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The seven wonders of employability

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There is growing recognition among tertiary education organisations (TEOs) of the importance and responsibility of transitioning students into the workplace. Previously, providing students with opportunities to gain real work experience and build 'employability', has been largely driven by policy makers and industry stakeholders (Cai, 2012), however, more recently, there has been added pressure from students themselves as they face a more competitive and changing job market (Jameson, Strudwick, Bond-Taylor, & Jones, 2012). Whether TEO's are trying to meet their students' demands, feel morally obligated to provide these skills, or are simply adhering to government policy, they are increasingly embedding work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences and professional development opportunities into the curriculum to enhance students' 'employability' (Higher Education Academy, 2016).

Different definitions of the concept of 'Employability' abound in the literature. A few authors describe employability as meaning the ability to not only gain employment but also to remain in employment and be successful in a chosen career. A commonality and key component of these definitions is, however, the importance of demonstrating relevant employability skills (Copps & Plimmer, 2013; Spoonley, 2012; Yorke, 2012). Numerous studies focus on lists of employability skills and attributes to be developed by students. These lists of employability skills go beyond knowledge and technical skills to include a range of attributes and personal characteristics such as work ethic and showing initiative (Victoria Careers and Employment, 2015).

Diverse models and approaches have been adopted by TEOs to deliver employability skills throughout their institutions. The ideas are far ranging and include various forms of WIL embedded in the curriculum as well as co-curricular and extracurricular activities such as providing networking and industry events. The value and effectiveness of students acquiring and enhancing employability skills through different forms of work-integrated learning during students' formal studies is well documented in the WIL literature. In particular, internships, work placements and work-based degree programmes that provide students with experiential action-learning, authentic work experiences and an opportunity to reflect on their experiences play an important role in enhancing employability skills and transitioning students from higher education to the workplace (Billet, 2011; Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007; Coll et al., 2009; Freudenberg, Brimble, & Cameron, 2011; UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009; Yorke, 2011).

According to Jackson (2015) whilst WIL is widely viewed as highly effective in equipping new graduates with the required employability skills, the evaluation of WIL programs remains predominantly outcomes-focused. In fact, many of these studies explore the relationship between WIL and the development of various skills within different contexts and lack the use of a common framework of employability skills to measure the progress made in different WIL contexts (COMET, 2013). One such framework of employability skills that can be applied across different education levels was developed by the Pathways Advisory Group, a cohort of New Zealand employer and industry representatives, educators, government agencies, and industry training representatives (Youth Guarantee, 2013). In alignment with this Employability Skills Framework, Careers New Zealand, advocate seven employability skills to enable students to successfully transition into the workplace. The seven employability skills are: "positive attitude, communication, teamwork, self- management, willingness to learn, thinking skills and resilience" (Careers New Zealand, n.d.).

AIMS

The overall aim of the study is to investigate the development of advocated employability skills during a WIL experience to inform future WIL curriculum development.

The specific research objectives are to:

- (i) to identify advocated employability skills developed by students during a WIL experience;
- (ii) to determine the extent to which students' experiences affect their perceptions of their employability.

METHODS

The student cohort consisted of all students in the Industry Based Learning (IBL) course, a compulsory 30 credit course in the Bachelor of Business degree, at Unitec Institute of Technology during 2017. The students were required to write a 1500-word reflection on their WIL experience which formed part of an overall assessment of their achievements in a student portfolio. The research ethics were approved by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee and students voluntarily provided their student reflections following an invitation to participate in the study after completion of their course.

The researchers applied a mixed methods approach (Corbin, Strauss, & Strauss, 2014, Lewis, 2013) to the dataset of 30 reflective essays. These essays represented a corpus of approximately 45,000 words. Dedoose software provided a comprehensive and quantitatively derived framework in which qualitative analysis was effective. The dataset was analysed to extract the application of the seven elements of employability to the lived student experience. References to employability skills were identified and coded to one or more codes. The frequency of occurrence of concepts was measured, and each student was classified according to one of two themes: personal learning and engagement about employability, and reflections on their own employability as a result of the experience.

