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From passion to profession: an employability framework in sport development

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Abstract

Employers seek graduates with a broad skill set who can acquire and implement new skills to quickly adapt to changes in the workplace. To ensure graduates are well-equipped for the workforce, universities should prioritise not just delivery of discipline-specific coursework, but also provision of opportunities for students to cultivate their employability skills. Tailored employability initiatives across the lifecycle of a degree are presented in this paper. By examining a case study in Sport Development, the article showcases how structured employability curriculum can be effectively integrated into core subjects to provide students with the essential abilities and understanding required for graduate employment. This paper demonstrates that universities have the potential to further strengthen students' employability skills by incorporating customised employability initiatives throughout the student lifecycle, encompassing both curricular and co-curricular activities. Universities are encouraged to work closely with alumni, industry, and other stakeholders to develop a degree-wide approach to employability activities that are tailored to the needs of students and their future profession.

Keywords

career
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career
readiness;
employability
framework;
graduate
preparedness;
student
experience;
work integrated
learning

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Introduction

As the job market continues evolving at a rapid pace, it is becoming increasingly critical for university students to acquire and develop employability skills (Østergaard & Nordlund, 2019; Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019). Over the years, researchers have attempted to reach agreement when defining the term 'employability'. There is however widespread consensus that employability skills refer to the qualities, traits, and abilities that enable individuals to perform effectively in a professional setting (Bridgstock, 2009). Employers seek candidates with not only technical skills but also transferable skills, such as communication, adaptability, emotional intelligence, teamwork, flexibility, and innovation (Daubney, 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023).

Despite the increasing trend towards integrating employability skill development and knowledge into higher education, the majority of employability initiatives are typically conveyed through co-curricular experiences delivered by the institution's careers department, through informal and dialogic methods

(Dean et al., 2022) or through traditional work placement opportunities, commonly known as work-integrated learning (WIL). In the latter approach, students are placed in real workplace settings to acquire practical experience relevant to the industry (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2008). On the other hand, purposely designed, integrated interventions, referred to as 'employability embedded curriculum', aim to prepare students for the workforce by providing formal experiences, practical skills, and the knowledge necessary to succeed on their chosen career paths. Employability embedded curriculum is particularly effective in promoting student retention (Bennett, 2021) and professional identity development (Bates et al., 2019), as students are able to see the direct relevance of their coursework to their future careers. By integrating employability tasks throughout the curriculum, students can learn about the expectations and requirements of their chosen professions and are better prepared to enter the workforce as confident, competent professionals.

The positive impact of employability tasks on both short-term employment and lifelong-lifewide senses have been identified by researchers (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). In a longitudinal study of creative industries graduates, Bridgstock (2011) empirically demonstrated this link, highlighting that employability focused curriculum was associated with subjective graduate outcomes such as career satisfaction and rated employability, as well as objective outcomes such as income. In 2003, Gore et al. conducted research on the impact of career development learning on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The study revealed a positive influence on the students' perception of the quality of their job roles, the alignment between their interests and roles, and their career outlook two years after participating in the program.

Employability tasks that are scaffolded throughout a student's academic journey, rather than being limited to a one-off work placement opportunity or assessment item, are recognised as highly beneficial. Harris-Reeves et al., (2022) explored the perceptions of students undergoing a transition strategy including a suite of tailored employability initiatives throughout the first year of the degree. The initiatives were found to promote student engagement and satisfaction as students transitioned into their studies contributing to their sense of identity, connectedness, and purpose (Wilson et al., 2011). Bates and Haynes (2017) noted the effective integration of an employability curriculum across the student lifecycle, with evidence of enhanced employability skills through all transition stages as they advance towards tertiary studies, throughout their academic journey, and after they graduate. Further, Bridgstock and Hearn (2012) presented a comprehensive program model to develop employability skills, emphasising its cyclical nature of constructing professional identity starting from the first year of study. It was identified that the approach allowed students to introspect on their fundamental interests, abilities, and values, while creating avenues for aligning their future career prospects. Through this process, individuals cultivated their aptitude for 'self-management' in career development (Bridgstock, 2009). When this process was initiated, students actively and meaningfully participated in the learning opportunities provided throughout the remainder of the degree. According to Bridgstock (2009), as students develop adaptable career identities, the latter part of their undergraduate degrees should concentrate on nurturing industry-specific knowledge and hands-on competencies such as networking tactics and methods for securing or initiating employment

