



## Facilitating and supporting employability in law: Reflections on the need for agile communication

Kate Tubridy<sup>1</sup>

Corresponding author: Kate Tubridy ([ktubridy@uow.edu.au](mailto:ktubridy@uow.edu.au))

<sup>1</sup>School of Law, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia

### Abstract

There is an increasing focus on enhancing employability for students in higher education. Yet academics who facilitate and encourage opportunities to support student employability are often doing so with a quiet agility. This paper reflects on my first year coordinating a work-integrated learning program and the development of skills necessary for such roles in a tertiary law context. Grounded in the well-recognised literature on positive professional identity and contemplating the concept of ‘pracademic identity’, these reflections offer insights on the experience of traversing across multiple professional spheres to enhance employability for students. In particular, this reflection piece seeks to uncover and highlight the skills essential to roles facilitating employability for law students.

### Keywords

Employability, agility, communication skills, pracademic, law

### Introduction

The complex nature of fostering employability in higher education is well debated in the literature (Healy et al., 2022; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Jackson & Dean, 2023). While acknowledging these complexities, as noted by Jackson and Dean (2023), higher education is increasingly focused on offering students experiences to enhance employability. This paper draws on the definition from Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) that considers ‘employability to be a multi-dimensional, lifelong, and life-wide phenomenon that is malleable and driven by the individual, yet encouraged and facilitated by HE [higher education]’ (p. 724). As such, this reflection will focus on the personal experience of developing skills to facilitate and encourage employability within a law higher education context.

### Facilitating and encouraging employability

This paper is timely as it is written 12 months after I commenced in the role of Discipline Leader (Clinical Legal Education and Professional Engagement). In this role, I coordinate the Legal Internship Program, which is a subject comprising a 20-day internship of professional legal experience. As such, in this role I regularly liaise with both the legal profession and law students. The Legal Internship Program is a professional work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunity under the University of

Wollongong Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum Classification (WILCC) Framework (Dean et al., 2020).

WIL is recognised as a valuable pedagogical approach for enhancing employability by engaging students in real-world practices (Dean et al., 2020). There are a range of employability benefits for students in undertaking a professional WIL experience. Hewitt and Grenfell (2022) argue that it is widely acknowledged that a 'lack of work experience' can hinder tertiary students pursuing graduate employment (p. 301). Focusing on the pedagogical strategy of legal internships specifically, McNamara (2009) identifies that '[w]ork experience which is integrated into an undergraduate law degree has a vital role to play in assisting law students to develop the skills and attributes they need in order to be effective legal practitioners' (p. 229).

The objectives of the Legal Internship Program include encouraging students to observe and reflect on the law in practice, analyse the theory-practice nexus, develop their professional skills, and consider their career aspirations. In this way, the Legal Internship Program aims to foster students' sense of professional 'identity salience' (Field et al., 2013, p. 18). There is a growing recognition of the importance in fostering students' positive professional identity during their tertiary studies (Field et al., 2013; Littrich & Murray, 2019; Murray et al., 2022). Yet in reflecting on coordinating an internship program which encourages students' professional identity development, my own professional identity is also evolving. By drawing on my own reflective practice during my time in a new role, I have gained insights into the development of skills that are necessary to support student employability.

## Traversing multiple spheres

I entered academia with previous professional experience as a lawyer, which has shaped my practice-based approach to academia in higher education. I have integrated this practical insight directly into my curriculum planning underscored by a commitment to supporting student employability more broadly. While I drew on my past practitioner experience in my learning and teaching pedagogy as an academic, coordinating the Legal Internship Program this past year has more actively (re)engaged my practice experience and skills. Working in 'the third space' of graduate employability (Hansen et al., 2023) means that I now traverse academia and the legal profession.

This type of role lends itself to the broader discussion on the complex nature of 'pracademia'. There are a number of different ways to define a pracademic in the literature and this can include those who work as both an academic and a practitioner, or former practitioners who are now academics (Dickenson et al., 2022; Hollweck et al., 2022). The very process of contemplating 'pracademic identity' is itself recognised as 'the complex, enduring process of situating and understanding self, and how this relates to the communities we interact with(in)' (Hollweck et al., 2022, p. 13). This process raises the tensions inherent in graduate employability roles. My own role involves a dynamic blend of academic responsibilities (such as designing subject pedagogy, assessments and learning aims) combined with responsibilities particular to this role (such as arranging and supporting student internships).

Dickenson et al. (2022) recognise that an individual's professional identity constantly changes and adapts through reflective practices and can be fluid and 'context-dependent' (p. 291). Rather than focusing on the definitional parameters of pracademic as a fixed concept under which to be labelled, what instead resonates for this reflection is to consider the skills and actions within the broad pracademia space. In particular, Hollweck et al. (2022) have suggested that it is 'that of translating, brokering, bridging, and boundary spanning, with insights from, legitimacy in, and networks across multiple spheres' (p. 18). It is these skills of actively translating and bridging which this paper seeks to reflect on and suggests that, within the law context, such translating requires the overarching skill of agility.

