

The 4E project: Employability through exploration, experience and engagement

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Strategic objectives addressed:

The project is aligned with RMIT University's Learning and Teaching goals of providing employment opportunities for students. It is also aligned with the university's aspirations towards improving student experience. That is, it focuses on building a sense of community by connecting students with their professions and occupations and with their fellow students.

The project is particularly aligned with RMIT University's Graduate Attributes of both "Work-ready" and "Active and lifelong learners". Just like the university seeks to imbue students with practical understanding and skills as well as consider learning to be a lifelong activity, similarly it is important to imbue students with an understanding about employability. Understanding employability is an active lifelong endeavour, not just an activity that is done after graduation.

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1 Executive summary

Developing a career focus for Information Systems (IS) students can be particularly challenging due to the variety of possible career roles available to graduates (e.g. business analyst, database administrator, network administrator, system developer) and any of these IS-related roles could be in a number of disciplines (e.g. healthcare, education, business, science). Therefore, an important part of the IS program (BP138 and BP308) is to educate students about these roles so that they can obtain a career focus early on and develop appropriate employability knowledge and skills.

The 4E project addressed these issues through a planned program of engagement within various communities of practice, including alumni, students, practitioners, career advisers, industry recruiters, and organisations, with various touch points across the IS programs. Scheduled activities were coordinated by an academic coordinator and designed by the IS program team. The activities ran within and in parallel to the existing curriculum. They included: site visits, workshops, competitions, networking events with prospective employers, and guest presentations by industry practitioners.

This program-wide schedule of activities reflected the pathway of career development of students, namely:

- In the first year, students **explore** the IT industry, the trends, and the skills required to meet these emerging trends
- In the middle and finals years, students gain experience by working with and in these organisations.

At various levels of the IS programs, students are given opportunities to **engage** with professionals in their field, refine their resumes, learn how to market themselves, build professional networks, and add to their experience in the world of work.

Students who participated in activities put forth by the 4E Project gained a better sense of employability in regard to the current industry and future trends in employment. They also gained practical skills in developing their online CV through a LinkedIn workshop and a competition. The development of their LinkedIn profiles also gave them a better opportunity to access to industry professionals through online networking.

2 Outcomes

The 4E Project was specifically designed for students in the two IS Programs (BP138 and BP308). As such, approximately 95 students from these two programs were impacted.

The early focus of the project on first year students increased their awareness of employment issues. The Business Information Systems Student Association (BISSA) reported that their members benefited significantly from the activities of the 4E project. Many of these students were seeking employment for their co-operative year placement and found the 4E project activities particularly useful.

The LinkedIn workshop and competition were also beneficial. 26 students participated in the workshop and 24 students entered the competition. The 5 prize-winners were composed of first and second year students and the Second year students who of the competition gained employment at high-profile companies, including Ernst & Young, GMH and IBM.

Additionally, 13 academics benefited from the “Future of Education and Employability” seminar run by Peter Evans-Greenwood from Deloitte’s Centre for the Edge.

3 Project outcomes and impacts

The main outcome of the project was educating IS students about employability in their respective field through engaging them with a program of scheduled activities. The majority of the planned activities ran as expected while a few were altered or merged due to practical reasons. A summary of the activities is presented next.

| Date | Activity | Outcome/Impact |
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| February | <p>Orientation to ICT and Employability & Individual Skill Awareness. IS students attending orientation were informed about ICT employability so that they may gain awareness of the skills required. This aim is to allow them to plan their future activities/portfolio before seeking co-operative year placements and/or graduate employment.</p> | Students attending orientation became aware of ICT employability before they started their IS studies. |
| April | <p>Digital Trends Workshop presented to ISYS1051 Digital Business Design and Innovation students. Students were made aware about upcoming digital trends in business.</p> | 77 students enrolled in ISYS1051 were informed about digital business trends. |
| April | <p>The Future of Education and Employability. Peter Evans-Greenwood, from Deloitte's Centre of for the Edge, presented and discussed the future of education and employability (based on his report, "The paradigm shift: Redefining education") with academics from the School of Business IT and Logistics.</p> | 13 academics from the School of Business IT and Logistics (primarily those who teach in the IS Programs, BP138 and BP308) were informed about future trends in education and employability. |
| May | <p>LinkedIn Workshop. Mr Timothy McCluskey, Relationship Manager from LinkedIn, ran a practical workshop for students from the IS Major to get them started on the design of their LinkedIn profile, an important part of job seeking nowadays. In addition to a practical component, the workshop also included a presentation and discussion about what prospective employers expect to see on LinkedIn profiles and advice on creating an effective profile and how to present such.</p> | 26 students from Years 1 and 2 participated in the workshop and obtained a sophisticated understanding of LinkedIn and began developing their LinkedIn profiles and the features available within LinkedIn that can be utilised to increase employment opportunities and access professional development. |
| June | <p>LinkedIn Competition. The LinkedIn competition was a way to encourage students to improve and refine their profile that they started in the LinkedIn workshop in preparation for job seeking.</p> | 24 students entered the competition. All students benefited from improving their LinkedIn profiles. In particular, The 5 prize-winners were composed of first and second year students. The second year students gained employment at high-profile companies including Ernst & Young, GMH and IBM |
| August | <p>Job Application Preparation. Ms Mina Lim & Mr Kieran Williams, Recruitment Partners from ComputerShare ran this workshop.</p> | 28 students in Year 2 received training on the major steps of the Job application process. A focus on CV preparation from an Employer's focus and tips on how to enhance the presentation of information to employers enhanced students understanding not only of the process but how to better gain employer confidence in an applicant. |
| September | <p>Meet the Employers. Combined with Chris Thompson's team. Students visited 3 employers at their actual work place in small groups at appointed days/times for a 1.5-hour window. Students went to NAB, EXXON, and Computershare.</p> | 18 students in Year 2 visited companies at their offices and received a tour and background information on careers within each company. |

