Communities of Practice

The cultivation of a community of practice concerning RMIT graduate destinations towards employability

A Report

RMIT University
School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning
Communities of Practice

The cultivation of a community of practice concerning RMIT graduate destinations towards employability

Introduction

A key goal of RMIT’s School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning (GSSSP) is to develop strong links between theory and practice. One of the primary ways in which the School of GSSSP seeks to achieve this goal is through the field education component of the courses offered through the School. Field education allows students to not only cement the skills acquired during their study programs; it also gives them the opportunity to develop networks within the workforce and provide potential to facilitate career opportunities for the students.

While the benefits of the Field Placement component are widely recognised, staff at the School have identified that the relationship between the student’s placement and their consequent employment has not been fully explored. In response to this gap in knowledge, a community of practice was developed specifically to explore the destinations of graduates, their employability upon graduation and the relationship between field placements and subsequent employment.

The formation of this community of practice sought to achieve the following specific outcomes:

1. Inform curriculum design throughout the School of GSSSP.
2. Analyse whether the graduate capabilities of the School are aligned with the work undertaken by students.
3. Enable streamlined, targeted and efficient marketing to potential students and employers.
4. Enable informed decisions with regard to alignment of School and university vision and industry placements.
5. Establish a good practice model for placements within the School/Portfolio.
6. Develop sustainable relationships between the university and industry.

The community of practice drew upon existing resources and relationships to complete this exploration. These included students, staff and external organisations with connection to RMIT and other key stakeholders of the university and the field education programs.

This report details the findings of one phase of the community of practice in which past graduates of the school were consulted.

Methodology

All stages of the community of practice project employed exploratory research methods aimed at increasing the Schools’ community’s knowledge and understanding of the key success factors which lead to the employment of RMIT graduates.

Specifically the stage on which this report focuses, involves the use of written surveys completed by graduates of the School of GSSSP. Two similar surveys were conducted utilizing a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods to gather information. The content of the surveys covered five categories:

1. “About you” which asked for demographic information.
2. “Since you graduated” which asked the graduates about what they had been doing since they graduated.
3. “About your placement” which asked the graduates about the specifics of their placement including location, position and length.

4. “Perceived connection between placement and subsequent employment” which asked the graduates about how they felt their placement impacted on their subsequent employment.

5. “Perception of RMIT and the Field Placements” which asked the graduates for their comments and suggestions for improving the link between placements and employment at RMIT.

The original survey was web based which was accessible through the RMIT website. Participants were then invited to complete the survey through a mail out to those students on the Alumni list. Due to a low response rate from the postal and web based survey, a series of follow up telephone surveys were conducted with alumni. The results of these two surveys were then collated and analysed with the results being presented in this report.

Sample
A total of 114 graduates of the School of GSSSP participated in the surveys. While every attempt was made to ensure that the sample was representative certain cohorts remained over or underrepresented in the final results. One reason for this occurring was that the sample was drawn from graduates who had registered their details with the alumni upon graduation. Graduates from some degrees such as Social Work and Social Science were far more likely to have registered these details than other programs, therefore they were more likely to be contacted by the researchers. For a full breakdown of the sample by program see Table 1.

Table 1: Graduate student survey responses by program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Internet</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science (Psychology)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science (Youth Work)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science (Environment)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A (Criminal Justice Administration)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Science (Planning)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science (Legal and Dispute Studies)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Soc. Science (Planning)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad Dip (International Development)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters in International Development</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work (grad program)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma of Justice</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance diploma of Translation Interpreting</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert IV in Community Services</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert IV in Youth Work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert III in Aged Care</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
<td><strong>114</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was also a gender imbalance among respondents with 86% of the sample comprising of females (see Fig. 1, page 4). This gender response rate occurred equally in both the telephone and web based surveys. This was again influenced by the fact that female graduates appear more likely to register their details with the alumni upon graduation.
Respondents were also most likely to be aged under 34 (82.5%) with 58% being under 24 years of age (see Fig 2).

Figure 2: Response to surveys and telephone interviews by age

Findings ¹

“Since you graduated”

One of the most encouraging findings of this research is that it strongly indicates that graduates of the School of GSSSP are highly employable. 66% of all graduates interviewed had gained employment within six months of graduating, with over 85% finding employment within a year. A further indicator of the high level of employability is that of among graduates who sought to enter the professional workforce upon graduation, over 70% gained employment after less than five applications for positions.

