.

The data demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive response to the workshops and to the SEAL process of self-reflection, where all respondents reported that the workshop was helpful in explaining how to link an experience to employability development, that they felt better able to articulate their employability, and that they would use SEAL with other future learning opportunities. This response

from one participant provides a good indication of the impact of SEAL: “I feel that I will need to analyse more of my life experiences because I think they contribute more to my employability than I thought.” In particular, there was an emphasis in the comments on how the process helped students to better articulate the value of their experience to a potential employer and how to differentiate themselves. One student commented that “it was really useful to have it spelled out to me how I would use my experiences to my advantage in an interview.” Half of the respondents found the process of linking an experience to employability somewhat difficult but most noted that the steps outlined in the workshop made it easier to understand, as did the use of examples of the SEAL self-reflection process. One student reported that the exercises in the workshop “make it a lot easier for us to piece it together” and another wrote that the process “helped challenge my prior way of going through the experience without as high of a consciousness.” Data supported the focus group findings around the difficulty in being able to pinpoint learning from a non-work experience. One student commented thus: “I knew that I had changed and grown during my study abroad experience but I just couldn’t say exactly how.” This comment is a valuable summary of the value of the workshops: “It has opened my eyes to the aspects in which learning experiences can be converted to employability.”

Evaluation of the pilot project confirmed the value of experiential learning to student employability development. It was never the intention of the UQ student employability strategy to be based around workshops on developing the attributes that employers are looking for. Qualities such as confidence, resilience and initiative are not easily learned from a textbook and are more effectively developed through experience, from having to draw on the qualities themselves during those experiences, and from reflecting on the ways that experiences have led to personal and professional development. While 73 of the 165 students involved in the pilot had undertaken the study abroad program, it was clear from the evaluative data that no matter what the experience, students were able to use SEAL to extract learning that was meaningful in employability terms. This student participated in a workshop based on involvement in a student engagement project: “It allowed me to consider how to place my experience into context and how to use it.” The pilot clearly demonstrated that students value the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, recognise their personal and professional development through learning from their experiences, and connect their learning to workplace practice. The structure that the SEAL process provides is particularly valuable, as articulated by one workshop participant: “It is good to have a structured approach. I think the difficulty lies in recalling situations.” Students also value the chance to identify the skills and attributes developed or enhanced from an experience that is not situated in a work context, and subsequently the ability to apply this to the professional sphere.

The development of the UQ student employability framework

The UQ student employability framework has four pillars and it emphasises employability as a learning process through which students reflect on their engagement with a range of experiences and opportunities. It is based on an ethos of lifelong learning and ongoing personal and professional growth. By conceptualising employability as a development process, all experiences are seen as learning opportunities. Furthermore, the framework attempts to address the issues of far transfer where the learning setting is different to the application context (Jackson, 2013) by focussing on reflection to aid the process of transfer from one context to another. The four pillars are set out below:

- **AWARENESS:** Employability is understood as the development of both discipline knowledge and skills, as well as personal attributes that guide workplace performance
- **EXPERIENCES:** Engaging with a range of experiences helps to develop employability
- **LEARNING:** Reflecting on experiences realises individual employability
- **TRANSFER:** Effectively communicating employability in the recruitment process and applying it in the workplace translates learning into performance

The pilot project helped inform the formulation of the four pillars of the framework. The literature is clear on the conceptual confusion that still exists around employability (Harvey, 2001) and thus the first pillar arose from an established need to raise awareness and differentiate employability from the act of securing a job. The first pillar was also informed by feedback from employers around their expectation that graduates develop the qualities needed for effective workplace performance. The second pillar was also informed by data from the employer meetings on the importance of students engaging in developmental opportunities to acquire the attributes that are valued in the workplace. This data is supported by Yorke's (2004) research into the provision of experiences for development and by Caballero and Walker's (2010) research around the use of non-professional experiences by recruiters to make selection decisions. The third and fourth pillars, which are at the heart of the learning process, originated from the positive evaluations from the pilot workshops and the value students were able to derive from unpacking their experiences using the SEAL process of self-reflection and connecting their learning to the workplace context, as well as being able to articulate what they can offer to an employer. Initial focus group work identified that students had some difficulty connecting their experiences to the workplace, which was substantiated in the workshop evaluations, and this was strong evidence for the need for a structured process for reflecting on experiences and translating them into employability. This structured process – SEAL – underpins the third and fourth pillars.

Conclusion

The UQ student employability framework emphasises the alignment between good learning and employability development. The framework underpins the institutional strategy and is based on an understanding of employability from the work of Yorke (2004), which focuses on the development of the achievements that make graduates more likely to be effective in the workplace which benefits themselves, the community and the economy. In order to be employable, students need to undertake a range of experiences, learn from them and connect their learning to their personal and professional development and then to the workplace context. The framework focusses on the benefit of experiential learning, not just on acquiring the technical skills for the recruitment process, and on raising awareness of the concept of employability and employer expectations. It is consistent with Yorke's work which emphasises that the "provision of experiences alone is not a sufficient condition for enhanced employability" (2004, p. 7). Furthermore, it fosters ongoing personal growth and contribution to society, rather than simply job readiness upon graduation. A pilot project to evaluate the value of experiential learning to employability development, and to test the SEAL process of self-reflection, demonstrated the need for students to be provided with opportunities to translate a range of experiences into employability in a scaffolded way. The project informed the development of the UQ student employability strategy which will be implemented from 2016.

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