

**The Student – Worker Interface:
Analysing Business Graduates
Transition into the Workforce.**

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Abstract

The transition from university study to professional working life is important to individual students, employers, higher education organizations (HEOs) and more generally to national economies. Given the number of stakeholders involved in the student-worker transition, alignment of the skills required by industry and skills learnt at university is paramount. This paper will discuss a participation program that is to be offered as a study unit at Macquarie University in 2010 called Professional and Community Engagement program (PACE).¹

PACE programs will offer an opportunity for students to contextualise and develop their professional identity through participation in the workforce, or an alternative form of community engagement. During the course the students will reflect on their professional role and practice using relevant theoretical frameworks. Thus, the professional and community engagement component of the course becomes an authentic learning situation enabling students to develop critical insights to facilitate their future transition from

study/university to the workforce, as well as an opportunity for employers to have an input into how students are prepared for the workforce by HEOs.

Expected outcomes of this paper include an enhanced understanding of the nature of business graduates' transition from learning to work and suggestions as to how higher education curricula may be re-informed using PACE to better prepare business graduates for a life of or at work. The paper will investigate the nature and quality of business graduates' current transition to work and suggest ways to facilitate more successful student-worker transitions. We will also examine the existing gap between HEO institutional and employer rhetoric in the form of graduate capability statements, the 'degree work mismatch,' (Yorke & Knight, 2007) and compare these to the reality of post-education life for higher education (HE) business graduates.

Introduction

Students attend university for a variety of reasons, for example, for new experiences, career preparation and increased knowledge. However, there is general consensus that university students' main academic motivation is driven by extrinsic factors such as career prospects or vocational reasons (Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006 and Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais & Briere, 1992). The fact that students' career prospects play a large part in their motivation to enrol and complete university studies highlights a need for substantive research to address whether student expectations of the practical use of their degrees is matched by the reality of their post-education experience. As a program, PACE facilitates in the resolution of the degree

¹ Macquarie University, Faculty of Business and Economics had developed such a program which will be piloted in 2010.

work mismatch by providing students with an opportunity for critical reflection in an academic framework. PACE aims to build work-related skills into the students learning context and as such provides students with relevant professional skills as well as technical and interpersonal generic skills, also known as graduate attributes.

The first year experience of university students, “is well recognised as an area of transition” in higher education (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Kift, 2008). Paradoxically, while graduate transition to work is critical to the graduate and/or student experience, there are very few substantive qualitative studies on Australian graduates’ perceptions and experiences once they leave university for professional work (Wood, 2004). Although there have been Australian studies from the employers’ and professional societies’ viewpoints (Precision Consultancy, 2007). This paper recognizes the gap in Australian research literature, particularly the lack of studies that are from graduate or student-worker perspectives (Johnston, 2003). We propose that all HEO business teaching and learning experiences be benchmarked to include an experiential component of teaching, such as PACE in order to assist students to improve their connection with their discipline area and the wider community (Yorke & Knight, 2007).

For example, research suggests that employers continue to be disappointed by the skill levels exhibited by university graduates (Rigby, 2009, p. 7). It is industry’s view that many graduates are not prepared for the process of getting a job nor coping with the work environment when they do get a job. The

current global financial crisis exacerbates the transition issues experienced by students with Yorke and Knight (2007) suggesting that competition for jobs is a major reason as to why graduates are not finding it easy to get employment. Economic trends and effects such as the competitive employment marketplace, has meant that some students, particularly final year students maybe sacrificing their study and learning time to focus on getting jobs, arguably creating a tension around the values of scholarship and the reality of workmanship. It is therefore critical to identify the preparatory needs of the student cohort (being work-ready) in order to develop responses to identified needs to ensure overall student/graduate success by decreasing such threats to their academic achievement, particularly in light of the fact that employability is consistent with academic values and success.

PACE as a pedagogical tool

PACE will provide an opportunity for students to become engaged, ethical citizens who are able to be socially and environmentally active and accountable and capable of professional judgement and initiative. This will be achieved by students directly engaging with community in a variety of workplaces including government agencies, companies, industry partners and non-for profit organisations. Such an experience in turn will produce bi-products such as, increased student contextual understanding of business models including the role of the individual in organisations which will help students to be ‘better’ employees as they are trained to work in partnership with their

employers to achieve their organisational missions and purposes. PACE's pedagogical value lies in its ability to include participation activities into the academic context. For example, it can be used to include work integrated learning, co-curricular activities, community voluntary services as well as service learning. These activities allow students to use their subject knowledge in appropriate contexts by allowing students personal qualities such as beliefs and theories of self efficacy to develop through reflection or metacognition.

