

Editorial

Finding the joy in complexity: Privileging the practitioner voice in graduate employability

Lauren Hansen¹, Bonnie Amelia Dean², Michael Healy^{3, 4}, Deanne Gannaway⁵, Barbie Panther⁶, and Jamie Mustard¹

Corresponding author: Lauren Hansen (Lauren.Hansen@deakin.edu.au)

¹ Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Graduate Employment, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

² Learning, Teaching & Curriculum, University of Wollongong

³ Education Services Australia, Melbourne, Australia

⁴ School of Education, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia

⁵ Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation, The University of Queensland

⁶ Deakin Learning Futures, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

The challenges of graduate employability practice

Graduate employability practitioners know students better than most. We are the voice at the end of the 'call in case of an emergency' number for students on placement. We have read their resumes and heard their dreams, and we know the challenges that all too often get in the way of them. To address these challenges, we must navigate institutional systems, processes and structures that are ill-suited to the messiness of our practice (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). Graduate employability is a complex practice with multiple stakeholders – students, employers, colleagues and our institutions. It is where the rubber of education hits the road of employment. And sometimes, our efforts to meet everyone else's needs leave us feeling like roadkill. The messy reality of our practice cannot be found in the neat, linear storytelling of empirical and theoretical literature, though it guides us in our evidence-based practice. Nor can it be found through the polished accounting of a case study or practice report.

As academic and professional staff deeply committed to the transformative power of graduate employability practice, we felt compelled to illuminate the shadow work of our fellow practitioners through this special issue. We believe in the transformative, emancipatory potential of quality careers and employability learning (Healy, 2023). We work as, and walk beside, graduate employability practitioners, and we see the impact on students and staff of inadequate resources and support to deliver quality pedagogy.

In this special issue, we are proud to share the unvarnished stories, practical strategies, and insightful provocations from the people who answer the phone when things go wrong on placement, who bear witness to another rejected application and fight for recognition of their contribution to teaching and learning. We have used the term *graduate employability practitioner* to reflect the diversity of roles contributing to student success in various ways. This term extends the practice beyond work-integrated and career development learning in the curriculum or the role of the career service. This term highlights the collective responsibility of all teaching and student support staff to help students recognise the capabilities they develop through their learning journey (Smith et al., 2018). Moreover, we have a collective obligation to elevate and celebrate quality practice.

At the core of the challenges graduate employability practitioners face is a higher education infrastructure that is not built for, nor does it value, the reality of our practice. The emerging professional ecology of graduate employability is a complex one, such that it is not yet possible to define it as a distinct profession (Healy et al., 2022). It is home to academic and professional staff and all manner of ‘pracademics’ in the third space of higher education work. They work in a wide variety of organisational units, from centralised services to specific faculties, and come with a broad range of professional experience, qualifications, and expertise. Graduate employability is an often-contested space, with various parties vying for authority, resources, and recognition. In the hierarchical culture of higher education, academic staff often exert authority over professional staff who may, in fact, have greater awareness of student employability. On the other hand, politically adept executives sometimes shape academic policies and practices in disciplines they know little about.

Some elements of graduate employability practice combine to create a career dead zone: the metrics by which academic staff are measured, the misclassification of professional roles that do not reflect their expertise, and the often time-consuming nature of graduate employability pedagogies, such as the administrative burden of WIL or the relational demands of in-depth student reflections. Academic staff teaching and researching employability are often seen as subordinate to their discipline-focused colleagues. Professional staff meet a lower ceiling in their career progression, as senior leadership positions often require academic credentials such as a PhD and a research record.

To attract and retain talented and committed practitioners in this space, we must provide an environment where the institution rewards and recognises good practice and allows practitioners to succeed in their careers. Healy et al. (2022) demonstrated how diffuse the graduate employability professional landscape is and called for more intentional inter-professional collaboration. For example, Heins-Wesson and Lucas (2024) have argued for recognition of work-integrated learning (WIL) as a discipline and that this practice ‘requires a specialised workforce who are appropriately qualified to create proven structures and meaningful practical experiences going beyond simply graduate employment outcomes.’

Australian Higher Education landscape

The articles in this special issue focus on universities in the context of higher education in Australia. While we did not intend to feature practitioners based only in Australia, most submissions came from this region. As such, the papers selected for this special issue can speak to the influence of Australia’s higher education context on the individual, discipline, and institutional domains of graduate employability practice. Australian higher education comprises a variety of universities and vocational institutions that offer programs to both domestic and international students. The sector prioritises research, graduate employment outcomes, global engagement, innovation, and industry collaboration.

Recently, the Australian University Accord (O’Kane et al., 2024), a report commissioned by the Australian government to review the higher education sector, provided a promise for change in Australian higher education. The final report, released in February 2024, argued for significant reform in higher education to develop the skills and knowledge in a future workforce at the scale required to meet the needs of a diverse and complex economy and society. Forty-seven (47) recommendations set ambitious targets with several measures specifically aimed at enhancing graduate employability, including curriculum modernisation, industry partners, skills development, careers support services and lifelong learning. However, although the ambition and intent outlined in the report have been applauded by many, the focus remains on what needs to be done rather than on those who do this work and how they can be supported. The Accord’s promises may not be realised if we do not take advantage of this opportunity to reimagine how students are supported to achieve their goals.