The analysis included both conceptual and relational content analysis which identified the presence and frequency of concepts from the dataset. The researchers considered how the concepts are related to each other, and the impact of the experience on students and this informed the results.

RESULTS

The analysis of the identified references to employability skills revealed 'communication' as the skill students engaged with most frequently. Students engaged least with 'willingness to learn'. (Figure 1.).

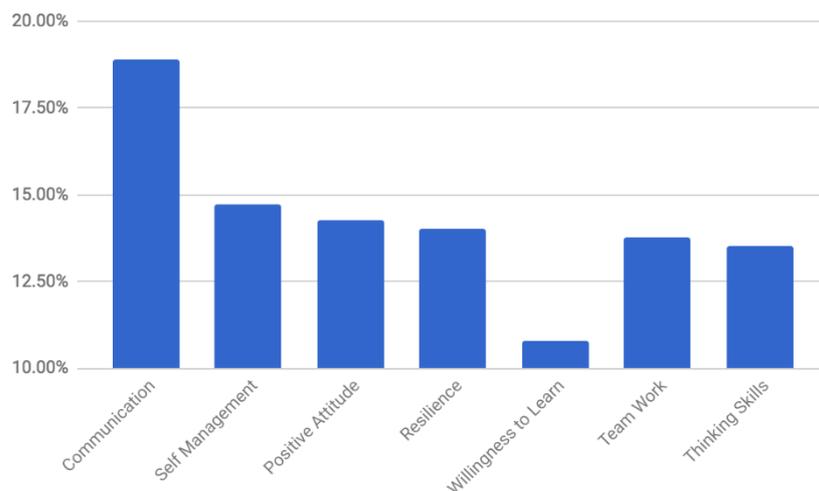


FIGURE 1: Analysis of student reflections by employability skills engagement.

Communication skills were identified by students as key to successful performance in their workplace experience. Careers New Zealand identified a range of activities which relate to communication skills including: showing respect when communicating, thinking about how communication affects others and how to ask questions and listen. The research revealed examples of student reflections on their own communication skills and how they had to develop their skills for the workplace:

I had to send regular follow up emails to keep in touch, and remind them of how the project was changing. I also had to regularly follow up with work and information from various meetings with the team, and discover how XXX wanted certain pieces of work to be completed. (Student A)

Students reflected on the communication skills of their colleagues and peers, observing the adaptive nature of communication in the workplace.

x is one of the newer staff members at company x.... she was very blunt at times, which I occasionally found frustrating. I got used to this quite fast, and found the most effective way to communicate with her. I don't think it's a matter of changing anything in my opinion, I think it's more important to adapt to the current situation and environment, work towards compromises, and encourage positive feedback whenever the opportunity arises. (Student B)

Students reflected on their need to enhance their communication skills to increase their employability.

One thing I have learnt about myself from the feedback at the Collaborative Assessment Meeting was that I will need to further improve on my written communication skill. As English is not my first language, either oral communication or written communication is a barrier for me to overcome. Therefore, my next goal will be improving my written communication. (Student C)

The second highest frequency of skills reflected on by students was Self-Management. These skills include timeliness and preparedness, self-awareness of how own actions affect others, and demonstration of commitment and responsibility.

In the research analysis students reference various aspects of self-management skills.

With the clear schedule of all the work, I understand how much time and effort I need to allocate to each of the task and even in some extreme situations, I can reschedule my work if there is some urgent work that needs to be completed by management. I have learned that prioritisation and planning is quite important to deal with multi tasks and put things under control in a timely manner. (Student D).

Willingness to Learn was the least developed of the seven employability skills. Willingness to learn includes learning new tasks, skills and information, looking for opportunities to improve or help the business, accepting advice and learning from feedback.

"I was least proud of the fact that I feel like I could have learnt more... (Student F).

The lack of awareness of the need to bring to work a disposition of 'willingness to learn' is particularly curious when students are in a credit bearing course while at work.

