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WORKING PAPER SERIES

Management student perceptions of professional career development education

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ABSTRACT

Universities can provide necessary assistance to young graduates about to embark upon their careers by helping them to identify employable skills and enhance their understanding of contemporary career management practices. Responding to the relatively poor employment outcomes of university graduates, Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia has embarked upon a strategy of investment in career development for all students. One part of this strategy is to implement a career development subject as an elective for all students. Evaluation results show that management students perceive the subject to be extremely valuable to their career prospects. They also report benefits accruing from self-reflection and long term planning, giving them a deeper understanding of themselves and their motivations, and an enhanced understanding of their aspirations within the contemporary workplace.

Keywords: *career development, strategic career planning, graduate employment*

INTRODUCTION

Victoria University is one of Australia's newer universities, located in Melbourne, Victoria. The University is working to improve the employability of its student cohort and one of the strategies adopted to achieve this will require an improvement in students' outcomes. The University is directing resources towards student employment preparation, student portfolios, career planning and career services. This article reports on the process of developing, teaching and evaluating a new career planning and development subject at Victoria University which is designed to meet the career planning needs of all undergraduate students.

The subject was developed and offered by the School of Management and because of this most students enrolled in the subject were undertaking management degrees. The subject was found to be especially useful for these students who, unlike accounting, law or information technology graduates, do not have a readily identifiable career path.

The following section of the paper outlines the problems facing young graduates in a difficult employment market. A brief background to the history of the career development strategy at Victoria University is presented, followed by details of the syllabus and assessment. The methodology used to examine student perceptions is described, followed by the findings and discussion of the study.

UNDERGRADUATE CAREER PREPARATION

Uncertain graduate employment prospects are common to all universities. Universities are facing a growing problem of placing graduates in an employment market which is extremely competitive and which no longer offers traditional career paths (Nabi & Bagley 1999). The number of graduates in the labour market has increased resulting in an oversupply of applicants for graduate placements (Doherty Viney & Adamson 1997). For these reasons it is imperative that universities invest resources into schemes that optimise student job seeking success while also providing sets of marketable and transferable skills to enable graduates to manage their ideal careers. For graduates, an ideal career is more and more being identified as a portfolio career. Portfolio careers and lifestyle driven careers enable individuals to not only manage and promote their career expectations but also allow them to promote themselves as flexible and motivated individuals with a balanced view of lifestyle and career aspirations (Simonsen 2000). Career success is increasingly being seen as those careers that are being managed by the individual ensuring that they promote their capabilities and skills in the market place while still maintaining a balance between their work, family and personal needs (Simonsen 2000; Greenhaus, Callanan & Godshalk 2000).

Fundamental to this is the development of strategic career plans during undergraduate study. This process enables students to clarify which skills are lacking and to devise ways of developing these skills over the time of their remaining studies (Nabi & Bagley 1999). Undergraduate students often have poorly formed ideas of what a career could mean for them and how their skills could fit a career. Lau and Pang (1995) analysed data from 492 undergraduate respondents in Hong Kong and concluded that they did not have a clear vision of their future careers. Most had expectations and plans regarding initial jobs but did not have a career plan (Lau & Pang 1995). They were found to be passive, feeling that they must take what is offered rather than establish a desired path (Lau & Pang 1995).

In the United Kingdom, Counsell (1996) found undergraduates' career decisions were influenced mainly by parents, close family, friends and acquaintances and tutors. Other, possibly more useful sources such as the job market, perceived needs and perceived skills and abilities were less influential, although females were significantly more likely to consider their perceived skills and abilities than males (Counsell 1996).

Some form of training for undergraduates is recommended by most commentators in the career management literature (Stewart & Knowles 2001; Nabi & Bagley 1999). The literature suggests that individuals need to develop an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses, together with an awareness of the opportunities in the workplace (Nabi & Bagley 1999). Lau and Pang (2000) suggest that undergraduates should learn career planning skills by attending programs at university as part of their syllabus, as well as through on-the-job training during employment and through self-learning. The development of career plans in the early stages of an undergraduate's course is likely to help the student develop the right skills and to become more self-reliant (Nabi & Bagley 1999).

