



## Graduate employability skills through online internships and projects during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Australian example

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### Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic many students undertaking professional placements and internships had to leave their physical place of employment due to restrictions. Some students doing professional experiences lost their placement, while others entered work arrangements where they worked online remotely. This paper investigates the potential advantage from their experiences in terms of now being more capable in online work skills due to remote working, as the professional world potentially moves to a more flexible working arrangement that may include a remote working environment mixed with an office environment. It investigates, through a case study methodology analysing assessment content from student experiences, the type of new professional purpose that may evolve as a result of a changing workforce environment.

**Keywords**  
professional purpose, employability skills, COVID-19, remote working

### Introduction

For the past two decades the Australian higher education sector has grappled with conceptions regarding employability skills and what attributes graduates should be bringing to the workplace (Moore & Morton, 2017). This has led to an increased focus on practical skills and professional purpose in the higher education curriculum (Bates, Rixon, Carbone, & Pilgrim, 2019). The education environment has shifted due to an evolving labour market process (particularly with digital and mobile capabilities) which has resulted in universities being placed under increasing pressure to produce employable graduates, with less focus on philosophical and higher-order thinking skills and greater focus on being job-ready (Bridgstock, 2009).

Work-ready and purposeful skills are ever-evolving, as the work environment moves from a 20<sup>th</sup> Century man-powered workforce to 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology-powered workplace through a central processing unit (CPU) (Cook, 2020). Much of the systems' work can now be managed by artificial intelligence. As a result, people-power now focusses on a professional purpose mindset that reflects a person's commitment to developing a professional future aligned to personal values, professional aspirations and societal outlook (Bates et al., 2019). However, has this societal outlook taken a U-turn in recent history due to the enormous influence of the COVID-19 virus and its impact on the professional working space globally?

This paper investigates the professional working space experiences for media and communication students at an Australian university who have engaged in professional placements and projects during the COVID-19 office shutdown, and questions whether the future office working environment may need a new set of employability skills as part of graduate attributes. Students studying this discipline typically would be exposed to substantial practice in using digital and mobile media skills through the course of their study. The paper specifically investigates whether key employability skills associated with remote learning are identified, and whether these skills will reshape the professional purpose of communication graduates of the near future. The case study methodology reviews the reports presented as part of a university project unit conducted during the COVID pandemic lockdown from March to June in 2020.

## Literature review

### Graduate attributes and employability skills

Graduate attributes are the skills, personal attributes and values, which are expected to be acquired for professional practice by graduates during their time of study, regardless of their discipline or field of study (Smith & Bath, 2006; Bridgstock, 2009). Globally, higher education is progressively shifting from knowledge transfer towards a more practical and employment-focused curriculum that prepares students for professional careers and employment making graduate attributes a strong focus of higher education curriculum outcomes (Martin, Milne-Home, Barrett, Spalding, & Jones, 2000; Moore & Morton, 2015). Employers typically need graduates with job-ready skills that effectively promote communication, teamwork and problem-solving above discipline specific knowledge. Smith and Bath (2006) consider such attributes are a combination of qualities such as: critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, logical and independent thought, communication and information management skills, intellectual rigour, creativity and imagination, ethical practice, integrity, and tolerance.

According to Oraison, Konjarski and Howe (2019) the education institution's graduate attributes are designed to reflect student outcomes regarding measuring their abilities for 21st Century professional skills and capabilities, keeping in mind the profession and the professional standards of the industry. Therefore, graduate attributes should reflect both the requirements of the accreditation standards and the industry needs. To this end, these attributes represent academic and generic skills required for effective operation in a specific industry.

The terms of 'graduate attributes' and 'employability skills' are sometimes used interchangeably. However, Belwal, Priyadarshi, and Al Fazari (2017) define the graduate attributes at university level as developing skills expected of an institute's students, and within industry as defining employability skills being skills specific to helping a graduate effectively operate in a professional environment.

Yorke (2004) described employability skills as a set of achievements that graduates develop – skills in understandings and personal attributes – that make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation, benefiting themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. Cranmer (2006) describes employability skills as enhancements that secure graduates a job as they enter employment 'job-ready'. Graduate employability, according to Boden and Nedeva (2010), is the level of development and nurtured skills that make graduates ready for work.

