



Integrating employability learning and career development learning: Insights into a business school approach

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Abstract

This practitioner reflection shares insights based on our seven-year journey pursuing an ambitious curriculum transformation espousing partnerships pedagogy within the School of Business (SOB) at Western Sydney University (WSU). With a significant proportion of first-generation and culturally and linguistically diverse students, employability is of strategic significance for WSU. The objective was to integrate employability and career development learning while addressing confidence and self-esteem deficits among graduates. Massification of the higher education sector, new universities, courses and pathways along with the competition among university graduates for employment all compound the issue. This challenging landscape required a unique approach to achieve a fundamental shift in learning and outcomes to prepare students for life beyond university. A massive curriculum transformation was endorsed and led by a cross-disciplinary team adopting partnerships pedagogy to transform the student learning experience. This reflection documents the practitioner journey involved in developing a program expressly targeting graduate employability for business students. Emphasis is on the experiences and challenges encountered while implementing a partnership-based approach to build, sustain, and cultivate graduate employability, through the development of industry networking experiences.

Keywords

Partnerships pedagogy; employability; career development learning; graduate identity, university-industry collaboration

Introduction

Australian universities have experienced major ideological disruption over the past three decades primarily due to shifts in government policy rhetoric and dynamic labour market pressures. Several authors (Arvanitakis, 2014; Small et al., 2019) refer to the democratisation and massification of the sector giving rise to increases in courses offered and larger diversity profiles of applicants to university. With a 400 percent increase in graduates since 1989 (Small et al., 2019), large volumes of university graduates are entering the labour market, reducing the value of a university degree as an employment differentiator (Tomlinson, 2017). Western Sydney University is recognised as a leading contributor to social change in Australia by prioritising accessibility and inclusivity to bridge the educational inequality gap faced by the Greater Western Sydney Region (Pollock, 2023; Itaoui, 2023). Featuring a significant proportion of first-generation university students and one of the highest culturally and

linguistically diverse student populations (Western Sydney University, 2022), employability of graduates including inequitable access to professional networks and work experience often result in confidence and self-esteem deficits among graduates. These inequities signalled the need for a fundamental shift in employability learning and outcomes. This practitioner reflection aims to share insights on aspects of our curriculum transformation embracing partnerships pedagogy to enact the integration of employability and careers learning within the School of Business (SOB) at Western Sydney University.

In 2017 the School of Business responded to graduate employability challenges with a pedagogical shift to embed Careers and Employability Learning (CEL) within core curriculum. This decision aligned with ongoing research advocating for a consistent and holistic approach to graduate employability, through recognising the interdependency of Career Development Learning (CDL) and employability, emphasising the positive impact of intentionally integrating CDL into employability focused curricula (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Dean et al., 2022; Healy, 2023). The focus of this practitioner reflection is on an initiative we championed in the second year of the degree, the intentional alignment of a common assessment positioned within three equivalent Professional Careers Subjects reflecting the discipline areas of Money, Markets, and Management. Designed and executed by a cross-disciplinary collegial team consisting of the subject coordinators as discipline-based academics, one also a WIL academic, combined with school engagement professionals. The program prioritised nurturing self-awareness and agency by offering students opportunities to explore their individual career identities through authentic experiential assessment. Letts (2019) noted the importance of empowering students to take ownership of their career development and to develop an employability ready mindset. This coupled with the ability to self-reflect and learn is harnessed through large-scale employability events enabling students to network with industry partners and graduate recruiters.

Partnership pedagogy presented an ideal framework for this transformation, espousing defined roles for internal and external partners through co-designing, co-developing, co-delivering and co-credentialing curriculum (Barrie & Pizzica 2019, p148). Commencing with a mapping exercise we identified existing and prospective partners, categorised them according to collaboration opportunities and subsequently prioritised outreach based on feasibility, compatibility and mutual value. Given resource limitations and a lack of expertise with partnership development, our team used an iterative approach to enacting partnership pedagogy. This framework inspired the potential scale and scope for utilising partner engagement to maximise student employability.