Individuals are being asked to manage their own careers and providing them with the skills to problem-solve, develop insight into goal setting and strategies for attaining these goals is the essence of career management (Greenhaus et al. 2000). Career management is a process by which individuals develop awareness about their strengths, weaknesses, values and interests, identify goals and opportunities and establish plans for the achievement of these goals (Noe 2002). Stewart and Knowles' (2001) model for this enables individuals to create their own career opportunities by matching 'self-awareness' with 'opportunity awareness'. Self-awareness is achieved through a process of continuous reflection which concentrates on transferable skills and qualities (Stewart & Knowles 2001). Opportunity awareness involves close study of a full range of employment placements through career seminars run by employers, vacation work, clear description of roles and responsibilities for students to consider and general classroom discussion of various possible careers.

Simonsen (2000, p. 109) describes strategic career planning as having a compelling vision of the future and understanding what one's life work is all about; preparing for an unpredictable future; specifying goals but also studying external influences – industry trends, market demands, competition, and anticipating the way external forces will shape opportunities. Similarly Lau and Pang (2000) recommend that graduates develop flexible goals, tentative time frames and action plans to achieve a direction for fulfilling career aspirations. They argue that flexibility in planning is essential as long-term plans may become unrealistic given the rapid change experienced by many in the employment market (Lau & Pang 2000).

These approaches informed the development of the career planning subject developed at Victoria University. The following section describes the background to the subject's implementation and provides a brief outline of the syllabus.

BACKGROUND

Victoria University was formed in 1992 as a result of a merger between Footscray Institute of Technology and Western Institute. Employment outcomes for Victoria University graduates have been less certain than for many other Australian university graduates. The University is located in the western region of Melbourne, an area dominated by small and medium sized organisations. The University is working to improve the employability of its student cohort

and one of the strategies adopted to achieve this requires an improvement in students' understanding of initiating and managing their careers. The University is directing resources towards student employment preparation, career planning and career services. The University's goal, as outlined in the 2002-2003 Strategic Plan, is for all Victoria University graduates to have an appropriate employment or further education outcome within three months of graduation. The key target is for 'the gap between VU graduate employability and the Victorian average graduate employability to be reduced each year to reach the Victorian average' (Falk 2002, p. 3).

Operationally this strategy has resulted in the development of a new subject, Career Planning and Development, as a collaborative effort between the Student Career Development Unit and the School of Management. The subject is offered as an elective and it contributes to the completion of a degree with the same value as any other subject.

The topics covered are aimed at developing the students' self awareness and their understanding of the world of work. They include the history and sociology of work; forecasting future trends in the nature of work; career development theory; self awareness; understanding change in the context of transition to work; organisational versus professional loyalty; career decision making; career strategic planning; career politics; the culture and legislation of work, and advanced job seeking skills.

The subject is taught as a workshop, including lectures and extensive group work. Students are required to complete a large number of reflective exercises, and they participate in role-plays, discussions and demonstrations via video, all aimed at developing self-awareness in relation to their interests, values and abilities. Opportunity awareness is explored through the use of several guest speakers from employment agencies and the University's Careers Development Unit that address the students on topics such as job search skills. The students also attend career seminars where there is the opportunity for them to speak to employers as well as seek advice from career advisors. Assessment includes a folio of responses to reflective exercises and personality tests, the development of a personal career learning plan, and a detailed strategic career plan. An employment application targeted to an employer of their choice involves careful preparation of the application together with an investigative report on the employer organization and the role sought.

The subject provides students with essential background knowledge for career planning and development. It takes a dual focus, examining both lifestyle choices and career development theory. The subject explores the career choices people make, and their involvement in work, while also examining the way work has developed, the trends for work and change in the future and the social implications of these. Students are provided with tools to identify their current interests, their values, preferred work environment, person work style preferences and their skills and abilities. They use frameworks to identify strategies to realise their life and work goals as well as their career expectations.

METHODOLOGY

This article reports upon the background to and the process of developing a new subject to meet the strategic goals of the University. The subject evaluation processes, which are common to all subjects conducted at the University, are utilised to examine student satisfaction with the subject. In addition material collected during focus group discussions conducted during the last session of each semester has been collated and analysed.

Although the subject is open to students of all disciplines the enrolments are predominantly (95 per cent) management students. These students undertake specialist studies in human resource management, service and operations management and general management.

