

Learn while you earn: Harnessing the career development value of paid work for higher education students

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Abstract

This conceptual paper introduces the ‘Stepping Stone’ concept, an evidence-based and practitioner-led approach to embedded career education implemented at a large Australian metropolitan university. In response to growing policy and market pressures on higher education providers to support graduate employability, the approach acknowledges the increasing diversity of the student population and the need for personalised, flexible and contextually embedded career development interventions. Grounded in career development theory and practice wisdom, the concept takes a ‘just-in-time’ approach by enabling students to leverage their current paid work into more career-relevant work while they study. Embedded within a scaffolded, course-wide program, the Stepping Stone concept supports students’ transitions into the workforce by aligning career education with their individual goals and circumstances. The paper highlights the value of collaboration across the higher education workforce to design and support relevant, timely and industry-engaged career development interventions and calls for broader recognition of practice wisdom in higher education policy and strategy.

Keywords

career development learning, graduate employability, embedded career education, paid work, career management skills

Introduction

Graduate employability is a critical priority within the higher education sector, driven by shifting policy demands and escalating market pressures (Campbell et al., 2022). At the core of this focus lies the urgent need to equip students with the essential knowledge, skills, and experiences to successfully navigate and manage the transition to and within the workforce (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Today’s student population is more diverse than ever, challenging the effectiveness of traditional, linear approaches to career development learning (CDL) such as Watts’ (2006) DOTS model. Career development interventions must be inclusive, adaptable and highly relevant to the diverse lives students lead, equipping them with the skills to self-manage their careers. This conceptual paper presents an innovative and sustainable approach to CDL that is grounded in evidence-based practice and seminal and contemporary career development theories. The Stepping Stone approach harnesses students’ existing or planned paid work to foster the development of essential career management skills and their broader graduate employability.

In recent years, there has been a greater emphasis on CDL in higher education. The increasing number of graduates, a competitive graduate employment market and the effects of rapid technological change have significantly impacted how universities equip students with skills for securing employment and managing their careers (Amiet et al., 2020). The pandemic further exacerbated existing labour market challenges, reinforcing the need to support students in developing careers that are no longer a linear pathway from education to traditional occupations (Tomlinson et al., 2023). Over the years, traditional career progression, determined by formal organisational structures or programs, has been supplanted by self-managed careers, where individuals have a range of employment experiences over their lifetime.

It is well established in the literature (for example, Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Harris-Reeves et al., 2024; Kinash et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2021) that higher education providers must help students understand the importance of leveraging their unique skills and experiences, as well as their formal qualifications, to enhance their graduate employability. Students' skill development must be understood within the broader context of their career self-image, as well as the importance of developing professional identities through the acquisition of social and cultural capital over time and in various contexts, which collectively enhances their employability (Walsh et al., 2021; Tomlinson & Jackson, 2021). Therefore, students must be supported in planning their careers as they transition into university and from university to the workplace (Lent & Brown, 2013). Contemporary CDL now moves beyond the opt-in career development model to programmatic assessment embedded early in and across undergraduate degrees, ensuring it is structurally unavoidable (Bennett et al., 2016; Bridgstock, 2009). This is especially important for students in non-vocational courses with diverse career pathways (Amiet et al., 2020).

Career development is a continuous process of managing life, learning and work throughout the lifespan. It applies to everyone, regardless of experience or educational level, and helps navigate education and employment to build meaningful careers (Australian Centre for Career Education, n.d.). Career education and CDL are often used interchangeably in the literature. In this paper, we distinguish career education as a specific intervention within an educational program from CDL as the broader, ongoing learning process that is supported by career education interventions. This distinction is consistent with Bridgstock et al.'s (2019) definition of CDL as 'the acquisition of capabilities that are useful to the lifelong development and management of one's career, grounded in an ongoing authentic learning-based process that builds knowledge of the world of work and one's self' (p. 57).

Employability results from ongoing career development, enhancing the likelihood of gaining employment. Several frameworks have been applied to support students' career development in higher education. Watts' seminal DOTS model (decisions, opportunities, transition and self) (Watts, 2006) focuses on the 'self-management of progression in learning and work, based on reflection on past achievements and what can be learned from and built upon these achievements' (p 16). Watts further contends that central to CDL are meta-skills, the ability to learn and build new skills and improve others, and inherently includes the transference of skills, the ability to select, adapt, adjust and apply skills to different situations and contexts. While the DOTS model recognises the importance of these meta-skills, it does not specify how these are developed through students' everyday experiences. Indeed, graduate employers seek more than generic employability skills; they seek candidates capable of a nuanced and judicious application of their skills, or work readiness. Bridgstock (2009) argued that in a dynamic and knowledge-driven economy, a simple list of generic and discipline-specific skills often defined by employer organisations and government departments is inadequate to foster sustainable employment. In the Bridgstock (2009) model for CDL, self-management and career-building skills are integrated as underlying the ability to acquire, demonstrate and apply discipline-specific and generic transferable (also known as transversal) skills

These considerations are best met if CDL is integrated within the curriculum through a whole-of-program model implemented as a collaboration between academic staff, careers services, and curriculum/learning designers (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012; Bridgstock, 2019). Bridgstock and Hearn (2012) propose a model where career identity development evolves through an iterative, reflective process that begins early in an undergraduate course where students reflect on their interests, abilities and values; and through

exposure to authentic industry settings, learn by experiencing aspects of the labour market and their intended professions (Bridgstock & Hearn, 2012).