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the design and implementation of innovative employability focused curricula spanning the student lifecycle in the Bachelor of Sport Development (BSD) at Griffith University. The objective of this inclusive, scaffolded approach is to foster student engagement, enhance the student experience, and ultimately facilitate post-graduation employment opportunities. The subsequent sections examine the educational experiences at each stage of the degree lifecycle.

Case study

Context and background

Sport is vital for the social fabric of society, especially for first-in-family, low academic capital students who enter the BSD at Griffith University. This specific demographic faces an elevated risk of encountering well-being challenges and may be less inclined to seek support when facing difficulties in their academic endeavours (Pedler et al., 2022). The challenge in designing the BSD curriculum, assessment and experiences was the diverse career outcomes for graduates, including event, sport and facility management, physical activity promotion and roles with grass-roots organisations or elite athletes without guidance from an accrediting organisation. The innovative degree wide BSD employability framework provides equitable opportunity for all students to gain the same career development experiences, maximising inclusion and removing potential inequity for less-advantaged students trying to engage with co-curricular experiences whilst managing work and life commitments. Tailored and innovative curriculum strategies, informed by the Griffith University Career Development and Employability Curriculum Framework (Griffith University, 2015), are designed to help students engage with the discipline, build confidence, and transform their passion for sport into a career. The degree incorporates employability-focused curricula seamlessly into core subjects taught by academics with expertise in both career development learning and the sport discipline. This unique approach provides tailored opportunities for individuals at every stage of their academic journey, from aspiring students to alumni (see Figure 1).

The Student Lifecycle

Based on the work of Lizzio (2011), the student lifecycle is divided into several stages, each with unique characteristics. Aspiring students are in the 'transition towards' stage, where they explore options and make decisions about academic and career paths. As commencing students 'transition in' to university they are required to develop an understanding of university expectations, their future profession, and start building their professional identity. During the 'transition through' stage, students in the middle years' work on developing their knowledge and skills and enhance their experience by taking advantage of professional development opportunities. As final year students 'transition out', they solidify their industry specific knowledge and skills and prepare for graduate employment. Lastly, alumni are encouraged to contribute to the degree by informing curriculum and mentoring in the 'transition back' stage.

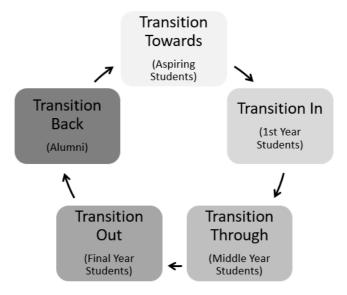


Figure 1: The Student Lifecycle (Adapted from Lizzio, 2011)

The BSD adopts a curriculum and assessment approach that spans the academic journey to progressively enhance students' development (Figure 2). The degree incorporates foundational employability-focused authentic learning experiences and assessment at both the 'transition towards' and 'transition in' stages. As students advance through their academic journey, customised opportunities are provided to help students clarify their sense of purpose and connection during the 'transition through' stage. During the 'transition out' stage, industry-specific knowledge and experience is solidified and refined. Lastly, as alumni enter their professional careers, the focus is on future success and the establishment of lifelong partnerships through opportunities to 'transition back'. Figure 2 highlights how the BSD offers a range of tailored approaches to support students in core subjects throughout their academic journey. The following sections provide a detailed explanation of each of the student lifecycle stages and curriculum initiatives in the Bachelor of Sport Development.