## Reflecting on translating and bridging: the need for agility

Upon reflecting on the past 12 months in fulfilling an academic role coordinating professional WIL experiences, the process of my own shifting professional identity has centred around the sharpening and activating of agile communication skills. Agility is most often conceptualised in disciplines such as information technology, supply chain management and sports science (Gligor et al., 2019). This paper draws on three of the key themes identified by Gligor et al. (2019) in their multidisciplinary literature review of the concept of agility. That is, that agility is the 'ability to quickly change direction', 'scan the environment/anticipate', adjust and be flexible (Gligor et al., 2019, p. 467). The process of (re)integrating my previous professional experience as a lawyer has uncovered the need to, at times, combine, and at other times, oscillate quickly between, academic and practitioner skill sets. Such roles require the ability to flexibly communicate with a diverse range of stakeholders in a diverse range of roles: including student/academic coordinator, student/internship liaison, and legal profession/academic internship facilitator. This needs specific skills to translate and bridge academia and the legal profession in multiple ways to multiple stakeholders. Given the 'third space' of graduate employability, these skills may not always be visible. Yet to bridge, boundary span and translate requires attuned soft skills of communication, the ability to quickly adjust and an understanding of diverse professional perspectives and pressures. The pressures of legal practice are different to those of academia and this requires insights into, and anticipation of, these differences. Communication styles are different, and this needs a discipline-specific understanding of how academic language differs from the language of practitioners (Hollweck et al., 2022, p. 17).

In addition, legal practice comprises a range of practice areas and organisational structures, each requiring nuanced understandings and respectful, responsive communication. Coordinating and embedding WIL opportunities in tertiary law therefore necessitates a certain agility to communicate between multiple professional fields. To do this, an academic needs to be responsive, flexible and insightful. This agility supports student employability as it builds legitimacy and networks with the legal profession.

Nurturing legitimacy has an impact on higher education students' employability. Building positive relationships with the profession enables the positive facilitation of WIL experiences and this can enhance student employability opportunities more broadly. Such legitimacy is developed through agile communication informed by lived insight, which is responsive and respectful of the diverse pressures and demands of legal practice and academia. This is possible through professional experiences as a legal practitioner and now as an academic equipped with an understanding of each. In this way, legitimacy is grounded in the lived insights of both academia and legal practice. However, key to this legitimacy is bridging the differences and opportunities through agile communication skills, that is, translating academic and practice requirements with respectful agility.

It is notable that academics embedding WIL practices are not only agile translators between the profession and academia. Importantly, these roles are translating and bridging for the student, the differing demands of academia and practice during their internship. Such roles provide guidance on, and equip students with, the language needed to have a beneficial internship experience. At times, academic requirements for assessment deadlines need a dexterous understanding during an internship when such assessments require the signature of a busy supervisor. Insightful flexibility and communication with students in such circumstances enhances student outcomes and fosters professional relationships.

## Implications: Uncovering and highlighting

Given the growing discussion on fostering employability in higher education, it is increasingly important to uncover and identify the skills needed for academics to encourage employability. Reflecting on the process of my own professional identity in a new role coordinating a legal internship

program has highlighted the ways in which my skills have developed. Academic roles coordinating WIL opportunities to enhance student employability are dynamic, valuable roles requiring a particular mix of skills and professional strengths. This reflection piece suggests that agile communication is essential to supporting WIL pedagogy and facilitating student employability, particularly within the law context. This paper seeks to highlight this important skill within broader higher education employability discussions. As such, the insights from this reflection paper may assist in informing the professional learning and development for coordinators of WIL subjects and programs more broadly.

## References

- Dean, B. A., Yanamandram, V., Eady, M. J., Moroney, T., O'Donnell, N., & Glover-Chambers, T. (2020). An institutional framework for scaffolding work-integrated learning across a degree. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(4), 80-94. <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.17.4.6>
- Dickenson, J., Fowler, A., & Griffiths, T. (2022). Pracademics? Exploring transitions and professional identities in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(2), 290-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1744123>
- Field, R., Duffy, J., & Huggins, A. (2013). Supporting transition to law school and student well-being: The role of professional legal identity. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4(2), 15- 25. <https://doi.org/10.5204/intifyhe.v4i2.167>
- Gligor, D., Gligor, N., Holcomb, M., Bozkurt, S. (2019). Distinguishing between the concepts of supply chain agility and resilience. *The International Journal of Logistics Management*, 30(2), 467-487. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLM-10-2017-0259>
- Hansen, L., Dean, B., & Healy, M. (2023, October 18) Beyond the Accord: the who and how of graduate employability. *Future Campus*. <https://futurecampus.com.au/2023/10/18/beyond-the-accord-the-who-and-how-of-graduate-employability/>
- Healy, M., Brown, J. L., & Ho, C. (2022). Graduate employability as a professional proto-jurisdiction in higher education. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 83,1125-1142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00733-4>
- Hewitt, A., & Grenfell, L. (2022). A call for regulatory reform to make work experience accessible rather than an obstacle. *Alternative Law Journal*, 47(4), 301–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X221123602>
- Hollweck, T., Netolicky, D.M., & Campbell, P. (2022). Defining and exploring pracademia: identity, community, and engagement. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 7(1), 6-25. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPCC-05-2021-0026>
- Jackson, D., & Bridgstock, R. (2021). What actually works to enhance graduate employability? The relative value of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular learning and paid work. *Higher Education*, 81, 723-739. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00570-x>
- Jackson, D., & Dean, B.A. (2023). Employability related activities beyond the curriculum: how participation and impact vary across diverse student cohort. *Higher Education*, 86, 1151–1172. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00966-x>
- Littrich, J., & Murray, K. (2019). *Lawyers in Australia* (4th ed.). Federation Press
- McNamara, J. (2009). Internships: Effective work integrated learning for law students. *Asia Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 10(3), 229-240. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/29509/>
- Murray, K., Tubridy, K., Littrich, J., & Mundy, T. (2022). Reflections on belonging and a law student pledge. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 19(4), 1-18. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/14>