However, Healy et al. (2020) argue that the promise of more meaningful CDL is an ideal currently unrealised in graduate employability scholarship, because so few graduate employability scholars have integrated theories or evidence from career development beyond the career management skills listed in the DOTS model. Healy (2023) suggests there has been a lack of integration between graduate employability and career development scholarship and practice, with CDL often considered as a discrete component of graduate employability frameworks; and that rather than being limited to a single model of career management skills, CDL should be viewed as an ongoing learning process that is underpinned by learning theories of career development that are integrated within graduate employability scholarship. This gap highlights the need for approaches that not only draw on empirical evidence and contemporary career development theory but also illustrate how these insights can be enacted in practice. Healy (2023) also notes that while CDL is important, students, especially those from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, learn about their careers and employability in all contexts of their lives. This is especially true for those whose personal, academic, and professional lives are intertwined. With an increasing number of students working more hours, formal career education programs must consider and capitalise on the career development value of paid work. This conceptual paper presents a theoretically and pedagogically grounded approach that harnesses the power of paid work for career development learning.

The career development value of paid work

The benefits of work-integrated learning (WIL) in the curriculum have been well established (Jackson, 2015; Jackson & Collings, 2018), and the value of paid, relevant work during studies in enhancing graduate employability and improving career outcomes is recognised (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Jackson et al., 2024). Universities are said to have an important role as 'brokers of job opportunities' (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021, p. 736), but they still have much to do to fully realise the career developmental potential of paid work (Coates, 2015; Webber et al., 2025) and for students to reap strategic employability benefits as a result.

It is well established that employers value work experience in graduates, whether or not it is relevant to the discipline and industry, and/or that allows them to demonstrate transferable professional skills (Coates, 2015; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Muldoon, 2009). In fact, employers seeking to hire graduates are often challenged by the mismatch between the skills and experience required and those of applicants. A recent review of workplace learning by Billett (2023) provides an in-depth exploration of the evolution, value, and richness of learning opportunities afforded by workplace settings and experiences, and how workplace learning may be supported and enriched to ensure its contribution to initial preparation for the workplace/occupation and continued development across an individual's working life.

Jackson and Collings (2018) compared the benefits of WIL and paid work in the final year of study on full-time graduate employment outcomes. While WIL did not increase full-time graduate employment rates, it appeared to be associated with higher-quality and more relevant employment. In contrast, those in paid employment in their final year had higher full-time employment rates. The authors suggest that this is most likely due to students remaining with their existing employer, rather than securing a relevant, quality graduate role. However, full-time work still supports students in developing work readiness. Jackson & Bridgstock (2021) found that only 17.3% of final-year business and creative arts students were in paid work relevant to their careers. Students value paid work for their careers, but less so for broadening their networks. However, the true value of paid work for career development is best realised with deep reflection and meaningful learning activities (Jung, 2022).

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024) recommended that, by 2050, groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education, including First Nations people, individuals from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, people with disabilities, and those from regional, rural and remote areas, should be represented in higher education in alignment with their proportions in

the Australian population. However, evidence suggests that students from equity cohorts are more likely to report financial barriers to studying (Cardak & Deci, 2022; Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2022; Russell et al., 2025). The higher education sector needs to adopt a ‘whole of student’ approach to ensure success for these cohorts. This includes assistance with job searches and relevant financial and housing support. More broadly, the final report highlights the need for the government to expand opportunities for students to ‘earn and learn while studying’ (Department of Education, 2024, p. 6). It proposes several measures to achieve this goal, including increasing WIL opportunities and access. One notable recommendation is establishing a national jobs broker to help students find paid employment related to their field of study. Employers would pay a subscription fee to the provider for student recruitment, while this service would be free for students. Some commercial organisations have already established services similar to the proposed job brokers, for example, Prosple (Prosple, 2026). Furthermore, most university students already hold part-time or casual jobs, enabling them to develop transferable skills that are highly regarded by employers.

While the Australian Universities Accord Final Report provides a vision and outlines some measures to address student equity and employability concerns, it does not address the complex reality of graduate employability practice (Hansen et al., 2024). We argue that evidence-based career education interventions that draw on the scholarship of both career development and graduate employability practitioners play a vital role in helping students learn lifelong career development strategies to identify, apply for, and succeed in industry or skill-relevant work while studying. We refer to these roles as Stepping Stone roles.

In this paper, we introduce the concept of Stepping Stone roles and how these have been integrated into an existing embedded career education program at a large metropolitan university in Australia. We proudly present this practice-led conceptual work as just one example of the scholarly practices flourishing within higher education that can be harnessed to address the challenges set by the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024). While such efforts often remain unpublished due to the time constraints faced by practitioners, they hold immense value and potential. However, we are committed to sharing our work, practitioner-to-practitioner, in the hope that the transformative power of our collective endeavour will lead to meaningful, sustainable change for students.

