

Graduate employability and higher education: Past, present and future

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The question of how to prepare higher education students for employment is at the forefront of higher education, yet in many respects it is the wrong question. This review article poses an alternative question: how might we prepare higher education students to navigate an increasingly complex world and labour market in which they will need to think for a living? I begin by considering the labour market environment into which graduates transition. I align this with contemporary definitions of employability before revisiting my employability and related research undertaken over the past 20 years. In voicing possible solutions, I structure the article's latter sections according to the four challenges posed by the Australian Deputy Vice-Chancellors for response in the 2019 HERD Review: namely, university funding; commitment to change by university staff; dealing with complexity; and building capacity.

Keywords: Graduate outcomes, graduate attributes, graduate labour market, university, graduate work, career development learning, work integrated learning, higher education policy

1. Why is employability such a hot topic?

Global secondary and higher education engagement is predicted to reach seven billion people by the year 2100, representing a ten-fold increase since 1970 (Roser & Nagdy, 2018). The enormity of this is brought into perspective when considering that the *total* world population in early 2019 is 7.68 billion people. In the Australian context, the 30 years since the 1987-1991 Dawkins reforms and the subsequent introduction of a unified national system have seen course completions more than triple and student numbers

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rise some 270%, to 1,082,000. Krause (2017, p. 55) notes a concomitant “expansion of multiple pathways to and through tertiary education that typify a mass higher education system”.

In 2019, almost half the Australian population engages in higher education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) together with over 431,000 international students who choose to study in Australia (Department of Education and Training, 2018). Twenty years ago, however, Coffield (1999, p. 485) warned that unless there was a “corresponding expansion of elite jobs”, the value of a degree would fall as more people gained graduate status. In fact, traditional employer relationships in the form of full-time positions with a single employer—Coffield’s “elite jobs”—are fast disappearing in a labour market that values organisational agility. At a time of technological change, skills shortages and an ageing workforce, the number of part-time, casual and multiple job-holding workers has never been higher. Neither has the workforce been as mobile: in Australia each year, two million people start new jobs and half a million change industry (Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018).

No-one could have predicted the rapid growth in higher education engagement over the past 30 years; neither could we have foreseen the rapidity of labour market change. In one sense, an oversupply of graduates has its economic benefits: fierce competition for work, for example, compels workers to work beyond their brief, limits wage-growth, and creates opportunities for small enterprises to flourish by providing cheap labour (see Bennett, 2019). However, higher education does not exist to enable a purely economic mission. Moreover, precarious or poorly designed work erodes worker retention, motivation, productivity and innovation (see Parker, Ohly, Kanfer, Chen, & Pritchard, 2008; Raja & Johns, 2010; Taylor, Marsh, Nicol, & Broadbent, 2017). If employability is to align with the broader purposes of higher education, it must be redefined.

At the current time, the terms employment and employability are often conflated; indeed, governments persist in measuring crude employment outcomes and reporting these as graduate *employability*. As Wilton (2011, p. 87) writes, it “is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed”. This is particularly true in times of recession and rapid labour market change. The uses and definitions of employability, then, must distinguish between job-getting (employment) and the ability to create and sustain work over time (employability): between “being employable or not, to a consideration of employability as having a dynamic adaptive nature” (Williams, Dood, Steele, & Randall, 2016, p. 877, drawing on Grazier’s 1999 report work for the European Commission).

Realistic and strength-based conceptualisations of employability use language that has relevance to both the current and future workforce. These include “the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan” (Bennett, 2018, p. i); having the “skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful” (Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007, p. 280) ; and “being capable of making well-informed plans for the future and having the ability to execute them in a changing world” (Gilworth, interviewed in Grove, 2018, n. p).

Employability should also speak to the need for work that has both personal meaning and societal worth. Over 40 years ago, in 1976, UK Prime Minister Jim Callaghan emphasised the need for education to elicit both social citizenship and economic (employability) worth. He said:

The goals [of education] are to equip children to the best of their ability for a lively, constructive, place in society, and also to fit them to do a job of work. Not one or the other but both. ... There is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills. Nor at the other extreme must they be technically efficient robots.
(Callaghan, 1976, n. p)

Callaghan’s words are relevant today, and yet the current policy environment ignores the societal benefits of higher education to focus its measurement almost entirely on economic outcomes. These policies are at odds with the nature of contemporary work and the social mission of higher education.

The brief overview presented above sets the scene for a discussion of current work relating to employability development and graduate employability. I begin by considering the labour market environment into which graduates transition. I align this work with contemporary definitions of employability before reviewing employability development and labour market research I have undertaken over the past 20 years. In voicing possible solutions, I structure the article’s latter sections around four challenges posed for the 2019 HERD Review by the Australian Deputy Vice-Chancellors: university funding; commitment to change by university staff; dealing with complexity; and building capacity.

2. How do graduates experience employability?

Employability within the context of higher education relates to the process by which we prepare students to negotiate graduate life and work. To shape this process, we need to understand the characteristics and future of work. I draw here on my previous research in the arts, which highlights the portfolio and non-linear basis of creative work.