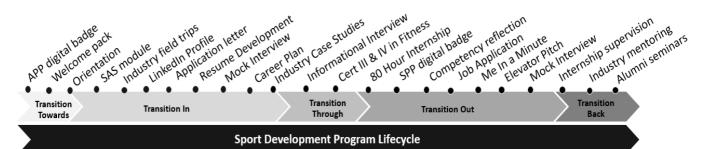


Figure 2: Employability Experiences in the Bachelor of Sport Development

Transition towards

The initial phase, known as the 'transition towards' stage, is targeted towards aspiring BSD students. At this point, it is essential to capture the interest of potential students and offer a taste of the discipline-specific knowledge that will be encountered during the degree, and career opportunities available in the industry. This is achieved through extensive partnerships with local high schools, conversations with aspiring students at marketing and open day events and the opportunity to complete an online module called *Achieving Peak Performance* (APP). This early experience includes video cameos featuring BSD Alumni who share their first-hand experiences as professionals and provides an interactive experience that encourages students to actively engage with the content. Upon successful completion of the module, students are awarded a digital badge as recognition of their newly acquired knowledge. These early experiences provide insights into what to expect from the university experience and assist in building students' sense of purpose and clarity around their career direction whether it be in the BSD or an alternative pathway.

Transition in

Upon receiving an offer for a position in BSD in accordance with official university procedure, students are greeted with a welcome email from the Program Director which includes an interactive, digital *Welcome Pack* containing essential information for commencing students. This resource offers: welcome videos from prominent BSD academics; information and videos regarding orientation day; key tasks to complete before commencing university; videos containing personalised enrolment information; photos and videos showcasing what to expect while studying BSD; senior student video testimonials sharing their experiences; and alumni videos sharing insights into the industry. This resource has a dual purpose of inspiring students to embark on their university journey and aims to ease any apprehension students may have by offering comprehensive information on what to expect during their university experience and a future career in sport.

As students begin their on-campus studies, orientation is typically their first exposure to the university experience. Attendance at orientation events is important for supporting students to transition successfully, and BSD students are encouraged to participate, regardless of whether they are new to

the university or have transferred from another degree in the university. Customised icebreaker activities are embedded throughout orientation day to facilitate student interaction and promote familiarity with classmates. These strategies are essential to foster a sense of belonging and play a pivotal role in addressing retention (Lizzio, 2011). Additionally, students gain an understanding of the discipline-specific content in the degree and its direct relevance to their prospective careers. Senior student mentors assist newcomers in feeling at ease with the often overwhelming prospect of commencing tertiary study. Moreover, the mentors provide valuable insights into their career aspirations since many are close to graduating and commencing a career in sport.

In the 'transition in' stage of the degree, students are required to enrol in foundation core subjects Sport Development 1, subsequently followed by Sport Development 2 in the second trimester. Both subjects include essential academic skill development to support students to achieve success and build capability (Lizzio, 2011) through the completion of a *Skills for Academic Success* (SAS) module. In addition, the subjects primarily emphasise career development by deliberately incorporating learning experiences that aim to enhance students' comprehension of employability and offer opportunities to cultivate fundamental employability skills. Engaging in such experiences fosters a sense of connection between students and their future profession, while offering opportunities to start moulding their professional identity (Bates et al., 2019). Figure 2 illustrates how the activities during the 'transition in' stage are structured to scaffold students' learning, gradually building on each other to enhance comprehension of their future profession and career objectives. The tasks are integrated into the curriculum in core subjects as both assessment components and timetabled learning experiences. They consist of a range of activities, such as weekly industry field trips, crafting LinkedIn profiles, composing job application letters and resumes, practicing job interview skills, devising a career plan, and reflections on alumni and industry case studies.