The Stepping Stone concept

Context

At Deakin University, career education is embedded in core units in each year of select generalist undergraduate degrees. The Embedded Career Education Program engages nearly one-third of the student population annually and over 100,000 students since its inception in 2017. Typically, one to two weeks of each unit are dedicated to career education, accompanied by an assessment task worth at least 20% of the unit’s final grade. The program’s success is evident in Deakin University’s consistently strong employment outcomes, with the university consistently ranking in the top three universities in Victoria for graduate employment and achieving its highest employment rates in the 2016-2022 period, as reported in the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, n.d.). Graduates have consistently cited the units with embedded career education when asked how the institution prepared them for employment.

Prior to 2020, the program’s curriculum incorrectly assumed that the student cohort was mainly comprised of high school leavers with minimal work experience. However, in 2024, only 51% of commencing undergraduate students had come from recent secondary schooling, and only 59% were aged 15 – 19 years. With the introduction of more accessible pathways to tertiary study, this number is expected to decrease. Feedback from students regarding the linear approach taken by the curriculum highlighted a disconnect between their diverse experiences and contexts and the provided learning

activities. In some cases, this disconnect was addressed by offering alternative assessment tasks and learning activities, which required considerable resources.

In 2020, the university's careers service introduced a new strategy that highlights the career development benefits of extracurricular paid work during studies. This approach was designed to enable students to gain valuable experience while they study. It provides the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools for students to capitalise on their paid positions to pursue jobs that match their preferred industry or skill set. The strategy seeks to achieve the following goals: (i) reduce the time it takes for students to obtain full-time employment after graduation; (ii) provide them with career management capabilities from the beginning of their degree to continually enhance their skills, experience and industry connections for sustainable employability; and (iii) establish a foundation for developing their professional identities. Implementing this approach from the first year of study aims to motivate students by connecting their career development to their current life and work circumstances, in real time.

The authors recognise that other forms of work, such as volunteering and caring, offer career development benefits to students; however, the Stepping Stone concept represents a novel, evidence-based approach to harness an untapped and powerful opportunity for CDL – leveraging students' existing or planned paid work to engage in career exploration, planning and action (Coates, 2015). The concept was introduced into the Embedded Career Education Program in late 2020 to align with the new strategic direction of the careers service.

Introducing the concept

The Stepping Stone concept is a new approach that underpins the Embedded Career Education Program and promotes the career development value of relevant paid employment while studying. In Australia, 80% of university students work while studying (Department of Education, 2020). While work can often compete with study, a key principle of this approach is to encourage students to engage in any form of paid work early in their degree to build their graduate employability and develop their career management competencies. Students are encouraged to leverage their current paid work, such as a casual retail role, into more career-relevant roles as they progress through their studies. Rather than both earn and learn while they study, as recommended by the Universities Australia Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024), at Deakin, students use their paid work to *learn while they earn*.

A Stepping Stone role is a paid position that meets one or more of the key selection criteria of a student's ideal professional role or is in their chosen industry or employer. The term Stepping Stone was chosen because it is Plain English, has resonated with students previously, and is a simple, visual metaphor. By using a self-selected Stepping Stone role that students can apply for in real time, we create relevant and relative learning activities that avoid the need for alternative assessments to address specific student life or work circumstances. This iterative, structured and reflective approach, grounded in career development theory, empowers students to take responsibility for their ongoing career management throughout their university experience and beyond.

The following section outlines the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of the Stepping Stone concept through four interrelated dimensions: career development as a lifelong process; non-linear and complex career paths; self-management and reflective practice; and relational and social dimensions of career development. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual underpinnings of the Stepping Stone concept.

Theoretical and pedagogical foundation

Personalised career education requires a range of flexible teaching strategies (Healy, 2023). The Stepping Stone concept embodies a student-centred and holistic approach to integrating career education, tailored to the diverse needs of learners. It recognises that each student comes from a unique background and has distinct career aspirations, enabling the program to provide tailored learning experiences that meet

them where they are (Healy, 2023). By engaging in career-related paid work while they study, students can actively apply and reflect on their transferable or discipline-specific skills, work values and career interests. This hands-on experience allows them to better understand themselves, the workplace and their career goals (Mezirow, 2000). This transformational learning journey encourages students to reassess their beliefs, develop fresh perspectives, and cultivate a sense of purpose and direction in their career development.

This approach extends traditional content models, such as the DOTS framework (Watts, 2006), by incorporating process-oriented and socio-contextual career theories to offer a comprehensive approach to students' career development throughout their studies. Integrating content and process perspectives recognises that career development encompasses both the factors that shape career choices and the ways students interpret and respond to these influences over time within their particular context.

Lifelong process

At the heart of the Stepping Stone concept is the belief that career development is not a simple or singular event but rather a lifelong journey that evolves and emerges over time. This idea is consistent with Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory (1980, 1990), which highlights the significance of self-concept and the various developmental stages individuals experience throughout their careers. Similarly, Savickas' Career Construction Theory (2005) emphasises the importance of career narrative and the adaptability needed to navigate transitions across the lifespan. Savickas' (2005) theory focuses on career adaptability, or the skills individuals use to navigate career changes and challenges. These skills include intentionally planning, making decisions, exploring career options and developing career confidence.

