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Collaboration in curriculum design: Embedding employability for future graduate success

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Abstract

This paper describes the implementation of a model of employability in a school of nursing and midwifery at an Australian university. The model was developed collaboratively with staff from various centres of the university, academic leadership, and academic staff, in response to decreasing employment figures and student satisfaction with graduate outcomes.

1   Introduction

Integrating career development learning (CDL) into an already full curriculum to enhance graduate employability can be a significant challenge for universities (Yorke, 2010), and it remains a complex process, often requiring a larger organisational change (Bridgstock, Grant-Imaru, & McAlpine, 2019). In the Australian higher education sector, where a newly released government performance-based funding model has been released (Department of Education, 2019), it is becoming increasingly important for collaboration between faculty leaders, academic staff, learning designers and careers advisers to support the development of successful future-ready graduates.

Universities across Australia are integrating career development learning into curricula to enhance graduate employability it a variety of ways. A recent study by Bridgstock et al. (2019) found variation in the ways careers services were positioned in organisations, their functionality and in the ways they and academic units were collaborating. This paper shares how one university is changing the way it has traditionally approached curriculum design. By expanding on the Bridgstock et al. model, the university is including greater collaboration. It draws on the expertise of careers advisers, learning designers, librarians and learning advisers working with faculty leadership and academic staff to embed digital literacy, communication skills and CDL to transform the curriculum for student success.

2   Collaboration and need for employability strategy

In 2019, the school of nursing and midwifery undertook an internal major course review and reaccreditation process for the nursing degree. Employment data indicated there had been a decline in employment since 2016. One recommendation and action from the major course review was the revitalisation of the school's employability strategy with the intention to embed CDL throughout the course to enhance graduate outcomes.

An Embedding Employability Working Group was established, including members of the school executive, course leaders, and the school's Senior Learning Designer and Careers

Adviser. The Careers Adviser had previously collected feedback from industry regarding the performance of ECU's nursing students compared to other applicants. In order to gather more feedback, members from industry and representatives from the Western Australian Nursing Graduate Recruitment Agency were invited to attend a discussion with the employability working group. A former student who had been unsuccessful in obtaining a nursing graduate position was also invited to meet with the working party, to determine if they had taken advantage of career support before graduation. After these discussions the working party established that graduating students struggled to articulate their skills and knowledge in both written selection criteria and when applying and/or interviewing for a position.

The working group used this information along with an evaluation of the available career support within the course, to consider scaffolded activities that could be introduced to enhance employability across the course from the first year and throughout the course. By carrying out a mapping exercise of current CDL, the working group discovered that the timing of the capstone unit of study dedicated to career learning came too late for some students when applying for graduate employment. The mapping exercise also highlighted the need for a more holistic approach to embedding CDL, rather than focusing on one point in the later part of the course.

3   Employability strategy development

A school employability strategy was developed using a "steps" analogy to convey to students the staged approach to developing employment skills. The strategy diagram (Figure 1) illustrates the specific points in the course where these skills are addressed and the skills that are developed across the entire strategy. The steps of the strategy illustrate the stages of introduction of employability, the development and enhancement of employability skills and the transition stage to and beyond employment. The end goal of employability success identifies lifelong learning and continued professional development to achieve career aspirations.

Figure 1: Employability strategy diagram (Embedding Employability Working Group)

A list of the essential nursing skills developed over the duration of the course was compiled from the mapping exercise and added to the employability strategy. A circular diagram (Figure 2) is used to illustrate the continuing development of these skills. A star shape at the centre of the skills diagram is used to illustrate the importance of the STAR model (Cook, 2009) of

situation, task, action and result when addressing these skills in written reflections. The STAR model is recommended to students by the West Australian Health Department graduate recruitment system when applying for a graduate position.

Figure 2: Essential skills diagram (Embedding Employability Working Group)

4   Reflective practice

Another action resulting from the major course review required the school to review the assessments within the clinical practice units to ensure consistency in assessment load and weighting with the intention of removing theory examinations and replacing them with more appropriate authentic assessments. This provided a unique opportunity to embed CDL into these units and assess the students' ability to reflect on their practice. To improve students' ability to articulate their skills and knowledge confidently, the assessments are designed to include both written and oral assessment formats. An additional requirement of the assessments includes using the STAR model to address an identified selection criteria statement. The redesigned assessments now align directly with the employability strategy and allow students to gain the skills required for writing successful graduate employment applications.

