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Reflections on reflection: Supporting employability learning in the higher education context

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Abstract

Graduate employability remains a key talking point in higher education despite the contested nature of the construct and the myriad of factors that influence an individual's capacity to gain employment. Universities are still positioned to produce graduates who can contribute to society and the economy through work. Students are similarly responsible for developing the knowledge and capabilities that will meet employer expectations and assure a successful career. This development process often involves students engaging in reflective practice. This paper reports on the efficacy of a structured, written reflective process implemented across an Australian research-intensive institution to support students to learn from experiences to develop their employability. Our study found value in the use of a formalised, stepwise approach to reflective thinking that helps students make and express meaning from learning opportunities. The findings suggest, however, that attempting to shoehorn the untidy business of reflective thinking into a standard linear approach does present some challenges. Despite these challenges, our examination of a sample of reflections using our process showed evidence of reflective thought. We found alignment with the experiential learning theories that framed the creation of our reflective process in the students' expressions of their meaning-making endeavours. Our findings strengthen our advocacy of an anchor for reflective thought in a personally meaningful experience and the use of prompts around effect and action to guide students learning.

Keywords
employability learning, reflection, reflective thought, reflective writing, meaning-making, experiences, experiential learning

Introduction

Graduate employability (GE) is an evolutionary concept, founded in human capital theory, that now shapes the relationship between higher education and the economy (Tomlinson, 2017a). The success of GE lies largely in a student's capacity to develop into an employable (or work-ready) graduate who can obtain post-graduation employment and sustain a career in their chosen field.

Foundational work by Mantz Yorke (2006) framed GE as the development of knowledge, capabilities and personal attributes that support graduates to gain and maintain employment. Yorke's early framing of GE placed graduates and their personal qualities and professional capabilities as the

instruments of success in the labour market and of their contribution to society and the economy through work (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Universities seem to accept their role, and indeed moral duty, to assist students to develop their employability (Artess et al., 2017). Institutional strategic plans have been found to share the aim of advancing GE within the context of global neoliberalism that posits education as a 'self-investment in one's own capital position' (Baron & McCormack, 2024, p. 258). This positioning suggests an interdependency between Career Development Learning (CDL) and employability (Wardle & Geronikos, 2024), where students must become capable of doing their jobs and navigating their career journeys (Buchanan et al., 2022).

The evolution of employability has seen the development of models and frameworks to document Yorke's 'set of achievements'. Dacre Pool and Sewell's (2007) CareerEDGE model is one example. These models and frameworks demonstrate WHAT needs to be developed through both curricula learning and life-experiences (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Nghia, 2017). We position GE as a learning process that frames the HOW of this development (Divan et al., 2019), drawing on experiential learning theory (ELT) (Kolb, 1984) for meaning-making from a range of experiences. These experiences are translated into recognisable learning that contributes to personal and professional development.

We acknowledge that there are a myriad of factors that influence how GE is deployed in employment settings (Tomlinson 2017a; Tomlinson, 2017b). These factors call out the lack of neutrality in the standard concept of GE. Not all students have the same access to opportunities from which to develop their employability. Supporting all students to make meaning from the experiences they do have at least provides a solid foundation for their GE journeys.

Reflective practice in the GE setting

Experiential learning (EL) is an approach that can be used to implement GE through both the provision of curricular and extra-curricular activities and opportunities for reflective practice for meaning-making (Grant et al., 2024). Reflection is fundamental to EL as a mechanism for reframing experiences to consider new ways of thinking and doing (Bulman, 2013). Reflection is vital for GE learning as it supports the realisation and articulation of personal growth and development, for employability and for informing career decisions and plans (Dean et al., 2022). Reflection also supports self-perception and identity formation, thus enabling graduates to make valid and persuasive claims on their employability and navigate recruitment processes (de Blaquiere et al., 2019).

There are cognitive capabilities that underpin reflective practice, including self-awareness, critical analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Atkins & Schutz, 2013). Ramlal and Augustin (2020, p. 521) posit that reflective writing 'presents cognitive, linguistic and psychological challenges to students.' Students are often called upon to produce self-reflections to demonstrate GE learning, although instruction on how to reflect varies in tertiary environments (Strange & Gibson, 2017). As a result, students often struggle, particularly in unstructured learning contexts, to understand what they have gained from a learning opportunity and how these gains contribute to their employability, or indeed their learning in general (Oguro & Mueller, 2020; Strange & Gibson, 2017).

The need to embed employability learning in the curriculum has been identified to support students to identify GE learning (Rana et al., 2023). Spagnoli and colleagues (2023, p. 72) suggest that 'student-centred professional development for employability requires guidance, intentionality, and mechanisms for reflexive practice.' Guidance, intentionality and mechanisms for reflection often manifest themselves in the use of reflective models (for example, Gibbs, 1998) to identify and express learning in the GE context.

The outcomes of reflections for GE learning align with the concept of perceived employability (PE), understood as an individual's perception (and self-reporting) of their 'possibilities of obtaining and maintaining employment', suggesting the combination of personal and structural factors lead to success (Vanhercke et al., 2014, p. 593). A student's PE is dynamic, potentially changing over the course of their studies as their development progresses (Gilbert et al., 2022). Reflective writing

supports this concept when viewed as less about evidence and more about expression of perceived learning through a deeply personal process of meaning-making.