Although precarious work has been a feature of arts work for centuries, the growth of insecure or precarious work across the labour market is now ubiquitous. The Australian Council of Engineering Deans (ACED, 2018; 2018a), for example, reports that engineering graduates enter a labour market in which rapid global change and advances in digital technology are accelerating and the economic downturn has reduced the availability of both employment and internships. Engineers Australia (EA, 2017) reports that less than 75% of new engineering graduates can find full time work, 12% settle for part-time work and 15% are unemployed. As a result, the recruitment and retention of engineering graduates is a significant challenge and there are increasing calls for engineering education to be “comprehensively engaged with practice” (Male, King, & Hargreaves, 2016, n. p).

Graduates take longer to establish their careers in this complex labour market (Challice, 2018) and many of them encounter “professional and personal identity revision” as they make multiple attempts to become established (Bennett & Bridgstock, 2015, p. 333). EA (2017, p. 92) emphasises the longer-term implications of disrupted transitions to work in that “new graduates who cannot find full time work cannot begin on-the-job professional formation”; similar concerns are expressed across multiple sectors of industry (see, for example, Jackson, 2015).

With this in mind, careers in the arts present an unrivalled opportunity to study the implications of precarity. My workforce research has focussed largely on the creative industries workforce and is housed within the Creative Workforce Initiative (CWI). CWI has since 2010 provided an “umbrella” for diverse funded and unfunded research. Reported in almost 100 articles, CWI researchers have come to understand the nature of precarious work, the influence of career calling on career decision making and the ability of higher education to mitigate many of the challenges faced by graduates (see also Comunian, Faggian, & Jewell, 2011).

CWI studies have targeted job security, initial and on-going training and education, career decision-making, identity, and access to benefits and protection. We have probed the nature and implications of non-standard

forms of employment, multiple roles across and beyond the creative industries, the impacts of enforced transition and the persistence of precarious work across the career lifespan. I note that respondents have been generally critical of the lack of career development learning within higher education, particularly in relation to understanding how to manage their practice, assert their rights and establish a business (see Hennekam & Bennett, 2017a).

CWI findings have relevance across multiple sectors of industry where the automation of routine tasks leaves workers to manage complex, skilled or non-routine low-skilled work for which dynamic and multi-level work design (individual, team and context – see Johns, 2006) is crucial. The demands of employability work across the career lifespan and the associated need for transformative work design are highlighted by Parker, Morgeson and Johns (2017, p. 416):

... individuals routinely craft their own work, implying change (Morgeson et al., 2005); novel and disruptive events can exert a significant impact on work (Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015); individuals often work across multiple, and frequently changing, teams, with work characteristics varying across these teams; and the external context can shape work design (Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2007).

Over the years, scholars have become increasingly aware that people who engage in precarious and/or non-traditional forms of work need to adapt across the career lifespan. Pro-active engagements with non-traditional work might include the adoption of short-term contracts or home-based work as a lifestyle preference or in order to meet other commitments, whereas reactive engagements often include the adoption of precarious work because of a lack of secure traditional, full-time roles. These “enforced entrepreneurs” must by necessity create and manage their own work to meet their personal and professional needs. When Ruth Bridgstock and I (2015) compared the career projections of graduating creative arts students with the realities of graduate life four years later, enforced entrepreneurship emerged as the typical graduate experience.

Career decision-making is particularly complex within professions such as the arts, where work is precarious and career calling is strong. In these sectors, career decisions can impact psychological well-being and identity as much as they impact individuals’ work and career. In 2017, I worked with Sophie Hennekam to examine the careers of 693 creative industries workers who had used the CWI primary survey tool to create in-depth

reflections on career decision-making (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018a). We employed the theoretical model of self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004) to understand how these workers interpreted and analysed their experiences along epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions. Self-authorship, most often described as a linear process, emerged as a complex, non-linear and consistent feature of career decision-making. The study exposed contemporaneous authorship of both visible and covert multiple selves prompted by proactive and reactive identity work.

To explore this in more depth, we applied selection, optimisation and compensation (SOC) theory to multiple accounts of musicians' careers in early, mid and late career (Hennekam & Bennett, 2018b). We looked specifically at the three SOC adaptive strategies with which individuals align their existing resources and resource demands (Baltes & Baltes, 1990) to facilitate effective functioning, adaptation and development. Although performance goals dominated the early career musicians' narratives, the musicians had quickly sought to optimise their potential by rethinking career success in terms other than performance. In mid-career, musicians reported that their earlier performance focus and lack of career awareness had limited their ability to maximise their potential. Mid-careerists frequently reported declining income, for which they compensated by leaving music or by adopting multiple roles and learning new skills within and beyond music. Highlighting inadequate access to professional development, 80% of the mid-career musicians had changed their career goals at least once. By late career, musicians were applying their broad skills and experience to roles within and outside music; however, the roles were most likely to be the result of enforced transitions. As such, late-careerists encountered increased precarity with roles which were often entrepreneurial and self-employed.

Of interest, we found that musicians do not always seek to resolve incompatible multiple identities or psychological stress. Instead, their behaviour tends towards Beech et al.'s (2016, p. 506) notion of identity work as "continuing struggles which do not achieve a secure sense of self". Rather than self-affirming actions, we identified multiple accounts of self-questioning identity work in which identity tensions form a career-long and arguably fundamental aspect of professional identity. We concluded that self-questioning identity work can be fundamental to an individual's work and sense of self and that this promotes non-linear aesthetic and economic decision-making including the non-sequential use of SOC strategies.