### Employability and professional purpose

The current professional environment for graduates is extremely turbulent, according to Bates et al. (2019), due mainly to the unpredictability of corporate restructures, technology and advances, outsourcing and remote working. Remote working has become more prevalent since Australia experienced the COVID-19 social distancing (Smith, 2010). This new professional environment has created a philosophical re-think on what constitutes appropriate learning for employability.

Universities typically create student opportunities for developing transferable employability skills through: embedding the skills within curricula linked to graduate attributes (e.g., communication skills, teamwork, complex problem solving) and incorporating opportunities for work experience within courses (e.g., internships, placements, international study tours or exchanges) (Bates et al. 2019). University students who commit to incorporating transferable professional skills into their study experience are best-able to adopt and maintain proactive career behaviours that enhance their employability after graduation (Clements & Kamau, 2017).

According to Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004), employability is a form of work-specific active adaptability that enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities. Bates et al. (2019) refer to work-specific adaptability as students recognising their professional purpose in employability. The turbulent work environment is made more unpredictable by corporate restructuring, changing online economies, and the demand for flexible working conditions (Smith, 2010). Universities need to balance the current curricula focus on disciplinary knowledge with multidisciplinary and transferrable skills which help students adapt to the requirements of their working life (Kinash, Crane, Judd, & Knight, 2016). However, research suggests the current emphasis on skills development to enhance graduate employability is too narrow and insufficient to capture the full complexity of preparing students to be purpose-focussed in their working life (Clark, Zucas, & Lent, 2011; Jackson, 2016). Bates et al. (2019) emphasise professional purpose as the importance of developing the individual's capacity to manage their own career and stresses the role of graduates' levels of self-awareness, confidence and adaptability.

The challenge for higher education providers is to assist students to personally identify meaningful career decisions and to develop a practice of proactive career behaviours while still at university (Bates et al., 2019). This is referred to as *developing a professional purpose for employability*. Bates et al. (2019) also refer to the domains of development for university courses to encompass key learning outcomes that include: Navigating the World of Work, Building Networks, and Self and Social Awareness. In 2017, Rowe and Zegwaard described a similar set of graduate employability measures as: networks, professional-identity and active citizenship. The attaining of such outcomes is best achieved through a real working environment embedded into courses, according to Clarke (2018).

Nevertheless, the working environment has gone through major changes since the introduction of social distancing leading to remote and work-from-home (WFH) working arrangements. Flexible working arrangements have evolved significantly from the pre-COVID-19 strategies of occasional WFH, staggered start and finish times, and hot desking to fully functional online working arrangements including using online meeting platforms (Flanders, 2020). The professional purpose domains of Navigating the World of Work, Building Networks, and Self and Social Awareness have significantly different interpretations since working in isolation was introduced mid-March 2020 in Australia. Much of the student's learning to navigate these domains had previously been cultured in a face-to-face working environment, but the new work environment is moving to considerable on-line and socially isolated work places which involve new ways of navigating these domains.

The Professional Purpose Model to employability proposed by Bates et al. (2019) related behaviours of students across the full range of the student community and at different stages of experience in the workplace. But the workplace has significantly changed, and most likely will remain in a state of modification on a permanent basis when businesses assess the new working model post-COVID-19 working isolation (Flanders, 2020). The mindset for an effective working focus for remote and blended working arrangements is vastly different to the old '9-to-5' office working environment, according to Cohen (2020). The virus has had a global effect on the business world in that the ability to develop face-to-face networks has reduced and an increased awareness of intercultural communication through online platforms is required – all significant contributors to the professional purpose domains for employability. What may have been effective employability skills may not now be as effective in a post COVID-19 new world order.

## Internships used to develop professional purpose

The wide range of employability skills described previously are considered difficult to develop in a classroom environment that seeks to replicate an authentic workplace (see for example: Andrews and Higson, 2008; Moore & Morton, 2017; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017; Smith & Bath, 2006). A 2013 commissioned report by the Australian Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations identified these skills as missing from Australian higher education curriculum - yet are necessary to successfully transition from study to employment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Professional placements and work experience have long been used by institutions as a linkage between campus study and workplace skills.