The SEAL reflection process

Since 2014, an Australian research-intensive institution has championed an experiential approach to GE learning, highlighting employability as a learning process through which students make meaning from their experiences (Reid, 2015; Reid et al., 2021). There was no strategic approach to GE at this stage in the university's evolution. The institution took a major step forward by recognising its responsibility to the student population to support their GE learning. It should be noted that this approach was founded on the concept of GE at that time, around students' abilities to become employable and gain a competitive edge in the employment market (Baron & McCormack, 2024). The development of the university's approach to GE has been published in an earlier edition of this journal (Reid et al., 2021).

The SEAL reflective process was formulated to address the institution's need for a mechanism that evidenced employability learning and provided a structure for students for reflective thinking (Reid et al., 2021). Our SEAL process supports 'deliberative thinking, looking back, examining oneself and one's practice in order to improve future practice' (O'Donovan, 2006. p. 612). The process harnesses the power of reflective writing to 'document and reflect, stand back and understand, gain perspective and save' (Stevens & Cooper, 2023, p. xv). We wanted to translate reflective concepts into a process that would give some coherence to those concepts in practical terms.

We formulated a user-friendly process, called SEAL (Figure 1) using language that we hoped would resonate with our students. The SEAL process does not differ conceptually from Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) framework, but it does differ practically. Our aim was to provide students with a concrete, stepwise process for thinking through an experience and its personal impact. To develop SEAL, we took the key parts of Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle and turned them into recognisable steps in a template so that students could translate their thoughts into writing and organise them 'into a particular structure' (Ramlal & Augustin, 2020, p. 520). In doing so, we aimed to address common traps students fall into when reflecting, where they often write in an objective, third-person way and/or use a stream-of-consciousness approach (Tate, 2013). We tried to capture the sometimes messy and non-linear cognitive process of learning through reflection in a structured and linear process to create something workable in our context. The SEAL acronym represents our conceptualisation of the reflection process in a stepwise manner (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The SEAL reflective process (Reid et al., 2021)

Since the SEAL process has its foundations in ELT and the long-established tradition of reflection for learning (Boud, et al., 1985; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004; Schon, 1983), it champions experience as the basis and stimulus for learning where learning comes from making meaning (sense) of those experiences (Jarvis, 2006; Merriam & Bierema, 2013). We also drew on Morrison's (1996) holistic approach to reflection, which creates understandings of experiences and feelings through self-assessment to foster personal development, as it seemed aligned to GE. Personal growth and

development through reflection often stems from a trigger point from an emotional and/or physical response to an experience that has caused some sense of 'inner discomfort or perplexity' in the learner (Brookfield, 1987, p. 26). Moreover, Bailey and colleagues (2017) suggest that confronting novelty or challenges creates growth through cognitive shifts and mastery of experiences.

SEAL aligns with adult learning theory, which states that the individual has a reaction to a situation that stimulates learning (Jarvis, 2006). This concept of learning sees the individual make meaning from situations that give them cause for consideration as they do not align with their extant self or understanding of the world (Jarvis, 2006; Reid, 2020). Thus, SEAL asks the learner to first identify an experience that created some kind of discomfort or personal impact, then it asks learners to analyse their responses to the situation and why they reacted the way that they did. These SEAL steps reflect Merriam and Clark's (1993) foundational research on significant learning, which suggests a learning experience must have personal impact and be valued by the learner to result in significant change. We also wanted to ensure that students had some prompts (the Effect step) for introspection and interpretation of their thoughts and emotions in response to their experiences (Moon, 2004; Schon, 1983).

The final step of SEAL is key to framing students' employability stories (de Blaquiere et al., 2019). This step helps students to gain confidence in articulating their employability using the language of skills that frames the current employability discourse and recruitment processes (Tomlinson, 2017a). It has been noted that even when employability learning is embedded in the curriculum, 'students remain unaware of the skills they have demonstrated or the relevance of their achievements' (Spagnoli et al., 2023, p. 72). The SEAL process aims to address these concerns by asking students to identify their learning and explore and explain how they might think, behave or react in subsequent situations (Kolb, 1984).

We developed a rubric for use with SEAL when student reflections are assessed (Figure 2, overleaf). The rubric was adapted from REFLECT (Reflection Evaluation For Learners' Enhanced Competencies Tool) by Wald and colleagues (2012) as the elements of that tool aligned with the theoretical framing of SEAL. We needed our own rubric to properly align with SEAL's steps. We recognise that our rubric is presented as a judgement of the *expression* of the SEAL steps. Our rubric does not make a judgement on the *validity* of that learning, but rather on how the student conveys their learning through reflective writing. The rubric also attempts to capture the student's narrative journey of meaning-making through writing-as-reflection (Charon & Hermann, 2012). We designed SEAL so that students would be guided to express their learning as an interaction with a situation (i.e., a learning opportunity) that produces a reaction that prompts meaning-making to understand how the experience has changed them or produced new knowledge and understanding (Jarvis, 2006).

The intention of SEAL was to support students to navigate their recruitment and career development journeys. Our hope was that SEAL would complement students' career development learning by fostering strong self-awareness and an ability to present their personal and professional attributes to prospective employers and the value of their experiences to this development.