In sum, there is compelling evidence from higher education and future of work researchers that labour market precarity and fluidity, combined with individual workers who resist the traditional norms of work and career

advancement, demands a different type of graduate than ever before. Alongside this is evidence that precarity, competition and lack of regulation exacerbates inequalities with respect to gender, race and class. Implications include the need to advocate for sector-specific research and guidelines, sensitivity training, and further work with unions and professional associations to provide the worker protection strategies traditionally undertaken by organisations.

3. Are employability outcomes equal for all students?

The question of whether or not disadvantaged students realise the same benefits from higher education as their peers is central to employability discussions. Despite this, equity policy has focused on access to higher education rather than on graduate outcomes. In 2016, I joined a team of researchers to investigate the relationship between disadvantage and graduate outcomes. Having mined the raw data from 142,647 graduates who responded to the 2014 Australian Graduate Survey, we found clear evidence that higher education disadvantage persists for many students after they graduate. We have since added our voices to the calls for governments to focus on pathways and success and to measure and scrutinise achievement towards public policy objectives (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett, & Richardson, 2018; see also Richardson, Bennett, & Roberts, 2016). Binder et al. (2016) warn that institutional careers services can inadvertently reproduce social inequality by matching elite students with elite jobs and vice-versa. The same could be said about multiple aspects of students' higher education experiences, from work-integrated-learning (WIL) contexts through to admissions procedures. Spence (2018, n. p.) agrees, cautioning that the pursuit of graduate employability "might not be a welfare-neutral or welfare-enhancing enterprise when viewed from a wider socio-economic vantage point".

I first reported gender inequity in 2008, when a study into the working patterns of 152 classically trained musicians revealed marked differences between the work of men and women (Bennett, 2008). Female musicians, for example, were found to be more likely to teach and less likely to hold leadership positions or to sustain performance positions. The women attributed career differences to the difficulties of managing family and other commitments whilst maintaining an uninterrupted career, which is essential to retaining technical proficiency as well as to more general advancement.

Some years later, Hennekam and myself asked 32 women in the Netherlands creative industries to describe their experience of being hired or recruited for work (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017b). We found sexual

harassment to be so prevalent that many women considered it part of their occupational culture and career advancement. The factors that influenced this phenomenon feature in multiple economic sectors: specifically, competition for work, industry culture, gendered power relations and the importance of informal networks. We have since called for effective sexual harassment prevention at the individual, educational, sectoral and governmental levels, beginning with public conversations to convey the message that sexual harassment is never acceptable. Six months after our study was completed, the “Me Too” movement brought this issue into prominence and helped to raise awareness through several short articles including a piece in the *LSE Business Review*. Hennekam and Syed (2018) went on to examine the factors influencing institutional racism in the film industry, highlighting multilevel racism and emphasising the power of individual agency in its mitigation.

Most recently, CWI colleagues in Europe and Australia partnered to investigate the careers and identities of female art music (classical music) composers. The gendered nature of careers in music composition has attracted scholarly attention for some 25 years, but the strategies employed by female composers to manage their identity had remained largely unaddressed. Our study highlighted the persistent marginalisation of female composers, as a result of which the female gender was reported to be a career disadvantage. The intersection of gender and age was a contributing factor.

In our first article from the study (Bennett, Hennekam, Macarthur, Hope, & Goh, 2018) we considered female composers’ management of gender identity and found that they lessened the impact of gender by employing the passing tactics of concealment and fabrication. These are tactics usually associated as identity management techniques for invisible stigmatised identities. Many women repeated previously unsuccessful tactics because of the severity of the image discrepancy and the lack of viable alternatives.

We next considered the findings from a feminist perspective (Macarthur, Bennett, Hennekam, Goh, & Hope, 2017). Although the female composers had different investments in gender, they reinforced the male habitus because the female habitus occupied a subordinate position. The women classified themselves and others according to gendered norms, which only perpetuated the male-dominated social order in music.

Bringing our research back to higher education (Bennett, Macarthur, Hope, Goh, & Hennekam, 2018), we noted that whilst recent decades have seen gender and feminist research emerge as major fields of enquiry in musicology, little had been written in music education. As a result, increased

awareness of the issues confronting women and other marginalised groups has not prompted either the pedagogical practices or curricular design that might support aspiring women and raise awareness across the whole student body. Some of the solutions we proposed are remarkably simple: for example, the inclusion of music that is representative of both gender and the cultures in which institutions and their communities reside; curriculum that engages students in professional practice; and greater awareness of inequality and worker rights and responsibilities. Representation, real-world learning and increased awareness have broad applicability across higher education and could be considered more explicitly across all disciplines.

4. How do students learn to be employable?

Employability development is not at the core of the curriculum because it has been poorly defined as the development of generic or “soft” skills that are unrelated to the core business of learning a discipline (see also Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). Employability development is not limited to discipline skills, knowledge and practices. Rather, it develops students’ abilities to conceptualise their future lives and work by learning the *practice* of the discipline and developing their metacognition. As McIlveen (2018, p. 2) asserts, “employability is not knowledge and skills *per se*; it is the propensity to understand their personal value and act toward their acquisition for deployment in a specific context”.