The 'transition in' stage encompasses a wide range of employability-focused learning experiences and assessment items with the *Career Plan* being a significant component. The *Career Plan* is based on the SOAR model (Kumar, 2007), a widely recognised framework for contextualizing career development learning principles. SOAR represents Self-awareness, Opportunity-awareness, Aspirations, and Results, and supports students in making informed decisions, taking action, and considering consequences when planning for their future. The *Career Plan* enables students to showcase their self-awareness, identify key employability skills and career aspirations, and improve their five senses of success (Lizzio, 2011). Students are required to go through 5 steps to complete the *Career Plan* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Career Plan Assessment Components

The *Industry Case Studies* assessment is a curated online package that includes videos and informational resources for students to engage with and reflect upon. The creation of the resource involved input from both BSD Alumni and industry partners, who were consulted in the development of the content and actively participated in the video production process. As students' progress through the BSD, they receive support to cultivate a set of professional competencies. These competencies are crucial for their journey towards becoming proficient professionals and are recognised as highly transferable skills applicable across various industries including effective communication, leadership, and the ability to collaborate effectively with others (Daubney, 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023). The *Industry Case Studies* provides students with insights of how the industry professionals' roles directly correlate to these professional competencies. Students analyse the professionals' perspectives by responding to a set of questions aligned with each competency. The resource not only offers students valuable insights into the relevance of each position to their future careers but also presents them with opportunities to contemplate their own competency development.

In addition to the assessment tasks focusing on employability, there is a set of practical industryfocused initiatives available throughout the 'transition in' phase. The objective of these initiatives is to offer a hands-on, comprehensive introduction to the sports industry. This is achieved through weekly Industry Field Trips to sport organisations and interactions with industry partners. Throughout these learning experiences, students engage in clinics and workshops specially curated to deliver valuable insights and training similar to what they would provide to professional athletes or community members. Additionally, industry field trips present a unique chance for students to participate in authentic workplace experiences that go beyond traditional work-integrated learning (WIL) placements confined to one specific setting. The field trips offer opportunities for students to interact with diverse sports organisations, granting them invaluable insights into the inner workings and practices of the industry. By directly engaging with alumni and industry experts, students partake in meaningful discussions and acquire a deeper understanding of the various career opportunities and roles available within the sports industry. This exposure broadens their perspectives and enhances their preparedness for future professional endeavours. As an integral part of the assessment in this subject, students are tasked with creating and delivering a comprehensive presentation that draws upon their experiences from the industry field trips. Through this process, they delve into their potential career paths, cultivating a profound comprehension of their professional aspirations. The field trips also open doors to valuable professional connections and networking opportunities, enabling students to establish meaningful relationships within the industry. By forming a strong connection to their future profession, students become better equipped to navigate their chosen career paths with confidence and clarity. Moreover, this process aids in the development of professional identity, allowing students to refine their career goals and align them with their passions and strengths.

Transition through

During the 'transition in' phase, there is a significant focus on providing opportunities for students to understand the importance of employability skills and cultivating these skills to establish a strong foundation for their future careers. As students move into the 'transition through' stage, there is a shift towards promoting self-directed professional development and following the *Career Plan* developed in first year. While promoting independence is crucial, maintaining regular communication with students and providing support throughout this stage reduces the likelihood of students experiencing the 'Sophomore Slump' (McBurnie et al., 2012).

During the middle years, students are encouraged to engage in diverse co-curricular activities to enhance skills and strengthen their resume. This not only enriches professional growth but also encourages taking charge of their own development by seeking opportunities aligned with career goals and expanding professional networks. These activities complement the core curricula outlined in Figure 2, which equip students with additional certifications to prepare for graduate employment and qualify them for part-time employment in the industry while studying.

Transition out

The employability focussed curriculum culminates in two capstone subjects completed in the final trimester of study as BSD students prepare to 'transition out' of their degree. Figure 2 demonstrates the process by which students are led through a series of learning experiences focused on solidifying the industry-specific knowledge and practical skills obtained during the BSD. In addition, there is an emphasis on refining networking, personal branding, and job application strategies to establish or secure employment upon graduation. The core capstone subjects consist of a range of activities delivered in partnership with Griffith University Careers and Employment including: an industry specific internship; professional competency reflections; graduate job applications, resumes and a mock job interview; Me in a Minute; promotional video resource; and a major project including an elevator pitch.