Central to the Stepping Stone approach is the belief in experiential learning, in which students immerse themselves in real-world scenarios that connect classroom knowledge with practical challenges (Kolb, 2015). Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) highlights the importance of learning from experience and applying those lessons in diverse career contexts. Healy (2023) emphasises that careers and employability learning should extend beyond formal classroom interventions and be integrated throughout students' educational and work experiences. His six pedagogical principles for careers and employability learning provide an important conceptual touchstone for our thinking. The Stepping Stone concept may be read as an applied exemplar of this orientation. Encouraging students to pursue paid, career-relevant work while studying, provides targeted support that helps them to actively shape and refine their professional identities over time. By engaging in continuous learning and reflection, they can align their career aspirations with the realities of the workplace.

Nonlinear and complex career paths

The Stepping Stone concept recognises the complexity and unpredictability of career paths by drawing on the Chaos Theory of Careers (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and Krumboltz's Happenstance Learning Theory (2009). These theories challenge linear career models, suggesting that chance events, dynamic systems, and external influences shape career trajectories. In an uncertain world, careers and employability learning should focus on active and reflective participation in the systems of education and work. Rather than simply matching students with suitable jobs, classroom interventions should inspire and equip them with the skills to explore opportunities, take initiative, and adapt throughout their careers. These interventions should also encourage reflection and learning from career experiences (Healy, 2023). As Healy notes, careers and employability learning occurs beyond structured interventions, within all aspects of students' everyday experiences. The Stepping Stone concept encourages students to remain open to unforeseen opportunities, acknowledging that every role, regardless of its perceived importance, contributes to ongoing career development and prepares them for future, often unknown, opportunities.

Self-management and reflection

Self-management and reflection are central to the Stepping Stone concept. While the DOTS (Watts, 2006) and Bridgstock (2009) models for CDL highlight decision-making and transferable skills, they do not fully account for the psycho-social dimensions of career learning. Indeed, the DOTS model has been critiqued for emphasising career management tasks and outcomes over the broader developmental process (Healy, 2023; Law, 1999; McCash, 2006), but it remains a valuable framework for structuring career management content in the curriculum. Within the Stepping Stone concept, the DOTS model serves as a foundation for organising career management skills and knowledge, urging students to view paid work experiences as valuable opportunities for skill development and career experimentation, helping them build on their successes year after year. By incorporating these structured reflective practices, the Stepping Stone concept helps students to make meaningful connections between their studies, work experiences and professional aspirations.

Relational and social

Blustein's Relational Theory of Working (2006) argues that career development is not solely an individual pursuit but is significantly shaped by social relationships and community connections. This view emphasises the importance of social context, workplace relationships, and societal factors in determining one's career path. The Stepping Stone concept incorporates these aspects by encouraging students to build networks and interact with industry professionals through paid work (Billett, 2011). These relationships not only promote career progress but also instil a sense of purpose and meaning in students' work. Consequently, the Stepping Stone concept emphasises that careers are shaped by personal choices and external social factors, providing a comprehensive and relational approach to career development (Healy, 2023).

Together, these career development theories provide a comprehensive theoretical and pedagogical foundation for the Stepping Stone concept, emphasising its versatility as an effective career development tool. It acknowledges the complex and unpredictable nature of early career pathways and transcends traditional career management frameworks. By integrating experiential, nonlinear, reflective and relational perspectives, it recognises that careers and employability learning is pervasive, occurring across various settings and through diverse experiences. This holistic approach empowers students to navigate their individual career journeys with flexibility and confidence, in line with Healy's (2023) call for careers and employability learning to be viewed as an ongoing and contextually embedded process.

The following section provides a broad illustration of how the Stepping Stone concept is enacted in practice, while remaining grounded in the theoretical and pedagogical foundations outlined above. It begins with the collaborative teaching approach that supports the program, then discusses how the concept is operationalised through assessment and learning activities in each year level of the degree.

Collaborative teaching approach

It is well established that there are significant benefits when CDL is a shared responsibility between students, academic staff and careers staff (Dean et al., 2022) with support from all levels of the university (Bennett et al., 2016; Bridgstock, 2019). The Embedded Career Education Program is located within the central careers service, known as DeakinTALENT. The team includes academics and learning designers with experience in pedagogy, career development, work-integrated learning and discipline-specific expertise relevant to the faculty they support. The team works closely with colleagues within the careers service, including career coaches with subject-matter expertise and employer engagement professionals who have direct connections to industry partners and providers of both graduate and Stepping Stone roles. This ensures strong alignment between an evidence-based career education curriculum and real-world employability trends, ensuring students receive relevant, up-to-date guidance on their ideal and Stepping Stone roles.

A key strength of the Stepping Stone concept is its pragmatic and accessible approach to CDL. To embed CDL in the curriculum, the program team works with subject teams to co-design customised curricula. As discipline experts, academic staff are well-placed to contextualise the Stepping Stone approach for their field and highlight its relevance for students. Disciplinary academics provide key insights into existing and emerging opportunities relevant to their field that may serve as Stepping Stone roles. In many courses, sessional staff who teach career development seminars are practitioners drawing on their industry and workplace experiences.

