



Student parents and carers need graduate employability support: Recommendations for employability practitioners

Mary McGovern¹

Corresponding author: Mary McGovern (mmcgovern@uow.edu.au)

¹ University of Wollongong

Abstract

Universities and their employability-related staff must address the inequities that claim diversity as a disadvantage and a barrier to securing work integrated learning and graduate employment. With increases in equity groups enrolling at university there is a need to ensure access to employability opportunities. Graduate employability should be an accolade for students however it is not accessible, and ubiquitous for all. Student parents and carers are an invisible cohort that needs to be identified, and supported with their employability as they are a significantly growing population in higher education. This provocation will present the current landscape at university and offer three recommendations: the integration of career development learning and work experiences; data-informed systems and procedures; and collaboration and research into 'employability for inclusion.' This is required to build staff capability and organisational capacity and prepare our future workforce that is representative of today's society.

Keywords

Equity, graduate employability, higher education, student parent and carers

Provocation

Employability is a shared expectation among graduates, higher education institutions, and industry (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Cheng et al., 2021). In Australia, reports show a steady increase in access and enrolment in higher education over the last decade manifesting in 43.5% of 25-34 age group hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Such an increase has illuminated diversity in the student population, necessitating a greater focus on inclusion and support across learning journeys, from entry to exit of study. According to Koshy (2020) around 50% of students can be deemed in at least one of the six equity groups and many will be in more than one equity group. The 6 equity groups are non-English speaking background (NESB), disability, women in non-traditional areas (WINTA), Indigenous, low socio-economic status (SES) and students from regional and remote areas. The University Accord Panel final report (Department of Education, 2024) reinforces the need to attract and support such students. This growth and demand provide an opportunity for developing new policies for the university sector and highlights the role of staff to improve their practices in providing inclusive support (Department of Education, 2024). This provocation aims to raise awareness of a group of students requiring support, individuals who are parents and carers, who are largely invisible among the diverse study body. I propose that employability educators should support

student parents and carers to facilitate employability development and organisations must build capacity and capability to facilitate transitions through university.

Higher education providers recognise that the educational landscape has changed, requiring new approaches and policies to support all students (Cook, 2022; Small et al., 2022). Student groups are often distinguished on their identification of belonging to a diverse group, which enable targeted approaches to support strategies (Harvey et al., 2017), however capability and capacity must be developed to address the intersectionality of needs relating to graduate employment. Parents and carers are prevalent across these equity groups but are unidentified and overlooked (Andrewartha et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2024). Andrewartha & Harvey (2021) report that carers typically have lower levels of qualifications but are highly motivated and bring skills to help them succeed and have 'improved the broader student experience' (p.6), and Andrewartha et al. (2022) identified the parenting population at 12.7%, and a third of part time students were parents. The debate about supporting student parents and carers is not about addressing their academic challenges, but highlighting the systemic biases that impact their employability. The Student Equity and Employability in Higher Education report demonstrates concerns for equity groups securing graduate employment, stating 'many institutional employability strategies are offering little to reduce these inequities' (Harvey et al., 2017, p.54). For student parents and carers, disadvantage persists (Pitman et al., 2019) despite efforts and strategies, research by Andrewartha et al., (2023). Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) funding has contributed to practice and policy however this has been contradictory at times and has impacted the continuity of staff working in a range of support areas.

Andrewartha and Harvey (2021) suggests both 'a need and an opportunity for universities to develop specific policies to attract and support those who care for others' (p.6). To support student parents and carers, employability educators must ask: What do parents and carers need for their graduate employability? How can the university provide and prepare students for WIL and employment? How do we engage with employers and industry to introduce this cohort? Students make choices regularly throughout their studies that can positively affect their development (Cheng et al., 2021). Choosing subjects, majors and completing work experiences, accessing support, and finding co- and extra-curricular opportunities will likely influence graduate employability. There is a need to better understand and acknowledge the issues unique to carers and parents who are often balancing competing work, life and study demands. They should not be disadvantaged in accessing opportunities. As Baker et al., (2023) posits there is an immediate need to 'disrupt assumptions' currently held by students and university staff and develop the 'graduate capitals' of human, social, cultural, and identity (Tomlinson & Jackson, 2019) and consideration should be given to personal, cultural and structural conditions that are enablers for female carers (Munro et al., 2023). Employability educators, including academics, career development learning (CDL) specialists and Work-integrated learning (WIL) related staff are focused on many aspects of students' preparation for the workplace. In these roles, educators must be attuned to their students' needs and design curriculum, assess learning and arrange opportunities, in a way that is inclusive and equitable and could acknowledge personal experience. Although higher education has shifted focus to embedding CDL and/or WIL into curriculum, Healy (2023), this continued work is required and with the University Accord there is a call for greater 'employability for inclusion' (Dollinger et al., 2023).