Like experience based learning PACE is based on a number of assumptions about learning. For example, PACE recognizes participation as central to deep learning. It is a holistic process that requires learners to reflect, evaluate and reconstruct experiences as essential stages in learning. PACE recognizes learning as a social construct that is influenced by the "socio-emotional context in which it occurs," (Andresen, Boud, and Cohen, (2000, p.225) quoting Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993). As such, PACE relies on the premise that learning involves the entire individual not just the cognitive or academic dimensions. The latter concept is now widely accepted by academics and educational theorists and is visible in almost all universities across the world in the form of graduate capabilities (Barrie, 2004, p. 262; Bowden et al., 2000). Graduate capabilities are also known as generic, soft or employability skills. These include but are not limited to the communication and interpersonal skills, analytical reasoning and cultural awareness. These graduate skills are deemed as important to one's development as a student, a professional

as well as a private citizen (Rigby, 2009).

Graduate capabilities success can be improved through the PACE process as PACE promotes full-range training for the individual. The PACE process is crucial to measurable development of capabilities or attributes such as value training, perceptive training, awareness and emotional intelligence, which arguably can only be adequately tested and developed in a simulation scenario. This is not to suggest that experience on its own leads to holistic learning development – the experience itself must be specifically conducive to the intended outcome. In the case of HEs, PACE must be relevant to educational outcomes, such as the development of professionals, ethical citizens and / or work-ready graduates.

Incorporating PACE into curricula design will help align HEO accreditation expectations with workplace and / or other post-education expectations. For example, providing students with real-life problem-based questions would provide students with an opportunity to draw practical and relevant skills that they can apply in various post-education situations, such as the workforce. Problem-based questions are an example of PACE in practice, and have the ability to enhance student understanding and engagement with curricula. Reid et al. (2005) suggest that the level of students' experience and reflection on their future career expectations throughout their studies affects their level of competence in subsequent professional work. Other research substantiates this view by suggesting that career-oriented students have a deeper, more personal and relevant engagement with the subject of

study and consequently have an easier and more comfortable transition into their subject-specific workplace, (Wood & Reid, 2006; Meyer & Land, 2005; Wood & Solomonides, 2008). PACE can provide a basis for tailored future development, inclusive of career orientation as well as a platform for lifelong learning.

In a different study, Abrandt Dahlgren et al., (2006) studied groups of students in three European countries across three discipline areas. The researchers found that psychology students who were taught in a problem-based manner that reflected their likely work situations tended to have fewer transition problems than engineering students who were taught in a more traditional, theoretical way. Following this argument, we contend that many business students, like the engineering students in the European study, are taught in a more traditional and theoretical way and thus may lack adequate employability skills, which has been described by some researchers as one of the reasons for graduate unemployment and stunted progress with in the workplace (Yorke & Knight, 2007). Problem-based pedagogy, team development and role-playing opportunities can provide business students with ample relevant experiences during their educational experience, to reflect on and develop solutions for future situations such as the transition to work. While our focus in this paper is on business students' transition to the workforce, our work can be translated to other study areas with pedagogical similarities to business studies and also other post-education activities. As an example, an unemployed business graduate with problem-solving skills would have the reasoning and resilience

to weather the storm, or the creativity and ingenuity to discover self-employment opportunities, in the current global economic crisis.

Where are business graduates going and why?

A study of the Australian labour market for business graduates allows us to see how successful business graduates are in finding appropriate professional employment. At first glance, one might be forgiven for thinking that there is an oversupply of business graduates given the sheer number of students (especially international students)² taking business programs in Australian HEOs (Birell et al., 2005). Be that as it may, there are still significant skills shortages in business areas such as accounting raising questions as to where are business graduates going?