The 80-hour internship offers a personalised experience carefully curated by university staff to align with the unique career aspirations and interests of every student. It presents opportunities to work under the guidance of industry experts and hone personal, professional, and networking skills in authentic workplace settings (Ajjawi et al., 2020). During the internship, students are expected to acquire and exhibit a range of professional competencies and engage in self-reflection by maintaining an activity log documenting the experiences and tasks. By successfully completing the activity log, students emphasise how the internship tasks align with professional competencies. During their oncampus classes, students receive guidance on how to evidence and articulate the competencies through the STAR (situation, task, action, result) framework (Doll, 2018). These learning experiences equip students with the skills necessary for real-life scenarios such as crafting job applications, addressing selection criteria, and undertaking job interviews.

In addition to completing an internship reflection, students are also required to undertake a *competency reflection* task that involves reflecting on the professional competencies acquired through co-curricular experiences. The competencies, including effective communication, collaboration, leadership, and adaptability, are transferable and applicable across different employment sectors (Daubney, 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023). In- class learning experiences support students to build capacity by outlining their skills claims associated with each competency and provide supporting evidence for these claims using the STAR framework (Doll, 2018). Further, students present three competencies in a verbal presentation, which simulates an interview or networking scenario. This exercise prepares students for securing graduate employment by enabling them to identify and articulate their skills effectively.

The process of creating a *Sport Program Proposal* (SPP) is a significant assessment task required as students 'transition out' of university. The task serves to consolidate the discipline-specific knowledge students acquire throughout their academic journey and is achieved by addressing an authentic project brief and conceptualising an initiative that fosters physical activity in the community. During the program development, students are exposed to learning experiences that guide the advancement of their program proposal. This includes how to present an *Elevator Pitch* and how to produce a professional document that mirrors what would be expected when applying for grant funding, event approvals, or community engagement proposals via local government. This process ensures students are well-equipped to undertake similar tasks in their future careers and provides a valuable resource for showcasing the breadth of knowledge and skills acquired during their studies to potential employers.

Creating a *Me in a Minute* video is viewed as a crucial undertaking in the 'transition out' phase, as it supports graduating students to enhance their self-promotion and communication skills. Students are guided through the process of refining their personal brand and conveying their unique strengths and value proposition through the production of a one-minute video. The process requires students to craft a compelling video while concisely articulating their personal brand, highlighting their key accomplishments, and presenting themselves in a professional and engaging manner. This activity not only fosters creativity and media production skills, it provides a platform to demonstrate their capabilities to potential employers. As an additional strategy to differentiate themselves to potential employers, students are encouraged to feature their *Me in a Minute* video on their LinkedIn profile.

The focus on fine-tuning job application strategies for students to prepare for graduate employment is centred on authentic scenarios within the core capstone subjects. In this approach, students are tasked with completing a job search to source an advertised graduate position. They learn how to analyse the job advertisement, identify the essential knowledge and skills required by the potential employer, and create a job application letter and resume that effectively addresses the criteria. Emphasis is placed on the importance of tailoring each job application to the specific job advertisement. In addition, students participate in a *Mock Job Interview* for the specified job and face tailored questions by an interview panel containing industry experts. Participating in this experience offers students a chance to receive valuable feedback on their performance during the interview process. It also supports students to identify areas for improvement, enables refinement of interview

skills and enhances student confidence in a genuine and supportive setting. Overall, the goal is to equip students with the necessary skills and knowledge to secure employment and launch their graduate careers.

Transition back

Figure 2 demonstrates how the 'transition back' phase is influenced by the employability-focused curriculum of the BSD. This phase offers alumni the opportunity to contribute to the BSD degree and take advantage of career advancement prospects. It is a self-directed process, with alumni connections encouraged and maintained through LinkedIn. The collaborative partnerships between staff and alumni are fostered, with employment opportunities frequently distributed among alumni networks. The BSD's success in preparing individuals for the workforce is evidenced by the frequent outreach from industry partners to employ its students and graduates.

