Scaffolding employability throughout undergraduate degrees: A case study in criminology

Lyndel Bates
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University

Stacey Walker
Kate Marchesi
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University

Hennessey Hayes
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University

The employability of students is increasingly seen as an important outcome for universities. While a field placement experience is one method of developing employability, the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University uses a range of approaches to embed employability throughout its degree programs. The School follows a student lifecycle approach using the Employability Framework. Thus activities occur as students transition into university, transition through their degree and then transition out. Activities also involve alumni within the transition up and back stage. This paper provides a case study for how employability is scaffolded throughout a university degree program. The case study demonstrates how students can begin to develop their understanding and skills in the area of employability prior to commencing their study and then progressively throughout and after their degree program.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, employability, student lifecycle, criminology

Introduction

There is an increasing emphasis on developing students’ employability throughout their university studies (Qenani, MacDougall, & Sexton, 2014; Rothwell, Jewell, & Hardie, 2009). While there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of employability, it appears that students tend to view it as a short-term concept which involves finding a job, although it also includes elements such as ability to obtain employment (but not necessarily being employed) as well as possession of skills and certain personality attributes (Tymon, 2013). Students also view placements, a form of work integrated learning, as key in developing employability (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tymon, 2013).

Work integrated learning is a process that provides students with an opportunity to apply the knowledge that they have learnt at university within the workplace (Beattie & Riley, 2015; Jackson, 2015b; Zegwaard & Coll, 2011). It can be delivered in a range of formats including placements as well as internships, practica, supervised practice and simulations (Smith, 2012). Work integrated learning is becoming increasingly mandated in Australian tertiary programs although collaboration between universities and employers in other countries may be rarer (Bilsland & Nagy, 2015).

Research suggests that there is a wide range of benefits of work integrated learning including the development of professional identity and the socialisation of students into the professional workforce (A. Bates, Bates, & Bates, 2007), assisting with the selection of a career (Jackson, 2015a) and career clarification (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011) as well as enabling students to develop and refine their skills (Jackson, 2015b). Additionally, work integrated learning appears to facilitate self-efficacy (Freudenberg, Brimble, Cameron, MacDonald, & English, 2012), work self-efficacy (M. Bates, Thompson, & Bates, 2013; Raelin et al., 2011; Raelin et al., 2014; Thompson, Bates, & Bates, 2016) and career decision self-efficacy (Reddan, 2014). Participation in work integrated learning may also affect student retention (Raelin et al., 2014). Recent graduates recognise the value of work integrated learning with a study conducted within a child protection context identifying that recent graduates were able to identify the benefits of participating in a placement (A. Bates & Bates, 2013). However, work integrated learning courses are resource-intensive and frequently require staff to undertake different roles and responsibilities than those who teach more traditional academic subjects (M. Bates, 2011). Given this, it is worth identifying other ways to enhance students’ employability throughout their studies by embedding opportunities throughout degree programs.

1 Corresponding author contact details; School of Criminology and Criminal Justice and Griffith Criminology Institute, Griffith University, +61 7 3735 1429, L.Bates@griffith.edu.au
**Student lifecycle**

The student lifecycle is a framework that enhances our understanding of students’ engagement and success by considering their needs as they move through each stage of their university degree (Burton, Chester, Xenos, & Elgar, 2013). The lifecycle focuses on four primary transition points within each student’s higher education career: *transition towards, transition in, transition through and transitions up, out and back* (Lizzio, 2012). *Transition towards* refers to future students and involves them aspiring and exploring before choosing what they will study (Lizzio, 2012). *Transition in* is the second stage of the lifecycle and constitutes commencing students. In this stage students commit and prepare for their study and join and engage with activities (Lizzio, 2012). The third stage, *transition through*, represents continuing students and is where they work for, and build on, their success (Lizzio, 2012). *Transitions up, out and back* describes how graduates and alumni concentrate on their future success and how they can partner with and continue their relationship with the university (Lizzio, 2012).

**Employability Framework**

Griffith University’s Career Development and Employability Framework integrates career development learning, industry connections and student actions together to map the advancement of a graduate career (Careers and Employment Service, 2015). The framework is mapped against the Student Lifecycle so that students and staff are aware of what actions should be taken at particular times.

Even during the *transition in* stage of the student lifecycle, there are important processes that enhance graduate employability. For instance, throughout this stage, students become increasingly aware of possible career options and avenues to increase their employability. While *transitioning through*, students are encouraged to develop professional networks both in person and virtually (for instance, through LinkedIn) to better connect with others in the field (Careers and Employment Service, 2015). They are also building their professional identity. The *transition out* stage supports students by assisting them to make preparations for graduate employment by encouraging them to feel part of a professional community. The *transition up* stage is directed more towards establishing a graduate role and by inviting graduates to re-engage with the university to mentor, make presentations or support internships (Careers and Employment Service, 2015).

**Context**

In the early 1990s Griffith University established a degree program in Criminology and Criminal Justice (Wimshurst & Ransley, 2007). Since this time, it has grown into the largest criminology program in Australia and one of the largest in the world. The field of criminology at Griffith is multidisciplinary and its curriculum includes studies in research skills, the legal system, psychology and sociology as well as more traditional criminology courses. In 2014, the school had 1,280 undergraduate students with approximately 50% of these in the single three year degree program. The remaining students were enrolled in a double degree which, in addition to their studies in criminology, involved studying human services, psychology, forensic science (each requiring four years of full-time study or equivalent) or law (comprising five and a half years of full time study or equivalent) (Wimshurst & Manning, online first 2015). Prior research suggests that it is important for criminology schools to focus on the transition from university to the workforce (Wimshurst & Allard, 2007). Thus, the School has a strong focus on employability.

