Management students’ engagement with industry: an embedded approach to scaffolding employability skills

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Abstract

Many universities have underpinned their curricula with statements of graduate skills and the aim that their graduates will possess attributes which will make them professionally ready for the workforce. At Victoria University (VU) the ‘Making VU’ project has committed to all courses having 25% of assessment linked to workplace activities to increase students’ employment prospects. Linking graduate employability skills with discipline specific assessment is one route to achieving such an outcome. This paper will explore how assessment tasks in two units of study are used in developing employability skills through students moving from being self-directed learners to self-directed reflective learners.
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Abstract

Many universities have underpinned their curricula with statements of graduate skills and the aim that their graduates will possess attributes which will make them professionally ready for the workforce. Victoria University (VU) is undergoing a process of reflection and restructuring to better engage with stakeholders, such as employers. The ‘Making VU’ project has five commitments; one of which is for all courses to have 25% of assessment linked to workplace activities as a tangible means of increasing students’ employment prospects.

While the endpoint is graduate employability, many students in the Faculty of Business and Law complete a work placement program between second and third year. Students are engaged in employment appropriate for their degree specialisation and at the same time reflect, theorize and evaluate their practical experience against their academic knowledge.

For the program to be successful and graduate employability to improve, there needs to be constant growth and reinforcement of the identified employability skills. This is a course and subject level responsibility. One of the core subjects undertaken before the work placement is Management and Organisation Behaviour (M&OB). The focus of this paper is the development of one particular assessment task within M&OB that requires students to start making authentic connections between theory and practice.

The success of the assessment task can be measured in a number of ways. Oral feedback from employers of students has consistently been positive and the student experience has improved as the resources have been refined. This paper will also explore how to develop students from being self-directed learners to self-directed reflective learners.

Key words: graduate employability, graduate skills, profession-ready
Introduction

Many Australian universities have formally structured and longstanding programs for work integrating learning in their vocationally specific courses such as Accounting and Hospitality Management. For students in these courses the transition from the theoretical knowledge to the practical skills may be technically difficult but cognitively obvious, that is, links with professional workplace practises are explicitly and consistently made within curricula. As students’ workplace experiences have become more widespread, those students from less vocationally linked courses seem to have struggled more because the theories and practices are less connected, less tangible, and often quite subtle (Boud and Solomon 2001).

Universities Australia (UA) released a discussion paper in May 2008 that argued strongly for a National Internship Scheme in order to improve the work readiness of Australian university graduates. The background to this paper is a skills shortage within Australia that is arguably hindering economic growth and international competitiveness. This is a macro level focus with a whole of nation view.

At the micro level, a practical response has been Victoria University’s organisational change program, Making VU. In order to be of greater value to and meet the future employment needs of its student population, VU has introduced a Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) policy stating that all courses will have 25% of assessment linked to workplace activities (Victoria University 2008).

According to a recent NAGCAS report, work-integrated learning is an educational vehicle for the provision of experiences that can contribute to career development learning (McIlveen, Brooks, Lichtenburg, Smith, Torjul and Tyler, 2008). A significant cohort within VU’s student population consists of students from the lower socio-economic status areas of Melbourne and who are first-in-family to go beyond the compulsory education level, enhancing employment prospects for these students is a high priority (Victoria University 2008a).

Whether the issue is approached from a macro perspective or from a micro level of individual personal need, the skill development required to maximise any workplace learning is a critical success factor for employment outcomes. An essential part of successful professional development is the acquisition of the capacity to be self reflective (Lucas & Tan 2007). All workplace skills such as these need to be
developed over time in a supported environment (Fiocco 1996). Most Australian universities have constructed their own set of graduate skills (Bowden, Hart et al. 2000) and many now market themselves on the skills or attributes that their courses develop (Charles Darwin University 2007). In an ACER study, reported on by UA, the importance of various job skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative, planning and self management was acknowledged by graduates as high. Retrospectively, graduates have been quite favourable about the degree to which university studies have developed these same skills and prepared students for work (Universities Australia (UA) 2008). One aspect however, with which students have been less satisfied, has been the work experience component (UA 2008, p.4).

The approach of designing a curriculum which integrates and assesses employability skills was endorsed by the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) 2007). Taking this broad ambition and weaving the objective through the coherent sequence of units of study making up a degree curriculum is perhaps a task more easily said than done. The premise of this paper is that students are not always adequately prepared for their workplace learning, hence student satisfaction, and employer satisfaction, with the experience may be low. To improve the satisfaction levels of all concerned, the units of study taken prior to the formal workplace experience must assume more responsibility for the systematic and structured development of workplace skills.