A work placement (internship or professional placement) provides undergraduate students with a real-life working opportunity where they can build skills around professional communication, time management, teamwork, and networking (Shoenfelt, Stone, & Kottke, 2013). Internships and professional placements have often been a student tool to 'fill the gap' between campus curriculum and real-world practice (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Considering the domains of professional purpose stressed by Bates et al. (2019), real world professional experiences place students in an environment that will challenge them to navigate workplace tasks and responsibilities, develop networks that help them negotiate through their experience and advance self-assurance. Such skills and experiences are typically very difficult to replicate in the classroom (Moore & Morton, 2017).

Accordingly, González, Espinoza, Sandoval, McGinn & Castill (2020) argue that the employability skills employers want, and those universities see as important can often be different. Bates et al. (2019) suggest that professional purpose aids students in identifying and understanding those skills needed to effectively operate in diverse and often dynamic working environments. The global professional environment has changed significantly during the months of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through increased remote working and online engagement, and these changes may stay (Mudditt, 2020). The Boston Consulting Group's 2020 survey found between 41 and 60 per cent surveyed had a preference to continue working two or three days a week from home if possible post-COVID-19. This change to 'hybrid' working arrangements means graduates require a broader set of attributes for developing a highly effectual professional purpose.

## Remote working

The advancement of technology has enabled an office-based workforce to harness available technology (typically available to many households in advanced economies) to work remotely, or work-from-home (Arruda, 2020). Cook (2020) talks of the digital nomad workforce that subjectively rates themselves as highly mobile and work focused, as they utilise the remote working technology to fit work in around their lifestyle. This mode of professional work is dependent on reliable technology and a business model that supports work tasks which can be completed from an out-of-office location through digital devices (Bishop, 2020; Cohen, 2020).

Remote work [also referred to as work-from-home (WFH), telecommuting or flexible working] relates to the professional being able to complete work responsibilities offsite from the outwardly imposed structures of traditional office work (Arruda, 2020). This arrangement places more value on autonomy, flexibility and the ability to travel and work wherever a person pleases (Cook, 2020). The remote workplace, according to Arruda (2020), requires and enables: corporate flexibility, headquarters 2.0 vision, work-ready homes, E-learning capabilities, relaxed business attire, and video virtuosity. In basic terms, remote working requires a digital capable computer device, internet, power source and semi-sophisticated instructional technology intelligence (Mudditt, 2020). Although the concept has been around for many decades, the evolution of the digital and mobile technology has enriched and progressed the capabilities of the remote workspace (Cook, 2020).

However, the simplicity of the remote working environment also can deliver working challenges that an office environment typically avoids. Out-of-office work locations can carry their own distractions not associated with the primary professional purpose of the job or task. This is particularly evident in a WFH environment where workers can be side-tracked by household chores, family commitments, faltering (or over-burdened) internet connection, and poor office ergonomics (Mudditt, 2020; Bishop, 2020). Although past surveys have indicated a fondness for the flexible working arrangement, many workers still admit that the office environment provides working security, support and structure that can go missing when working offsite (BCG, 2020).

### **COVID-19 working environment**

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the office-based work mindset, with many institutions encouraging staff to work remotely from the office to avoid possible Coronavirus infection. The scale of such a workplace to home-base shift had been unprecedented up until the pandemic (Bishop, 2020; Cohen, 2020; Knaus, 2020). The change in work-space and mind-set to working remotely will undoubtedly lead to more considered viewpoints to working arrangements and flexible office environments in the future (Cook, 2020; Mudditt, 2020). The pandemic work model for WFH and flexible work times most likely will become an ongoing arrangement for many professional staff who have the resource capabilities to work from a remote environment (Arruda, 2020; Mudditt, 2020).