Eighty students enrolled in the subject during 2002. When invited to complete subject evaluations 60 students returned evaluation forms and 12 students agreed to participate in a focus group discussion. Both quantitative and qualitative data were generated from the forms. The qualitative data were analysed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) method of

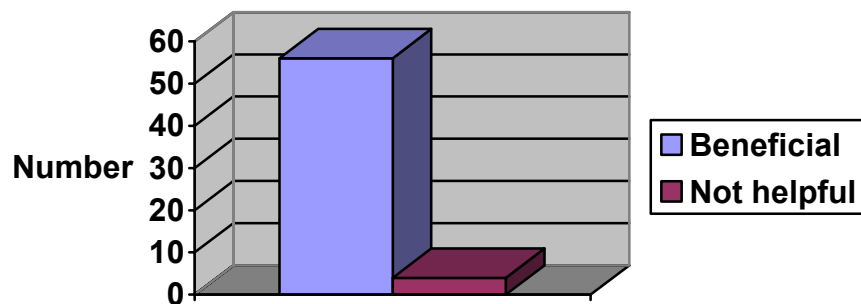
arraying data and developing themes. The quantitative data were used to generate simple tables.

The evaluation form asked students to indicate what they expected from the subject, whether the subject met expectations, whether the subject helped the student to clarify their career direction and ways in which the subject could be improved. The focus group discussions were less structured with students being invited to comment on any aspect of their experience of the subject.

FINDINGS

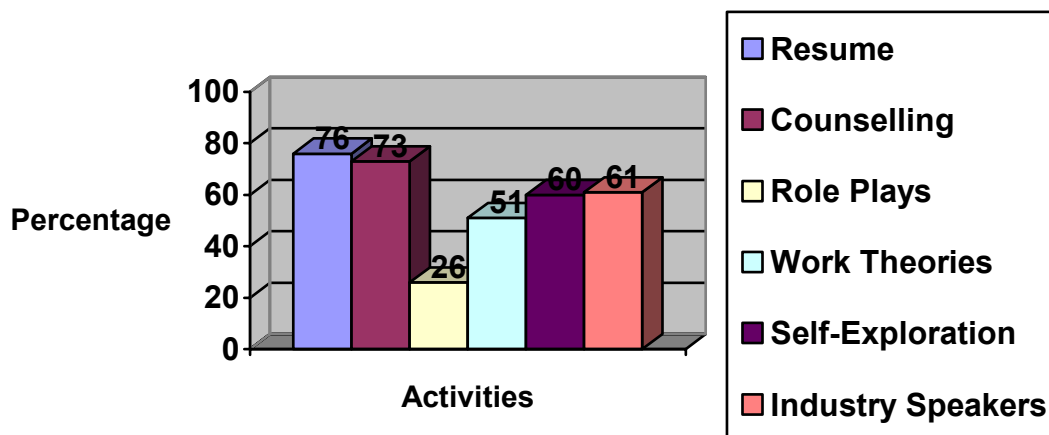
Sixty students returned usable evaluation forms. The survey asked whether the subject helped students to clarify their ideas about their career. An overwhelming majority 56 of the 60 respondents agreed that the subject was beneficial and that this had helped them to determine a career strategy (Table 1). The remaining four indicated that they were still puzzled about a possible career direction.

Table 1: Usefulness of the Subject



Students were asked to indicate what they had expected from the subject. Their responses are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Student Expectations of Activities



As expected most students anticipated concrete activities and content to assist with immediate job hunting skills, including career counselling. The majority of students expected assistance

with resume writing (76%) and careers counselling (73%). They were not anticipating activities which challenged their assumptions about work and their mode of operating in a working environment. Most did not anticipate working in role play situations (26%), although this was reported by them to be one of the most useful aspects of the subject. Around half of the students expected theories of work (51%), self-exploration exercises (60%) and industry speakers (61%) to be part of the syllabus.

Overall 54 (90%) of the 60 students completing the evaluation form said the subject met their expectations. Typical responses indicated that without a subject like this students would find it difficult to understand their career aspirations. The subject appears to have deepened the students' awareness of their own values, their understanding of their preferred work environment and their sense of longer term career direction.

Most students commented on the obvious concrete skills obtained from the subject, such as interviewing techniques and job searching:

I feel it has given me a sense of the workforce, has helped me with interviews, through practice, and has helped me to identify my ultimate career goals. The subject has provided me with practical information about how to go about finding a job, and has given me the necessary skills and practice via role-play etc to go about doing this.

Importantly, most students also reported a deeper level of awareness of the psychology underpinning a successful career:

The subject assisted in identification of underlying career anchors and values, which in turn enabled me to make an educated decision regarding a major career change.

I feel I have a greater understanding of career planning and strategy, and have gained a number of useful tools which will assist me long after I graduate. In my opinion, this subject has done more to prepare me for the workforce than the bulk of my course.