This paper focuses on one approach by presenting examples of LiWC assessment tasks from two VU units of study that endeavour to make explicit the connection between the skills being utilised and developed while investigating authentic management and business practices.

Context

To achieve the aim of making a minimum of 25% of course assessment apply to learning in the workplace and community (LiWC) at VU it is intended that LiWC learning and assessment activities will be embedded in all courses as a fundamental part of the educational process. The LiWC policy at VU proposes a flexible interpretation of what 25% of all assessment means. Rather than focussing on
a precise quantification of LiWC the developing policy proposes an interpretation which places quality teaching and learning above mere compliance with a numerical target. In other words, the developing policy will countenance a course with less than 25% of LiWC assessment if the experience is demonstrably a valuable one. The staging of LiWC across a course and the overall time devoted to learning in the workplace and/or community activities will vary greatly depending upon choice of approaches, professional accreditation requirements and regulations.

Within the approach adopted by VU, LiWC is deemed to be learning and assessment activities that occur in, for and through the workplace, including in the community, as a site for teaching and learning. In this interpretation of LiWC “workplace” is deemed to be any place where individuals (paid or voluntary) conduct real or simulated work activities or research. Hence, workplaces may be real, simulated or virtual, in the private, public or community sectors, and range from multi-nationals and government agencies, to small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and community based agencies.

Thus, LiWC activities may take place across a broad range of settings, including: in the workplace or community enterprise, in the classroom (where projects are undertaken for a workplace or community enterprise), and within the VU workplace and learning community. The range of activities includes such things as assignments that require students to visit an organisation for the purpose of observation, data gathering or interviewing employees. Such an assignment entailing a workplace visit represents an “entry level” LiWC activity. At the further end of the continuum of LiWC activities are such things as internships and Co-Operative Education work placements (Keating 2006).

This paper presents information about both ends of the LiWC assessment spectrum at VU, namely a task within the first year subject and how it is constructively aligned with the other end of the spectrum, Co-Operative Education (Co-Op). The Co-Op year at VU is twelve months of full-time paid employment that is normally taken at the end of the second year of a three year degree.

Parallel to the LiWC initiative is the ePortfolio project at VU which is a process leading students to collect career information about the skills, specialist knowledge, achievements and experiences they have acquired during their studies and other activities while at university. The career information collected is stored online and can be downloaded by the student to be presented to potential employers.
or to other academic institutions as a portfolio. Students are brought to an understanding of VU’s graduate attributes via engagement, from 1st year, with the ePortfolio.

Working from the premise that VU has many first in family students as well as students from low socio-economic status areas in Melbourne, the ePortfolio project aims to enhance the employability skills of students by presenting a framework for linking their university experiences with workplace selection criteria. The career ePortfolio is presented to students as a powerful personal marketing tool that will enable them to be better prepared to apply for work experience, vacation work, graduate programs or promotions in their current workplace. Students are also told that portfolios are used in a number of industries and have many purposes including analysis of the skills and experience that have been acquired, both in and out of the workplace, in relation to employer requirements.

First year

One of the core subjects undertaken by Bachelor of Business students at VU before the work placement is Management and Organisation Behaviour (M&OB). This is a compulsory core unit for Bachelor of Business (B. Bus) students, normally undertaken during the first year. The subject, as part of the B. Bus compulsory core, is not only taught in Melbourne but also at a number of locations offshore, namely Beijing and Hong Kong in China, Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru in Malaysia and Bangkok in Thailand. From a pedagogical perspective the range of social and educational contexts makes it difficult to meet the needs of a widely diverse student cohort. Within the context of transnational education it is also critical to maintain comparability of learning outcomes (DEST 2005).

The majority of students taking M&OB have entered their degree course directly from secondary school. While many have part time work to support their studies, the anticipated outcome of their degree, professional employment, is not yet fully appreciated by them from an academic learning perspective. Some students would be able to argue the basic assumption that having had a job helps them to get another job but these students still need to be encouraged to identify and reflect upon the skills that they have acquired in their studies. These students are also largely not yet able to demonstrate a longitudinal career development perspective.
As a starting point for students to make more significant connections between their academic learning and the workplace, the M&OB assessment tasks have been reviewed by the teaching team and through consultation with past students. The result is a better alignment of the learning objectives with the learning outcomes of the assessment tasks and a more supported developmental approach to learning (Biggs 2003). One assessment task in particular has been reworked and resourced to facilitate early growth of job skills and is consistent with the VU LiWC policy. This task is a “field work” assignment that sits at the entry level point of the VU LiWC range of assessment activities. As a group work assignment, groups of three students are required to interview a manager. The aim of the interview is to find out how managers typically spend their day, week, month, or year. Students are then required to write a report comparing the answers they receive to their interview questions and their observations of the manager interviewed with current management theory.