The pandemic working environment has seen people from office-based jobs transfer their work stations from the office to the home, or another remote location. In Australia, workers have been encouraged to WFH at every opportunity, with both State and Federal legislation applying social distancing laws to all public and work spaces (Cohen, 2020; Knaus, 2020). The pandemic 'remote office' has involved the use of home broadband, digital and mobile technology and online video conferencing as the primary means of information and communication exchange (Mudditt, 2020). Cohen (2020) highlights that this form of working has been available as an alternative work arrangement for many years but has not been seen by mainstream management as an applicable option for the professional corporate work space, until the pandemic has forced the remote work option upon the broader community.

In Australia, the pandemic working environment was one created through government legislation and company policy at a macro-level, and imposed wholesale change on the working conditions for most office-based staff (Cohen, 2020; Knaus, 2020). As with many global economies, the Australian professional environment is likely to remain in a state of alert with the working environment evolving from an office-based workforce to a mobile workforce that can operate in a blend of remote and centralised locations (BCG, 2020; Mudditt, 2020).

### **Post-COVID-19 and professional purpose**

According to the Boston Consulting Group (based on a management survey conducted in May 2020) peoples' needs will be the priority focus on the 'ramp-up' to returning to the office environment, and that the working spaces must be more adaptable to accommodate the post-COVID-19 staff requirements (2020). Flanders (2020) highlights the need for offices to incorporate more flexible working arrangements for office staff returning from remote working. The physical office environment will be more focused on safety and protection than on cooperative work spaces, with organisations having to consider social distancing and virus community transmission (Mudditt, 2020).

The blended professional model will become more the normal, as opposed to the exception, as staff begin a schedule of mixed remote and office working locations (BCG, 2020). The blended model includes: staff having flexibility around onsite working hours or days; shared space and hot-desking with other employees; plasticity around working hours over the course of the day; remote and onsite office resources; and social distancing strategies (BCG, 2020; Cook, 2020). Communication will be dominated by digital communication strategies and social isolating (Cohen, 2020; Lawson, Gill, Feekery, & Witsel, 2019).

American consulting group, Morning Consult, conducted a survey from June 16-20, 2020 among a national representative sample of 2,200 U.S. working adults regarding their position on professional engagement and the working environment. Major findings from the survey included: 75% of respondents stated they would like to continue WFH arrangements for part of their working week; the majority of people working remotely during the pandemic have had largely positive experiences; flexible working arrangements will be crucial for all companies going forward; and flexibility is important as not all workers report better productivity or a sense of comfort working from home (Morning Consult, 2020).

Professional purpose for students graduating into the new world order of a blended professional model will need to focus on a broader understanding of navigating in a work environment that supports in-office and remote operations, networking in a physical and digital environment while advancing their social networks and maintaining a presence in the working relationships. With 70% of current remote workers stating the new reality has caused at least 'somewhat' significant changes to their daily routine, workers now need an updated set of employability skills to navigate the new world order and remote communication (Morning Consult, 2020). Communicating and creating meaning through digital media is vastly different to the face-to-face mode of information exchange, which most office workers have operated under before the pandemic (Lawson et al. 2019).

The new world order for business communication and operations will require significant skills in digital and mobile communication, including skills in holding engaging digital conversations through electronic devices, information sharing in electronic mode, and sign-off protocol through electronic signatures that are legally and bureaucratically compliant (Cook, 2020). Universities will need to explore ways of authenticating new workplace environments due to changes being introduced because of social distancing in workspaces post-pandemic. Students who have completed professional placements as the Coronavirus pandemic caused mass disruption to the Australian workforce may have already begun to exercise these professional work initiatives and have built an understanding of professional purpose for the current work environment.

## Methodology

This study adopts a case study methodology to investigate whether media and communication students have established an advanced process of developing professional purpose due to remote working environments.

The primary question being investigated is: Can key work characteristics or developed skills be identified as a result of completing a professional placement through a remote working environment?

The secondary question is: Are there identified key learnings that may direct professional purpose as a result of completing a professional placement through a remote working environment?