However, Dean et al. (2022) also identified a range of challenges regarding the evolving nature and perceptions of an academic's role in CDL. Generally, although academics recognise their vital role in guiding students' career development, they lack confidence in offering career support and formally teaching career development and employability skills (Amiet et al., 2020; Dean et al., 2022). Although some academics may engage in informal, unplanned dialogic CDL activities with students, they require more support when embedding a formal career development intervention into the curriculum (Amiet et al., 2020; Bridgstock et al., 2019; Dean et al., 2022; Glovers-Chambers et al., 2024).

A collaborative teaching approach enhances access to pedagogical knowledge and reveals teaching insights that have lasting effects on educators (Scherer et al., 2020). Therefore, just as the Stepping Stone concept employs a student-centred, just-in-time teaching strategy to meet students where they are, it must also cater to the needs of specific disciplines and academic colleagues. Besides explicitly showcasing its relevance to the subject's disciplinary content, contextualising the Stepping Stone approach also fosters confidence in academics to link discipline skills, knowledge, and attributes with lifelong career development. Consequently, the program team becomes familiar with the nuances of particular disciplines and cohorts, as well as with Stepping Stone examples pertinent to each discipline. At the same time, the teaching team learns how to structure career development activities in a manner that supports their students. In 2024, over 90 academic and professional staff worked with the team and built their career development learning capabilities through delivering learning activities and assessments based on the Stepping Stone concept.

Deakin University has made substantial investments in a well-equipped careers service designed to support career development learning (Bridgstock, 2009). The university leadership has fully embraced the Stepping Stone concept, ensuring that program and subject leads integrate relevant assessment tasks and learning content into their courses. This level of support has been vital for the success and sustainability of the Embedded Career Education Program. The strategic importance of the Stepping Stone concept cannot be overstated, as it promotes the acquisition of relevant experiences and skill sets throughout a student's course of study, rather than deferring them until after graduation. Such proactive investment ensures that students, our key interest-holders, graduate with a strong foundation, enabling them to continue developing self-management and career-management skills for lifelong employability and career success.

The concept in action

The Stepping Stone concept encourages students to consider their 'ideal role,' whether that be at the end of their undergraduate degree, after further study or at the peak of their career. This approach allows them to visualise their future career trajectory (Super, 1980, 1990). We do not restrict this role to the most suitable options for graduates or entry-level positions. Students are prompted to explore possibilities that can enhance their engagement in career development learning during the early years of their degree; a time when they are primarily focused on transitioning into university rather than out of it.

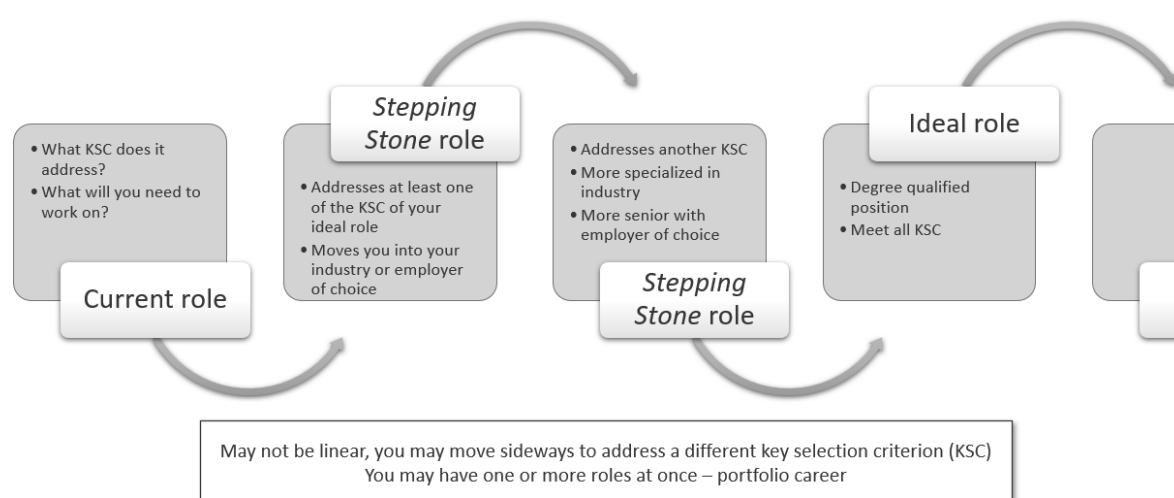
The Stepping Stone metaphor emphasises that career planning has no destination; rather, it is something all workers continue to practise (Watts, 2006; Super, 1990). The skills being developed, and the process modelled through the implementation of the Stepping Stone concept, are relevant at any career stage for students (i.e., career starter, changer or advancer), equipping them for lifelong career management and sustainable employability (Bridgstock, 2009; Super, 1990). Although this approach primarily targets non-

vocational undergraduate courses, the underlying concept applies to all students and professionals, irrespective of their course or career stage.

Introducing the Stepping Stone concept to first-year students was intended to make career development learning not only seem more relevant but also more manageable, as it incorporates their existing or planned paid work. The Stepping Stone concept helps students explore the full complexities of career development, freeing them from a limited view that it is simply about job searching. For second- and third-year students, the metaphor encourages them to reflect on their development, recognise gaps in skills and experiences, and pinpoint their next employment goals to bridge those gaps. Consequently, a Stepping Stone role won't be seen as a consolation prize for third-year students. Instead, it symbolises their progress toward career objectives rather than merely focusing on obtaining a graduate role as the ultimate aim. Tackling this negative perception of CDL is vital for students with substantial life and work experience, who may misunderstand the advanced thinking it involves. They might perceive engagement with CDL as a sign of weakness or appropriate only for those who are less capable or experienced, instead of recognising it as a lifelong process.

