

THE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY INDICATORS: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

Beverley, Oliver

Curtin University, Perth and Sidney, Australia, b.oliver@curtin.edu.au

ABSTRACT: Higher education is moving rapidly towards more evidence-based accountability, and governments routinely collect data on graduate enrolments and completions. Graduates are expected to be equipped with a broad range of skills and attributes that enhance their opportunities for employment, enable them to perform well in the workplace, and engage as contributing citizens in a civil society. Currently, Australian indicators specifically measuring employability are very limited. The Australian Graduate Survey incorporates the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) which reports graduates' uptake of full-time and part-time work or further study, their employer and salary. There is no routine Australian collection of employer satisfaction with university graduate skills in Australia, nor are there any national measures of academic staff perceptions or capacity around graduate achievement of attributes. The Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI), an outcome of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council project 'Building course team capacity to enhance graduate employability', were designed to supplement the Australian Graduate Survey and provide more comprehensive graduate employability data from a broader range of stakeholders at degree program level. Graduates, employers and academic staff are asked to indicate the capabilities that count for early professional success, and the extent to which they are demonstrated by new graduates. The fourteen capabilities in the GEI are drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement. The Graduate Employability Indicators were created as part of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Competitive Grant *Building course team capacity for graduate employability*, a joint initiative by Curtin University, University of Southern Queensland, RMIT University and Victoria University.

KEY WORDS: graduate employability, surveys, graduates, employers, academic teaching staff

1. INTRODUCTION

The Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI) were created as part of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Project, Building course team capacity for graduate employability. The aim of this project was to build the capacity of university teaching staff to enhance the employability of their graduates through: tools to identify strengths and gaps in course effectiveness for graduate employability, and the capacity of course teams (full-time, part-time and sessional teaching staff) to identify and assess skills and attributes which lead to graduate employability; resources to enhance identified strengths and address gaps; and a benchmarking process for course leaders focusing on graduate employability. The outcomes of the project are disseminated through the Assuring Graduate Capabilities website <http://tiny.cc/boliver>.

The Graduate Employability Indicators are premised on the widely-accepted definition of graduate employability as the achievement of "the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" [1]. Australian universities have used focussed on 'graduate attributes' for several years and these are generally considered to encompass employability skills [2,3]. Recent mapping of those attributes shows that, in the main, most universities tend to focus on seven clusters of attributes [4] including: Written and oral communication; Critical and analytical (and sometimes creative and reflective) thinking; Problem-solving (including generating ideas and innovative solutions); Information literacy, often associated with technology; Learning and working independently; Learning and working collaboratively; and Ethical and inclusive engagement with communities, cultures and nations.

It is generally agreed that embedding employability as part of the graduate skill set (or learning outcomes) through curriculum design, course content and delivery is a promising start: curriculum mapping, for example, offers a way of testing how and where employability-related learning is incorporated into a course curriculum [5,6]. However, this project focused less on input measures, and more on evidence of outcomes: what graduates can do in readiness for employability, and in response to such evidence, provide teaching staff with resources and processes such as benchmarking to improve curriculum with a view to enhanced graduate employability. A key premise of this project was that academic teaching staff must be properly prepared to identify, model and assess key attributes and skills in a curriculum specifically designed to ensure graduates achieve the 'required mix' of knowledge and skills. Two questions follow: what is the 'required mix', and who determines what it might be? If employability is one of the key aspirations of university education, it would seem that employers should have a major voice, as should graduates and those who prepare them: academic staff.

2. THE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY INDICATORS

The Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI) are online employability surveys designed to supplement data from national surveys (such as the Australian Graduate Survey). The Graduate Employability Indicators, administered at course (degree program) level, capture the perceptions of graduates, employers and course teaching teams about the importance of key capabilities to new graduates' early professional success, and the extent to which those capabilities are demonstrated by new graduates. Results from the Graduate Employability Indicators can be used to enhance curriculum for better graduate employability outcomes, and specifically to inform

course curriculum review, teaching staff professional development and benchmarking.

