Academic-employer co-created assessment for the creative industries

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We propose to pilot a framework and protocols for academic-employer co-created assessment in the creative industry disciplines. Through this project assessment tasks will be embedded at key strategic points in whole of program lifecycles. The project will build reciprocal and collaborative relationships between employers, industry and professional bodies, on the one hand, and higher education institutions, educators, and students, on the other. Our project provides not only a practical model for employer engagement, but also addresses broader issues of graduate employability.

As a larger number of Australians are participating in the high education as a pathway to increased employability, graduate outcomes have become a key accountability for education providers (Hammer, McDonald, & Forbes, 2014). Increasingly universities are positioned as brokers between diverse stakeholders including students, employers, and government, with complex and at times competing interests. On one hand, educators are asked to develop actively engaged, empathetic global citizens (Nikolic & Gledic, 2013). They are also charged with producing the "repository of human capital" that "provides the workforce capability that underpins economic growth" in Australia (Universities Australia, 2014, p. 4).

Innovative employability frameworks offer students essential transition opportunities both during and from tertiary education. When embedded throughout the student lifecycle, these frameworks may also serve important roles in expectation setting, student engagement, and promoting student success over the whole of program. While one-off work-integrated-learning opportunities provide small numbers of self-motivated student critical connections to employers, the current climate also necessitates more broadly inclusive approaches. For diverse cohorts students to meet the needs of an increasingly complex and competitive workforce there remains a critical need for models of assessment design that meet the disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global/intercultural employability needs of students in the creative disciplines in Australia. As Professor Maurits Van Rooijen (2009, p. 7) points out, universities of the future will need to embed employers as "integral and equal partners in the education process." Our approach engages employers and peak industry bodies in practical and active ways at key points in the student experience, while allowing educators to maintain primary control over "big picture" curriculum design and pedagogy.

This aligns with the key recommendations of the *Good Practice Report: Assuring Graduate Outcomes* by focusing on ways to work with industry to improve graduate outcomes (Oliver, 2011). We contend that a well-developed holistic experience across a whole degree program informs and develops graduates who are well-rounded and able to engage in "real world problems". Moreover, an environment of genuine collaboration helps students understand how their learning is relevant and applicable to their emerging career goals and employment contexts. It has the added benefit of helping employers understand what universities do and the complex relationships and agendas that need to be constantly balanced.

Drawing on Experience

This proposal draws on the principles and findings of The Belonging Project, a longitudinal project based at RMIT University. The Belonging project has investigated the development and embedding of disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global/intercultural competencies throughout the entire curriculum as a means of supporting graduate success. (For further information see: www.rmit.edu.au/mediacommunication/belonging-project).

The project also draws on knowledge gained through *First Things First* (Johal & Clarke, 2014). *First Things First* established meaningful creative synergies between students and employers by redesigning curriculum to embed employers throughout the first two semesters of the student lifecycle in a Bachelors of Communication Design program. Importantly, this allowed students to focus on the development of their professional identities from the first week of their first year.

Drawing on our Team's previous experience and the existing literature, our proposal aims to develop **academic-employer co-created assessment** for the creative industries to support academics and employers to build industry and educationally relevant assessment.
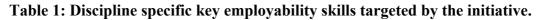
As part of our project we will deliver:
1. Protocols for academic-employer engagement
2. Frameworks for academic-employer co-created assessment
3 Assessment case studies
4 Resources for the development of communities of practice

Approach the project will take

Employability Skills

The specific employability skills we have identified as key to graduate outcomes are informed by emerging data from the OLT project *Developing Graduate Employability* (Jollands et al, 2014). In interviews with chief investigators, employers in the creative industries identified five primary capacities as desirable in employees: knowledge of the profession, professionalism, flexible and collaborative work practices, high level communication skills, and emotional intelligence. These skills correspond to the disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global capacities that are the focus of The Belonging Project model. For this reason, the specific discipline employability skills we will be targeting are as follows:

Disciplinary Skills			Interdisciplinary Skills					Global Skills		
Prof Indentity > Network's	Prof Etiquette > Professionalism	Prof Communication & Discipline	Analyse/identity/ source skills/needs	Work in team's	High Level Communication > Translate skills > Understand others disciplines		Basic competencies outside of the discipline	Intercultural communication	Recognising cultural difference	Professionalism in global context > Researching norms > Cultural expectations/ assumptions

Table 1: Discipline specific key employability skills targeted by the initiative.

Approach

In this project, we will bring together academic staff members from three universities who teach in the creative industries with an equal number of industry/employer partners. Drawing on the project team's longstanding networks and success in managing employer relations, we are also in discussion with peak industry bodies and key employers, who will be able to support the long-term success of the project.

