Exploring the value of values: Does higher education need to abandon a 'skills transferability' focus in favour of 'values transferability'?

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Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Australia have responded to their environment – driven by government and industry - and cultivated a skills focus when it comes to employability of its graduates. However, this has led to criticisms of a 'job factory' with minimal thought given to longer-term lifelong learning orientations and at the core, the students themselves and their values. With a quasi-field experiment design, using both phenomenology and surveys, 15 undergraduate and postgraduate students were exposed to a range of experiences exploring the role of values in career choice and career development. Findings reveal that students appreciate the focus on values as a currency of the employability equation. Five core themes arose out of the research: amplified career awareness; entrepreneurial thinking; anxiety; educational purpose; and understanding personal values. These findings pose questions for HEIs: whether to incorporate a discussion on values as part of employability; how to achieve this in a manner which reaches all students; and when is best to do so. Participants unanimously felt that the penultimate year of study is the ideal time to have a conversation with students not based on skills transferability into the workplace, but values transferability.

Keywords
values, higher education institutions, employability, personal identity, career development

Introduction

Governmental shifts in higher education policy settings in Australia have contributed to a generational change in positioning of the role of higher education. The proposals of late 2024 to adjust the number of international students entering Australia to study at a higher education institution (HEI) and its consequential impact to the funding of the sector, was arguably met with an indifference from much of Australian society (Karp, 2024). Indeed, just 14% of Australians believe universities should be a funding priority for the national government (Australian Marketing Institute, 2024). With the international student cohort lacking a voting voice in Australia's electoral system, and tepid activism from many stakeholders, it seemed no one was willing to go into bat for the sector. How did it get to this point?

For many years, industry has expressed concern over the calibre of graduates from HEIs (Steed, 2018). The lack of graduate skills such as teamwork, critical thinking and communication has been reported by industry (Singh et al., 2014; Karimi & Pina, 2021). Long-held pillars of industry's connection to academia such as internships are no longer the guaranteed pipeline to employability that they once might have been (Naqvi, 2024).

These dynamics have created a tension within university environments. Academic traditionalists with an Aristotelian view of valuing curiosity, a commitment to 'truth', and a desire to use knowledge for students to be a better person in themselves (Neem, 2013) sit alongside institutional drivers of graduate employment outcomes, industry partnerships, and competitive positioning (Smyth & Smyth, 2017). This conflict is nestled within a decreasing domestic (Learning Creates Australia, 2023) and international (Universities Australia, 2024) student market. The primary stakeholders in higher education – universities, government, employers, and learners – see the purpose of higher education differently.

Yet with such differing stakeholder views as well as a consequential focus on 'employability' (Aubrey & Riley, 2020) in place across HEIs, what does this mean for the learner? What is their 'true north' in this mix? And how do they find it?

This paper continues as follows: the literature review explores the relevant literature contexts of the past generation and states the research question underpinning the study. The materials and methods section explains the selection of and rationale for a phenomenological approach, and details the quasi-field experiment design, noting the limitations of the study. The findings section presents the data collected, before the discussion section examines the core themes arising from the research and showcases an example of how the research has already been deployed. Finally, the conclusion signposts the implications for existing practice across HEIs as well as identifies recommendations for further research.

Literature review

Within the current stakeholder environment, differing worldviews power the actions of many players. Table 1 summarises these philosophical positions succinctly:

Figure 1: Stakeholders' philosophical positions on the role of higher education (Naqvi, 2021, p. 41)

Stakeholder		Philosophical ideology			
		Aristotelian	Neo-liberal	Pragmatic	Utilitarian
Government (Federal)					X
Universities	Management		X		
	Academic	X			
Industry			X		X
Learners				X	

The prevailing dominance of the utilitarian view in higher education is no surprise given the power of the national government (through policy and public funding) and industry (employment, ongoing development of graduates) over the sector. This has given rise to a focus on employability, and a skills focus to deliver what is needed for the national economy and industry, in line with this worldview.

The role of values in the employability discussion

Employability has been defined as: 'A psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect, and enhance the individual-work interface.' (Fugate et al., 2004, p. 15).

This concept of a 'psychosocial' component has continued to be noted in more recent studies (Healy, 2023; Savickas, 2021). Our working lives occupy such a large portion of our whole lives, that the tasks we perform in our roles serve to shape our values and identity (Duncan, 2011). Here we see that through our work, we learn the things that are worthwhile to us and generate value not just in a transactional, labour-output sense (Smith, 1937), but also in a range of other contexts including a motivational, moral, and regulatory 'fit' (Higgins, 2006).

A personal value system has been defined as: '[…] an enduring organization [sic] of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct, or end states of existence along a continuum of relative importance.' (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5). Leveraging this definition, values can be in the ownership of an individual, as well as an occupation. Different occupations have different values, even in the same work environment. Consider the example of a hotel, where the values of management may differ from those working in the kitchen. Or a hospital, where management may have different value drivers than the nursing staff. Indeed, Davies et al. (2007) found that the inability of nurses' values to be met in their roles, due the decisions of management, led to significant stress and ultimately, burnout.

To consider one sector as an example, studies into the personal values of creative industries practitioners within the sector highlight some recurrent themes. A study of 35 creative industries practitioners revealed values of autonomy, authenticity, and camaraderie (Poettschacher, 2005). A study of Australian creative industry practitioners highlighted values of passion, a thirst for learning, collegiality, and self-promotion (Bridgstock, 2005). Just in that sample of studies, the problem of a skills-focused educational outcome becomes evident through the lens of the personal values. Poettschacher (2005) noted how many creative industries practitioners, having scoped out the working environment of the sector, would create a business setup but '[…] establish a business only to reject the very attributes of business itself.' (Poettschacher, 2005, p. 181). The core skills of entrepreneurialism are commonly rejected by creative industries practitioners, yet the working conditions of the sector often catalyse an entrepreneurial outlook for career sustenance. Thus, the 'deeper conflict at the value level' (Poettschacher, 2005, p. 181) remains. Using this sector as an example, it becomes apparent that students on the cusp of entering the workforce need more than a focus on skills to reconcile these competing elements within themselves. They need to have a sense of their value set to make an informed choice.