Outlined in the previous sections, employability is inadequately described by outdated language such as skill, job, employer and employment. The developmental role of higher education is better described in terms of students’ cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens (Bennett, in press). I call this “employABILITY thinking” and it is operationalised as a strengths-based, metacognitive approach to employability development, delivered in the existing curriculum without the need for additional time, expertise or resources. EmployABILITY thinking focusses on ability, for which reason ABILITY is capitalised. The approach is grounded in social-cognitive theory and it prompts students to understand why they think the way they think, how to critique and learn the unfamiliar and how their values, beliefs and assumptions can inform and be informed by their learning, lives and careers. It is through this metacognitive process that students learn how to create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan (Bennett, 2018).

A central and neglected component of employability development is identity. In a social constructivist (Stryker, 1980) or social ecology (Wenger, 1998) view of identity development, people create personal realities as they

interact with others. Student identity is a fundamental aspect of higher education learning and teaching, constructed socially and within the fields of higher education, industry and community. These realities influence, reshape and reinforce each other in a continuous cycle.

Employability strategies that include a focus on individual development can align with identity development through self-authorship (see Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Bennett & Hennekam, 2018a for self-authorship within the workforce; Bennett & Male, 2017 for self-authorship amongst undergraduate engineers). The rationale for exploring students' individual, socio-cultural and professional identities within a social constructivist frame (see Bennett, 2013) is that as students “(re)conceptualise their strengths, interests and goals” (Bennett, 2012, p. 27) in relation to self and career, there is a corresponding increase in career curiosity, student engagement, the capacity for creativity and problem solving, increased learner agency, and motivation to learn.

Students' attitudes and subjective norms and their behavioural intentions are crucial to their decision making, from choosing and changing their major (Soria & Stebleton, 2013) to assessing their career prospects and potential salary (Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005) and engaging with graduate attributes statements (see Pitman & Broomhall, 2009). Only by communicating the expectations we have of students and the experiences that will be provided can we ensure that students develop “more complex and sophisticated expectations of university and of their own roles and responsibilities” (James, 2002, p. 81; see also Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018).

Realistic expectations of higher education studies and graduate employability are created for students through appropriate, sufficient and consistent information. In the employability context, students' expectations relate to their perceptions of how well they are being prepared to find graduate-level work. Many students anticipate a difficult transition into the labour market, but early (as yet unpublished) findings from our longitudinal research on students' employABILITY thinking indicate that students' employability development strategies are dominated by attempts to achieve a high grade point average (GPA). These strategies are largely out of sync with industry recruitment and employer feedback and they emphasise the need for meaningful engagement with industry.

Authentic WIL experiences—from formal internships to simulated and virtual learning—play an important role in the development of employability, and Australia's national WIL strategy (Edwards et al., 2015) leads the way internationally. However, few institutions would be able to claim that every

WIL experience is centrally recorded or that it is quality controlled to the same extent. Despite Australia's WIL expertise, compelling empirical evidence and a world-leading national WIL strategy, it also doesn't take long to locate Australian WIL experiences that finish on the last day of semester (eliminating the chance of post-placement debriefs); fail to include regular opportunities for dialogue; and feature ineffective feedback and assessment mechanisms. These highlight the urgent need for greater action at the institutional level.

The WIL studies in which I have been involved view WIL as a cyclical process of reflection on, and in, action that impacts future action (Schön, 1991). As researchers, this prompts us to remain reflexive practitioners and learners as we seek to understand each individual context and to reform our practice accordingly: precisely the process required to sustain employability. Here, I highlight three projects in which we investigated the WIL experiences of international students (Barton et al., 2017), women in engineering (Male et al., 2015) and media, journalism and arts students (Bartleet et al., 2014).

The primary study motivation for many internationally mobile students is enhanced employability (see Kelly, Bennett, Girindharan, & Rosenwax, 2018). The challenges specific to international students are well documented, but these students are also often highly motivated to succeed and to overcome adversity. Indeed, Clements and Cord (2013) have found that international students align workplace learning in an unfamiliar cultural context with increasing the likelihood of long-term global mobility.

For Sonia Ferns and myself (2017), the starting point for our project with occupational therapy students was Billett's (2010) work on the mindful relationship between self and work and its impact on learners' self-identity, self-awareness and personal agency. Our thinking about student development during WIL was informed by Knight's (1999) competency, activity and ethos approaches to internationalisation and by my metacognitive approach to employability development.

We employed Krathwohl's 2002 revision of Bloom's taxonomy to explore the functional and cognitive aspects of employability—students' functional knowledge and cognitive process development—over the course of a placement. Summarised at Figure 1, Krathwohl separates the noun and verb aspects of an educational objective to form two dimensions in which the noun relates to knowledge and the verb relates to the cognitive process. Krathwohl recognises metacognition as a fourth category within the knowledge dimension.

The cognitive process dimension										
The functional dimension	The knowledge dimension				Remember	Understand	Apply	Analyse	Evaluate	Create
	Factual knowledge									
	Conceptual knowledge									
	Procedural knowledge									
	Metacognitive knowledge									

Figure 1: Krathwohl’s revision of Bloom’s taxonomy (2002, p. 214), summarised in Ferns & Bennett (2017, p. 207).