Figure 2: The SEAL marking rubric (Student Enrichment and Employability Development, 2024, University)

	Basic	Developing	Expert
Situation	Little or no description of the disorienting dilemma, conflict, challenge or issue of concern. Minimal context provided.	Limited description of the disorienting dilemma, conflict, challenge or issue of concern. Some context provided.	Full, and clear description of the disorienting dilemma, conflict, challenge or issue of concern. Context well established.
Effect	Little acknowledgment that the situation impacted the student. Little or no recognition of, or attention to emotions. Little or no consideration of why the situation may have made them feel/react this way.	Some acknowledgment that the situation has had an impact on the student. Limited recognition or attention to emotions. Limited consideration of why this situation may have made them feel /react this way.	Full acknowledgment of the impact of the situation on them. Recognition and attention to emotions. Consideration of why this situation may have made them feel /react this way.
Action	Limited or no description of the actions that the student took or the outcome of those actions.	Some description of the actions that the student took and description of the outcome of those actions.	Full description of the actions that the student took, with a clear explanation of why they took those actions. Clear description of the outcome of those actions.
Learning	Little or unclear analysis or meaning making of the experience. No identification of any capabilities and attributes developed or enhanced through this situation.	Some analysis and meaning making of the experience. Identification of some capabilities and attributes developed or enhanced through this situation.	Comprehensive analysis and meaning making of the situation. Identification of specific capabilities and attributes developed or enhanced.
Future application	No description of how the learning could be applied in the future.	Some connection made between the learning and how they may be able to put it to use in the future (work or learning situations).	Clear connection made between the learning/capability development and how they may be able to put it to use in the future (work or learning situations).
Reflective writing	Superficial description of the experience with little evidence of introspection or attempt to analyse why they responded the way they did.	Focus on their personal experience. Description of the experience with some evidence of introspection and analysis of their responses to the situation. Some evaluation of how this learning may be integrated into future perceptions, attitudes, actions.	Focus on their personal experience (not that of the team or others). Description of the experience with evidence of exploration and critique their responses to the situation. Evaluation of how this learning may be integrated into future perceptions, attitudes, actions. Conveys a sense of transformation because of the experience.

Context for our study

We embarked on our research project five years after the implementation of SEAL across our university in 2016 (Reid et al., 2021). As employability practitioners, we knew the use of SEAL was widespread, having been integrated into curricular and extra-curricular programs and activities at the university, reaching over 19 000 students. Our solid theoretical foundations for SEAL and the significant uptake of it across the institution indicated that it may have some value to employability learning. We wanted to understand what that value might be and how our interpretation of ELT and reflective practice supported students' reflective thinking. Our project was also our first opportunity to examine students' reflective writing using the SEAL prompts. We did not set out to make judgements on students' reflective writing capabilities, rather we wanted to see how they expressed the thought process that framed their learning journeys.

Method

Upon receiving ethics approval from our university's relevant committee, we conducted a qualitative study between 2021 and 2023 on the value of SEAL. We gained ethics approval to recruit students via their university email addresses to submit their SEAL reflections and/or participate in an interview. We also gained approval to recruit staff for interviews on their implementation of SEAL in curricular or extracurricular activities.

We chose an interview study with the two sets of research participants to explore the value of SEAL. This choice of methodology aligned with our intention to understand perspectives on the use of SEAL by interpreting the meanings that the research participants placed on the efficacy of the process (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Students who had submitted SEAL reflections for the university's Employability Award and who had used SEAL in courses as nominated by staff were interviewed. Seven of the 18 students consented to participate in an interview, representing Engineering (n=2), Science (n=2), Social Sciences (n=2) and Business (n=1). We asked questions around SEAL's structure and steps and their engagement with the process as prescribed in the template. We acknowledge the limitations of a stepwise template but wanted to investigate users' perspectives on our approach to cement our work as employability practitioners and continue to advocate for SEAL's use across our university. Over 50 academic and professional staff were invited to participate in interviews, but only a small number of academic staff volunteered (n=4).

In addition, students were invited to grant us access to their SEAL reflections so we could undertake basic content analysis (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) to examine how they had used the process to make meaning from their experiences. We wanted to see how they had expressed their responses to experiences using the ELT that framed SEAL's development. Eighteen students submitted 83 discrete reflections. This sample consisted of 61 reflections as part of the requirements for the university's Employability Award, 17 for compulsory Engineering competencies evidencing and five for course assessments. We had even representation from all disciplines other than Health and across all stages of undergraduate study, with one PhD candidate and five recent graduates in our sample. The small sample of staff and student interview participants may have been due to their unavailability at the time and/or the continued impact of COVID-19 restrictions in 2021. Due to limited research funding, we were also unable to offer compensation for participant contributions.

The content analysis involved scoring the submitted reflections against the SEAL rubric (Figure 2) out of 18, whereby 0-8=Basic, 9-14=Developing and 15-18=Advanced. We found that 51 reflections were scored as Developing and 30 were Advanced. We used the 81 Developing and Advanced rubrics for our study to gain meaningful insight into expressions of the SEAL steps. It is worth noting that of our sample of 83, only two reflections were scored as Basic, largely because the students appeared to choose experiences that did not create personal impact. We also acknowledge that those students

who participated in our study were likely to be already actively engaged in their employability development.

The textual data for each SEAL step across 81 reflections was identified against the experiential learning theories that underpinned each step for the implied meanings of the outcomes of the students' reflective thought processes. This approach aligns with the principles of latent pattern content analysis (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). We acknowledge that we did not analyse the reflections according to the demographic characteristics of the students or academic conditions as our project was only our first step in examining SEAL reflections. Our goal was to investigate how students used SEAL to express reflective thought and was not tied to a demographic analysis or investigation of the influences on reflective thought.