Students are asked to use their comparison to make informed comments about the role of the manager in the workplace. By comparing actual managers in the workplace with the theoretical “ideal best practice” described in textbooks, lectures and other sources, students are expected to be able to see how theory relates to practice. The process of comparing information and observations with theory is the basis of much of the academic writing that students will engage with in their studies at university. The setting for this assignment and the aim of comparing theory with practice is intended to model for students an analytical method and approach to learning in the workplace that can be built upon in subsequent units of study within their university studies.

The assignment in M&OB aims to give students a professional preview of workplace management practices; it is focused primarily on the discipline specific aim of comparing theory with practice. However, students are also asked to work in groups and, as part of the formal reporting requirement of the assignment, to reflect on their group processes using the Core Graduate Attributes (CGAs) as a framework for this reflection. Through this aspect of the assignment students are introduced to reflective practice using the core graduate attributes, which in the Co-Operative Education units is the focus rather than the discipline itself.
Many of the prior tutorial activities but in particular one structured resource, the VU ePortfolio introduction module, assists the students with this first piece of reflective writing. By working through the scenarios and worksheets in this module students are required to document and identify their current skills against the core graduate attributes, learn to value additional skills and start a career development plan.

The assignment requirement to interview a manager in industry is a potential barrier to success for offshore students, as many students do not have the local social networks or cultural context to undertake such a task. Similarly, feedback from onshore and offshore teaching staff in M&OB points to the difficulties faced by students in these categories who, for cultural reasons or from lack of access to a suitable network of contacts, are unable to negotiate time with a manager to conduct the interview. The assignment requires relatively sophisticated communication skills, the ability to access and utilise social and community networks and an understanding of the etiquette and protocols of the broader business community.

To help students to overcome this barrier and to assist with writing questions and interviewing techniques a DVD of manager interviews providing a range of ‘model interviews’ is available. The learner-centred DVD presents structured interviews with business leaders from the western region of Melbourne, Malaysia, mainland China and Hong Kong. The interviews are conducted in English and where appropriate bilingually in Cantonese, Mandarin and Malay.

The DVD of manager interviews will also benefit students in M&OB who are not from the above at risk categories. The interviews with managers from China and Malaysia will present alternative approaches to universal business management issues and model cross-cultural values to students who have limited contact with alternative cultural perspectives of business.

This assessment task is designed to be a precursor to later year, more comprehensive Learning in the Workplace and Community models. The academic skills, knowledge and abilities developed by students as they undertake this assessment task provide scaffolding for the development of the more sophisticated academic skills that these students will need to be successful in later year units of study. The DVD of support materials will provide additional scaffolding for the at risk categories of NESB,
SES, First in Family and international students for this acquisition of academic skills which will have positive effects in a number of other units of study across all years in the degree program.

Post second year

Bachelor of Business students at VU have the option of undertaking a Co-Operative Education year (Co-Op) as part of their degree studies. While students are off campus for their Co-Op year they are enrolled in two semester-long units of study, Co-Op Education 1 and 2, and are required to submit assignments for these units.

The VU Co-Op subjects’ assessment tasks are designed to guide students towards a reflection on the integration of their academic and workplace learning. The VU Co-Op subjects’ aims are to have students explore their workplace context by examining the organisational structure and identifying and defining their individual role as active and accountable employees within the organisation as well as that organisation’s position within the respective profession and/or industry. Furthermore the Co-Op units of study seek to facilitate the development of an understanding of the key issues relating to the students’ transition to the professional workplace, including workplace culture, professional etiquette and communications (Kimber 1996). The Co-Op subjects also encourage an exploration of key processes such as employment legislation and industrial relations, reporting accountabilities and performance appraisals; identify the key generic skills required by their employer/industry, and their relationship to Victoria University's Core Graduate Attributes (Victoria University 2005; Victoria University 2005a).