Using this process, we charted students’ cognitive and functional development towards metacognitive knowledge and understanding. Student progression through the functional and cognitive dimensions consistently showed advancement from foundational skills to the more complex skills of analysis and critical thinking. As they became more proficient, students’ confidence and resilience grew and, as expected, they were more likely to attempt complex tasks.

Research with Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, Anne Power and Naomi Sunderland reconceptualised critical service learning as a form of higher education WIL encompassing deep concepts of sustainability. Our OLT-funded work with Australia’s First Peoples was possibly the most rewarding project I have ever engaged in. Between 2011 and 2013, our research incorporated critical service-learning programs with regional and metropolitan Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and Central Australia. We learned how partnerships transform students’ and academics’ understandings of Australia’s First Peoples’ cultures and we explored the centrality of relationship building, decolonising education, colonial guilt and Otherness. The multi-site programs informed a Framework for working respectfully with Indigenous communities using the four concepts of relationships, reciprocity, reflexivity and representation (Bartleet, Bennett, Marsh, Power, & Sunderland, 2014).

The Framework has since been used in multiple countries and in contexts as diverse as the training of prison service staff (see Bartleet, Bennett, Power & Sunderland, 2014). It has also informed employability development that is mindful of Indigenous cultural awareness. This includes with journalism students, who have been supported to challenge exclusions, stereotyping and the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people by large-scale Australian media and to take these practices of critically reflexive learning into their professional lives (see Johnston, Bennett, Mason, & Thomson, 2016; Mason, Thomson, Bennett, & Johnston, 2016; Thomson, Mason, Bennett, & Johnston, 2016).

The research in journalism is one of several projects to explore the role of capital in employability development (see Arthur, Claman and DeFillippi (1995) and Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth (2004) for early discussions on capital and Marginson (2014) and Tomlinson (2018) for more recent thinking). We have regularly employed Bourdieu's theory of practice and Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992) work on reflexivity to identify, map and examine power relations, positions and other field structures and dynamics. We found that in journalism, the field struggle operates

via sub-field and field, to society, and that heterodox collaborative practices can contribute to challenging broader, misrecognised power relations of dominance between Australian settler and colonised peoples” (Mason, Thomson, Bennett, & Johnston, 2018, p. 135)

In the creative industries, we identified the multiple human capital career creativities needed to create and sustain careers that are commonly protean and boundaryless:

the former, emphasising capital expansion as an output of human capital career creativities where the facilitative skills and practices transcend those of a portfolio career; and the latter, emphasising work that transcends fields, digital boundaries, economic sector, and employment type. (Bennett & Burnard, 2016, p. 123)

Through a broad range of WIL experiences, then, students can begin to create meaning, challenge dominant world-views, and begin making “intelligent decisions about how to move ahead with their learning needs” (Helyer, 2015, p. 16). However, negotiating and understanding a workplace, its expectations and organisational structure (including relationships) can be complex, difficult and time consuming.

Although many WIL students experience a shift in thinking, other students voice a complex relation of modalities and they need help to make meaning of each experience (see Bennett, Reid, & Rowley, 2017). Students' participation in multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), from the learning and peer communities in which they are experts to the professional communities in which they are novices (Reid et al., 2011), highlights the individual autonomy and reflective behaviour they enact and observe in different situations. The importance of Billett's (2010) *preparation for, scaffolding of and reflection on* work-integrated learning cannot be over-emphasised. Neither can Smith, Ferns and Russell's (2014) five elements of a quality WIL curriculum: authenticity; preparation and induction processes; debriefing sessions that enable reflection; quality supervision; and

appropriate learning outcomes with scaffolded skill development and robust feedback.

Students, then, need to become reflexive practitioners who create meaning from their study and non-study, university and industry-based experiences. If they are to present as capable graduates, they need to learn how to recognise, articulate and provide evidence of their abilities and how to strengthen areas in need of development. Multiple educational studies using developmental e-portfolios have confirmed the efficacy of ePortfolios in this regard and across the student lifecycle:

... for submission and assessment of students' work; to encourage collaborative peer interaction; for self-promotion in professional settings; for accreditation; for archiving and curation of learning; for longitudinal representation of the outcomes of an academic program; as an influence on curriculum; as a vehicle for encouraging self-realisation and reflection; and for requiring continual updating of staff and student skills in working through forms of digital technology. (Rowley & Bennett, 2016, p. 16)

E-portfolios, from cloud-based folders such as Dropbox through to complex commercial platforms, provide a vehicle for self-realisation and reflection. In simple terms and through a continuum of collect, critique and curate – the 3Cs process (Blackley, Bennett, & Sheffield, 2017, 2018)—students begin to self-author by making informed, future-oriented decisions about their strengths and developmental needs. As they do so, the content of their portfolios transitions “from archive to self-portrait” (Bennett, Rowley, Dunbar-Hall, Hitchcock, & Blom, 2016, p. 107). Within a metacognitive employability framework, e-portfolios emerge as a necessary component of employability development within higher education.