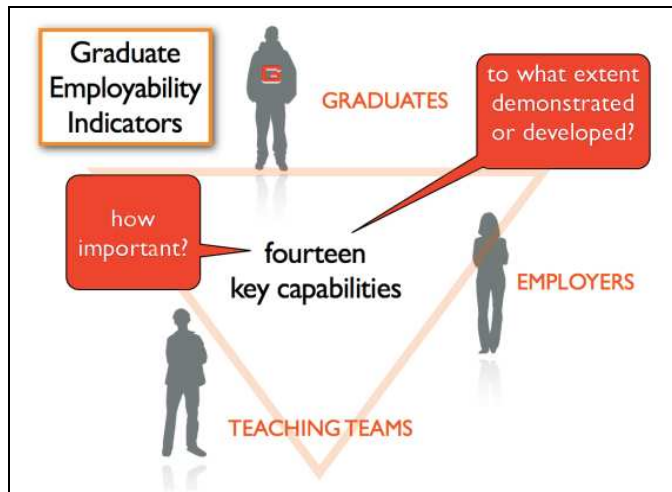


Figure 1. The Graduate Employability Indicators capture perceptions of graduates, employers and the course teaching team about the importance and demonstration of fourteen key capabilities

The Graduate Employability Indicators (GEI) are designed to gather and triangulate the perceptions of three stakeholder groups in relation to the graduates of a particular course.

Graduates’ perceptions of:

- the **extent** to which their experience during the degree contributed to the development of the fourteen capabilities and their overall work-readiness; and the **importance** of the fourteen capabilities to the early professional success of new graduates of the degree (quantitative items);
- the best aspects of the degree in helping develop capabilities for employment and suggestions as to how the degree could be changed to improve skills for employment (qualitative items).

Employers’ perceptions of

- the **extent** to which new graduates demonstrate fourteen capabilities, and their overall work-readiness; and the **importance** of the fourteen capabilities to the early professional success of new graduates (quantitative items);
- other skills, attributes and personal qualities that are most useful for new graduates in this field, and which skills, attributes and personal qualities could be prioritised for improvement (qualitative items).

The Course Team’s perceptions of:

- the **extent** to which new graduates demonstrate fourteen capabilities, and their overall work-readiness; the **importance** of the fourteen capabilities to the early professional success of new graduates; and their **confidence** in their own ability to teach and assess the fourteen capabilities (quantitative items); and
- their role in assisting students to develop the capabilities, and the main incentives and disincentives for doing so; and the staff development opportunities they think would increase their confidence to teach and assess work-related skills, attributes and personal qualities (qualitative items).

The Graduate Employability Indicators focus on fourteen attributes, skills and personal qualities (hereafter referred to as capabilities).

Table 1. Abbreviated titles of the fourteen capabilities in the Graduate Employability Indicators.

1. Knowledge
2. Writing
3. Speaking
4. Thinking
5. Quantitative
6. Using ICT
7. Teamwork
8. Independent Learning
9. Intercultural Understanding
10. Problem-solving
11. Values & Ethics
12. Community Engagement
13. Industry awareness
14. Social contexts

The capabilities in the Graduate Employability Indicators are drawn from other surveys, namely: Item 11 in the National Survey of Student Engagement [7], Item 11 in the Australian Survey of Student Engagement [8] and Item 12 of section A in the Australian Council for Educational Research Graduate Pathways Surveys [9]. Unlike the other surveys, however, the GEI target graduates of up to five years, employers and course teams. All are asked about the **importance** of capabilities, and the **extent** they are developed or demonstrated. Course teaching teams are asked about their **confidence** in **teaching** and **assessing** the capabilities. The Graduate Employability Indicators are available in two ways: Institutions can use in-house or open source web solutions (eg Survey Monkey) to create the surveys online, and use them to gather and report their own data. Alternatively, institutions can request that Curtin University administer the surveys on their behalf. The Curtin site is designed so that each survey can display the logo of the requesting institution, along with the name of the course and intended stakeholder group.

3. REPORTING RESULTS

The GEI provide evidence to answer the following five principal questions in relation to graduates of a specific course:

1. How important are the fourteen capabilities for graduates’ early professional success?
2. To what extent do graduates generally demonstrate the capabilities, or do courses contribute to the capability development?
3. To what extent are graduates work-ready?
4. How confident are staff in teaching and assessing the capabilities?
5. Where might greatest improvement be effected: which are the capabilities that are most important yet demonstrated or developed to a lesser extent?

Figure 6 is an example of the graphical display of the quantitative results.