Academic-employer co-created assessment relies upon the establishment of clear engagement frameworks and protocols to ensure equitable and functional working relationships. For this reason, after conducting a literature review to synthesize existing approaches, we will bring together employer partners and academics for a series of approximately three workshops to develop an engagement protocol, followed by an open forum for feedback.

Academics and employers will be paired into teams. Once a draft protocol has been agreed upon, each academic-employer team will work to design a single second semester pilot assessment, adhering to the protocols established. Collectively teams will produce assessments across all year levels of the student lifecycle and address disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and global/intercultural competencies. Nine assessments will emerge from this project.

Teams will meet monthly to workshop assessments and all teams will convene approximately every six weeks during this phase. In mid-June a second open forum will be organized to showcase the pilot assessment tasks and to once again invite feedback.

In the second semester, teams will pilot the academic-employer co-created assessments. As part of the evaluation of the pilots, teams will document the evolution and delivery of pilot assessments and engage in critical self-reflection based on pre-determined prompts. In addition, each team will have an observer who will act as a critical friend and document the delivery and execution of the pilot assessment.

Finally, students involved in each pilot will be invited to participate in focus groups. It is anticipated that each subject will run two focus groups: one which occurs during the assessment period to capture student insights into the process and a second held after the assessment has been completed to evaluate impact.

Deliverables

In November, teams will present the assessment case studies at a third and final open forum. This forum will showcase achievements and challenges. It will also serve as the basis for the development of a resource pack. A website with blog will be built to disseminate the engagement protocols, resources, case studies examples and any academic outputs and peak body publications that emerge from the project. The website will be promoted through the forums, partner institutions, and peak discipline bodies' annual conferences. Together these will support the establishment of an ongoing community of practice (CoP) informing relationships between employer groups and universities.
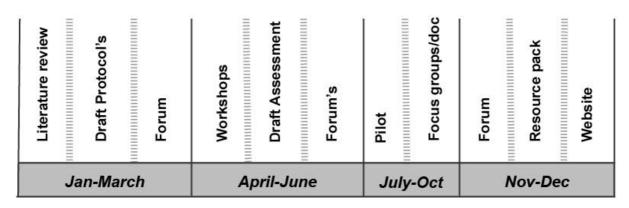
Jan-March			April-June			July-Oct		Nov-Dec		
Literature review	Draft Protocol's	Forum	Workshops	Draft Assessment	Forum's	Pilot	Focus groups/doc	Forum	Resource pack	Website

Table 2: Project timeline.

Projected Impact

This project has the capacity to provide transformative and positive long-term impacts for a range of stakeholders. These include:

Students: Students who participate in the piloted academic-employer co-created assessments will benefit from immediate and whole of program connection to peak employers in their fields. This provides a unique networking opportunity and raises the possibility of increased opportunities for internships, future collaborations, and post-degree employment. Students not directly involved in the pilots will benefit from the project through increased dialogue and awareness of student skills generated by the academic-employer partnerships.

Academic Teaching Staff: Academic teaching staff directly involved in the project will develop increased knowledge and skills and ongoing reciprocal and collaborative relationships with industry and employers. This will lead to more embedded whole of program lifecycles academic -employer co-assessments at key strategic points. Academic staff will also have opportunities for greater access to industry through an ongoing community of practice (COP) between the Universities and employers for sustainability.

Employers/Industry: Employers/industry will benefit from having a deeper and more informed understanding of the type of education experiences graduates experience throughout their degrees as well as having an opportunity to help shape these learning experiences. There is also potential to develop direct lines to employability for students as the employers will have greater knowledge and connections with the students throughout the assessments. The above-mentioned COP will provide ongoing access to Academic Teaching Staff.

Key questions

The pilot initiatives that contributed to this project's design have convinced us of the viability of the idea. Our initial research into existing pilots at RMIT indicates that employer-academic co-created assessment has significant potential to increase student confidence and engagement and improve transition experience (Johal & Clarke, 2014). Early indications also suggest that such initiative may have a positive long-term impact on cohort employability. However, we acknowledge that there are a number of potential challenges

and practical and conceptual areas in which we would welcome feedback. These include but are not limited to:

- Meaningful ways to engage students in the process of co-creation so that they may understand the particular employability stills represented and develop connections to the employers and peak bodies that contribute to the project;
- How to strike an appropriate balance between the agendas of individual employer partners and the needs of a diverse cohort entering a broad field of practice;
- Ways to address and highlight the engagement of first year students in employability frameworks in an academic culture focused on foundational skills;
- Strategies for ensuring long-term viability of the model for time-poor partners and academics;
- Approaches for sustaining a community of practice;
- Dissemination frameworks.

We also welcome feedback on the project design and timeline.

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