Privileging the practitioner voice

The papers presented in this special issue aim to illuminate the voices of graduate employability practitioners to highlight, discuss and challenge the practices and perceptions of individuals dedicated to this work. Our special issue embraces diverse perspectives, from individual practitioner reflections to faculty-level insights and programs, through to institutional-level initiatives. This curated collection of papers keenly illustrates the complexity of professional development for graduate employability practitioners, which primarily occurs within and through their own practice. Through the authors' stories, we hope to highlight the experience of such practitioners in developing their knowledge and expertise in this area, noting the importance of reflection and conversation in these spaces. Despite the multitude of ways in which practitioners engage in their work, common among these are the dedication to student learning, collaborations that transcend disciplinary boundaries and an urgency for recognition of advocacy for visibility of individuals who champion employability as a third-space practitioner.

Individual domain

Disseminating diverse, individual accounts of work as an employability champion sheds light on how practitioners are boundaries crossers, reflective practitioners and advocates of inclusivity for student learning. Making visible often concealed voices in higher education, our first paper is a provocation by Mary McGovern (2024), who challenges the ubiquity of graduate employability for students who are parents and carers. Presenting a confronting argument for empowering and enabling student parents and carers, McGovern leaves readers with three practical recommendations for integrating the voices of individuals from the underrepresented group through initiatives that uplift career development, build on quality data and produce inclusive research.

Highlighting collaboration across a teaching team, Ruth Wallace, Sally-Anne Doherty and Elizabeth Cook (2024) present a reflective commentary on the implementation of a relational employability framework in a graduate degree. Drawing on image reflections – a pedagogical activity where students infer meaning using an image as a prompt – the paper describes the team's experiences and challenges embedding the activity to enhance students' articulation of employability. This paper brings forth the complexity of experimenting with employability pedagogy by allowing us to 'hear' the teacher's authentic voices and lessons learned. Similarly, showcasing a team's reflections Anna Branford and Luella Leon (2024) present a theoretical and critical paper illuminating the controversies of the employability agenda discourse. Building on the strengths and perspectives of the authors, their paper distinguishes employability from a psychological and sociological lens to inform readers of the need to problematise and support self-reported career readiness.

Graduate employability practitioners emerge across disciplines and are often drawn into their roles from many backgrounds and previous career trajectories. Pointing to how employability work often encompasses building on the strengths of individuals in diverse roles, Jennifer Luke and Cristy Bartlett (2024) bring readers a conceptual paper navigating career and learning support roles to advance graduate dispositional employability. Illuminating how graduate and staff employability intersect, the paper proposes a four-stage model that shows how greater collaboration between diverse staff roles can lead to enhanced, holistic student outcomes. Further highlighting the multi-faceted nature of graduate employability practitioners' work and identities, Adrian Buck (2024) advocates for a transdisciplinary approach in a practitioner reflection paper. To prompt and encourage readers into this approach, core questions are proposed that transpire across identity and career development to inspire engagement in the reader's own professional identity.

Discipline or faculty domain

Employability strategies enacted across a degree, discipline or faculty are contextually tailored to meeting learners' needs but are typically led by academics who emerge as employability champions

within their educational practice. Showcasing a multidisciplinary academic team experience, Katrina Clifford's (2024) paper explores curriculum development for enhancing employability in liberal arts degrees. The contribution of this paper lies in its use of Tuckman's (1965) model of forming, storming, norming, and performing to unpack and offer recommendations for a team approach to designing an employability sequence of learning that readers may learn from and apply in their contexts. Similarly, sharing curriculum transformation for graduate employability, Karina Wardle and Kay Geronikos (2024) present a practitioner reflection on a seven-year journey in a business school to develop career development and employability programs. Through the illustration of two salient moments, Wardle and Geronikos recite student benefits of the program and emphasise partnerships with students and external stakeholders as critical to its success, as well as reflecting on the importance of learning through their own practice and reflection.

Moving into a non-clinical health context, Natalie Colson, Louise Maddock, Mary-Ann, Shuker and Georgina Sanger (2024) reflect on the process of designing a new capstone course for students that integrates work-integrated learning for student groups. Aligned with the themes emerging from Wardle and Geronikos' (2024) paper, Colson et al. raise the importance of partnerships for program sustainability and provide helpful, practical resources, including course structure, flyers and conversation prompts to elicit new partnerships, and details for initial partnership meetings. In the educational field of Law, Kate Tubridy (2024) offers an academic's reflective account of the challenges and strategies for embedding employability across a law degree. Readers will gain insights from Tubridy's process and the importance of agility in translating employability discourse to motivate colleagues in making curriculum enhancements.