The (Graduate Careers Australia, 2008) survey shows that new Australian Resident Business Graduates enter a wide range of employment ranging from more professional work as accountants, and economists to general work such as in administration. The average rate of full-time employment in accounting, business studies and economics graduates is 86.9 per cent within four months of completing their degrees. While this is 1.7 per cent more employment than the average graduate, it does not distinguish what type of full-time employment students are in, so the students may very well be in general skill employment such as in hospitality. These statistics are interesting in light of the fact that unlike nurses and

² The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) found that 40% of enrolments of international students were in business programs. (2007 or 2008??)

psychologists, business graduates are generally viewed as requiring further training before they can become professionals in their fields of study; for example, accounting students are required to successfully complete accreditation courses before they can be professional accountants. PACE situations such as structured, student-specific tailored internships incorporated into business courses would more adequately prepare and empower student-workers to make a high-quality transition to the workplace (Precision Consultancy, 2007) and to successfully participate and contribute to society and the economy.

Different students, different experiences of transition: How PACE can narrow the discrepancy

The diversity of business student cohorts due to the many sub-disciplines in their study implies diversity in students' experiences in the transition to the workplace and beyond. The experience of transition to the workforce is also dependent on whether the students are transitioning as domestic or international students (Sidoryn & Slade, 2007). The University of South Australia (UniSA, 2007a) provides comparative data on domestic and international students' professional development. Their research showed that international students perceived themselves to be 'under-prepared and potentially disadvantaged to enter the workforce.' This was deduced from the fact that international students had a lower agreement level on all employability skills statements when compared with domestic student responses (with the average agreement level being 21%

lower than that of domestic student responses).

UniSA also reviewed actual employment outcomes (which can be used as a measure of student-worker transition) for domestic versus international students by using data from a Graduate Destination Survey (GDS). The GDS data revealed that over a 3-year period (2005-2007) graduate employment outcomes for international students were reportedly averaging 33% lower than that of domestic students who had successfully gained full-time employment at the completion of their studies, and 24% higher for those not working and still seeking full-time employment. It is our view that variables between international and domestic students' development of employability skills, such as workplace culture and English language proficiency, may be mitigated by embedding PACE strategies in business curricula. Such strategies could lead to a higher number of successful international graduate articulations from study into the Australian workforce.

Recommendations: How to enhance business graduate transition to the workforce

Employability skills are generic graduate attributes that many employers see as necessary characteristics, which should have been acquired by graduate workers in order for them to be reasonably competent in industry (Bowden et al., 2000). The Department of Education, Science and Training (2002) defines employability skills as the general skills required to gain employment and to progress within an enterprise; these skills include communication, teamwork and emotional intelligence. Graduates

including business graduates need to develop employability skills as well as subject-specific skills in order to make a smooth transition into their career and become adaptive and productive in the workforce. HEO business programs could incorporate PACE opportunities for students to embed and integrate employability skills through fieldwork and other such simulations of post-education life, such as ethical dilemma solving. Such opportunities would increase the students' comprehension of the social, employment and academic culture (Petocz et al., 2001), and enhance students' perceptions and insight into their future choices. Moreover, such opportunities would increase the potential productivity of business graduates and would give them a competitive edge in accessing the workforce (Holtermann, 1995) and other post-education activities.

While almost all HEOs ostensibly incorporate employability skills in their curricula, these skills are not adequately developed nor tested to meet workplace expectations. Redesign of curricula to include implementation of PACE would involve, "the conscious attempt to establish situations which provide learning in a real context or one that is as close to some aspect of the real context as can be designed ..." (Andresen et al., 2000). For example, communication in business studies tends to be almost wholly tested in writing and teamwork is infrequent and selective. This is a far cry from the reality of the workforce where communication is often verbal and teamwork is constant and indiscriminate. With well-tailored PACE activities, the HE sector could improve business graduates knowledge and generic skills, which are necessary to ease student-

worker transitions into the workforce. The articulation of academic experience into harnessed worker skills can be achieved by incorporating PACE into business curricula design, such as introducing an affective third year *Transition to the Workforce* [goals and values] subject (Wood, 2006).