Findings

Here we present two sets of findings regarding the value of SEAL based on our analysis of the interview data and content analysis of students' submitted SEAL reflections.

Interview findings: The structure and steps of SEAL

Four stage structure

Both students and staff indicated that the SEAL process supported reflection by providing a simple, four-step structure for reflection.

> *If you don't know where to start with reflecting on your work, I think it's a really good method that helps you go through the process of: Where am I now? How did I get here? What am I going to do to fix the situation? What have I learned from all this? I think it's a really good way to structure it* […] *I don't think I would have really come to this conclusion if I didn't have this process of thinking.* (Student A)

> *Having these processes in place, people can say, especially when they're out of their comfort zone, how they use what they know, or how they apply themselves to really adapt to the new situation* […] *SEAL gives a bit of structure to that chaos* […] *rather than just being in the aftermath of it all and saying, 'Well, I did this, I didn't know how I did it, but I just kind of got there in the end'.* (Student B)

> *I think without the structure* […] *I don't think I would have arrived as far as I did* […] *You can even see* […] *in the learning paragraph I went on a bit of a journey.* (Student D)

We found that staff recognised the value of the SEAL structure for students unfamiliar with self-reflection. Some staff indicated that they had previously used a different reflective model but had changed to SEAL when their students showed a preference for its structure. It was also found that use of SEAL decreased student enquiries on the expectations of reflective tasks and made marking and feedback easier.

> *When I gave students that choice, most students chose the SEAL methodology. I think what's really good about it is it provides a framework to allow students to reflect, and it gives them a process to follow. And I think the process was really helpful for students who've never self-reflected before.* (Staff A)

Linear process

Our findings showed the value of structure; however, the linear nature of the SEAL created some challenges for students, particularly when using the SEAL template to document their reflections. The

linear nature of the process and the juxtaposition of the steps sometimes caused confusion and a conflation of the steps so that their discrete nature was blurred.

> *I don't think I'd specifically go Situation, Effect, Action and Learning, but I'd definitely go from start to finish, maybe not in that order, but I would start off with Situation and end in learning. It would just be a little bit* […] *fuzzy in the middle and it would definitely be the start and finish that stay the same.* (Student E)

> *I'd probably put all four of them* [stages of the process] *into one big question and just say discuss the Situation Effects Actions and the Learning and just have the space for the students to write about the four of them in whatever order they want and however they want.* (Student E)

> *I think that it* [the SEAL process] *is not flexible enough to reflect how the brain works because the brain doesn't sit there and go 'Okay'* […] *and then move onto a very discrete topic and then move on again* […] *It's more flexible, and there's a lot more integrated thinking than that, but I do think that the actual Situation, Action Effect and Learning certainly is embedded in there. I think that it's just more of like a circle* […] *rather than moving on from one thing to another.* (Student E)

Stages of SEAL

Students noted that some of the elements of SEAL appeared to play a more important role in eliciting deep reflection than others. A key finding was that thinking through the personal effect of a situation helped students consider their reaction to a situation and the learning gained from it.

> *To me 'Action' I could have skipped. But I always saw the Situation section more as* […] *just providing the context for whoever was reading it, so I probably wouldn't have been able to jump immediately from the Situation to the Learning because* […] *the Effect was really where the meaty part was.* (Student F)

> *The Effect is what helps you really choose the situation to talk about* […] *It was something that I had strong feelings about or was like a challenge* […] *It was something I had to take specific actions for. It was something that I had to* […] *sit down and think about. They all did link together in the sense that the Effect motivated me to take Action.* (Student G)

Our findings showed the difficulty students faced in 'disentangling' their responses to the four steps, and that their responses did not sit neatly within one step.

> *When I was writing the reflection, I felt like in my Effect, I was also talking about actions and vice versa.* (Student E)

> *It was difficult for me to label what was the Situation and what was the Effect* […] *If you've done it before then it's easier, but this is the first time I was using it, so I got confused between the Situation and the Effect*. (Student A)

Findings from the staff interviews aligned with our student findings on the confusion between steps. One staff interviewee explained that 'Action and Effect are the ones that students often mix up', noting that those parts of the process were often combined into one.

Engagement with SEAL

Influence of context

Our interview data revealed the influence of context on students' engagement with reflection, identifying the mandatory nature of the setting as the motivating factor. Student L stated that 'if it was something that wasn't compulsory, I don't know whether I would have done it', and that 'I probably would have been more lazy with my responses if it wasn't a requirement of my degree.' Compulsory engagement did not, however, guarantee quality of reflection. One staff participant commented that 'even if you make it [reflection] assessable, I don't think it guarantees that all the students are going to approach it in that really deep and meaningful way.'

Our findings showed that where reflections were used to demonstrate mastery of mandatory competencies, students often made decisions about which learning opportunity to reflect on based on what they thought would lead to a particular outcome. Many students had already identified the development gain they wanted to portray and then 'worked backwards' to find an appropriate situation to reflect on rather than starting with the Situation. This self-fulfilling prophecy strategy still seemed to foster reflective thinking, as the below student interviewees demonstrate.