Alumni are an essential part of the BSD professional industry network and are invited to take on leadership roles by sharing their industry knowledge and working with staff to support students' success. This involves contributing to the BSD curriculum through participation in videos, alumni seminars, mentoring students, and supervising final year internships. The ongoing partnerships with BSD alumni are highly valued and considered crucial to enhancing students' understanding of their career prospects, connection to the industry, and sense of purpose (Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Discussion and conclusions

To secure and maintain employment, graduates need to possess a broad range of skills that enable them to learn and apply new skills to adapt to the constantly evolving work environment (Østergaard & Nordlund, 2019). It is critical that universities acknowledge this and ensure graduates not only have specialised knowledge and skills, but also hold essential transferable skills to succeed in the workplace (Pitan & Muller, 2023). The Bachelor of Sport Development recognises the importance of providing students with opportunities to enhance their employability skills. Hence, the degree places significant emphasis on providing scaffolded curricular and co-curricular opportunities at every stage of the student lifecycle. This framework ensures students have access to curricular opportunities in core subjects, fostering and enhancing their employability skills throughout the entirety of their university journey.

The framework for employability outlined in this paper serves as a comprehensive guide to improve students' employability skills within a sports-based degree and can be seamlessly modified for other disciplines and undergraduate tertiary degrees, in a scalable and sustainable manner. The framework strategically positions key learning experiences throughout the student lifecycle to enable the development of transferable skills such as communication, innovation, teamwork, and adaptability (Daubney, 2022; Pitan & Muller, 2023). These experiences are complemented by core curricular tasks focused on building student capability and confidence, nurturing career readiness, and refining personal branding, job application, and networking skills. This approach equips students with skills applicable across a wide range of industries. Additionally, the framework emphasises the importance of experiential learning opportunities, such as traditional and non-traditional WIL opportunities and industry collaborations. The practicality of this framework makes it an effective approach for enhancing employment opportunities for graduates across a range of university degrees.

While the implementation of the employability framework presented in this paper has been successful for student engagement and graduate employment outcomes, a comprehensive evaluation of its impact has to date only been conducted in the 'transition in' phase (Harris-Reeves et al., 2022). To fill this gap, it is necessary to conduct research that not only assesses the overall effectiveness of the framework through the entire student lifecycle, but also examines the impact of its individual components on employability. To conduct a comprehensive evaluation, it is essential to consider multiple facets of the employability approach, including the student experience and perceived value, graduate outcomes, industry perspectives, and feedback from alumni who work in the field. Gaining

insights into the effectiveness of the framework in preparing BSD students for their careers requires gathering perspectives from final-year students, alumni, and industry partners. Additionally, gathering longitudinal data on student perceptions throughout the student lifecycle would provide valuable insights into student perceptions of their career readiness, confidence, and skill development.

Implementing career development learning throughout the entire lifecycle of a degree poses several key challenges. Firstly, there is a critical need for educators with specialised expertise in career development learning to both deign and deliver the curriculum. Incorporating effective employability focused curriculum requires not only an understanding of discipline specific subjects but also a deep grasp of industry trends, job market dynamics, and evolving skill requirements (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Without such expertise, students may receive outdated or inaccurate advice, potentially hindering their career prospects. Secondly, resourcing constraints may present a significant hurdle. In the case of the BSD degree presented in this paper, one academic staff member largely took on the responsibility for designing, implementing, and delivering the career-focused content across the degree. While there was involvement from industry partners and experts from the institution's careers department in delivering certain elements of the curriculum, the limited availability of resources could potentially impact the long-term viability of the degree program. Balancing these challenges requires strategic planning, investment in training and development for educators, and potentially collaborative efforts with external professionals to provide well-rounded, sustainable career development opportunities.

Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of employability curricula in developing students' employability skills (Bridgstock et al., 2019), the integration of such curriculum throughout the entirety of the student academic journey is not widely adopted. To ensure students have access to appropriate and inclusive opportunities for enhancing their employability skills, universities are encouraged to align these opportunities with 'where students are at' in the various stages of the student lifecycle. To support students' employability skill development throughout their degree, tertiary institutions should identify current curriculum and resources, as well as gaps in the lifecycle. Leveraging these established experiences can allow for a strategic integration of employability curriculum to support students throughout their academic journey and enhance the overall student experience.

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