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| October | Skills Audit Vacation/Voluntary Work. Ms Kim Wen from Forrestfield Consulting and Ms Sally Brooks Careers RMIT. | 20 students in Year 1 participated. An RMIT BIS Alumni Kim Wen conducted a workshop primarily for First year students that examined common 'soft skill' components with advice on how to present and develop evidence of such. Sally spoke of the organisations in the voluntary sector seeking BIS students over the Christmas vacation. |
| November | End of Year Employer Networking Event. Including Digital Design Project Exhibition/Competition attended by three Michael Page Recruitment Officers and Four employers from Austral Consulting and GMH. | 85 students from all years attended this final semester week activity designed to celebrate success and to provide an opportunity for students from all years to link personally and better comprehend employment requirements. This function was organised through BISSA and the ISYS1051 course. |

Another deliverable is an “Employability Skills Matrix”, which maps courses from the IS Major to employability skills development. This matrix will be used in future IS program team meetings as a means to review the employability skills IS students are obtaining from the courses in the IS Major.

An intangible outcome of the project is the relationship that the academic champion and the project leader built with the newly-created Business Information Systems Students Association (BISSA). Due to low student attendance at some of the early events, the 4E Project team sought the assistance of BISSA to improve attendance. For example, the “Job Application Preparation” and “Skills Audit Vacation /Voluntary Work” workshops were advertised by BISSA to its members and the 4E Project team collaborated with BISSA for the LinkedIn Competition and the “End of Year Employer Networking” event.

An issue that affected the project was that one of the project leaders, Mr Vic Kamay, left RMIT University. This was a significant issue as Mr Kamay was to act as the “academic champion” to coordinate the project and a number of the planned events were based on his professional network. To address this issue, the team appointed Mr Terrence Sheehan in his place. As such, a number of proposed workshops were changed and/or re-scheduled. Overall, the project was still successful, albeit with some minor changes.

4 Dissemination strategies and outputs

The project was disseminated at various stages to a number of different groups. This includes discussion of the project and the development of a schedule of activities during the IS program team meetings, and reporting on the project at the School of Business IT and Logistics’ Learning and Teaching Committee, and the College of Business’s Undergraduate Working Group.

The Employability Skills Matrix, will be scheduled to be presented and discussed at a future IS program team meeting, and will serve to be useful in the upcoming accreditation of the IS programs in 2016.

Furthermore, this report will be made available to the Office of the Dean, Learning and Teaching (OLDT). In turn, the ODLT will make the report available to members of RMIT University through their webpage.

5 Evaluation of project outcomes

The 4E Project ran as a pilot project to increase students' understanding of employability and obtain employability skills through an engaged program of scheduled events throughout an academic year. The various events targeted various groups of students in the IS programs (e.g. first year students at orientation, second year students seeking co-operative year placements, final year students seeking graduate employment). To a lesser degree, it also served as a vehicle to disseminate employability awareness to academics who coordinate courses in the IS major.

The IS academics were engaged in a fruitful and thought-provoking discussion with Peter Evans-Greenwood, who recently wrote a report for Deloitte about the future of education and employment. To further cement this process, the 4E project team developed an "Employability Skills Matrix" to map courses from the IS major to employability skills. This matrix was developed from an analysis of the course guides and through consultation with the course coordinators. Thus, it will be useful for future improvements of the courses.

Students who participated in the 4E events received a number of benefits, including an understanding of employability, current and future trends in the industry and employment; understanding of LinkedIn and practical skills for developing a professional profile. In some cases, such as prize-winning students who participated in the LinkedIn competition, students obtained co-operative year placements with high-profile companies.

Students generally rated the events between 4-5 out of a maximum of 5. The LinkedIn workshop and competition were well received as the workshop provided students with insights about what prospective employers seek in their LinkedIn profiles. The End of Year Networking event was also a highlight. The combination of the LinkedIn events and the networking event was also effective. One student reported that he met a recruiter at the networking event, connected with her on LinkedIn, and was subsequently invited for an interview. Although he was eventually successful, he did not accept the offer as he had accepted another offer in the interim.

Another student, who attended 4 of the 7 events, related how these events gave him a better understanding of the industry, employability, and how they related to his program:

"Before I had a very narrow understanding about my degree and future employment opportunities. These events have opened my eyes and helped me to be aware of the ICT industry and the possible career paths that I can take. "

He also stated:

"The best things of the events that I have attended were the enthusiasm and friendliness of the presenters. Additionally, I got chance to meet other students from my field. It was interesting to learn their opinions and future aims."

Overall, as a pilot project, the 4E project resulted in a number of positives for students who participated in the events. It increased their understanding of employability, gave them employability skills, and helped them to connect with the industry.