The concept is shared with students through learning materials and classroom activities. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual graphic featured in the learning materials. Examples specific to each discipline include authentic roles and details from actual position descriptions.

Figure 1. Stepping Stone Roles for Career Development



Each year, we support students with immediately relevant career development learning to secure paid work or leverage their current employment to their next Stepping Stone role. This allows students to use their time at university to increase the duration of their paid employment in an industry, with an employer or developing skills relevant to their chosen career. In practice, the Stepping Stone concept, along with its accompanying career development curriculum, differs from the previous approach to embedded, scaffolded career education, where students addressed each component of Watts' DOTS model (2006) sequentially throughout their degree (McKenzie et al., 2021).

Assessment

We support students in developing their career management skills from their first year of study. Assessment tasks worth a minimum of 20% of the total unit grade are included in core units in the first, second, and third years, making them structurally unavoidable. The assessment tasks draw on authentic artefacts and tools from the recruitment process, such as job application documents, online professional profiles, networking strategies, and job interview preparation and practice. As a result, students, regardless of their experience level, can plan and create a modern, highly personalised portfolio of career artefacts from the beginning of their course that documents their own evolving career narrative. By

engaging in these activities, students actively craft their career stories by reflecting on their experiences and planning for future opportunities (Savickas, 2005).

Creating artefacts for real jobs that they can apply for now allows students not only to practice essential job search skills but also to participate in authentic workplace experiences, reflect on them, and apply their learning to enhance their job market readiness (Kolb, 1984). This approach helps students build resilience and adaptability, equipping them with a dynamic skill set that enables them to navigate various anticipated and unexpected career opportunities (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and develop their emerging and evolving professional identities.

Across the degree

The Stepping Stone concept is fundamental to the Embedded Career Education Program's curriculum, guiding students through a progressive learning journey tailored to their year level and flexible enough to accommodate various career stages. This approach is contextualised to the course discipline(s) and unit of study and designed to minimise duplication for students, particularly those enrolled in double degrees or specific majors.

In their first year, students are supported in identifying several career pathways to explore using Stepping Stone roles. This is achieved through reflective exercises that draw on evidence from various career self-awareness tools, such as the SuperStrong assessment (VitaNavis, n.d.) and the Work Readiness Scale (Caballero et al., 2011), as well as their previous workplace experiences. These exercises help students proactively shape their professional journeys by developing a narrative grounded in their individual interests, values, strengths and experiences (Savickas, 2005), and then select an ideal role to explore. Students are introduced to the utility of position descriptions as evidence for career exploration and planning in their first year. They learn to analyse position descriptions to locate important information and identify roles that align with their values, interests and strengths. Students assess their current skills, knowledge and experiences against the key selection criteria for their ideal role and identify areas they would like to develop through their paid work now. These key selection criteria serve as the goal posts for their career development throughout their degree, noting that their ideal role will likely change multiple times during this period given that career development is an evolving journey shaped by chance encounters, changing interests, and new opportunities (Krumboltz, 2009; Pryor & Bright, 2011). Krumboltz's theory (2009) emphasises that recognising the value of chance encounters and new opportunities relies on an individual's developed self-awareness and opportunity awareness. Students are then supported in identifying suitable Stepping Stone roles to help them meet the key selection criteria for their ideal role at the end of their studies. This self-directed career construction (Savickas, 2005) challenges students to better understand how they can align their career goals, work experience and employer expectations. It embodies the higher-order thinking and personal agency development that define high-quality CDL.

In their second year, students revisit the Stepping Stone concept, focusing on skill development and industry engagement to deepen their connection to their profession. They are encouraged to reflect on their experiences over the past 1-2 years, including their studies and current paid roles. This reflection aids them in identifying the skills gained and areas for growth, helping to clarify how these experiences align with their evolving career goals and emerging career narrative (Savickas, 2005; Super, 1980). These activities reinforce the message that career paths are not linear but are influenced by ongoing experiences, choices and external factors (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Students explore ways to develop and leverage their professional networks to gain insights into their industry and uncover opportunities for placements, mentoring, jobs and professional growth, particularly through their online presence and active engagement on LinkedIn. In particular, LinkedIn has tremendous value in supporting students' professional identity development and networking (Healy et al., 2023; Bridgstock, 2019). Students use these insights to identify their next Stepping Stone role, understanding that their career journey is shaped both by deliberate action and responsiveness to the unpredictable nature of personal and professional development.

In their third year, students return to the Stepping Stone concept for the final time, focusing on articulating their emerging career narrative through job application packages and mock video interviews. Through this process, students actively shape their career stories, connecting their past experiences, including their Stepping Stone roles, with their present aspirations and future goals (Savickas, 2005). They reflect on how each role has contributed to their professional growth, understanding that their career journeys are dynamic and evolving, rather than defined by a single destination (Super, 1980). Although students may find it challenging to secure a professional position immediately after graduation, engaging in Stepping Stone roles enables them to recognise their ongoing skill development. These experiences equip them with a versatile skill set that is well-suited for an unpredictable job market (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Their focus is not solely on their end goal, but rather on how they will advance their journey post-graduation, utilising the skills and insights they have gained from their experiences (Kolb, 1984). This approach also aligns with our ethical responsibility to foster their self-reliance rather than encouraging dependence on others for career decision-making.