Employment within the professional workforce is more prevalent among graduates of higher education degrees than VET programs. 82% of graduates of Higher Education programs reported being employed with the vast majority of these graduates holding positions directly related to their field of study. Over 50% currently hold full time positions, while 25% work part time. These results are indicative of the fact that the majority of Higher Education graduates seek to enter the workforce upon graduation. Interestingly this appears marginally lower than the 2006 graduate destinations survey that indicates 82% of HE graduates were in full time employment.

¹ The finding which separate Higher Education and VET students have been taken from the telephone survey only.
While 40% of Higher Education graduates did report that they spent some time travelling at the completion of their degree, this travel was usually limited to a period of less than 3 months. Further study among this group is also less likely with only 28% of graduates attempting further study after graduating from their undergraduate degree. Amongst those who complete some further study, Graduate Diplomas of Education are the most likely course to be undertaken.

“About your placement”

It is clear from the surveys that students from the School of GSSSP undertake their placements at a wide variety of organisations. Respondents reported having undertaken their placements within the private sector, at NGO’s (CSO’s), and at local, state and federal government departments and agencies. Certain organisations and sectors featured prominently including local councils, DHS, aged care facilities and community service organisations.

Respondents were overwhelmingly positive when reflecting on their placement experience. 88% of graduates interviewed agreed or strongly agreed that they had learnt a great deal from their placement. The feedback received concerning the value of having a placement as part of the courses was overwhelmingly positive. Most students not only enjoyed their placements and could see the value of it in their course, in general, they highlighted the placement as being one of the best aspects of the course they undertook.

While the graduates reflected positively on the placement, there were mixed opinions regarding the level of support given to students during their placement. 64% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they received adequate support from RMIT staff during their placement with 70% agreeing that they received this level of support from their placement supervisor.

A number of common themes emerged amongst the respondents who held negative views in relation to the support they received. These included:
- Students feeling they were not visited at workplaces often enough
- Students feeling they were not assisted in finding a placement
- Students feeling that they were not prepared or adequately advised in relation to what type of placement they should be undertaking

“Perceptions of the relationship between placement and subsequent employment”

Respondents viewed the undertaking of a placement as having a positive impact on both their ability to gain employment and in enhancing their skills in the workforce. Overall 79% of respondents replied positively when asked if they believed that their placement had been helpful in preparing them for professional work.

Graduates were also asked about the direct relationship between their current employment and the placement they undertook. 55% responded positively when asked whether they believed that their placement assisted them in obtaining their current job while 43% stated that there was a direct connection between their current job and the placement they undertook. These connections included securing a position at the organisation where they undertook placement and obtaining a position through contacts they made during placement. Furthermore 63% of all respondents believed that their placement had been helpful in equipping them for their current job. When discussing these particular results it is important to note that many students who went on to complete further studies are still not working as a result; many of these graduates stated that they...
where either ‘undecided’ or ‘disagreed’ that their placement had positively impacted on their employment. This occurrence ultimately lowered the number of ‘positive’ responses, and the results, consequently need to be viewed with this in mind.

“Perceptions of RMIT and Placement”

The final section of the survey allowed graduates the opportunity to express their views on the placement in general and the way in which RMIT can better link the placements with graduate employment. Again the responses were primarily positive however a number of common themes were present.

One of the most common suggestions made by the graduates was that RMIT work towards building partnerships which specific organisations. It was suggested that this would not only assist RMIT graduates gaining employment but it would also ensure that the organisations where students did their placement would have a better understanding of what placements should entail. A number of graduates suggested that local councils should be considered as worthwhile partnership organisations.

Another theme that became apparent in the analysis of the data is in relationship to the timing and length of placements. A number of higher education graduates suggested that a short placement should be held earlier in the degrees so as students could ‘get their feet wet’. The students felt this would allow them to determine earlier in the degree which type of employment they were best suited to and/or enjoyed.

Many of the ‘negative’ comments and observations given by graduates appeared to relate to a general anxiety around the degree, placement and employment. That is, students feeling they didn’t feel they knew enough about placements and that they were unsure about career paths open to them. Some graduates felt that more time during the degree should be spent on this issue. Suggestions included having employers coming to speak in classes and time spent in classes discussing placement before it occurs.

Included in many responses to this section of the survey was a very clear message that the placements are seen as the most practical and important part of the courses and that they should continue to be offered.

Submitted on behalf of the Community of Practice - Field Education graduate outcome

**Steering Committee:**
- Julian Bondy
- Robyn Dale
- Martyn Jones
- Enza Santangelo
- Helen McLean

**School of GSSSP Community of Practice:**
- Alan Ogilvie
- John T. Jackson
- Beau Beza
- Christine Craik
- Bruce Wilson
- Linette Hawkins
- Robbie Guevara
- Russell Solomon
- Michael Emslie