If individual values might therefore serve as a dowsing rod to occupational choice (Greenhaus et al., 2019), we see the opportunity to equip students with a sense of using their own values as a compass to steer their career and employability, and perhaps circumnavigate later career crises. How might a focus on values articulate itself for an individual? Personal values have an established connection in the literature, as part of the concept of career identity (Arthur et al., 1999) as well as personal identity (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019). This same concept has been identified as a positive predictor of salary levels and job performance (Day & Allen, 2004). Therefore, understanding one's own values can have an economic impact, as well as an increase in overall employability (Eby et al., 2003).

Introducing protean careers, a values-based approach

With graduate employability of significant concern to all stakeholders, there is a need for HEIs to assist their graduates. Specifically, in the area of non-technical skills, such as the ability to embrace change and continued learning (Elias & Merriam, 2005), conceptual understanding and problem solving (Moss et al., 2008), interpersonal skills (Baird & Parayitam, 2019), and communication (Naqvi et al., 2025). Education, arguably, amplifies its value to graduates in fulfilling a need beyond the immediacy of today's market needs.

Aligned with this concept of education as a lifelong pursuit that enables an adaptability to changing work conditions, is the 'protean career' concept, from the career development literature (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Protean careers are characterised by their foundation in the values and motives of the individual, driving career decisions. There is an individual responsibility taken for career development

such as re-training, a desire for meaningful work, as well as individualised, subjective definitions of success.

Through the self-powered orientation of the protean career, the resultant work undertaken is of interest and of value to the individual (Hall & Mirvis, 1996). Again, where 'value' takes on that broader definition of motivation, moral, and regulatory fit (Higgins, 2006), a protean career individual is not distracted by the trappings of status such as job title, money, employment security (Greenhaus et al., 2019). Indeed, a protean career reflects the freedom of the individual 'making choices based on one's personal values' (Briscoe & Hall, 2006, p. 6). A summary of the protean career, illustrated by comparing to a traditional career, is provided in Table 2. The values focus of a protean career contrasts with the current skills-transferability focus prevailing in higher education.

Table 2: Protean vs. traditional career concepts – a key attributes comparison

	Protean career	Traditional career
Mobility / security	High mobility, lower job security Transferable skills, knowledge, and abilities	Low mobility, high job security Firm-specific skills
Occupational roles	Several occupational roles	One occupational role
Source of income	Client(s) Contracts or invoices Multiple sources of income	Employer Salary / wages Single source of income
Career motivation and measures of success	Subjective, psychological measures of success	Hierarchical position, salary
Responsibility for career development	Personal responsibility for career development Personal and professional networks very important	Organisational responsibility for career development Personal and professional networks not as important

Extracted from Bridgstock (2005), p. 42. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications.

The 2010s saw an advancement in education research specifically exploring the role of values in career development, and its nexus with employability. Watchravesringkan et al. (2013) drew a connection between graduate career choice, long-term career decisions, and facets of self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943) such as a sense of accomplishment. An earlier study (Añaña & Nique, 2010) looked at the values of students in different disciplines, and found that nursing students for example, orient around values of stability and care. Gubler et al. (2014) explored protean careers further, and the orientation of such protean-inclined individuals. The Chartered Association of Business Schools argued for a shift in the employability discussion, away from skills to 'what works' (Cashian et al., 2015, p. 6). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) advocated for a series of experiences to complement employability skills, aiding students to understand themselves and develop a graduate identity. Such experiences included values, both as an individual but also vis-à-vis social awareness (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 580) which continued that line of sight to the psychosocial realm discussed by Fugate et al. (2004).

This continued into the 2020s, with scholars recognising that graduate employability often sits aside from complementary fields such as career development (Healy et al., 2020). Indeed, Healy (2023) advocated for an integrated approach towards these two areas in higher education pedagogy. The idea also began to arise that the concept of employability is not solely down to the individual (Fugate et al., 2021) but is more a mix of stakeholders (Naqvi et al., 2025) including HEIs. At this juncture, then, exists the opportunity to research and explore the intersection of individuals, career development, protean career traits, and education, and its potential influence on teaching and learning.

Amongst global competitive forces, evolving industry demands and continued change in technology (Aubrey & Riley, 2020), the graduate of today needs to possess strong non-technical skills (sometimes

referred to as 'soft skills' or 'employability skills') to adapt to ongoing changes (Sharma, 2018). Scholars posit that it is these qualities which are essential for sustained success by ensuring individuals have the career flexibility and resilience to participate in a dynamic workforce (Bellos et al., 2024; Sharma, 2018).

Society now reflects a trend towards non-linear career paths, where individuals navigate multiple roles and industries throughout their lives (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018). This evolution calls for clear, accessible ways for individuals to identify and showcase their unique competencies, ensuring they can transition between jobs and disciplines with ease.

Given the shifting sands of industry and the retrofitting of its needs into higher education curriculum, employability is undoubtedly of concern when educating graduates. However, graduates as learners are individuals too, informed by a set of values. This research therefore proposes the following question: what is the role of the personal values of learners as a basis for their onward career development?