## Research methodology

The phenomenon of students undertaking professional placements (internships, work projects and work integrated learning placements) under the protocols of a pandemic lockdown is new, so there is limited data to analyse between March and June 2020. Therefore, this paper uses a descriptive case study methodology to measure learning impacts identified in the assessment component of professional projects during the pandemic isolation. Case studies are a popular research method in the business area and are commonly used to analyse specific issues within the boundaries of a specific environment, situation or organisation (Dubrovskiy, 2018). This method is best suited to answer the research questions as it allows for a descriptive analysis of workplace practices used to complete professional placements in a remote working environment.

## Context

The example case investigates a project unit at the higher education level. Swinburne University of Technology has a project unit within its Media and Communication programs that requires students to engage in either an internship or complete a professional project. Those students completing a project within their discipline are supervised and receive mentoring as part of the learning process. Students completing internships must be supervised directly by their employer. Assessment in the unit involves three parts: initial identification and planning of project/internship, folio of completed work, reflection on learning and new knowledge. Students are assessed on their ability to: produce quality and professional work, identify key areas in their project that will enable knowledge and skills growth, and an ability to analyse and reflect on their professional experience. The purpose of the unit is to provide students with experience in professional work, and help the students identify professional purpose for employability skills they can transfer into their graduate roles.

During the first semester of 2020, which began on 2nd of March and ran until 5th of June, the university was forced into shutdown after the second week of study because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those completing projects needed to receive mentoring and supervision via online technology to conform to new social distancing rules. Those students completing internships either had to work remotely offsite or follow a strict timetable of rotating rosters onsite with employer supervision from a distance. Both methods required students to work remotely and utilise digital technology to complete their projects or internships. A few students had to change from an internship to a project by week 3 of the semester, as the business they were interning with closed due to the pandemic.

## Data collection

The data collected refers to key terminology associated with the characteristics aligned with professional project as identified by Bates et al. (2019), as listed in Table 1. These characteristics are related to digital and video communication, teamwork, self-management, remote supervision and working remotely.

A quantitative study of the professional practice reports (that include feedback and work folios) for the unit was undertaken to identify characteristics of learning relating to employability skills for professional purpose. There were 50 students who completed the unit. Internships placements accounted for 24 of the initial work folios, however, when COVID-19 social distancing rules were enacted seven students lost their placement opportunity (and needed to switch to their Plan B project work) leaving 17 ongoing work placements. This resulted in 33 professional project students who now were required to receive supervision and mentoring through digital and online communication.

## Data analysis

### Analysis framework

The framework for investigation employed the method clustering for quantitative analysis and coding reliability (Krippendorff, 2004; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Neuendorf, 2002). The final work folio and the feedback text (as part of the assessment) was analysed to identify key characteristics or employability attributes that may shape professional purpose – and rate them as positive, negative or neutral learning experiences. The professional purpose themes embedded in the characteristics included: performing professional functions, maintaining and building professional networks, ability to socially interact for work, ability to manage workload, and ability to manage technology for work. For this research, the methodology was to interpret the entire text, rather than look for associated meaning in a single word or short phrase – so the overall characteristic for the sentence or paragraph indicated the rating. This is the most simplistic and commonly used approach to character identification, which in past studies has best represented the samples' cluster credentials, although

this method is open to an element of subjective interpretation by the researcher in terms of cluster qualities (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000).

The analysis was conducted over 50 pieces of assessment. The number of mentions refers to the number of times the characteristic was addressed in folio content or feedback text. Each of these mentions is then coded as positive, neutral or negative in order to ascertain the rating for the employability characteristic and provide a numeric value. The key characteristics were identified by recurring themes relating to the employability characteristic most often presented in the assessments (see Table 1).

The analysed data has been collated from content present reports and assessments associated with professional practice, and then coded for clustering to allow quantitative analysis. There was no eliciting of information, with individual student comments or student demographics not represented in the data, but rather the data is a representation of collective of characteristics observed, coded and collated by the unit convenor/author.

## Results and findings

The table below illustrates the clustering results identified for the key professional purpose characteristics. The results highlight a number of key skills core to this working environment for professional practice students working remotely.