The assessment tasks in the current VU Co-Op education units of study are structured around student reflection on their workplace experiences. This reflection builds on earlier ePortfolio work and is framed within the VU CGAs. Assessment tasks comprise, amongst other things, a series of reflective journals, a self appraisal report and a career plan. Each of these assignments requires students to understand the CGAs and to interpret and discuss their workplace experiences through the prism of the CGA framework.

Results
The use of core graduate attributes as a framework for reflection and self-appraisal has a particular focus on teaching and learning issues in that it supports students transiting into different levels of Higher Education degrees from both Vocational Education and high school. Different levels of academic and professional readiness can be read in the excerpts below.

One M&OB student reflecting on her performance in the group assignment said:

“This report has enabled me to highlight the areas that are opportunities for myself… I once believed that it was my responsibility to have all tasks done by myself but I now know it’s my responsibility to ensure they are done, but not physically take part in each one. I need to involve my whole team…”

Another student from M&OB has articulated in her report conclusion the value of the ePortfolio as a planning tool:

“I evaluated how my group assignment skills have improved and developed using the group development model in the textbook and the core graduate attributes. I will go ahead and plan a long-term goal using the ePortfolio that will help me achieve a top position with a leading company.”

Reflecting on her Co-Op year, student A said

“… studying at university gave me a profound theoretical basis … also … the five core graduate attributes …helped me to improve these skills and apply some of my theoretical knowledge …”

While the following Co-Op student, student B, is a little short on detail, B has acknowledged that he still has some strengths and weaknesses:

*Over the past two semesters I have developed all 5 CGAs and I will continue to do so during my career. As CGA 3 and 4 were my strongest workplace skills after semester 1, my aim was to improve the remaining three over the second period of Coop. After measuring all CGAs once again I have proven to myself that the weaker three have indeed improved and I have developed all five dramatically since I began my Coop experience.*

More positively, this Co-Op student, student C, has realised the value of academic results:

*My CoOp experience has allowed me to consider some academic goals for the remainder of my university course. I have only three subjects until I complete my degree and I am more motivated than
ever to do well. These are all events-related subjects so I should perform well but I would like to achieve excellent results because it will reflect on what I have learned during my CoOp – which has been a great deal!

Discussion

The assessment tasks discussed are constructively aligned with the learning objectives of the units of study and B.Bus degree. The academic skills, knowledge and abilities developed by students as they undertake the first year assessment task provide scaffolding for the development of the more sophisticated academic skills that these students will need to be successful in later year units of study.

Within the 1st year undergraduate subject workplace behaviours are modelled and demonstrated through the use of DVD materials and practised via the field research component of the assessment task. The DVD of interviews with business managers also supports students by providing models of interview techniques required by many Higher Education assignments; adds to the internationalisation of the curriculum by providing Australian, Malaysian and Chinese management perspectives; and works to ensure equity in assessment outcomes by providing all students with access to resources for successful completion of the assignment. As Hicks, Reid and George argue, the broad aim of learning support should be “to assist students to maximise the opportunities of the environment they are learning in” (1999,p.4).

VU’s students are from low socio-economic status areas and very keen to improve their employment prospects which is one reason why “profession readiness” is being added to the existing CGAs. At the micro level, ‘It is agreed that graduate employability concerns should not and cannot be matters for university action alone. This said, the need for universities to embed employability skills as part of the graduate skill set through curriculum design, course content and delivery is fully endorsed’ (UA 2008,p.15). As suggested by Lucas & Tan (2007) the skills of self reflection must be systematically developed over all units within an academic program and not confined only to those with an explicit workplace orientation. However, at the macro level, given the importance placed on work readiness
amongst students Universities Australia has also conceded that “The issue of work-readiness is not easily solved by higher education institutions on their own. This point is supported by McIlveen et al in their 2008 report. Their responsibility and expertise lie in providing general, flexible education, training and professional skills development, i.e. education that encompasses inquiry, teaching, research and community engagement, not vocational preparation and skills alone (UA 2008 p.6)”; VU has publicly made commitments to this end.

Achieving student support for the Co-Op educations units of study has been perceived as additional work, or as an additional burden on curriculum or assessment design. This paper has presented evidence demonstrating that with minor review and revision existing assessment tasks can be modified to fit with a longitudinal approach to constructively aligning assessment across a degree program. The authors of this paper believe that similar opportunities exist in other first and second year units to modify assessment tasks such that they scaffold student learning for LiWC and ultimately employability skills.
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