Discussion

In Australia, as in many countries, employability is a national priority increasingly framed as a central goal of higher education. Policies focusing on tracking graduate employment outcomes, for example, through the GOS, require universities to consider employability as part of their strategic and educational mission while also fulfilling the broader economic and social roles of higher education (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019). National and institutional policies play a pivotal role in defining, shaping and driving the integration of career education into institutional practices and the academic experience of students, typically outlining the expectations, objectives, and strategic goals for developing employability and career readiness (Campbell et al., 2022). Moreover, many accrediting bodies, particularly in business and engineering, are increasingly incorporating employability criteria into their program accreditation standards, requiring institutions to demonstrate the inclusion of CDL and alignment of courses with industry standards. While it is well established that embedded career education is vital for ensuring students are not only academically successful but also prepared for the demands of a dynamic and unpredictable labour market, effective implementation requires collaboration among academics, career services, and industry partners (Bridgstock, 2019). No small challenge in a complex higher education institution.

Key themes related to skills and jobs in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024) directly align with the Stepping Stone approach. For example, the report recommends that the 'Government provides increased opportunities for students to earn and learn while studying' (Department of Education, 2024, p.6). Career education, embedded within the curriculum in an intentional, systematic, and consistent way throughout a student's academic experience, will lead to informed career decision-making and skills development for lifelong career management and adaptability. However, the Accord also notes the pressing need for greater participation in higher education by students from equity backgrounds to meet the growing skills gap in Australia and to secure Australia's economic and social future. Greater rates of participation must be complemented by greater support to ensure their graduate success (Department of Education, 2024).

The Stepping Stone approach promotes a more equitable experience of career development by empowering students to leverage their current paid roles. Most students juggle work and studies out of necessity, and this concept recognises the importance of their existing commitments and leverages them to develop their careers and employability skills. The Accord Final Report (Department of Education, 2024) notes, 'many students need to undertake paid, part-time employment to finance their study. If the employment can be obtained in an industry aligned with their field of study, it can provide valuable experience, connections and job skills that enhance their post-graduation job opportunities' (Department of Education, 2024, p. 76). By integrating their real-world job experiences with their academic studies, students can not only support themselves but also gain invaluable skills and industry experience that directly contribute to their career success. This method transforms the perceived burden of work into a

powerful learning opportunity, allowing students to see the direct impact of what they learn in the classroom on their ability to earn a living and develop successful careers. So, rather than supporting students to earn while they learn, the Stepping Stone approach supports students to learn while they earn, capitalising on untapped and valuable learning opportunities offered by the workplace (Billet, 2023).

It is important to recognise that not all students have equal access to Stepping Stone roles. Students with disability, for example, often face additional challenges, including managing health conditions and navigating structural barriers that limit their participation in paid work (Eckstein, 2020). For the Stepping Stone model to be inclusive and effective, curriculum design must account for these inequities through teaching strategies to identify and engage with inclusive employers, articulate their value and align their strengths to the role requirements. This ensures that all students, regardless of circumstance, have meaningful opportunities to develop employability throughout their studies.

The Stepping Stone concept connects life and learning, providing short-term value while allowing students to envision longer-term high value from their studies, thereby leading to meaningful careers and improved employment outcomes. As noted in the Accord final report, 'having part-time work is important for students seeking to support themselves while studying. And if the work is in a field related to their field of study, it boosts possibilities of long-term employment post-graduation' (Department of Education, 2024, p. 111). The concept also supports the Accord's recommendation for increased opportunities for work-based placements for students already employed in relevant industries or organisations. This alleviates the burden of unpaid placements, particularly for students from equity groups.

To address students' need to undertake paid work while studying, the Accord recommends the establishment of a centralised and privatised Jobs Broker to 'assist students to find appropriate employment opportunities relevant to their field of study and reduce the financial roadblock to accessing or completing higher education. Jobs Broker should be implemented so students who need to support themselves financially with part-time work, particularly those from the target cohorts, can be helped to find work related to their field of study' (Department of Education, 2024, p112). The service would be free for students, with employers charged a subscription fee.

We argue that the Jobs Broker initiative would be costly and ineffective, limit student agency and deprive them of invaluable learning opportunities and the career development benefits from identifying and pursuing Stepping Stone roles. It would also duplicate existing professional services, such as Seek, Prosple, LinkedIn and university job boards, which students will continue to use beyond graduation. Career development professionals already struggle to dispel student perceptions that they will automatically secure a job upon graduation or that the university career service is responsible for job placements. Students need to take responsibility for their career management from the beginning of their degree, and it is the role of higher education providers to support them in developing the skills and strategies essential for sustainable employability. The Stepping Stone approach models the career management capabilities students will need beyond their studies if they are to develop and manage successful careers.