> *I did a few Engineering placements* […] *so for me it was just a matter of trying to think of a situation that best mapped to that particular point and then applying that.* (Student F)
>
> *I was probably* […] *thinking, I need to find some kind of learning outcome. I would think backwards, about what actions I took to encourage some kind of learning. It seems like a* […] *weird way to* […] *say that, but I think that's how my mind was working: I need to make sure I finish this reflection and what have I achieved out of this? and I think* […] *What did I achieve? Maybe these are some actions that I took to kind of steer myself into that direction of achieving something good and then I identified the actions based on the outcome.* (Student E)
>
> *The way I did it is because we were mapping onto those competencies* […] *I was aligning* […] *with certain competencies that had to do with project timelines and working with people and professionalism* […] *I should try and reference that to show how my learning links to those competencies.* (Student G)
>
> *It's science, a lot of students are goal oriented. And they start at the end* […] *That's how I would do it, too, because it's quite overwhelming* […] *but even if they do start at the end* […] *just having been forced to go through that process as students who were giving it any kind of thought will actually* […] *make them aware of other employability literacies that they got out of the experience.* (Staff B)
>
> *The other tension for students is they want to tell you that I've had the best experience of my life in this course so that you will give me a great grade.* (Staff C)

We note that even though some reflections were formally assessed in a curricular context, all reflections were written for an audience who would read and form a judgement on the reflective process as documented in the SEAL template.

Reflective tendencies

Both student and staff participants in our study identified the influence of individual reflective tendencies on engagement with the process and use of SEAL. Our findings revealed that students either considered themselves naturally reflective and consequently placed more effort into their meaning-making or admitted that they did not value the reflective activity.

> *It really depends on your personality and how you view the value of the task. So, if you're* […] *just ticking the box to get through it, then you're going to make something up, or just chuck a couple of sentences in the boxes and move on* […] *As someone who was quite a*

> *reflective person to begin with* […] *I really valued the opportunity to reflect and to improve my understanding of my skills, knowledge and attributes.* (Student D)

Our findings point to the influence of discipline on engagement with reflection and perception of its difficulty. Staff participants perceived Humanities students to be more proficient at reflective writing than STEM students.

> *A lot of Science students will say, 'That's just not scientific. I don't do feelings.' Humanities students are quite used to writing about how they feel or think. Science students say, 'We're not used to it, and we don't really know how to do it'. So even though the thinking is there, it doesn't always translate to words on a page.* (Staff B)

> *Humanities students would find this easier than say a Physics or Math student because…those kinds of subjects* […] *have the right answer* […] *In a self-reflection you've got no idea whether this is the right answer* […] *who is the other person going to interpret what I've written* […] *If you've only ever done subjects where you get a right answer, then I think that this is challenging* […] *confronting, difficult, uncomfortable.* (Staff A)

Summary of interview findings

Overall, the interviews suggested that a simple stepwise structure may not accurately capture the complexity of the reflective thought process, although both staff and students found value in SEAL's approach to reflection for learning. Engagement with, and effort applied to the reflective process, were influenced by context and reflective tendencies.

Content analysis findings: How students use SEAL

In the second part of our study, we used content analysis on the submitted SEAL reflections to gain an understanding of how the experiential learning process was expressed using SEAL. Our findings are presented according to each of the four stages of SEAL and the language used by students to articulate reflective thought. We have provided examples of language indicators from across the 81 reflections and the full excerpt from each stage of SEAL from a single reflection (Student H). We have included a full reflection to show the holistic reflective thought process using SEAL.

Situation

The Situation step of SEAL asks students to identify a learning opportunity to provide the anchor for their reflections, in alignment with ELT and the concept of a concrete experience stimulating learning (Kolb, 1984).

We found that the situations described in our study were grounded in research projects, volunteering, placement activities and global experiences. Example language indicators included *write, review, present, work, assigned a role, task, duties, perform, responsible* and *volunteer.* These experiences align with those commonly associated with GE that provide potential for personal and professional development relevant to employability (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021).

Below is Student H's reflection on the Situation step of SEAL, showing their description of the learning opportunity. Note that the bleed between the steps in SEAL that we identified in our interviews is evident here, as the student articulates both the situation and some of the personal effects of it.

> *I volunteered* […] *during the start of my studies* […] *because* […] *[I] thought that their campaigns for climate change and efforts to make our world a better place to live in was very attractive and hence wanted to be a part of it* […] *One of the tasks during my initial association with this club was to gather support from students* […] *to sign a petition to promote the reduction of fossil fuel usage and also convince them to attend a rally* […] *It was really challenging for me because I had to step out of my comfort zone and overcome*

> *my hesitation to speak with people. Further the need to convince them was emotionally arduous for me.*

We found that students described the context of their reflective activity, as shown in the above example. We acknowledge that in most learning contexts in our sample, students were given some guidance on how to select an appropriate situation, i.e., one that was new or challenging. The students were instructed to work through the SEAL process, responding to the prompts provided, to reflect on that particular learning opportunity.

Our interviews with staff and students shed light on *why* a situation may have been chosen for reflective learning. Staff B noted that 'students will nearly always use some kind of catastrophic event, a negative event.'