5. Reimagining graduate employability

... we are in economic trouble because our universities are not producing the ‘work-ready’ employees we need; they [universities] must be required to do better in this regard; doing better will be judged by metrics developed from outside the academy; failings will be laid at the door of academics. ... the notion of ‘excellence’ in this context is largely rhetorical and acts as an empty idiom of

consensus in terms of what the system might achieve.
(Frankham 2017, p. 637)

In the article cited above, Frankham makes the compelling case that the performative culture of higher education is implicated in “not preparing students for the workplace” (p. 628, author’s emphasis). With this challenge in mind, I turn now to the future and reimagine graduate employability. The following sections are structured in line with the four challenges posed by the Australian Deputy Vice-Chancellors for response in the 2019 HERD Review: university funding, with a focus on policy and purpose; commitment to change by university staff; dealing with complexity; and building capacity.

Reimagining graduate employability: Policy and purpose

Degrees guarantee nothing about their value at the point at which they are cashed in. (Liu, 2011, p. 9)

In *Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in HE* (Department of Education and Training, 2016), the Australian Government asked the higher education sector to attend to fairness and equity in the development of innovative, evidence-based and research-led approaches to employability development. The Government has also demanded the development of graduates who as members of the skilled workforce are entrepreneurial, creative, responsive to change and engaged in learning (Innovation and Science Australia, 2017). Indeed, the *Australia 2030: Prosperity through Innovation* plan’s first imperative is to “Respond to the changing nature of work by equipping all Australians with skills relevant to 2030” (Cawood, 2018, p. 26). And yet the Government in Australia, as elsewhere, continues to measure employment rather than employability.

In Australia, student funding models and economic uncertainty have positioned graduate employability at the centre of the Higher Education policy agenda and have enhanced both the sector’s utilitarian mission and the shift towards governance (for the UK and European contexts see Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012; Sin, 2015; and Tomlinson, 2017). The result is that employability is now firmly entrenched within a reductionist graduate outcomes discourse rather than in the developmental domain that defines higher education. As Clegg writes (2010, p. 346), “the ‘present future’ implied by the discourse of employability does not even extend to old age, much less to generations beyond”.

Graduate employability will be addressed only through the delivery of employability as part of the core curriculum, and at this point in time the integration of employability demands institutional action *despite* policy and measurement rather than in line with it. I argued recently (Bennett, 2019) that a strategic government would support universities to redirect the considerable budget expended on maximising the results of rankings and retrospective measures towards achieving their research and teaching priorities.

Rankings and policy influence institutional behaviours from where to publish and who to hire through to which programs to offer. In this respect, the Australian higher education sector must evidence both its economic and its social value if it is to shape policy reform and regain its autonomy. Research with national datasets including the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS), Student Experience Survey (SES), Employer Satisfaction Survey (ESS), Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) and Labour Force Survey and Australian Census Longitudinal Dataset (ACLD) has the potential to generate sample sets for analysis alongside longitudinal, empirical data from our student and graduate populations. Research of this kind would create a unique understanding of student development including from individual, cohort and discipline perspectives and in line with demographic variables such as equity and gender.

To be at the forefront of this research and to ensure that the societal benefits of higher education are reported alongside economic impact, the higher education sector will need to leverage the expertise of researchers across multiple disciplines. The datasets will provide unparalleled opportunities to understand the longitudinal career trajectories and decision-making processes of graduates, to support students in anticipation of these activities and to rethink our engagement with alumni.

Rankings exercises and intrusive steering mechanisms promote self-interest and status competition ahead of public good. Australia could prioritise a “networked and potentially more egalitarian university world patterned by communications, collegiality, linkages, partnerships and global consortia”, as proposed by Marginson (2011, p. 422). Coombe (2015, p. 141) adds that a sound policy solution “would enable a radical whole-of-system reform that recognises and funds the different types of educational institutions to better reflect their purpose and the type of education outcomes they deliver to students”. With the caveat of not classifying (or funding) institutions as either teaching or research, Coombe’s solution would enable employability development to be prioritised as a core and cognitive aspect of curriculum.

Reimagining graduate employability: Commitment to change by university staff

Most employability development is co-curricular and attracts the students who need it least. Conversely, initiatives located within the curriculum tend to be unpopular because they are separated from the discipline-focussed study in which students want to engage. Employability development is most effective when it is aligned with disciplinary knowledge, skills and practices so that it forms a core part of the student experience and leverages the interests that prompted students to enrol in the first place. This is possible only if university staff commit to change.

The academic workforce, however, epitomises workforce transformation as it is experienced across the labour market. Hourly paid and temporary faculty deliver the majority of university teaching at the undergraduate level and undertake an increasing number of coordination roles (see Loveday, 2018; May, Peetz, & Strachan, 2013; Richardson, Wardale, & Lord, 2018). The profile of staffing within institutional careers services has similarly changed and this comes at the same time as careers services begin to transition from the delivery of traditional, centralised career counselling to research-informed, in-faculty personal and career development (see Chan & Derry, 2013).

The impact of policy was evidenced in research with colleagues on the impact of the Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA) exercise and short-lived journal rankings. Our research (Bennett, Genoni, & Haddow, 2011; Hughes & Bennett, 2013) demonstrated that ERA quickly subverted publishing behaviour among the most vulnerable academic staff. Similarly, the inclusion of creative works within ERA assessments highlighted the disruption of creative practice to meet the demands of the metrics rather than the best interests of the practice, research or teaching (Bennett, Wright, & Blom, 2010; Wright, Bennett, & Blom, 2010).