5   Evaluation of knowledge and skills

In order to support employability development, an Employability Action Plan workbook was developed and introduced to students in the first semester of their course. Based on both the DOTs model (Law & Watts, 1977, 1996) and the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007), the action plan takes elements from both models and presents students with a series of exercises and reflections. These allow students to understand their skills and values in order to develop self-awareness. The students evaluate their current employment skills and identify any areas in which they need to improve and develop a plan to address these areas. The action plan was included as an assessment in an early stage unit. As part of this assessment, students were asked to complete a reflective writing piece about themselves, outlining their reasons for choosing to study nursing and summarising their skills and values. The workbook is completed in three stages during the course, and revisited in the later stages of the course as part of a final capstone unit.

6   Portfolio – Evidence of knowledge and skills

To help students make, understand and articulate connections between their learning, experience and work, an ePortfolio is included as part of the employability strategy. EPortfolios provide an electronic space to collect evidence of learning and experience whilst allowing the curation and critical reflection of this evidence. A professional portfolio detailing nursing experience, qualifications and work placements is a registration requirement for Australian nurses. Nursing students are introduced to the concept of using an ePortfolio in their first semester of study. Students are encouraged to collect evidence of their knowledge and skills and align these with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA) Registered Nurse Standards for Practice throughout their course. Course learning outcomes are aligned with these standards and assessments within the course, and students are made aware of these alignments. Throughout the course, learning activities and assessments are identified as recommended elements to add to the ePortfolio. By the end of the course, students have accumulated a collection of evidence pieces which they can draw from when applying for employment (Figure 3). In this way, the ePortfolio activities are designed to enhance students' understanding of their achievements and their ability to articulate these achievements in written employment applications and verbal interviews (Peet et.al, 2011).
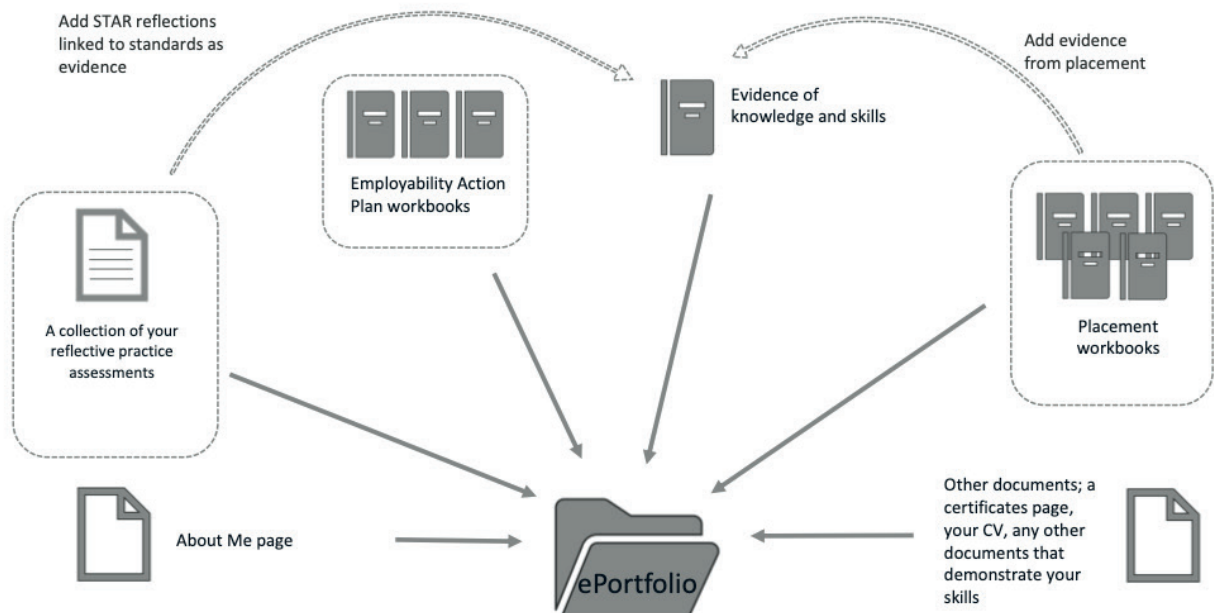

Figure 3: ePortfolio contents diagram (R.Scriven)

7   Conclusion – Evaluating employability skills

In summary, this paper has described the implementation of a model of employability developed collaboratively with staff from various centres of the university, academic leadership and academic staff in response to decreasing satisfaction with graduate outcomes. Initial reaction to implementation has been positive, with staff reporting a more structured, cohesive and consistent approach to embedding CDL in the curriculum. Further research into the practice of embedding employability skills development will include surveys and focus groups involving students, staff and industry partners. Evaluation of student outcomes and industry feedback over the study will determine the effectiveness of this strategy: the research will use CDL and reflective practice to measure and examine success and allow students to rate their own progress against goals (Pelletier, 2019), and industry panels will be asked to provide feedback on their experience with graduates.

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