Research design

Context and interventions

For this research, phenomenology was the selected research method. The purpose of phenomenology is to describe a phenomenon as the lived experience of individuals (Speziale et al., 2011). As an inductive approach to research, the lived experience gives a subjective meaning to an individual's perception of the stated phenomenon. A common form of phenomenology is the descriptive or transcendental approach. Husserl held the view that there is value in studying the experiences of humans as perceived by their consciousness (Giorgi, 1997).

This method was selected for several reasons. One example of descriptive phenomenology being used in educational research is a study that looked into teacher experiences delivering nutrition education in a school environment (Hall et al., 2016). This study used a similar methodology with semi-structured interviews and sought to describe the experiences of teachers as they were delivering new content to a cohort. Reflections were captured after the point of delivery, via a written reflection, as well as in a later interview stage. This aligned very closely with the research questions and objectives of this study.

The chosen method and methodology for this study is grounded in the best practice principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning (Felten, 2013, p. 122) in the following ways:

- 'inquiry focused on student learning' – investigating how students might become attuned to their values is centred on not just what they learn (their values), but how they learn (the interventions);

- 'grounded in context' – personal values are at the core of this study, contextualised through the lens of career development and management;

- 'methodologically sound' – the research question is focused, and the proposed research tools connect the question to the student, and student learning;

- 'conducted in partnership with students' – as the population sample is drawn from a student cohort, and the students will not only experience but engage with the interventions and then reflect upon them, this research views students more as collaborators than subjects;

- 'appropriately public' – Felten (2013) prescribes the merits of broadening the base of dissemination beyond traditional academic journals due to its iterative and contextual nature. This research was synthesised and constructed into an online learning module now deployed across six Australian universities.

The phenomenological approach was implemented through a quasi-field experiment design, with two data collection components. The second data component was designed to capture the experiences of the students as they engaged with the interventions (Taylor et al., 2015). Similar studies have also utilised quasi-experimental research methods designs. Patten (2016) explored the experiences of entrepreneurs in creative industries, using phenomenology and semi-structured interviews. In addition, narrative interviewing was used in Patten's study to expand the scope of participants to drive the discussion.

The methodology introduced a series of educational experiences to an existing university elective unit which drew its enrolled students from across the institution. This interdisciplinary mix was desired to ensure a population breadth in the research design. Over ten weeks, participants were exposed to the interventions outlined in Table 3. These experiences – as phenomenological interventions – were the experiment's independent variables:

Table 3: Educational experiences

Experience no.	Title	Description
1	Values heart chart	Participants will draw a giant love heart. They will be asked to 'fill' their heart by writing in all the things that matter to them, then apportioning a section of the heart in alignment to the relative importance of each item to the other. They will then discuss and reflect, including how this allocation correlates to their time investment in each item.
2	Career anchor	Complete a quiz to ascertain their career anchor (Schein, 1993). This will be one of either: Technical / Functional Competence; General Managerial Competence; Autonomy / Independence; Security / Stability; Entrepreneurial Creativity; Service / Dedication; Pure Challenge; or Lifestyle Integration.
3	Anchor mapping	Participants will be asked to map their identified career anchor to a range of explained organisation types.
4	Work preferences	Participants will rank the following aspects of work in order of priority (1= most important; 10= least important) as per Greenhaus et al. (2019, p. 128): 1. Permits you to work on a variety of tasks 2. Gives the opportunity to help others 3. Provides a great deal of independence in deciding how the work gets done 4. Enables you to make a great deal of money 5. Offers you a secure future 6. Gives you the opportunity to develop friendships at work 7. Allows you sufficient time to spend on family or other non-work activities 8. Enables you to work with a supervisor who is competent and supportive 9. Provides you with power and influence over other people 10. Gives you a feeling of accomplishment
5	SWOT	Complete a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of self. Students will take this commonly taught business strategy tool, ordinarily used by organisations to plot their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and complete an analysis of themselves as individuals.

Drawing heavily on the underpinning principles of the protean career, there was a career development learning theme infused into the curriculum. Participants were encouraged to use their learning to design a way to present themselves to the graduate employment market.

The first week of the course had an information session to explain the rationale of the course, the planned interventions, and their connection to not just the mechanics of the research but the learning outcomes of the course and the research objectives. This was illustrated with the inclusion of 'Q&A' videos with current industry practitioners, who recorded short vignettes to articulate their connection of their craft to their values, viewed through a prism of employability.

Participants and ethics

Participants were recruited from the enrolled student cohort from a specific university's elective unit offering. To enrol in this course, students were required to have completed at least one year of study as a pre-requisite. This was viewed as an ideal cohort to allow for some familiarity with university, and as it was an institution-wide elective, an interdisciplinary mix of disciplines were present including advertising, science, journalism, health and medicine, arts and music. To mitigate any concerns around the power dynamics of an academic researcher and a student population, the researcher had no role in the day-to-day running nor any associated marking of any other courses to which the student cohort was enrolled. Participants were representative of both undergraduate (n=10) and postgraduate (n=5) study. Ethics approval H22REA049 was received in March 2022.

Data collection and analysis

While the overall design is quasi-experimental, predominately qualitative evaluation methods that allow the participants lived experience to be elicited were used, aligned with the phenomenological approach. Three dependent variables underpinned the study: self-awareness, values and career preparedness. There were two data collection methods:

Method 1

Interviews of approximately 30 – 45 minutes each with 15 participants who experienced the interventions. This sample reflected 30% of the total population which completed the course. Interviews were conducted after the completion of the course, using a narrative interview (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016) approach to optimise the opportunity for exploration of participants' perspectives on the research topic. It also aligned with the desire to cultivate a student-centred approach to the research. A semi-structured interview proforma was available for use should any student feel unable to self-narrate the story of their journey through the subject (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

To elaborate on the interview structure, participants were presented with their artefacts from the learning activity interventions, as listed above in Table 2. They were then asked one narrative question: 'What are your recollections of creating this?' During the questioning phase (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016), participants had their focus directed to their artefacts from the educational experiences and were prompted to talk about their emotions connected with what they saw. Specific prompts for participants included: 'How did you feel when you first created this at the end of the learning activity?' 'Looking at it now, how has your relationship with it changed?' 'Have these activities informed your own views on your future career in any way?'

An inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used, analysing the specific data collected and using NVivo14 to assist in the organising, structuring, and coding of the data. Three cycles of coding (Bingham, 2023) were conducted using the interview transcripts which were initially formatted through Otter.ai. The first round of open coding (Saldana, 2009) used full sentences to group into categories segmenting attitudes, beliefs, values, experiences, theoretical engagement, future intentions, and educational purpose. Axial coding (Williams & Moser, 2019) then identified areas of overlap in these categories and were subsequently refined, and relationships between these

initial codes were defined. This enabled selective coding to then organise and synthesise these codes into themes.

Method 2

To complement the interviews, and with an attempt to capture in-the-moment experiences, an anonymous Pulse check (PC) was used with participants. This PC was a randomised set of three statements from a pool of nine statements via Qualtrics (refer Appendix 1), sent within ten minutes of class ending at the end of each fortnight of course content (five instances in total). There was one open-ended question – 'Are there any other reflections from this fortnight you wish to share?' - added as a standard in each of the PCs. Participants responded to these statements using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree), evaluating their sentiments across three areas: self-awareness, values, and workforce preparedness. A four-point Likert scale was chosen to eliminate the occurrence of neutral responses, given the research was seeking personal perspectives based on a recent experience. Also, since there is an inherent relationship between participant and HEI, the intention was to mitigate the risk of social desirability bias (Asún et al., 2016) contributing to neutral responses. The survey was built in Qualtrics within a secure IT environment.

These PCs provided a secondary data-point, to complement the interview data with some real-time capture of engagement with the interventions as they were introduced to the participants.

This method supports Method 1, in that any implications arising from the data collected in Method 2, such as particular areas of enjoyment, or discomfort, or concern, were able to be accommodated in the Method 1 interviews occurring later. This ensured the participant had double the opportunity to reflect upon their experiences with the interventions. Descriptive statistics (Kranzler, 2018) were used to analyse the PC data and to bring the raw data into due form, to contribute to the findings and results in the second half of this paper, potentially providing a useful contrast variable with the qualitative data gathered. This method also aimed to provide coverage to cater for the communication preferences of the participants. For example, a student not as comfortable during Method 1, still had the opportunity to 'have their say' using Method 2.

Findings

The inductive thematic analysis revealed 54 sub-categories, 19 categories and five themes. The following themes were identified from an analysis of both the interview data and the pulse check (n=15): amplified career awareness; entrepreneurial thinking; anxiety; educational purpose; and understanding personal values.

Amplified career awareness

The interventions seemed to stir an 'awakening' amongst participants, notably in the number of career pathway options available to them irrespective of the discipline of their degree. The Values Heart Chart exercise (Experience 1) seemed to be the most resonant when participants reviewed their completed artefacts. The visual articulation of what they felt mattered most to them catalysed discussions which connected strongly with Experience 4 relating to 'work preferences'.

To this point, participants felt they had been presented with somewhat linear career options via their disciplinary studies, leading in one participant to a feeling of 'being on a ride and not knowing how to get off' (Participant K). This more focused thinking observed amongst participants had been commonly reinforced from their personal circle of family as well as peers in the same area of study. Interestingly, only those participants who enjoyed interdisciplinary peer relationships at university were already aware that their studies might lead to a range of career outcomes.

Entrepreneurial thinking

An entrepreneurial desire was evident amongst most participants in their responses. A feeling of self-belief was articulated, with several indicating that an entrepreneurial pursuit might be their first foray after graduation: 'Having spent almost $80k on my degree, now it's like I might be even happier doing something else' (Participant O). There was a noted interplay between experiences 2 and 5. Reflections on their career anchor, and its accuracy or not, were then weaved into a discussion about participant self-assessed strengths and weaknesses. The opportunity to test the waters in being an entrepreneur arose in 73% of completed SWOT analyses.

Participants expressed a value in understanding themselves and the options they have in how they present themselves to the workforce. Experience 3, which tasked participants to map their career anchor to a range of identified organisational types, was often referred to during interview as the first time they recognised they might be a 'fit' for a range of organisations. Figure 1 illustrates the average rating of sentiment received via the Pulse Check (PC) for a range of statements.