> *I would pick things that were* […] *a big challenge or* […] *an experience that I* […] *messed up a little bit because I feel like* […] *when things are going along smoothly it's not something where* […] *I've learned so much* […] *this is what I have to change for the future* […] *That learning aspect of SEAL meant that if I could find a way to use that experience to improve for the future it meant that I was more inclined to pick something that was* […] *difficult* […] *or something where I* […] *made a small mistake, or I could have improved on.* (Student G)

> *When I picked the situation, it was more how I felt, so I picked it more on the Effect, and then by default, because it had a strong effect meant I could* […] *have learnings I could take away in the future.* (Student G)

The above quotes show alignment with the position that many ELT theorists take that learning happens where there is a sense of discomfort (Brookfield, 1987) or where they reacted to a situation (Jarvis, 2006). Morris (2020, p. 1068) also suggests that 'learning involves risk, as experiential learning incorporates novel, challenging, experiences.' The reflections that we examined showed that students chose to reflect on an experience that provided a meaningful learning opportunity as those opportunities were novel or challenging.

Effect

We created the Effect step to shape students' reflections on the personal impact of the situation and the discomfort they may have experienced that stimulated learning. A trigger point forces the learner to create and clarify the meaning of the experience thus prompting a change of perspective (Bulman, 2013), therefore discomfort is central to learning (Brookfield, 1987). We looked for words in the reflections that suggested the student had experienced discomfort, shifting perceptions or a heightened emotional response. Discomfort was also inferred from the students' actions taken in response to the impact of the situation on them (the Action of SEAL).

We found language indicators for expressions of Effect that included *judged, embarrassed, overwhelmed, concerned, stressed, disappointed, confused and helpless, felt guilty, defensive, eye-opening experiences* and *was not confident.*

Student H reflected on the effect of being pushed out of their comfort zone during a volunteering experience, as described in their Situation step, using words such a*s felt like giving up, embarrassed* and nervous to articulate how the situation made them feel. The impact the student felt was clearly articulated and shows how discomfort frames the learning experience. They had already identified in their Situation reflection that the experience elicited some discomfort, and their Effect reflection builds on that.

> *My introverted nature made this entire task very complex. Thoughts of people mocking or criticising me flashed across my mind and I felt like giving up immediately. I struggled*

> *to come up with lines to talk to people and this made me nervous. I did not feel like putting in the effort to do something I was not comfortable to do in the first place. I felt confused and helpless. On the other hand, I knew I had voluntarily signed up for this and felt embarrassed to tell the club members that I did not have the confidence to do it. My anxiety was nearly getting to me, and I knew I had to do something about it.*

We used the language indicators to examine the reflections by expressions of the effect of the experience on the student, using language that indicates the strength of emotions and reactions to the situation. Our findings could be both an indicator of the ability to articulate emotional reactions and/or the depth of reaction the experience generated (i.e., the extent to which it stimulated discomfort). Merriam and Clark's foundational (1993) research on significant learning posits that the impact or effect of an experience is tied to the personal value placed on these things. The example above shows that the student identified how a strong sense of responsibility and their introverted nature shaped their reaction to the experience. The sense of discomfort experienced may relate to the experience itself (and its potential to create such feelings) or the individual's response, based on their personality, their values, beliefs, and/or prior experiences. This is where the learner's lens influences the reflective process, and the meaning made from an experience (Reid, 2020).

Action

We investigated the ways the students described the actions they took in response to the challenging situation they identified as a learning opportunity and the personal effect of that situation. The texts were examined for the students' reflections to see whether they identified actions that they took as a result of the impact of the experience (Gibbs, 1988). Using the concept of discomfort as our lens, we looked for how students described their interactions or responses to the situations. Language indicators for Action included *apologised, created a list, discussed, set up a meeting, sought out feedback, asked for advice, tested, identified, observed, decided* and *devised strategies.*

Our findings revealed that the students' reflections tended to express the actions they had taken in response to a situation and its effect when they had personal agency and active participation in the situation (e.g., placements, volunteering). This finding may indicate the situation itself contributed to the students' reflective thought processes as there were actions that could be taken in response to an experience. It might also reflect what Ramlal and Augustin (2020) suggest is the challenge for students of using higher order thinking and complex introspective capabilities to reflect, whereby an active experience was 'easier' to reflect upon. Expressions of actions showed less depth when there was no expectation of an active response to a situation (e.g., training sessions or conference attendance).

Individual reactions to situations may determine the meanings made from an experience, but our findings align with ELT around the active and engaged participation of the learner in a concrete experience (Morris, 2020). We suggest, however, that it is the activeness of the learner – what causes discomfort for the individual and how they choose to respond – which determines active participation, rather than the nature of the activity.

For example, one student reflected on their completion of online modules as part of an extra-curricular activity. This may seem like a 'passive experience', but the student experienced a sense of discomfort as one of the modules included personality testing. The student articulated feeling 'slightly defensive' of the results and this led them to take action to address their identified weaknesses which led them to learn to 'be more open to learning about myself' and 'to take criticism in a constructive manner'.

Below is Student H's reflection on the actions they took based on the effect of the situation described above. The student made clear connections between how they felt during their volunteer experience and why and then reflected on what they did in response to those reactions.

> *I could not let my nerves control how I reacted each time I had to speak to someone new. I drank some water and calmed myself down by taking deep breaths. I also went for a short walk around the campus to relax myself. After gaining my composure, I tagged along with one of the senior volunteers and observed closely how he was carrying out his designated task. I spent about 30 minutes learning and taking cues from him as much as I could and then made the decision to complete the rest of the shift on my own. I did stammer a bit initially but then slowly the entire process became simpler and familiar.*

The reflection is an example of the value of the 'treatment' of a concrete experience by assuming responsibility for 'acting pragmatically to find solutions […] to specific real-world problems' (Morris, 2020, p. 1069). This is where the learner is empowered to act upon the personal impact of the experience, so they are actively experimenting (Kolb, 1984) by testing out a new way forward.