Salient moment one

Our first salient moment came during the first iteration of the three subjects. The design of the original 1000-word common reflection assessment, stipulated student attendance at two employability events from a carefully collated list of internal/external events. Significant variety and availability of events prompted us to create our own networking event as an additional on campus option. The inaugural event held in 2018, attracted over 350 students. The authentic engagement evident by both students and industry partners served to drive pivotal curriculum changes and asserted the appetite for career focused events to connect students with the professional world. COVID-19 required the change of attendance at two rather than one compulsory event and the practice has been continued. Initially conducted virtually the Professional Networking Event and Professional Careers Conference transitioned to hybrid, then in-person mode to reinforce active participation. Significant time and resource investment from academic staff to cultivate professional connections and networks, refine the learning process, and elevate the student experience occurred as a result of the change in delivery modes.

As academic professionals we were experiencing a fundamental reconstruction in our roles and the scale of the program required an innovative approach for implementation. Contemporary scholarly

discourse surrounding the academic role and career development (Dean et al., 2022), provides us with the opportunity to reflect on our own perceptions and attitudes navigating this new terrain. Traditionally career development learning remains a supplementary offering delivered by career education professionals and predominately offered on a 'as needed' basis to students. Consequently, it was rendered impractical to deliver comprehensive discipline specific CDL to all students. While collaborations between university schools and career professionals to offer students work-readiness programs exist, these initiatives can be generic and often stand outside core curriculum. This has emerged as a challenge and concern within the higher education sector, particularly as calls for integrating career development and employability into curriculum intensify (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Amiet et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2022).

Recognising the inherent constraints and complexity of pursuing this aspirational agenda our team embarked on a collaborative journey. This involved fostering stakeholder partnerships, both internally with faculties, professional services and students, and externally with industry, alumni, government, and communities. This undertaking required a major shift in our mindset, acknowledging our diverse backgrounds and varying degrees of industry experience and connection with CEL. We embraced the reality that none of us held the mantle of 'expert' and that real and substantial improvement in student employability outcomes was dependant on strategic and sustainable partnerships. Initially, our core responsibility was to build momentum and mobilise a wide range of partnerships. This entailed using a variety of strategies enacted by all team members. For example, we attended external industry/chamber events, leveraged prior research and engagement contacts such as internship hosts as well as directly reaching out to organisations in our region to encourage and foster engagement in our programs. This approach to cultivating professional connections gained traction internally and on social media platforms such as LinkedIn. What eventuated was a transformation in CEL made possible through partnerships pedagogy. Significant value and currency was achieved across a suite of CEL experiences through systematic consultation and shared expertise and resources. Partners have collaborated to co-design & evaluate learning experiences including our events, co-develop subject resources, co-deliver presentations and co-credential a short course.

Additionally, the recognition for preparing students to understand and be able to navigate the benefits of professional settings resulted in weekly workshop-tutorial structures, facilitating a journey of self-discovery for students. Recognising the importance of effective networking for career success, we strategically incorporated activities that address students' social and emotional skills prior to their participation in industry events. Student performance metrics and feedback including learning analytics, subject and event evaluations, assessments and unsolicited testimonies documented this reflective and skills-based approach empowering students to engage authentically and confidently during the professional industry events further reinforcing their professional identity, building networks and pursuing opportunities. Research to evaluate the effectiveness of these CEL strategies is ongoing.

Salient moment two

Our second salient moment came several years into the program and after numerous iterations of event design. Having consistently received positive feedback by all event stakeholders since inception, we were suddenly confronted with a barrage of negative feedback relating to over-representation of some discipline specific partners. Our various event evaluation mechanisms including surveys, focus groups, debriefing sessions and peer review, revealed stakeholder satisfaction and engagement was impacted with a reduction in perceived relevance and causing friction within our team.