Figure 1: Average sentiment of statements across PC 1-5 (n=15)
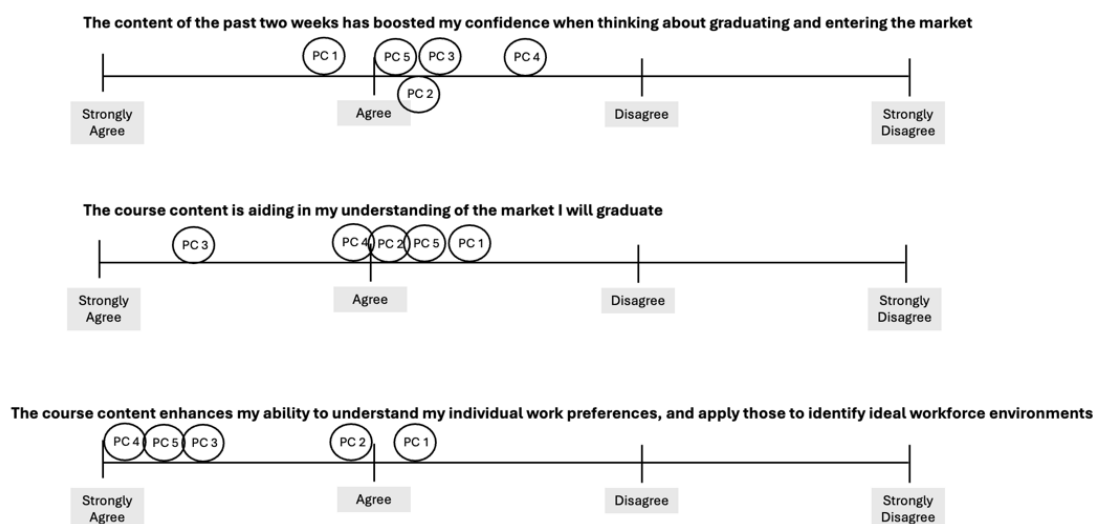
Anxiety

Figure 1 also highlights an interesting conflict in sentiment which was also reflected during interview. Looking at the statement 'the content of the past two weeks has boosted my confidence when thinking about graduating and entering the market', the more participants were exposed to the educational experiences over the ten weeks, the less comfortable they seemed with the idea of entering the workforce. Whilst entrepreneurial spirit was activated in most participants, this broadening of choice was accompanied by an anxiety that this awareness had revealed avenues of career choice and modes of entry into the market, very close to graduation for most participants undertaking this course in their final year of study. As one participant noted, 'this course should come with a trigger warning' (Participant N). This anxiety was often expressed as frustration – towards the university where they were studying: 'Why weren't we talked to about this earlier on in our degree?' (Participant B).

Anxiety also prevailed with some during the completion of the Values Heart Chart. Participants were readily able to list the things that were important to them, but the apportioning of a size to complement those items generated tension and worry on a range of fronts: 'I wondered what my mother would think if she saw it [the proportion given to 'family' in the Values Heart Chart]' (Participant L). This ranged from perception, gulfs between the importance placed versus the actual time commitment given in real life, and items that were later realised to be absent altogether.

Educational purpose

Participants strongly felt that every university student should be made aware of these insights: 'What about those [students] who don't take this course?' (Participant F). It was described by some as one of the reasons they went to university; as one student said, 'my goal wasn't just to get a job. My goal was to get an education that would get me a job I would be happy with' (Participant I). Advocacy for this type of education/conversation during study was unanimous, whether at undergraduate or postgraduate level. The modal logistics of how this might be delivered *en masse* varied amongst respondents: as a compulsory unit, an optional asynchronous module, with the option of either standalone or scaffolded learning over each year of study. However, one recurring theme arose as to the timing of when students should begin to undertake this form of career development learning: the second half of the penultimate year of study. For participants beyond this stage of study, frustration was evident: 'This is coming way too late. It would have been helpful to know about this much earlier' (Participant J).

Whether participants were undertaking two- (in the case of postgraduate Masters degrees), three- or four-year undergraduate degrees, the penultimate year of study was considered an optimal time. Participants were asked why this could not occur as effectively at an alternative stage, noting the clear rationale already mentioned as to why later was not ideal. A majority of participants felt that during the earlier stages of study, students are grappling with the adjustment to self-driven study, the learning of their discipline, and the managing of multiple responsibilities: 'I didn't realise how much I had taken on when I left high school' (Participant C).
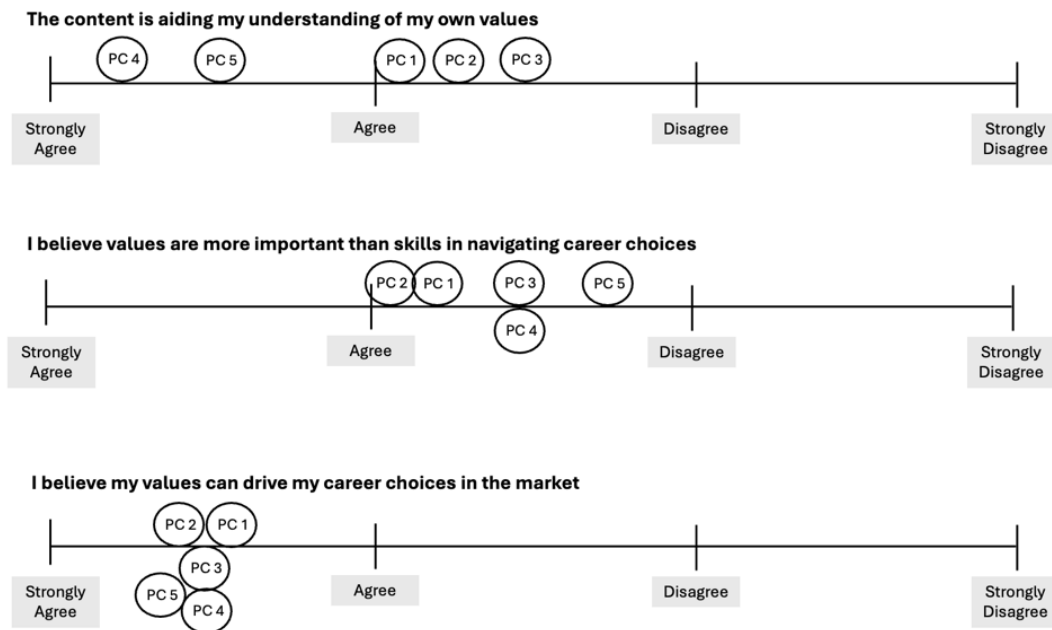
Understanding personal values