Learning

The reflections were analysed to examine the learning the students identified from their reflections. The top ten learnings referenced were written and oral communication, planning and organisational skills, determination and persistence, self-awareness, flexibility and adaptability, confidence, time management, people skills, new appreciation and leadership (including decision making, negotiation, influence and conflict management).

We found that students could articulate what they had learned from an experience, as demonstrated in the reflections where students described what 'I have learnt'. Below is Student H's reflection on their learning from the volunteer program, based on the situation's personal effect and the actions they took.

> *This experience helped me make a start to develop resilience and embrace a change within me. It motivated me to take up more such challenges in future to force myself to come out of my comfort zone and eventually learn the art of conversing confidently to anyone. It did make an impact in my mind as to how one needs to learn the skill of being able to talk in a persuading manner when necessary to get certain things done. I also realised that just conveying information is the easiest part of communication. Making someone listen and get convinced to do something you want them to do is a skill not many can master* […] *This situation did improve my confidence to talk to strangers* […] *If I face a similar situation in future, I will employ the same strategy of observing and learning first if possible, instead of just jumping in and getting nervous.*

We recognise that within the context of the prevailing GE discourse, students are well-versed in the language of skills, particularly the labels used to identify desired knowledge and capabilities in recruitment. Students in our sample who submitted reflections for the institutional Employability Award seem particularly attuned to the language of skills and the rhetoric surrounding extra-curricular experiences such as study abroad (Vande Berg et al., 2012). Students in our sample who submitted reflections for mandatory Engineering competencies are also conversant in the competency language. This familiarity with the language of skills may generate particular expressions of learning using SEAL.

Summary of content analysis findings

Our basic content analysis of 81 submitted SEAL reflections demonstrate how students use SEAL to reflect on experiences based on the experiential learning theories that underpin SEAL's formation. While our study revealed the challenges of using a stepwise template to reflect, our sample shows evidence of the value of SEAL to address our intent to assist students to articulate a discomforting experience, the effect of that experience, actions taken in response to the personal impact, and learning from the experience. Our position is that students' reflective practice may not be sophisticated, due to the challenges of this 'distinct mode' (Ramlan & Augustin, 2020, p. 521),

therefore the reflections that were submitted for our study demonstrated a depth of thinking that might be reasonably expected by the participants and within the context of using a template for reflective thought.

Discussion

We originally developed and implemented SEAL across the university to support employability learning through reflective practice. Students are used to a curricular structure and formal assessment process, but in the absence of these formal mechanisms, they often find it challenging to engage in reflective thinking and writing and recognise learning from experiences (McCarthy, 2013). Moreover, many reflective models conceptualise the learning process but do little to offer guidance on HOW to reflect and on WHAT to reflect. The SEAL process was created to address the WHAT and HOW questions in a template that students could use to guide the writing-as-reflection meaning-making process.

Our study offers support for a structured and staged approach to reflection to help students to conceptualise and articulate learning from experiences, particularly those outside of formal settings. In the GE context, students are asked to document reflective thought processes and provide evidence of learning. Ramlan and Augustin (2020) uncovered an issue in their research with lack of organisational structure of students' reflections that contained largely descriptive detail. The full example of a SEAL reflection that we presented in our study shows that the student was able to construct a narrative journey using SEAL, identifying a situation that caused discomfort and why, how they responded to it, and the learning they gained from the experience, including how they might react in subsequent similar situations. The language indicators we identified also demonstrated how students could capture their emotions, reactions and plans (Gibbs, 1988; Moon, 2004) in some depth. Our findings support ongoing advocacy, based on adult learning theories (Jarvis, 2006; Kolb, 1984) and practitioner experiences, for an anchor for reflective thought (the S of SEAL) and the use of language around effect and action to guide students to consider how an experience has contributed to their learning.

Our interview findings suggest that, while there is value in SEAL's stepwise structure, it is difficult to shoehorn the untidy business of reflective thinking into a standard linear approach. There were limitations identified by our study participants on the steps in SEAL and the overlap and conflation of some of those steps. Guided reflection through a given structured process has been shown to support learning (Ramlan & Augustin 2020; Silver, 2013). We acknowledge, however, that a simplistic linear approach with discrete steps does not accurately and appropriately represent the complicated cognitive process of reflection, where it is difficult to articulate these steps as independent thought processes. It may be helpful in the HE context to break down the reflective process into discrete parts, but it is difficult to connect and blend those parts (Atkins & Schutz, 2013). Our study suggests that the structural challenges may be a consequence of using a template for reflections that provide guidance but may also interrupt the thought process. It is not clear how this interruption might influence a student's understanding of their experience, how they interpret learning from the opportunity, or the depth of learning identified and gained. This is something that requires further investigation, given the reflections we examined in our study showed that students used language to reflect their meaning-making endeavours that aligned with our intentions for SEAL based on experiential learning theories.

