

## **Connectedness capabilities**

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## **Chapter 2**

### Connectedness Capabilities

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## Connectedness Capabilities

### <a>Introduction

Connectedness capabilities comprise the knowledge, skills and attributes that individuals require to build, maintain and make the most of their networks and social relationships for life and career (Bridgstock, 2019a; Forret & Dougherty, 2001). As Chapter 1 illustrated, a university education that focusses predominantly on developing learners' disciplinary and transferable skills is no longer a guarantee of positive career outcomes. In part, this is because of the far greater numbers of students moving into the graduate labour market than ever before. In both Australia and the United Kingdom, graduates from many fields now face a highly competitive short-term job market (Karmel & Carroll, 2016). Once they surmount the initial challenges involved in transitioning to the world of work, graduates will continue to be tested as they learn how to live and work productively and meaningfully in an increasingly dynamic and complex society.

Higher education plays an important role in preparing students for both short term job outcomes and their broader career and life journeys. It is widely agreed that upon leaving university, students should be equipped with the foundational capabilities to enable them to build and manage their careers, add economic and social value to their work, and continue learning (Barnett, 2006; Becker et al., 2017; Oliver & Jorre de St Jorre, 2018). One critical aspect of these activities is the student's ability to build, maintain and make the most of mutually beneficial relationships over time, including via digital platforms and social media. This chapter explores this capacity, considering why it is important and how it is currently being addressed in higher education. The chapter then outlines five connectedness capabilities drawn from research that will enable graduates to forge and make the most of meaningful social relationships and networks. Finally, three empirical studies (covered in

Chapters 3-5 of this volume) are introduced. In different ways, each study explores how these connectedness capabilities are being integrated into higher educational curricula, and the impact they are having on graduates' lives and careers.

### **<a>Capabilities for graduate employability**

Over the past two decades, universities have increasingly engaged with the concept of graduate employability, mapping and modifying curricula and pedagogic practice, and developing co-curricular programs to help maximise the success of their graduates in a congested labour market. Efforts have largely concentrated on developing students' 'employability skills' (Yorke, 2006), most commonly conceptualised as a combination of discipline-specific and transferable skills, which are underpinned by a range of additional qualities that employers desire such as proactiveness, resilience, determination, and adaptability. Discipline-specific skills represent the skills and knowledge that are relevant to a particular domain, discipline or subject area, and are often incorporated into curricula to address specific professional or occupational needs, including meeting the requirements of industry accreditation bodies. Transferable skills include broader capabilities that can be applied across contexts or disciplines, such as written communication or digital literacy. There is some divergence in the literature with respect to which transferable skills are important to graduate employability, as evidenced by the variety of disparate conceptual frameworks which define such skills (Suleman, 2016), however, social skills such as communication and teamwork are commonly agreed to be of value because they enable graduates to work effectively with others (Tymon, 2013).

Some scholars have questioned the efficacy of the employability skills approach in preparing students for life and work, with many pointing out the difficulty of measuring skills and their impact on graduate outcomes (Cranmer, 2006; Duncan & Dunifon, 2012). Others

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have commentated on the artificiality of the transferable skills construct. Because they are acquired and applied in disciplinary and other highly contextually specific circumstances, transferable skills cannot simply be ‘transferred’ from university to professional work, or between professional roles as the label implies (Barrie, 2006; Jones, 2009). Rather, they must be ‘translated’ and re-contextualised, which often requires significant additional learning. A considerable tranche of literature over the last decade documents the fact that employers continue to report that graduates are not employment-ready, and lack some of the simplest skills needed for successful employment. Despite attempts to build ongoing dialogues between employers, professional associations and universities about skill requirements, employers in all fields continue to report dissatisfaction with graduates’ disciplinary and transferable skill sets (Shah, Grebennikov, & Nair, 2015).

It is clear that the employability skills usually emphasised in higher education represent only one small segment of the broad set of influences and capabilities that impact on graduate outcomes (Nagarajan & Edwards, 2014). Many of these are not under the control of the graduate, nor can they be easily influenced by higher education, such as the extent to which suitable job opportunities are available in the labour market (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018). There are also non-capability ‘supply-side’ factors that have an impact on graduate employment outcomes, such as institutional reputation, and biographical / demographic characteristics of the graduate (Karmel & Carroll, 2016).

Despite the restrictive nature of many official graduate outcome measures (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2018), thinking around graduate employability has started to expand beyond notions of short-term employment outcomes to start to address graduates’ lifelong and ‘life wide’ experiences in building lives and careers, including how to add value in different ways across different domains. So too, thinking about the capabilities and experiences from which graduates will benefit has started to expand. For instance, the literature has started to embrace

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the idea that each graduate will develop a unique personal capability set which forms the basis and expression of their distinctive graduate identity (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017). Through learning experiences within and outside higher education, students develop personal ethical values and social awareness, skills and knowledge, and the ability to engage and apply their capabilities in different contexts. Thus, over time the graduate develops a self-concept that helps them make sense of their learning experiences, beliefs and capabilities, and directs their behaviour.

The formation of graduate identities and self-concept are tied to the development and use of metacognitive capabilities. A critical awareness and understanding of thinking and learning processes means that students can self-manage learning and career development in an ongoing way. This includes the ability and propensity to continue learning and adapt to make the most of employment opportunities, as well as the capacity to find ways to add value through work and social engagement (Bridgstock, 2009). In the context of the contemporary world of work, many graduates will need to be enterprising and continually identify or create opportunities for themselves, whether through self-employment, work as an employee, or through other contributions (Bell, 2016; Rae, 2007).