The importance of understanding values was also identified in the data. During interview, participants shared a common theme of values being initially inspired from their parents, religion and overall upbringing (several identified the role of older siblings in helping shape what they considered to be right/wrong). All undergraduate participants reported that these years coincided with (insufficient linkage observed to consider it a catalyst or consequence) a re-evaluation of those values and a morphing of their value set into one which echoes their past but is informed by their present experiences and their future intentions. As one participant shared:

> I think being your own boss and 'having a go' has always been part of my family's approach to work. My Dad worked full-time but started a side business which ended up doing really well. If anything, it's only when that started to fail after COVID that it's now seen in our house as risky to work for yourself. Growing up, my parents always made sure that we saw the good bits of running your own business. When it went bad, I had to move out of private school and do year 12 at a public [government] school and that really messed with me. I think the downside of that makes me now want the safety of full-time work. (Participant A)
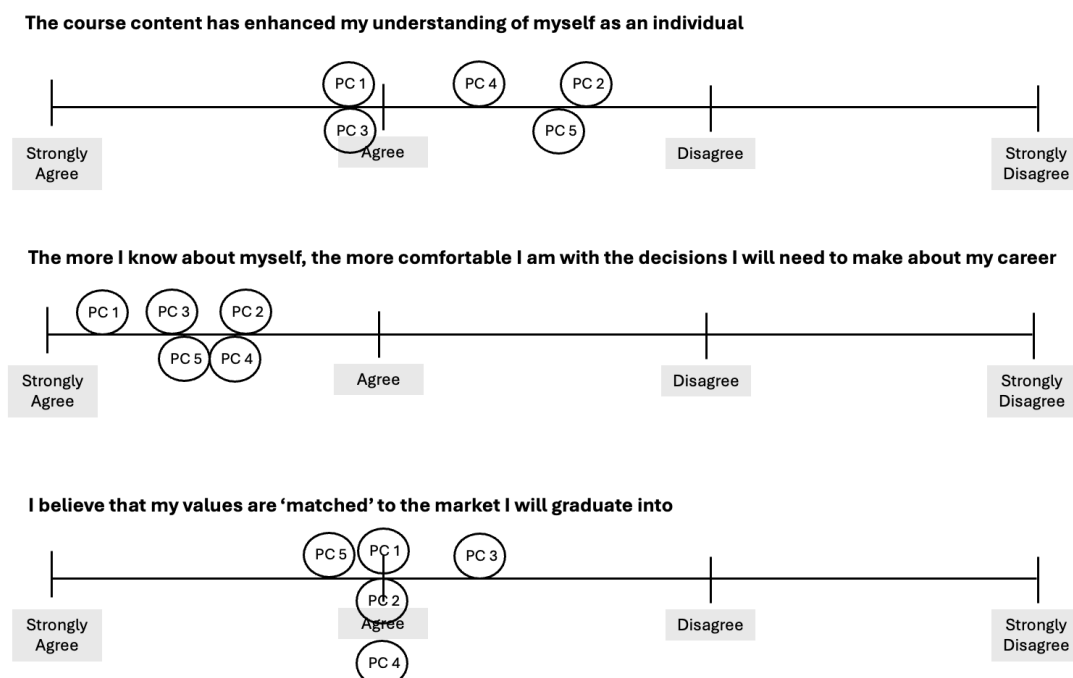
Figure 2 illustrates the average rating of sentiment relating specifically to the values of participants.

Figure 2: Average sentiment of values-focused statements across PC 1-5 (n=15)

The content is aiding my understanding of my own values

Strongly Agree — PC 4, PC 5 — Agree — PC 1, PC 2, PC 3 — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

I believe values are more important than skills in navigating career choices

Strongly Agree — PC 2, PC 1 / PC 3, PC 5 / PC 4 — Agree — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

I believe my values can drive my career choices in the market

Strongly Agree — PC 2, PC 1 / PC 3 / PC 5, PC 4 — Agree — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

Finally, Figure 3 visualises the average rating of sentiment statements which takes the topic of values and intersects it with career development.

Figure 3: Average sentiment across PC 1-5 relating to the intersection of values and career development (n=15)

The course content has enhanced my understanding of myself as an individual

Strongly Agree — PC 1 / PC 3 — Agree — PC 4, PC 2 / PC 5 — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

The more I know about myself, the more comfortable I am with the decisions I will need to make about my career

Strongly Agree — PC 1, PC 3, PC 2 / PC 5, PC 4 — Agree — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

I believe that my values are 'matched' to the market I will graduate into

Strongly Agree — PC 5, PC 1 / PC 3 / PC 2 / PC 4 — Agree — Disagree — Strongly Disagree

Discussion

The combination of methods proved insightful when analysing the resultant data. At times, there was harmony across the two collection points and at other times, there was evidence of flux in the responses from participants. This is notably evident in the PC responses shown in Figure 3. Whilst there was a spread of sentiment regarding the effectiveness of the experiences serving to enhance self-understanding, there was a consistent view that these insights would help participants navigate decision-making in relation to their career. More interestingly, there was a consistency in the view that there was a match between their values and their discipline; what complemented this finding was the interview data that showed a re-evaluation not necessarily of what was being studied, but how participants had thought to take themselves to market.

The empowerment observed to make decisions accords with the emergent entrepreneurial spirit in participants also observed. Rotter's social learning theory (1954) introduced the notion of an 'internal locus of control', describing people possessing this trait will attribute outcomes to their own efforts, skills, and ability. Subsequent studies (Shaver & Scott, 1991; Perry, 1990; Patten, 2019) have connected this locus of control to those individuals more likely to engage in entrepreneurial pursuits.