Writing is commonly used to demonstrate and assess the skill of reflection after the capacity to reflect has been developed elsewhere (Wald et al., 2012). We found numerous examples of reflections that demonstrated well-articulated responses to SEAL's steps, using our rubric to make these judgements. We acknowledge that a 'good' reflection may just be an indicator of writing skills, however Charon and Hermann (2012, p. 6) offer the position that 'writing is used to attain the state of reflection'. They also propose that writing is discovery and a means of accessing depth of thought, not simply a

reporting of reflection and, thus, is a powerful tool for translating experiences into something discernible and coherent. In the context of GE learning, it may be enough just to engage students in the process of reflection – to engage in metacognition and foster meaning-making of personal experiences to support learning – without evaluating if a written reflection is 'good' or 'bad'. Producing a written reflection is commonplace in higher education, whereas not all adult learners practise this approach to learning as an everyday occurrence. They often engage in more informal and unstructured thought processes to learn from their experiences. SEAL is an unnatural mechanism in this sense, but it does allow for students to reach into experiences and 'extract' meaning so their learning can be recognised and deciphered. We hope, too, that its continued usage makes reflective practice through writing become natural.

There are assumptions that can be interrogated about reflective writing that warrant further consideration. Charon and Hermann (2012, p. 6) posit that two of these assumptions are that written texts 'display their writers transparently, allowing the reader unambiguous access to the writer's earnest thoughts, motives and feelings' and that a written reflection will be interpreted similarly by anyone who reads it. While our findings show that SEAL has value to students to support reflective practice, we recognise the limitations on the language of the stepwise template to encourage and extract these earnest thoughts, motives and feelings. Some of the reflections in our sample are quite long and meandering but are not necessarily an indication of surface thinking. Using a template may restrict the student's ability to fully express their cognitive process of learning from something. The prevailing GE world places responsibility on the student to become employable and fosters a competitive approach to gain employment (Baron & McCormack, 2024). We may not gain access to the writer's thoughts, motives and feelings. Employability is not a quantifiable construct, however, as it is only a self-perception (Vanhercke et al., 2014) until 'proven' by gaining employment and even then, success comes from a myriad of influencing factors, such as gender, race and labour market (Tomlinson, 2017a).

Another element of reflective practice that warrants attention is the learning opportunity that is being reflected on and how the individual responds to it. Morris (2020) identified the importance of time and place in experiential learning, refining Kolb's model so that it acknowledges concrete experiences as contextually rich. Schnepfleitner and Ferreira (2021) concur, suggesting that some situations may present greater opportunities for discomfort that foster more meaningful learning. The employability development playing field is not an even one, as students with access to certain types of experiences may have a greater chance of significant learning, for example study abroad programs (Reid, 2020), and a better story to tell. We found that students who were actively involved in an experience wrote about significant growth, but this may have been because they had something worthy of writing about. SEAL asks students to fill a template out and they must write something in each box, therefore we could assume they are choosing something worthy of comment. The question is whether this matters, as long as students are engaging in reflection.

Students' reflective tendencies play critical roles in the reflective process and there are cognitive, linguistic and psychological challenges for some students when engaging in reflective writing (Ramlan & Augustin, 2020). Our research participants spoke about the personal value placed on the opportunity for reflection and a scientific versus social science mindset as two mitigating factors on the outcomes of reflection. It is acknowledged that to learn from reflection presupposes the individual's ability to think metacognitively and represent their experience in language (Charon & Hermann, 2012; Coulson & Harvey, 2013). It is also often assumed that students have been taught to reflect in ways that will support meaningful outcomes from the reflection process.

Despite the limitations discussed here, the value of the personal learning journey undertaken through reflection is substantial. Providing a foundation for reflective practice and supporting the metacognitive process through the use of SEAL prepares students for ongoing use of reflection so they can analyse their behaviours, recognise growth and improve on how they approach situations in the future. Our findings align with the work of de Blaquiere and colleagues (2019) and Ramlan and

Augustin (2020) who champion the use of a practical architecture to support reflection and metacognition, with the aim of assisting students to understand and articulate their employability. Our examination of the sample of submitted SEAL reflections does demonstrate how students have used language to show how an experience has impacted them and what they have learnt from it. We have not judged the validity of their learning but have shown that they are capable of achieving – or at least working towards – metacognition through engaging in experiential learning using SEAL and within the context of using a template to support meaning-making. We continue to champion the practice of providing guidance for students' reflective practice, channelling this practice into making meaning from a situation, considering the personal effect of that situation, and identifying what personal and professional learning can be taken away from how the student responded to it.

Conclusion

We set out to investigate the value of our SEAL reflective process for enabling employability learning but as our research journey progressed, we uncovered some complexities around using a standardised process to articulate reflective thought. While we recognise the limitations of our stepwise reflective process, providing a structure still seems a worthy endeavour. Writing-as-reflection guides students to engage in reflective practice and assists those for whom reflective practice (and writing) is not intuitive nor an innate capability. Our call to action for universities is to continue to encourage reflective practice to support student learning in the GE context by carving out a space for guided reflective thought using a structured approach that translates experiential learning theory into practice using a model that resonates with students. In the uneven playing field of employability and disparities in access to learning opportunities, we remain committed to the power of reflective writing to encourage students to grow and learn. It is our hope that SEAL will continue to be adopted at our university and beyond so that the skills developed through utilising our process are carried forward and drawn upon for learning once students have left higher education, no matter where their careers take them.

Declaration of completing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest or funding regarding this study or the assembly of the manuscript.

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