The skills of positive attitude, resilience, thinking skills and teamwork were reasonably well developed and engaged with by students during their internship. Students considered that the WIL experience had developed their skills and that resulted in greater employability.

I have gained some great skills in this organisation and I feel like my employability has increased in the social media and digital marketing world. (Student G)

The practical experience took me from a perceived idea that HR may be an area that I can make a difference in, to solidifying for me the fact that HR is where I definitely want to work.

I am most proud of how much I have grown during this placement. I came in with no experience in the industry and have flourished. My confidence and skills such as conducting meetings, professionalism, and computer based skills have all improved.” (Student H)

Each student’s reflective writing was analysed by the number of references to employability skills. The number of references was classified as High, Medium or Low Engagement (See Figure 2.).

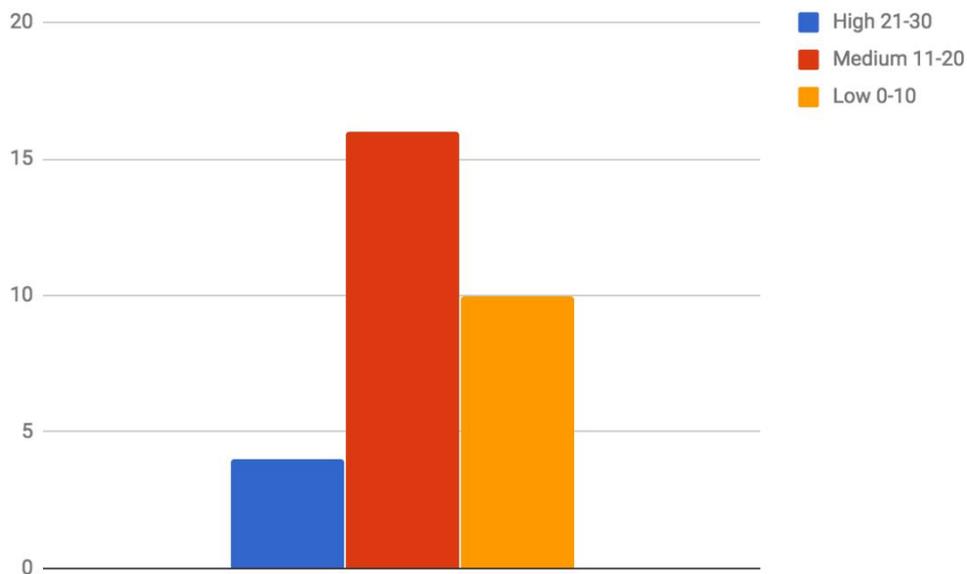


FIGURE 2: Frequency of student references to employability skills

The number of references to employability skills in student reflections was reviewed and classified as high (>20), medium (20 - 11), and low (<11) references. The results indicate that most students reflected that they were engaged in developing their employability skills. Ten students displayed lower levels of engagement.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the development of advocated employability skills during a WIL experience to inform future WIL curriculum development. The results of this study reveal a high level of engagement with the advocated skills of ‘communication’ and ‘self-management’, a medium level of engagement with ‘positive attitude’, ‘resilience’, ‘thinking skills’ and ‘teamwork’ and a low level of engagement with ‘willingness to learn’. In particular, the study has determined employability skills are developed by students in a WIL experience at variable levels and overall students believe the WIL experience has improved their employment prospects.

According to Youth Guarantee (2013), students who are highly engaged with their employability, and aware of the skills they need to foster and grow are likely to have better employment prospects. The variability of engagement with the employability skills, and the levels of student engagement poses questions and challenges for both the WIL curriculum of study, and the Bachelor of Business. How can students better develop their employability skills during their study programme and in preparation for WIL experiences? Can a higher level of reflective writing increase engagement with employability skills for all students? The authors suggest further work needs to be done to advance students’ understanding of the concepts and principles of ‘willingness to learn’ and the advocated employability skills in general.

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