Institutional domain

Graduate employability practitioners are crucial to enacting institutional employability strategies. Introducing a novel theme to the employability discourse, Micheal O'Connor (2024) turns our attention to the employability of higher degree research (HDR) students. O'Connor (2024) points out that while thousands of HDR students graduate each year in Australia, attention must be afforded to enhancing greater connections to industry and employability skills training to enable these graduates to succeed beyond their dissertations.

In the final paper for the special issue, Bonnie Dean, Kate Tubridy, Venkata Yanamandram and Michelle Eady (2024) present an institutional approach to implementing employability. By juxtaposing the tensions between university strategy and the initiatives that bring it to life, the authors offer 'the significant conversation' as an inspirational tool for advancing WIL across an institution and beyond. This approach is driven by employability champions across various disciplines and roles. The authors share four vignettes—one from each contributor—that highlight the diverse ways in which conversations can turn big employability dreams into reality.

Leading with joy, together

It is more important than ever that, in the absence of institutional valuing, reward and recognition of this pivotal role, we illustrate the joy and pride we experience in our graduate employability practice. Despite the identified challenges, the papers presented in this special issue speak clearly to that joy - joy in seeing student success and transformation and joy in forging and maintaining partnerships. This demonstrates that while joy alone may not sustain a career, the support of a community can. The team submissions particularly highlight how individuals have found good people to work with and built good relationships, working together and sharing practice.

The creation of this special issue was itself an act of community and peer-supported learning. As a guest editorial team, we shared a commitment to privilege the voices of practitioners, to provide a platform to share their work with peers in a format that best reflects the reality of what they do. We are grateful to all who submitted to the special issue, many of whom acted as reviewers. We have

come to know our authors through their papers and what must have seemed like endless emails. We have had the honour of reading, reviewing and discussing the work of our peers, learning from them and each other along the way.

The challenges of navigating the complexity of graduate employability practice in Australian higher education may sometimes leave us feeling like roadkill. But we all share a commitment to building capability and an eye for possibility in our students, colleagues, and selves. We share this endeavour with students, industry and each other in ways that nourish and uplift us. In this way, our work to support students is recast, from picking a lane or the road less travelled to how they might take flight instead.

References

- Branford, A. and Leon, L.C. (2024). Critical considerations of Career Enrolment Data: Challenges, limitations, and possibilities. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2045>
- Bridgstock, R., & Jackson, D. (2019). Strategic institutional approaches to graduate employability: Navigating meanings, measurements and what really matters. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(5), 468–484. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1646378>
- Buck, A. (2024). Transdisciplinary employability practitioners: engaging with skills for the future and redefining professional identity. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 41–44. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2017>
- Clifford, K. (2024). Collaborative strategies for designing employability curriculum in a liberal arts context. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2046>
- Colson Shilton, N., Maddock, L., Shuker, M.A. and Sanger, G.(2024). Creating group work-integrated learning experiences for non-clinical health degrees: A practitioner reflection. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2028>
- Dean, B.A. et al. (2024). Implementing employability strategy: Inspiring change through significant conversations. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 80–94. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2021>
- Hains-Wesson, R and Lucas, P, (2024, March 28) Why WIL should be its own discipline. Future Campus, <https://futurecampus.com.au/2024/03/28/why-wil-should-be-its-own-discipline/>
- Healy, M., Brown, J. L., & Ho, C. (2022). Graduate employability as a professional proto-jurisdiction in higher education. *Higher Education*, 83, 1125–1142. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00733-4>
- Healy, M.,(2023) Careers and employability learning: pedagogical principles for higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(8), 1303-1314, <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2196997>
- Luke, J. and Bartlett, C. (2024). Bridging the Gap: Graduate Dispositional Employability and the Interconnected Relationship between Third Space Career and Learning Support Services. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2034>
- McGovern, M. (2023). Student parents and carers need graduate employability support: Recommendations for employability practitioners. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2029>
- O'Connor, M.D. (2024). Reconceptualising and supporting graduate employability practitioners for Higher Degree Research candidates. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 76–79. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2043>
- O’Kane, M., Behrendt, L., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B. & Wikramanayake, S. (2024) *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*. Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord>
- Smith, M., Bell, K., Bennett, D., & McAlpine, A. (2018). Employability in a global context: Evolving policy and practice in employability, work integrated learning, and career development learning. Graduate Careers Australia. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.6372506.v2>
- Tubridy, K. (2024). Facilitating and supporting employability in law: reflections on the need for agile communication. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 72–75. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2023>
- Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Development Sequence in Small Groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6), 384-399.

- Wallace, R., Doherty, A., Cook, E.J. (2024). Using image-reflections to support undergraduate students' relational employability: A practitioner reflection. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 5–17. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2030>
- Wardle, K.M. and Geronikos, K. (2024). Integrating employability learning and career development learning: insights into a business school approach. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 15(2), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2024vol15no2art2039>