**Table 1: Work Characteristics Common to Content for Remote Professional Projects**

Characteristic	No. of mentions	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Key Learnings
Digital and mobile communication platforms	112	86 77%	18 16%	8 7%	Can be professional Simple and easy Use as a work tool, not social Unreliable technology
Online video communication	73	57 78%	16 22%		Preparation Time management
Teamwork	16	6 38%	10 62%		Frustrating Asynchronous Unbalanced workload
Self-management of workload	66	45 68%	21 32%		Self-discipline Planning and timetabling – break down tasks
Receiving supervision and information remotely	44	22 50%	7 16%	15 34%	Desk-top research skills are important Time-delay in responses can be frustrating and inefficient



Working offsite	44	22 50%	5 11%	17 39%	Flexible Preparation and commuting decreased Relaxed working environment
Meeting work objectives*	60	17 28%	3 5%	40 67%	Need to build SMART Objectives Partial successes are OK Attainable and realistic

\*unit assessment

Terminology for digital and mobile communication platforms was mentioned 112 times, with 77% of comments being positive about the experience with this work characteristic over the course of the professional project work. Negative ranked comments accounted for 16%, and 8% of comments regarding digital and mobile communication platforms were considered neutral, as a value could not be applied by the comments. Themes included: how to use social media professionally, the simplicity of the platforms, the need to concentrate on social media as a tool and not a social outlet, and issues around unreliable technology.

Online video communication was specifically identified 39 times, with 78% of the comments valued as positive and 22% valued as negative regarding the experiences with this technology. Comments focussed on being prepared to deliver content and dressing appropriately for professional communication. Other issues included poor time management, identification and confusion regarding meeting log-ons.

Teamwork was identified 16 times, with 63% deemed to be positive about teamwork performance in remote working, and 37% negative. Many of the projects would have involved working autonomously making teamwork a non-factor in the reports. Some negativities were themed around frustration with trying to synchronise discussions and an uneasiness with balanced workloads across teams. Regardless, the asynchronous approach to teamwork was identified many times to be a positive.

Self-management of workload was mentioned 66 times. Many comments indicated positive self-management at 68%, whereas 32% of comments deemed the experience with self-management to be negative. Of the negative comments, many could be themed as a lack of self-discipline in managing tasks and adhering to a timetabled workload.

Terms relating to guidance, supervision and acquiring information remotely were mentioned 44 times. Of these mentions, 50% were positive, 34% were neutral and 16% were deemed negative. Negative comments typically referred to delays in responses from employers, manager and sometimes university supervisors. Many comments referred to the need to be efficient with desk-top research.

There were 44 comments regarding working offsite. Positive comments were coded at 50% and related to not having to commute, flexibility around work times and a more relaxed working environment. Neutral comments accounted for 39% of comments, and 11% disliked the relaxed atmosphere as it could be demotivating.

Meeting work objectives was requirement of reporting for assessment involved 60 mentions. The high neutral count of 67% was due to deliberating on success at achieving objectives set for the

professional projects. It is difficult to attribute characteristic values, as these objectives are specific to the unit, and not the work.

## Discussion

The employability attributes of graduates appear to have evolved to fit the remote working purpose (Cook, 2020) as a result of experiencing social distancing because of the pandemic. The majority of employability characteristics being coded positive (60% of all comments being coded positive and 74% being positive/neutral) indicates the students completing professional practices under remote working experiences have identified positively with skills sets that will contribute to their evolving professional purpose. Students who have completed professional projects and placements under remote working conditions have been exposed to a set of employability skills that may well represent the professional office environment going forward as indicated by Cook (2020) and Cohen (2020). These skills will continue to evolve for the office environment beyond professional purpose and employability skills considered to be best practice before the pandemic instituted social distancing in the workplace (Bates et al., 2018; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017).