The importance of understanding values and connecting that to career choice was also consistent. Whilst not necessarily considered to be more important than skills when contemplating career choices, as visualised in Figure 2, it does pose a forward consideration as to how HEIs weave these discussions into the curriculum. Such discussions are currently often housed in extra-curricular services of institutions such as career services or career placement support hubs (Manlagaylay & Añar, 2022; Dunbar et al., 2019), to one side of actual degree curricula.

In one study, students reported that it was 'limited subjects and content' (Pattinson et al., 2023, p. 1493) that primarily prevented them from achieving their educational goals, as it related to their onward role as a global citizen, an employee in real-world settings and working alongside other disciplines. This supports the importance of equipping students in a systematic way with the tools needed to fulfil their self-defined educational purpose.

However, streamlining activities such as the Value Heart Chart or otherwise into current curricula is easier said than done. Koseda et al. (2024) discuss nine elements they consider vital for embedding employability into curriculum. One of them describes the philosophical shift required within HEIs to commit to developing an Aristotelian graduate instead of a job-ready graduate. In acknowledging 'a traditional educational ethos and pedagogy is not incompatible with employability awareness' (Koseda et al., 2024, p. 680), Table 1 of this paper earlier highlighted how the current utilitarian approach of HEIs may be incompatible.

The timing of when to commence these discussions – the penultimate year of study – draws parallels with existing literature as to the psychosocial development of humans. This timing often coincides with a when young adults begin learning how to handle increased responsibilities across study, work, family, and forge new interpersonal (including intimate) relationships (Erikson, 1950). With so much in flux around identity, this author argues it is the responsibility of HEIs to provide overt support at such a time through curricula on career development.

Taking the research findings and seeking to address the need to make this for a wider audience (Felten, 2013) than just students who enrolled in a specific unit at a specific university, the author explored ways of promulgating the new knowledge obtained. A competitive grant was offered by the Australian Technology Network (ATN), a membership body of six Australian universities. The ATN launched a new Frontiers program, a multi-level professional development program for Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students to create a strategic employability advantage for its graduates.

Successfully winning a grant, the opportunity to apply the findings of this research as an asynchronous online learning module was developed. The aim of ATN's Frontiers program is to 'support graduates

to better understand the future, to best prepare for it' (ATN, n.d.). Given the research findings showed a strong theme of the importance of students knowing how to take oneself to the employment market and to interact with the world, this was in close alignment to the ATN program.

The Frontiers program was established as a collaborative activity across all six ATN member universities. There is an overarching governance agreement specific to the ATN Frontiers program that resides under the overall ATN governance agreement. The program is not credit-bearing or credit-eligible across member universities and exists as a professional development program that sits alongside HDR candidature.

The following figures (4-6) visualise a sample of the content developed, which is drawn from the main themes of this research project.

Figure 4: Landing page of 'Crossing the Bridge: Industry, Academia and You'
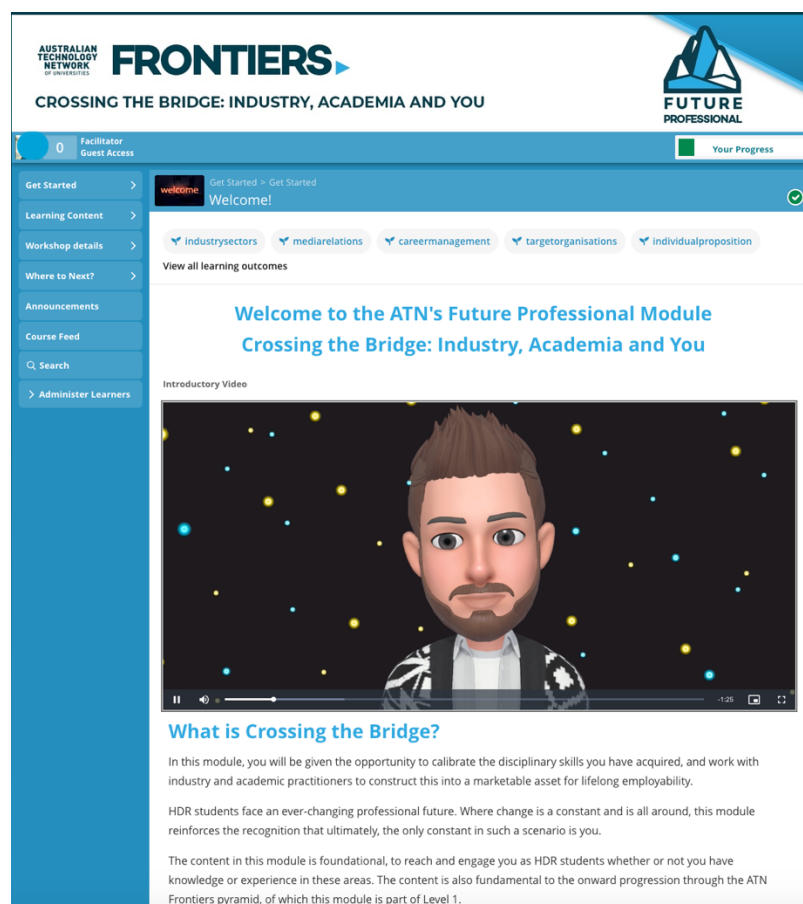
The module utilises a digital avatar, Jay, to guide participants through their self-paced learning. Using the themes from this study as a guide to structuring the module content, the following areas are covered:

- Introducing career development theory to participants, and the Values Heart Chart;
- Industry perspectives of managing your career, conveyed through interviews with five industry practitioners from a range of sectors;
- Career anchors (Schein, 1993);
- Career development stages (Greenhaus et al., 2019) – see Figure 5;
- Differences in career types – traditional, Boundaryless, and Protean;
- Personal branding;
- Introducing the importance of communication;

- Working with external stakeholders such as the media, to address the theme of 'educational purpose' arising in the study; and,
- Resilience and wellbeing – see Figure 6.