Furthermore, the Stepping Stone concept enables students to discover positions that help them cultivate discipline-specific or advanced transferable skills relevant to their desired careers, often extending beyond their chosen industry. A Jobs Broker using a matching process would not address the personalised needs of students as effectively as the Stepping Stone approach. Through genuine recruitment experiences, students learn to analyse position descriptions to identify appropriate Stepping Stone roles, determine their level of interest, and then consider how they can demonstrate their suitability to the employer. These are lifelong career management skills that students should have the opportunity to practice and receive feedback on while they study. This comes at no cost to the student or the employer and is an investment that most universities are already making in their careers and employability services.

While the Accord sets a strong and admirable vision for the future of higher education, it is practitioners who will instantiate the vision. The Stepping Stone concept represents just one practice response to the challenges outlined by the Accord; many more career development practitioners are implementing evidence-based solutions informed by career development theory, student feedback, and their own

practice wisdom. However, the higher education sector rarely recognises the reality of practice or the voice of the practitioner, and policy is often shaped by those with little experience at the front lines of graduate employability (Hansen et al., 2024). For this reason, we strongly advocate for a practice-led implementation of the career development recommendations of the Accord.

While policy provides the impetus and informs the direction for CDL in courses, the practical implementation is complex and requires the thoughtful integration of numerous supports and resources. The enthusiastic adoption of the Stepping Stone concept within courses stems from investment by leadership at all levels, leading to a well-resourced careers service with direct links and partnerships with industry, as well as a range of resources and services to support the embedded program, including digital technologies. Collaboration between careers staff and academic staff leads to bidirectional capability building, which in turn underpins the contextualisation and personalisation of the approach. Additionally, the versatility of the Stepping Stone approach means that while it can be implemented at scale as a university-wide endeavour, it does not need to be, and could also be achieved at a smaller scale, for example, only within specific courses. Effective embedding of CDL content into specifically chosen subjects, where relevance and personalisation can be maximised, also avoids curriculum overload.

One of the challenges for the concept, as with many CDL interventions, is gauging student success in securing Stepping Stone roles, their relevance, and the transition from one role to the next. Measuring the impact of the Stepping Stone approach on student learning outcomes with valid tools is essential for continuous innovation, improving outcomes and advancing graduate employability research and policy. Although tools like the GOS offer insights into the overall program's success, they primarily serve as a lagging indicator, do not assess the impact of specific interventions on learning, and do not provide timely feedback for program enhancement. Bridgstock and Jackson (2018) recommend integrating 'graduateness' metrics within the curriculum to assess employability at both the program and institutional levels more effectively.

Efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of the Stepping Stone concept and to address the broader challenges of measuring graduate employability interventions within the higher education curriculum are currently underway. Despite the limitations of the GOS data, it does provide an opportunity for comparing employment outcomes between cohorts pre- vs post-implementation of the Stepping Stones approach. While platforms like LinkedIn offer some potential for tracking students' career pathways longitudinally, their utility is constrained by limitations in data accessibility, consistency, and scalability for institutional-level analysis. To address these gaps, a recent initiative, grounded in the UK's Careers Registration model (Association of Higher Education Career Services, 2022), was implemented in late 2024 to collect data on students' career intentions, including their employment status at several points during their enrolment. This will soon provide consistent, structured insights into students' progression into career-relevant paid work throughout their degree. Additionally, the Work Readiness Scale (Caballero et al., 2011), now embedded within selected course assessments, offers a validated measure of students' perceived employability and work readiness at each year level of study. By capturing students' engagement with paid work and WIL, these data sources collectively support a more nuanced and real-time evaluation of their employability development. This multi-pronged approach addresses ongoing concerns in higher education about how to effectively assess and evidence the impact of employability-focused curriculum interventions (Caballero et al., 2026; Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018), providing a more comprehensive foundation for understanding the impact of the Stepping Stone approach on students' career development.

Conclusion

The Stepping Stone concept is an invaluable learning tool within our institution. Its simplicity, flexibility and intuitive nature resonate with students, leadership and course teams alike, empowering learners to recognise the value of their current paid work while exploring ways to leverage it to move to their next career step. By providing a targeted, intentional and structured pathway, the Stepping Stone approach

not only encourages student agency in engaging with the world of work but also aligns with critical themes highlighted in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of careers advice or as reactive participants in a volatile job market, the Stepping Stone approach encourages active, reflective engagement with their own career path. By embedding career development learning in ways that are structured, inclusive and metacognitively rich, we ensure that students are not just prepared for the world of work, they are prepared to shape their working lives on their own terms.

Acknowledgements

We express our gratitude to Professor Dineli Mather, former PVC Graduate Employment at Deakin University, for her strategic leadership and for conceptualising the idea of students working in career-relevant roles while studying. Our sincere thanks also go to Mrs. Sharon Berman for her support in operationalising and implementing this concept within the curriculum. Additionally, we are grateful for the thoughtful reviews and constructive feedback on our draft manuscript from Professor Jamie Mustard, PVC Graduate Employment, and Mr. David Eckstein, Lecturer, Equity Programs, whose expertise and insights were instrumental in enhancing the quality of our work.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used Grammarly, a generative AI tool, to clarify and enhance expression. All substantive content, analysis and conclusions are the original work of the authors.

Contributions against CReDIT

Lauren Hansen: conceptualisation, writing – original draft preparation.

Sharon La Fontaine: conceptualisation, writing – original draft preparation.

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