Establishing and maintaining a diverse network of external partners for program delivery continues to present a significant challenge for our team and the sector more broadly. Despite our best intentions to maximise representation and rotation of partners, it became evident that time constraints and late withdrawals increased our reliance on readily available partners. Recognising the limitations of this

dependence, we addressed it partially through forward planning, selection criteria, record maintenance, team communication, regular engagement with a broader network for example through attending industry and local chamber events, conducting industry visits and informal coffee catch ups, and industry partners also help to recruit speakers. Success of a CEL program embedded within curriculum necessitates dedicated leadership and commitment by team members and school executive as well as strict time management for project deliverables. Establishing clear and realistic partnership development strategies that can be executed by the individual team members within the realm of the academic role is also critical to achieving success. Furthermore, continuous evaluation with partners and iterative changes develop efficiencies, refine event planning processes and maintain value for partners. This feedback driven approach informs a deeply reflective process, crucial for facilitating continual improvements and innovations to learning and assessment, event planning and design as well as delivery processes. It further ensures the program remains responsive to the evolving needs of all stakeholders and that finite resources are deployed judiciously.

Delving further into the challenges of growing our network and broadening representation, a particular concern stems from the potential for industry partners to perceive their contribution as a one-sided transactional relationship, potentially jeopardising long-term collaboration (Butcher et al., 2011; Cooper & Orrell, 2016). This is particularly cogent with the more resource intense partnership pedagogy roles such as co-credentialing a course compared with co-delivering of a lecture. Additionally, we acknowledge the dynamic nature of organisational structures with contacts changing, whilst some sectors like sport, hospitality and international business significantly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic and other unforeseen occurrences. Our journey in establishing and maintaining partner networks across the partnership pedagogy typology became a paradigm of experiential learning: precisely the pedagogical approach we aimed to foster within curriculum. We recognised the need to emphasise reciprocity and mutual benefit, demonstrating the value we offered to partners beyond simply utilising their resources (Butcher et al., 2011; Cooper & Orrell, 2016). This included facilitating access to skilled graduates, providing networking opportunities and ensuring transparent communication regarding program developments and outcomes. Engaging with partners in a professional manner and establishing clear expectations and motivations is critical to developing positive enduring relationships. The membership of school engagement professionals within our team guarantees successful delivery of our program as they help manage event planning, liaise with industry representatives and schedule meetings among other duties.

Numerous industry centric reports accentuate the value of industry-university collaborations, highlighting their potential to not only serve as a hub for co-creation of innovative and competitive market solutions, but to serve as a reciprocal environment for knowledge-sharing and access to employability-ready graduates (Deloitte, 2022; Bean & Dawkins, 2020-2021; Universities Australia, 2016). Through our experience, we have learnt the importance of being mindful of our partners' time and resource limitations as well as the need to research and evaluate prospective partners according to the partnership pedagogy roles as not all interested partners are a good fit. We avoid overusing, over-relying upon, or assuming ongoing interest from them. Furthermore, in addressing the overrepresentation concern, particularly prevalent with larger organisations boasting a relative abundance of resources, we actively seek alternate or additional avenues to accommodate their engagement outside these subjects. The program's commitment to building a strong culture of partnerships across the various role typologies within our subjects has yielded a broad spectrum of career and employability engagement across the School of Business and University.

Conclusion

Over the past seven years, the team has been engaged in the design, implementation and iterative refinement of a curriculum based CEL program, underpinned by the partnership pedagogy framework. This journey has included varied events, study tours, workshops, and teaching activities. Six thousand students have successfully completed the program. The efficacy of these approaches is validated

through the student reflection assessments and employability outcomes currently being measured by a longitudinal study. Benefits include: deeper student understanding of contemporary workplace realities; comprehension of future workforce demands; and meaningful connections and knowledge-sharing with industry partners. Notably, both industry partners and students have cultivated a shared sense of purpose, professionalism, mutual respect, and intellectual engagement.

The level of collaboration with internal and external stakeholders and integration of CEL within core curriculum was ambitious and executed over several years and semesters. The shared commitment and passion for CEL has been critical to achieving success and in supporting the pursuit of quality and innovation. This is despite the broad agenda and limited resourcing. CEL and engagement related work is often unappreciated in part due to the challenges of measuring outcomes in a funding landscape dependant on outcomes. Building on team composition and passion we are exploring additional means to address inequalities faced by our diverse cohort including through refinements to our mentoring program and to evidence impact of these CEL initiatives through scholarly research and publication. As practitioners, this journey with all its triumphs and challenges has ultimately been rewarding. Our collective teaching and learning practices have improved, partner engagement is solid and growing, and the pinnacle satisfaction is witnessing our students' growth and their reciprocal contributions as alumni.

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