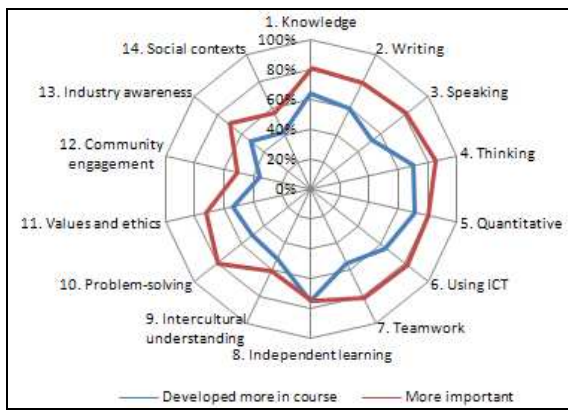


Figure 2. Graduate perceptions: An example of the graphical display of GEI quantitative results

Figure 2 shows, by way of example, a comparison of graduates' perceptions of the **extent** the degree experience contributed to capability development (percentage agreement "quite a bit" or "very much") with the **importance** of the capabilities (percentage agreement "quite" or "very important"). Similarly, Figure 3 shows an example of a triangulation of the perspectives of the stakeholder groups about the extent that new graduates demonstrate the capabilities (employers and course teaching team) or the extent graduates perceive they are developed in their course (percentage agreement = 'quite a bit' or 'very much').

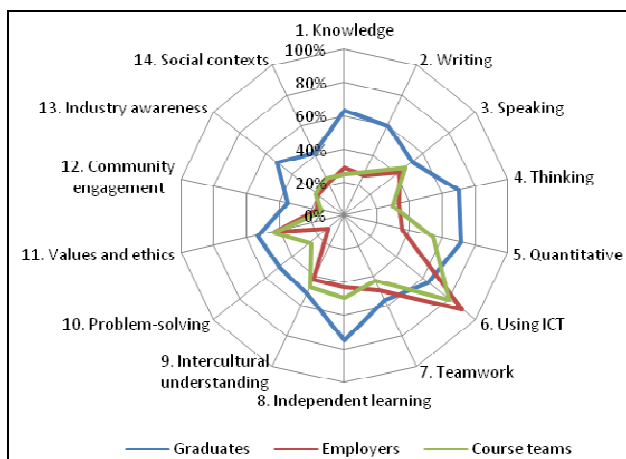


Figure 3. An example of a triangulation of the perspectives of the stakeholder groups about the extent that new graduates demonstrate the capabilities

Figure 4 shows an importance-performance analysis: the top-left quadrant shows the capabilities seen as most important which are developed or demonstrated least.

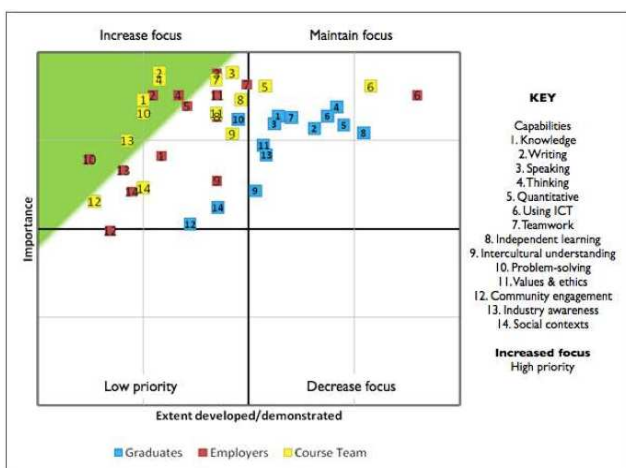


Figure 4. An importance-performance analysis enables course teams to see capabilities requiring urgent action

A suite of downloadable Graduate Employability Indicators reporting tools and templates is available at the Assuring Graduate Capabilities website <http://tiny.cc/boliver>. The Graduate Employability Indicators were piloted and refined in several stages [10] and further publications provide examples of the use of the Graduate Employability Indicators in disciplines such as Accounting [11].

4. CONCLUSION

The Graduate Employability Indicators, administered at degree program level, capture the perceptions of graduates, employers and course teaching teams about the importance of key capabilities to new graduates' early professional success, and the extent to which those capabilities are demonstrated by new graduates. Results from the Graduate Employability Indicators can be used to inform course curriculum review, staff professional development and benchmarking. To date, 84 courses from 10 Australian higher education providers have used the Graduate Employability Indicators. The Graduate Employability Indicators are fully implemented at Curtin University, Australia.

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