Later studies on the work of teaching-research academics have questioned whether it is feasible for academics to meet the demands made of them, particularly given that the parameters for success change so quickly (see Bennett, 2012). In 2018, Lynne Roberts, Michelle Broughton and myself reported a study on the impact of introducing teaching-focussed (teaching only) roles across a university. Highlighting the perceived low value of the teaching role and confusion about what that role might entail, we emphasised the uncertainty surrounding career paths for teaching academics alongside concerns about developing the traditional academic skillset required to transition between roles and institutions.

In this environment, it is hardly surprising that academics resist calls to add to their teaching work. Rather, institutional employability strategies must address the three ubiquitous challenges expressed by educators:

- ▶ *Lack of time* due to overcrowded curricula, content-heavy programs and the misperception that embedding employability means to do more.
- ▶ *Lack of resources*: the need to develop appropriate teaching resources and to understand the theoretical basis of that work.
- ▶ *Lack of expertise*. Few educators are careers professionals and career education is a distinct field of speciality. It is unrealistic to expect of academic staff both a nuanced understanding of the discipline, career education and contemporary industry.

EmployABILITY thinking (see <https://developingemployability.edu.au/about/>) has proven to be effective because it recognises teachers as the most important and influential people in students' journeys, addresses their three ubiquitous challenges, and places them at the centre of educational reform. The approach illustrates that employability development can form part of the core curriculum by leveraging the discipline expertise and interests of staff and students in partnership with the career education expertise of careers services professionals. This is not simply a matter of employing "people with a commitment to their mission and a clear sense of what matters" (Davis, 2017, p. 45); it demands wholesale change in academic pathways and career progression to ensure that teaching and research are equally funded and respected. Combined with in-curricular employability development initiatives, there is enormous and as-yet unmet potential to engage university staff in employability development and related research.

Reimagining graduate employability: Dealing with complexity

Engaging students in employability development is one of the sector's most pressing challenges. Students' reluctance to engage lies in the poor alignment between learner identity, career preview and goals, and the perceived relevance of learning to future lives and work. Lack of relevance features strongly in accounts of non-performance and attrition: attrition of student engineers, for example, has in part been attributed to students entering engineering without understanding the realities of either their degree program or engineering work (Bennett & Male, 2017; Male et al., 2015).

Caruana and Ploner (2010, p. 97) agree that students are “at the very least ambivalent about how their learning experience relates to either employability in global labour markets and local culturally diverse workplaces and/or to the development of affective skills in broader cross-cultural contexts”.

Student engagement in employability development needs to establish explicit relevance and it must create cognitive links. This can be achieved only by helping students to find the relevance between the learning we assign them and their expectations for their future lives and work. Properly defined, students are interested in developing their employability. Although most students ignore “Career Development 101” courses, they flock to courses which help them to “Create your Future” (see, for example the Stanford Designing your Life elective, in Burnett & Evans, 2016). New approaches must adopt a broader definition which communicates to students and faculty that employability requires work throughout the career lifespan rather than being complete at the point of graduation. They must confirm also the need for a metacognitive orientation which is mindful of self, profession and society. Terms such as work-ready, job-ready and career-ready are insufficient for the task.

Holmes’s (2013) framework of university employability perspectives enables approaches to be classified as possessional (the possession of employability attributes), positional (the presence of capital) or processual (a focus on the process of employability development). In 2017, content analysis of 107 research-intensive universities in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States (Bennett et al., 2017) revealed that the public (website) face of employability development strategies is mostly positional or possessional. Positional approaches are prevalent among research-intensive universities and they rely on social and human capitals; however, these approaches perpetuate inequity unless sufficient individual agency is at hand. Positional approaches are also limited, because the completion of higher education does not necessarily heighten students’ social or cultural capital unless they come from advantaged social backgrounds (see also Farenga and Quinlan’s 2016 discussion of “hands-off” and other approaches). Website messaging is often mis-aligned with institutional practice (see Bennett, Knight, Divan, & Bell, 2019). Although this is a problem in itself, the larger concern is that the possessional approach, which remains the most common approach to graduate employability, is also the most out of sync with the diverse student body and the demands of contemporary work.

The development of employability is most effective through a processual approach in which the responsibility for employability development is shared by institution, industry and student. Co-curricular initiatives recorded in the form of awards, micro-credentials and for-credit activities can all emphasise the students' responsibility for ensuring graduate success (Burke, Scurry, Blenkinsopp, & Graley, 2017). Process is central to employability development because it recognises students' need to develop, in advance and across their careers, "a set of person-centred constructs that involve individual proactivity and reflexivity relating to career identity, personal adaptability, and social and human capital" (Bennett et al., 2017, p. 59; see also Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). This demands a pedagogical shift towards process and relevance through reflection, engagement and experiential learning. Industry concerns that graduates lack the attitudes, emotional intelligence, inter- and intra-personal skills and metacognitive capacities to be successful in the labour market (see Cumming, 2010) could be negated if students learned to be agentic, active learners who know how to learn and how to predict what to learn.