To support this cohort, greater emphasis must be placed in three significant areas:

1. Integration of career development learning and work experiences

University staff are encouraged to work with student parents and carers to design innovative and customized teaching and learning opportunities to combine and align CDL and WIL into the curriculum to facilitate their career self-management leading to graduate capitals and employability. This can involve engaging with parents and carers from commencement of study and embedding innovative 'student as partners' initiatives.

2. Data informed systems and procedures

Systems and procedures need to be developed to enable better identification, collection and monitoring of equity groups, student parents and carers data to inform planning and evaluation for students in accessing learning and workplace opportunities now and in the future. This will contribute to organisational capability and build capacity.

3. Collaboration and research into 'employability for inclusion'

Students, universities, and industry must collaborate to co-design and research how student parents and carers prepare and perform in the workplace which can guide policies and practices. There is a need to identify the issues that prevent and reduce uptake of opportunity. Research and practice must elucidate parent and carer experiences.

Students need to have quality learning experiences so they can function, perform, and contribute to society. If they do not, we risk failing to prepare future graduates. The diverse student body of today is the workforce of today and tomorrow and they need nuanced approaches. The future workforce must be representative of society, and we need to consider and determine the staff capability and organisational capacity to impact equitable employability? It is a provocative question that forces us to confront issues of equality, societal expectations, collaboration, integration, and sustainable approaches.

References

- Andrewartha, L., & Harvey, A. (2021). *Supporting carers to succeed in Australian higher education*. La Trobe University. <https://doi.org/10.26181/60ee1cda518e2>
- Andrewartha, L., Knight, E., Simpson, A., & Beattie, H. (2022). *A balancing act: supporting students who are parents to succeed in Australian higher education*. La Trobe University. <https://doi.org/10.26181/19179719.v1>
- Andrewartha, L., Knight, E., Simpson, A., & Beattie, H. (2023). Balancing the books: how we can better support students who are parents. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(2), 160-173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180164>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023, June). *Education and Work, Australia: Data on engagement in work and/or study, current and recent study, qualifications and transitions to work*. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release>
- Baker, S., Xavier, A., Due, C., Dunwoodie, K., & Newman, A. (2023). Disrupting assumptions about graduate employability: exploring culturally and linguistically diverse university students' graduate capitals in Australia. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 45(2), 174-191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2180165>
- Bridgstock, R., & Jackson, D. (2019). Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(5), 468-484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1646378>
- Cheng, M., Adekola, O., Albia, J., & Cai, S. (2021). Employability in higher education: a review of key stakeholders' perspectives. *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, 16(1), 16-31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HEED-03-2021-0025>
- Cook, E. (2022). A narrative review of graduate employability models: their paradigms, and relationships to teaching and curricula. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 13(1), 37-64. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2022vol13no1art1483>
- Department of Education (2024). *Australian Universities Accord: Final report*. Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>
- Dollinger, M., Corcoran, T., Jackson, D., & O'Shea, S. (2023). Employability for inclusion: the urgent need for a biopsychosocial model perspective. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 46(2), 113-130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2258324>
- Harvey, A., Andrewartha, L., Edwards, D., Clarke, J., & Reyes, K. (2017). *Student Equity and Employability in higher education*. Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research <https://doi.org/10.26181/60efae508cd20>
- Healy, M. (2023). Careers and employability learning: pedagogical principles for higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(8), 1303-1314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2196997>

- Koshy, P. (2020, November 3). *Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2014 – 2019*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE). <https://www.acses.edu.au/ncsehe-briefing-note-equity-student-participation-australian-higher-education-2014-2019/>
- Munro, D., Willis, J., Gibson, A., & Laundon, M. (2023). Higher education decision making of Australian women with caring responsibilities. *Frontiers in Education, 8*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.927792>
- O'Shea, S., May, J., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2024). Parents Managing University and Family Life. In S. O'Shea, J. May, C. Stone, & J. Delahunty (Eds.), *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life: Motivations, Transitions and Participation* (pp. 191-216). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34451-0_8
- Pitman, T., Roberts, L., Bennett, D., & Richardson, S. (2019). An Australian study of graduate outcomes for disadvantaged students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 43*(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2017.1349895>
- Small, L., McPhail, R., & Shaw, A. (2022). Graduate employability: the higher education landscape in Australia. *Higher Education Research & Development, 41*(3), 919-933. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1877623>
- Tomlinson, M., & Jackson, D. (2019). Professional identity formation in contemporary higher education students. *Studies in Higher Education, 46*(4), 885-900. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1659763>