**Application of the Employability Framework within the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice**

The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University utilises a range of strategies within the career development framework at each stage of the student lifecycle (see Table 1). The *transition towards* stage provides potential students with their first connection with their field and assists them to consider future employment pathways. Initiatives within this stage include high school visits by academic staff where students participate in an interactive criminology problem to demonstrate the type of work undertaken by criminologists. Additionally, teachers and principals are invited to a lunch where the Deputy Head of School (Learning and Teaching) explains the program so that they are able to answer their students’ questions. Finally, potential students are invited to attend a careers evening. At this event, students hear about the career paths of criminology alumni. Potential students can also attend Open Day and TSExpo events where information about potential careers is available.
Table 1: Embedding employability in criminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| Transition Towards | • High school visits  
|                  | • Teachers’ and Principals’ lunch  
|                  | • Careers evening  
|                  | • Open Day  
|                  | • TSEXPO |
| Transition In   | • Orientation  
|                 | • 1011CCJ Criminology Skills |
| Transition Through | • Flexible study options  
|                   | • Criminology Student Society  
|                   | • Griffith Industry Mentoring Scheme  
|                   | • Criminology Undergraduate Research Internship Scheme (CURIP)  
|                   | • Academic Excellence Society (ACES)  
|                   | • 3002LFC Community Internship |
| Transition Out | • 3007CCJ Developing Professionally  
|                 | • 3008CCJ Professional Practice  
|                 | • 3022CCJ Restorative Justice Practices |
| Transition Up  | • Careers evening  
|                | • Arts Education and Law alumni awards  
|                | • Supervision of placement students |

At Orientation, students begin to be exposed to potential career options. Additionally, within the transition in stage, the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice offers the course 1011CCJ Criminology Skills. This is a core first year course which teaches students a number of key skills including referencing. However, it also includes a career development component. Within this component, students view videos of criminology professionals talking about their careers and attend an introductory lecture provided by Careers and Employment Services.

As students transition through their criminology studies, they are provided with a number of career development activities. Firstly, there are a number of study options available including internal, external and via Open Universities Australia. Students may use these options to enhance their employability. For instance, students may elect to swap study modes from internal to external so they can undertake relevant employment or take some courses over the summer break through Open Universities Australia so they can graduate a semester earlier. Additionally, there is a strong Criminology Student Society. This society, which is run by undergraduate students, includes a number of activities such as visits to Police Headquarters, Police Academy, correctional facilities and the courts to enable students to explore potential career options. Criminology students are also able to participate in the Criminology Undergraduate Research Internship Program (CURIP). This program enables students to volunteer to work on research projects being run through the school. It provides students with a hands-on opportunity to participate in research. High-achieving students may be invited to join the Academic Excellence Society (ACES). ACES members are offered certain career opportunities such as attending seminars given by visiting academics and professionals. Additionally, criminology students can avail themselves of university-wide initiatives. This includes the Griffith Industry Mentoring Scheme. This scheme is run centrally by the Careers and Employment Service. In this scheme, students are provided with an industry mentor with whom they can meet and discuss their career plans. Students are also able to participate in a university-wide service learning course, 3002LFC Community Internship. Within this course, students complete a 50 hour placement in a not-for-profit organisation.

As noted earlier, the transition out stage is targeted at final year students and aims to prepare them for transition out of university and into the workforce. In this stage of the student lifecycle, the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice offers three courses for students. The first course, 3007CCJ Developing Professionally, is a core course for all single degree students. The course provides students with a number of career development activities including advice on job search strategies, preparing resumes and interview techniques. Additionally, the course discusses professional identity and self-care. The School also offers two elective courses: 3008CCJ Professional Practice and 3022CCJ Restorative Justice Practices. Both of these courses are work integrated learning courses. Professional Practice involves students completing a 100 hour placement in an organisation.
related to criminology and criminal justice. Students complete a project under the supervision of an organisational mentor. Restorative Justice Practices is co-taught by the Department of Justice and Attorney General and the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice. In this course, students are taught practical skills in communication, which are skills needed to run mediation conferences.

While the transition up phase is largely self-directed, it is scaffolded by final year courses and continued support from the university. Frequently, alumni of the School return to participate in activities related to the career development of future or current students. This includes presenting at the Careers Evening or supervising students on placement. Additionally, the Arts Education and Law Alumni Awards recognise the achievements of criminology graduates working in industry.

Therefore, while many of the elements that build employability include a work integrated learning component (e.g. Developing Professionally, Professional Practice, Restorative Justice Practices, Community Internship), many other opportunities to enhance employability are present throughout the degree. Thus, students’ development of employability skills occurs before, during and after their studies in criminology.

**Conclusion**

Student employability is increasingly seen as an important outcome of tertiary study. While there is some discussion regarding what constitutes employability, the emerging school of thought is that it is necessary to scaffold it before, during and after a student’s time at university. To this end, the Careers and Employment Service at Griffith University has developed the Employability Framework. The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice has had a strong focus on employability and, in line with the Employability Framework, embeds employability at all stages of students’ studies including before they commence their studies. Further research is required to fully understand the impacts of this process, but anecdotal evidence suggest that it is a useful process to enhance students’ professional skills and employment prospects.

**References**


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