The higher education sector must identify and operationalise the type and extent of change needed to prepare graduates of all disciplines for their social and economic engagement. Far from covering everything a graduate is ever likely to need, this focus privileges the development of mindful metacognition. Agreement on the requisite graduate learning outcomes depends on consensus about the purpose of higher education and the meaning of learning (Barrie, Hughes, Crisp, & Bennison, 2014). All learning should have relevance to possible disciplinary, societal, personal and/or professional futures of students. If the learning we ask of students is relevant, we should articulate its relevance. If it is not relevant, we should stop teaching it. This is a challenge not to make every program vocational, but to make every program developmental and relevant.

Reimagining graduate employability: Building capacity

This final section focusses on building the capacity to meet the challenges and opportunities outlined in the review article. Figure 2 illustrates the four forces which impact contemporary higher education, adapted to the context of employability development from Peter Goodyear's model of 'design for learning'. Goodyear emphasises that "Part of graduating as a lifelong learner is knowing how to design for one's own learning, and for the learning of one's workmates: learning how to create better environments in which to think for a living" (2015, p. 45). My adaptation of Goodyear's model to the context of employability development seeks to maximise our ability to

engage stakeholders in “knowledgeable, design-led change” (Goodyear, 2015, p. 37).

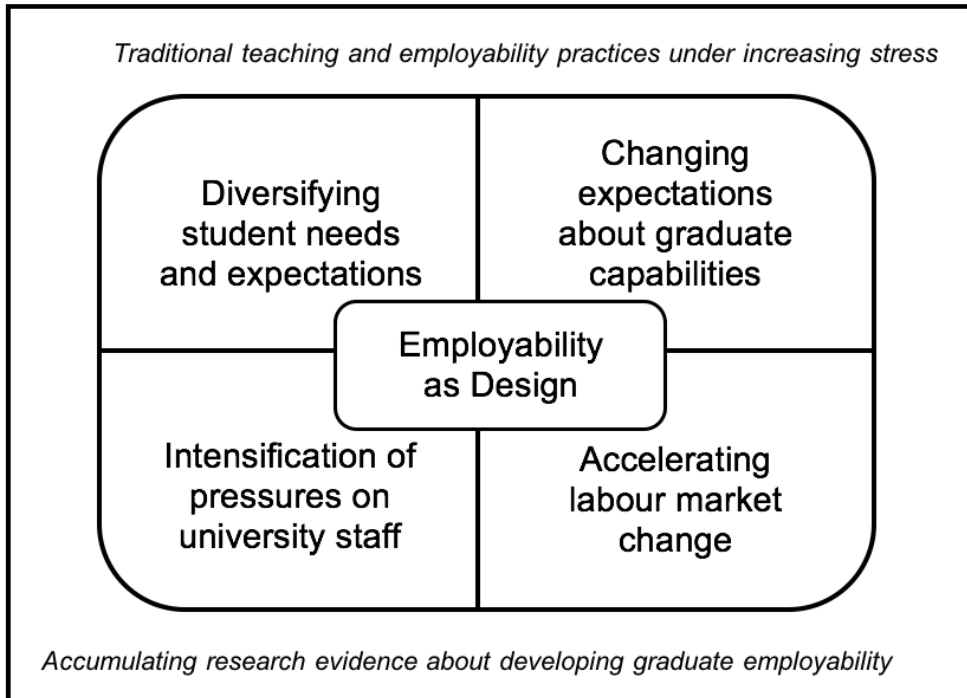


Figure 2: Drivers of change: ‘employability as design’ as a means of resolving conflicting forces shaping employability development in contemporary education. Adapted from Goodyear (2015, p. 37).

A good example of employability as design is the potential involvement of alumni as industry experts, placement hosts and returning students (see the work of Jess Vandelerlie at <http://www.engagingalumni.com>). Accelerated labour market change demands career-wide learning. Career-wide learning as a component of employability necessitates knowledge breadth as well as knowledge depth, with the result that graduates and established workers are as likely to complete first-year units as they are to enrol in graduate study. However, universities have largely failed to capitalise on this opportunity, leaving other providers to meet the needs of industry.

The additional of unit- or module-based professional learning opportunities would enable the higher education sector to broaden its core business and meet the need for just-in-time and career-wide professional learning. It would create new opportunities to build capacity in the form of

whole-of-career professional learning for alumni and the broader community. Professional learning initiatives might incorporate a range of “payment” options from monetary payment through to institutional service in the form of guest lectures, hosted placements, community engagement, mentorships, industry advisory roles and membership of program review committees. The inclusion of alumni in undergraduate courses would enable students to engage with graduates on an informal, peer-to-peer basis, helping students to challenge and extend their perceptions of graduate pathways. And engaging students in the design of professional learning initiatives would expose them to the design thinking they need to manage their own careers. EmployABILITY thinking is derived from this approach.

6. Concluding comments and recommendations

The question of how to prepare higher education students for employment is at the forefront of higher education, yet in many respects it is the wrong question. This review article posed an alternative question: how might we prepare higher education students to navigate an increasingly complex world and labour market in which they will need to think for a living? The higher education landscape has shifted from who does and does not get to participate to what happens within the academy (Bexley, 2016). If we are to educate for employability rather than employment, for life rather than for a job, our concern should move beyond graduate employment to focus on the development of graduates who are prepared to meet the demands of life and work well beyond their discipline. Employability must focus on ability, must form the centre of the curriculum, must embrace diversity, and must integrate the metacognitive capacities with which higher education graduates are not only ready for work, but ready to learn.

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