### **<a>Connectedness capabilities**

The ability to foster connections with others, to work productively with them to achieve desired outcomes, and to contribute to / benefit from wider networks is another important set of capabilities. More than teamwork, interpersonal or communication skills, connectedness capabilities are concerned with making the most of the inherently social world in which we live (Bridgstock, 2019a; Forret & Dougherty, 2001). As discussed by Bridgstock and Tippett in Chapter 1, through social and networked processes, connectedness capabilities facilitate many of the activities involved in graduate employability, including identity

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development (Field, 2009), career development, enterprise and entrepreneurship, lifelong learning, and productivity at work.

The five connectedness capabilities described in the Connectedness Learning Model represent the individual (and also programmatic and organisational) capabilities required to develop and connect with social networks, and to work productively with, and through, them. These connectedness capabilities are:

1. *Building a connected identity*: the ability to develop and represent professional identities effectively in the context of social networks, including social media profiles and personal/professional ‘branding’. Building a connected identity is a complex and ongoing process involving sense-making and self-expression through which people selectively organise their experiences into a coherent sense of self and communicate public versions of this sense of self to others.
2. *Making connections*: the ability to develop weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) and extend and expand professional networks, including online and face-to-face networking (de Janasz & Forret, 2008). Making connections focuses on fostering embeddedness into a wide social network, and on developing initial, weak, one-to-many and indirect ties. These ties are important for exposure to new ideas, knowledge, industry and disciplinary trends and career opportunities. When strengthened, they are the foundation for collaboration, learning and ongoing career-enhancing relationships such as mentoring.
3. *Strengthening and maintaining connections*: the ability to strengthen professional connections and develop strong ties through reciprocity, and then maintain these as needed. Strengthening and maintaining connections is central to social connectedness. Embeddedness in social networks and development of weak ties is important for exposure to new ideas, knowledge and various kinds of resources, but strong ties and

deeper relationships are required for a significant proportion of other processes within socially based professional, learning and career development and collaborative innovation/problem-solving. For example, strong ties bring new ideas to fruition through integration and refinement; career development is facilitated through strong-tie information and resource sharing, career sponsorship and mentoring processes; and professional learning is facilitated through strong ties in communities of practice and enquiry. While acquiring and growing connections can occur in online or face-to-face modes, or a combination of both, strengthening connections often involves more extended face-to-face contact and interaction.

4. *Working with connections*: the ability to work effectively and professionally with collaborators and networks to add value in diverse contexts and for diverse applications. Working with connections involves making the most of connections for purposes such as collaborative innovation and problem-solving, career development and enterprise, and socially-based lifelong learning, as covered briefly in Chapter 1 of this volume.
5. *Social network literacy*: the ability to understand, interpret and evaluate the characteristics and processes of professional networks, and to apply this knowledge and skills for professional purposes. Social network literacy includes the ability to (i) articulate the roles that social networks play in work and life, and how social networks of different types operate; (ii) identify, interpret, analyse and communicate signs and symbols and other data relating to social networks; and (iii) to navigate social networks strategically and effectively for different purposes.

These connectedness capabilities can be developed through a range of considered pedagogic approaches that typically involve interaction with others and authentic learning



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activities (see Chapter 6), supported by reflective identity formation learning processes. In turn, these pedagogic approaches are enabled by a range of strategies that foster individual, program, and institutional connections with internal and external stakeholders (see Chapter 11). The connectedness capabilities were initially synthesised from the findings of a series of in-depth interviews with higher education graduates, industry and community representatives, and their validity confirmed by quantitative survey research with higher education students and graduates (Bridgstock, 2019b). There are also three connectedness learning principles that relate specifically to the development of connectedness capabilities. These principles can be used to develop courses and learning experiences to enhance the connectedness capabilities of students. They are:

- Students have the opportunity to develop social connections and relationships.
- Students develop one or more of the connectedness capabilities, particularly building a connected identity and identifying and growing new connections.
- Students develop capabilities for career development learning, networked learning and/or collaboration for problem-solving or creating new knowledge.

This volume includes three chapters that focus explicitly on the development of connectedness capabilities and the impact of these capabilities on student and graduate outcomes and experiences.

In Chapter 3, Lupton, Oddone & Dreamson use semi-structured interviews with nine students and recent graduates from Queensland University of Technology to explore students' digital literacies and professional digital identities. Mapping students' perceptions of their own digital capabilities according to level of coherence and interaction, the authors distinguish between four professional digital identity clusters: leading, participating, emerging and technical. Each of these identity clusters represents a different combination of

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confidence, competence and literacy in using digital media. The authors discuss these in relation to students' connectedness capabilities, and the implications for pedagogic practice in higher education.

In Chapter 4, de Villiers Scheepers, MacIntyre, Crimmins, & English, explore the connectedness capabilities of students from a regional Australian university, considering how the use of digital media for professional purposes differs between traditional and non-traditional student populations. Surveying 210 undergraduate students, half of whom had previous full-time work experience, the authors find that students with previous career experience demonstrate a greater awareness and use of social networking for professional purposes than school leavers with no previous employment. Four pedagogical implications are discussed, which identify opportunities for educators to improve students' social media skills and develop their connectedness capabilities.

In Chapter 5, Bridgstock, Jackson, Lloyd, & Tofa describe the professional networks and social capital of recent university graduates. Using a survey of over 600 Creative Industries and Business graduates from three Australian universities, the authors find that graduates' professional networks and connectedness capabilities remain underdeveloped, even up to 5 years after course completion. In particular, social networking literacy, networking / acquiring new connections, and using networks for career development are all identified as key capability sets that require further development, with the chapter identifying both general and specific opportunities for augmenting and strengthening students' social capital while they are at university.

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