Throughout the module, reflective prompts are provided at the end of each section, applying the work of Moon (2019) to provide assistance during what may be affective experiences.

Figure 5: Understanding stages of career development (Greenhaus et al., 2019)

Figure 6: A section focusing on personal resilience in professional contexts

The reception from HDR students undertaking this module across the ATN was positive. Up to the end of 2024, 336 enrolments had been received with a positive sentiment score of over 85%.

Study limitations

The primary limitation in this study was the scale of the quasi-experiment and the sample size for both the interviews and the PC. It is also noted that the research participants, in the form of undergraduate and postgraduate students, hail from one large, city-based HEI. The institution profiles as one which possesses strong ties to industry with regular work-integrated learning touchpoints in the curriculum, enjoys a strong reputation in teaching and learning excellence, has higher-than-average employability statistics of its graduates, and regards itself as an accessible institution for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. These characteristics may shape the experiences and perspectives of the students captured in the study. However, given the exploratory (Stebbins, 2001) nature of the study, as well as the fact that educational research contributions of a similar method and design have been made from samples of this size (Hall et al., 2016), the sample size was considered suitable for an exploration of the research question.

Themes from the study may resonate across institutions with similar characteristics and profiles. However, the ability to adopt recommendations from this study may vary depending on variations on policy and procedural settings within different institutions, student demographics, and workplace cultures. Accordingly, future research is recommended which includes multiple institutions, including

Naqvi, J. (2026). Exploring the value of values: Does higher education need to abandon a 'skills transferability' focus in favour of 'values transferability'? *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 17(*1), 1–20.

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city and regional, as well as public and private institutions in Australia to further assess the generalisability of the findings in this study.

Conclusion and future direction

The role of education in contributing to a skilled, engaged workforce, is constantly under consideration by governments and HEIs. How education might best equip the individuals comprising the next generation workforce was one of the drivers behind this study.

This study explores the role of values in career development. Findings show that values play an important part in helping individuals understand the context of the graduate job market, and the role they may choose to adopt. Themes of amplified career awareness and entrepreneurial thinking offset the anxiety and discomfort which accompanied such exploration into themselves. With sentiment clearly expressed as to the value of such insights prior to graduation, the ball now sits in the court of HEIs.

With a clear appreciation of a values focus in the employability discussion, how best to integrate this and make room alongside the skills focus which (pre)occupies many HEIs? Potential suggestions include elevating existing career development learning out of extra-curricular spaces such as careers centres and weaving into curricula. Interdisciplinary learning needs to become more standard, not just at the selection of the keenest students to explore units beyond their home discipline.

The transfer of research findings on the topics of values, employability, and career choice into a self-drive learning tool serves as an example of what might occur with future research and findings deployment. An online, open-source asynchronous learning module utilising similar interventions with an academic base might become another tool for use within designated work integrated learning courses across HEIs. Of course, resourcing considerations accompany such an idea, but this study demonstrates the feasibility and desirability of such as idea.

As well as pointing to future strategic shifts in HEIs, this study also provides practical guidance for HEIs. Academics and educators may potentially wish to leverage the activities and their evaluations to inform their own practice, particularly where they are interested in an alternative to a skills-driven approach to employability. The role of values in career development may catalyse further discipline-specific research in terms of identifying developmental approaches which prepare students for their onward role as practitioners, while honouring their values.

Finally, students in HEIs may also find utility from this study as they transition into professional practice. As they navigate macro shifts in the world around them, exercises such as the Values Heart Chart afford them a greater understanding of themselves and their values. Such insights may cultivate a confidence and a 'sixth sense' in their career navigation abilities, whilst centring their decisions around their own values. Thus, the tripartite 'employability dialogue' between student, HEI, and industry may begin to shift from one of skills transferability and job-readiness, to values transferability.

Conflict of interest

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Statement on the use of artificial language tools

No generative AI or large language model (LLM) was used in the authorship or conceptual development of this work.

CRediT author statement

The conceptualisation of the study, the overall research design, the interpretation of findings, and the preparation of this manuscript were solely undertaken by the author.

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APPENDIX 1

Statements for use with Method 2 of Data Collection

Pulse check ('PC') statements for use. All statements will require a response on a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

1. The content of the past two weeks has boosted my confidence when thinking about graduating and entering the market (topic area: self-awareness)

2. The course content has enhanced my understanding of myself as an individual (topic area: self-awareness)

3. The more I know about myself, the more comfortable I am with the decisions I will need to make about my career (topic area: self-awareness)

4. The course content is aiding my understanding of my own values (topic area: values)

5. I believe your values are 'matched' to the market I will graduate into (topic area: values)

6. I believe values are more important than skills in navigating career choices (topic area: values)

7. I believe my values can drive my career choices in the market (topic area: career preparedness)

8. The course content is aiding in my understanding of the market I will graduate into (topic area: career preparedness)

9. The course content enhances my ability to understand my individual work preferences, and apply those to identify ideal workforce environments (topic area: career preparedness)

The following question will be a standard prompt for each of the PCs:

'Are there any other reflections from this fortnight which you would like to share?'

Naqvi, J. (2026). Exploring the value of values: Does higher education need to abandon a 'skills transferability' focus in favour of 'values transferability'? *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 17(*1), 1–20.