Reid and Petocz (2007) suggest that internationalization could be viewed as a tool to align curriculum objectives and activities to current world job-market requirements. PACE can be used to tackle traditional educational issues including the effects of globalization on the certainty of notions of articulation of different levels and cultures of education, by providing transcendent learning outcomes rather than the usual, limited country-specific cognitive educational perspective. Such a hybrid pedagogical design would equip Australian business graduates with a globally competitive and sustainable business and social understanding, which would make business students highly sought after and productive in any workforce. Moreover, running practical workshops can have the ability to promote a critical approach to post higher-education life in business graduates as well as enhance graduate resilience in a range of circumstances.

Also, PACE assessment tasks will be key learning activities. Assessment will be based on participation in induction and debrief sessions, a mid semester progress report to the supervisor allows students to demonstrate their increasing understanding of business and the role they might play in business, and a reflective journal to allow the students to reflect on the relationship between work

and study and their own motivations and goals in each.

Moreover, while assessment of employability skills in HEOs is challenging, HEOs can ensure that graduates gain employability skills and consequently employment (which is an important and well-recognised motivation for study) by keeping in contact with alumni. One such research study has recently been pioneered in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Macquarie University. In such a situation even the HEO is an active recipient of PACE, based on the experience, reflections and perceptions of its alumni. Another PACE strategy could be to develop interactive assessment tasks in business such as real-life professional work or applied research. Moreover, by identifying alumni's experiences in work, HEOs can ensure that relevant skills are taught and learnt by existing students, particularly international students, making it the beginning of a life-long learning process. UniSa, for example, developed an International Student Course Survey (ICSS) based around student motivations for study. The cohorts were separated into two groups; one was students studying at UniSA to receive an international qualification with the intention of returning to their home country for employment; and the other group was students studying at UniSA with the intention of remaining in Australia and seeking ongoing employment. While UniSA has not as yet used the ICSS Survey, this classification enables each cohort to easily identify career needs based on their desired outcomes. The UniSa report suggested:

For example, a Group 2 student will be able to identify that in order to address permanent residency requirements they will need to achieve specific competencies such as English language proficiency and local work experience. Knowledge and awareness of such criteria allows the student to maximise relevant opportunities available to them through PACE studies and enhance their ability to stay in Australia as skilled migrants. The UniSA research study and this paper's philosophy is that career development starts at the beginning of a students' degree with specific sessions {of experience}³ occurring throughout all years of study to support career development" (UniSA, 2008).

PACE is a hot issue, because it has the ability to mitigate the effect of the divergent conceptualisations of graduate / student-worker outcomes. Implementing PACE can be viewed as good practice in that it breaks down individual barriers and provides meaningful development to the student and ultimately the graduate. Given the magnitude of their responsibilities, business graduates need a broader range of skills to succeed in the marketplace. There is a crucial need for curriculum reform to assist graduates with their transition to the workforce. HEOs and industry need to form a partnership in order to adequately prepare students for the main purpose for which they study: to find work. While technical and theoretical expertise is a necessary capability in the workforce, like Scott

³ Word in brackets our own.

and Yates (2002) we conclude that “it is not sufficient” to produce a successful graduate who does not have the skills that a competent employee ought to have. While students are vitally interested in their careers, they often wrongly believe that theoretical knowledge and technical skills will gain them employment, whereas employers value collateral skills such as communication and leadership skills.

While PACE has some limitations, such as the determination of standards of education with certainty and integrity in assessment and its administration intensity, PACE increases student-worker identity and provides future workers with greater awareness and understanding of the reality of life. We recommend that the workforce and HEO organizations should further invest in industry advisory groups to facilitate the flow of information between industry and higher education to improve and enhance transitional success stories of the student – worker interface. International consensus suggests that the reach, quality and performance of a nation’s higher education system are key determinants of its economic and social progress (Australian Business Deans Council, 2008). An effective transition of business graduates facilitated through PACE implementation strategies is paramount for economic growth and future economic prosperity nationally and globally for the trained professionals whom we entrust with the running and maintenance of our economies.

This paper has provided evidence that illustrates how experiential based learning, exemplified by PACE can be used as an effective pedagogical tool that

aligns and improves business graduates’ educational outcomes from different stakeholders’ perspectives. It is imperative that the advantages of PACE’s integration into learning, teaching and professional development at Macquarie University be realised. After all, experience based learning may well supplement students scholarship by nurturing technical and graduate attributes such as resilience and cross-cultural skills that graduates will require post education to be ethical, socially and economically viable global citizens.

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