The Swinburne example of how students have advanced their professional purpose through completing professional placements and projects to suit the new world order of work post-COVID-19 isolations has highlighted an evolving shift in employability attributes for the workplace, as discussed by academics and industry experts (see for example: Arruda, 2020; Cohen, 2020; Cook, 2020; Flanders, 2020; Mudditt, 2020). Skills aligned with working remotely have emerged as significant for the workforce. Students have specifically signalled positive learnings central to their professional experiences to include: the use of social media technology as a primary strategic communication tool (77%); video-conferencing skills (78%); strategies for self-management of tasks (68%) flexible timetabling (50%); and, desktop research (50%). Many of these skills may not have been prominent in the students' reports without their imposition being so obvious as a result of having to conduct their professional work from remote locations. These skills match the new working world order expressed by many experts and commentators regarding the skill set necessary to function in the post-pandemic working environment, especially those put forward by Arruda (2020), Cook (2020) and Flanders (2020).

Students undertaking a work placement or project during the height of COVID-19 isolation and remote working have experienced working conditions that will shape professional purpose in the near future and beyond. At the time of writing, many Australian corporations and government offices were grappling with the reality of a second wave of Coronavirus infections affecting the office working environment. These such students have been part of the office-based realisations regarding remote working capabilities that will undoubtedly shape the COVID-normal workplace (Cohen, 2020).

This paper's case study is not intended to be an absolute model of student experiences and new attributes, due to the small sample number and the unpredictable change that continues to occur as a result of the emergency working conditions imposed on many global office-based workforces. Nonetheless, it does indicate a change in direction and operations for many office-based workforces in post-pandemic Australia. It should also be noted that the subjects analysed have a media and communication discipline background, with substantial exposure to social media and digital technology than possibly would be included in other discipline majors.

## Summary

Graduating students need not only transferrable professional skills, but also to identify and understand attributes that will allow them to function in an ever-diversifying workplace (Cook, 2020; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). Graduate attributes have been defined as skills acquired while studying

that enable professional practice, regardless of the discipline studied (Smith & Bath, 2006). Employability skills are defined as a set of achievements that graduates develop that make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupation (Yorke, 2004). Bates et al. (2019) emphasise the institution's role in developing professional purpose through enhancing the student's capacity to manage their own career by accentuating the role of graduate attributes such as: self-awareness, confidence and adaptability.

The literature examined in this paper has shown that graduate students who understand the notion of professional purpose for their chosen discipline are advanced in learning and are better placed to effectively transition from study to the workplace; as this is an important advancement on graduate attributes (Gill, 2018; Bates et al. 2019). Results from assessing the employability skills development for students doing professional practical during the social-isolating phase demonstrates these students have been exposed to a range of employability skills that will more-likely become common for the workplace going forward, as also demonstrated by leading authors and industry experts (see for example; Cohen, 2020; Cook, 2020; Flanders, 2020; Mudditt, 2020).

The current emphasis on skills development to enhance graduate employability by institutions is suggested by Clark et al. (2011) and Jackson (2016) as being too narrow and insufficient to capture the full complexity of the task of preparing students to be purpose focussed in their working life. Many institutions have utilised the professional placement (internship or work placement) to provide students with the opportunity to develop their professional purpose toolkit as a key purpose to their graduate attributes (Rowe & Zegward, 2017; Oraison et al., 2019). This has enabled graduates the opportunity to mature their professional networks, understand their self and social awareness in relation to their chosen discipline, and provide insight into navigating their professional environment – opportunities that are difficult to replicate in a classroom (Bates et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017).

The workplace has gone through a rapid metamorphous as a result of imposed social distancing policies due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since early 2020, the office workspace has evolved to include social distancing, non-contact interactions, flexible working arrangements, remote workstations and an explosion in the use of digitally engineered communication – not typical to office environment pre-2020 (Flanders, 2020; BCG, 2020).

This case study measured the characteristics identified for such professional purpose skills from folio content and feedback in work placements and projects completed during social isolation due to the COVID pandemic. The data demonstrates the value of certain employability skills that will enhance professional purpose, particularly for the new remote working conditions likely to be in many future workplaces that will employ higher education graduates.

## Conclusion

The higher education students who have worked on professional projects during the COVID-19 pandemic isolation phase that involved remote working and non-contact business operation may have experienced a working environment that will more closely mirror the future office working conditions. These students already have insight into employability attributes necessary to foster professional purpose for their chosen work discipline, giving them a distinct advantage in the graduate recruitment process against students who have not experienced such working conditions.

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