It has helped me to focus on the future and what I want to achieve. I have been working for a while and this subject has helped me understand and change my perspective of the workplace.

It gave me an indication of the direction that I want to follow in terms of my career and how I am going to get there.

This deeper self-awareness extended to a broader investigation of lifestyle goals, including family, friends and pursuits outside of the work environment but supported by it. Respondents indicated that the subject had provided them with life-long skills and enhanced self-awareness as well as giving them a broader understanding of what a long term career meant, especially the need for balance and flexibility.

This should be a compulsory subject because it has helped me understand more about myself and relating it to my desired field of interest. It has cleared up any uncertainty after finishing my degree.

I didn't really know what to expect however I got a lot out of it – ie. personal exploration. It pushed me to consider my goals and future plans and gave me a better idea of my desired career direction.

Although I don't particularly enjoy all of the self-exploration exercises it made me look more closely at myself and help me to identify a suitable job.

It gave me a strategic view of my career and greater self-awareness.

The subject highlighted self-understanding and what I value in a career.

The subject enabled me to understand that there has to be a balance between work and family life and pleasure... it's a bit of everything including life's challenges.

I was very work oriented before, with career challenges and so forth, but this subject opened up other doors and has given me opportunities to think of other areas also – that career is not just being at work, it means you need to include other areas...you need to plan your career and take up opportunities presented to you.

Flexibility is very important...you can really look at what you want to do and what you are good at while still enjoying a balance in your life.

Importantly the subject left students feeling confident of the prospect of negotiating a career which would be satisfying and enjoyable. By the end of the semester students were discussing the intrinsic worth of work rather than the more obvious extrinsic rewards such as salary and conditions.

The subject taught me a lot about myself, my values, my career plans and how I might fit into today's workforce.

It has helped me realise that it is possible to fulfil my passion and enjoy a role! .. by aligning values with your career.

Many students used the subject as a forum to discuss possible career paths arising from their management studies. They were reassured to find that the subjects they were studying, for example; managing change, negotiation, strategic management, human resource management, service management, business ethics and knowledge management, were extremely relevant to a wide range of positions.

The subject demonstrated that I will be best suited to a position in management, which was the perfect answer!

Even those students who remained uncertain of their career choices reported benefits from the subject.

I am still confused about what I want to do. However, it has made me think a lot more about my career, even if I haven't yet come to a decision.

While students enjoyed being given the tools to take control of career decisions for themselves they also felt a need for one-to-one advice, based on their understanding of career anchors, values and work preferences. Many statements received indicated that the students wish to have individual career counselling as part of the subject.

The subject could include, more feedback on an individual basis. Perhaps make it compulsory to make an appointment with a career counsellor.

As a result students will be strongly advised to attend the many career seminars conducted by industry groups, professional associations and graduate recruitment programs where they are able to meet employers and consult career advisors.

DISCUSSION

When students began the career development subject their views of what a career meant was limited, with rewards being expressed in terms of concrete rewards. Researchers Moy and Lee (2002) have observed that extrinsic rewards, such as career prospects, pay and job security, are the most influential factors in graduates selecting initial jobs. The jobs that are most visible, those which are heavily promoted and which clearly offer these benefits tend to be found within multi-national organisations. Naturally students seek positions with larger companies because they are more visible and they market themselves effectively to graduates. Those organisations which are smaller, which operate in professions which do not market themselves effectively, are not so heavily targeted by graduates. There is a role for career development subjects such as this to make students aware of a wider range of career opportunities, especially in small and medium sized organisations.

When the subject concluded, with students having spent significant periods contemplating what they would look for in their career over the longer term, many deeper ideas emerged.

Students recognised the importance of matching their values to their chosen career. They developed an understanding their desired working environment, understood whether job security was important to them, understood which careers offered opportunities for growth and responsibility and they realised that the desire for compatible colleagues was an essential part of their job search strategy. Students also appreciated the importance of having a long term plan that incorporated flexibility and balance to ensure a meaningful and challenging career (Greenhaus et al. 2000). The ability to market their skills and capabilities while still remaining flexible was seen as important in a changing job market.

It may be that graduates would be better directed to finding first jobs in small and medium sized organisations rather than seeking employment in the increasingly competitive graduate recruitment market of the multinational organisations. Small and medium sized organisations offer better managerial relationships, more responsibility and the likelihood of more senior positions than multi-nationals (Moy & Lee 2002). They also offer a wide range of fulfilling careers that sit outside the professional multi-national career which so many students aspire to because it seems the obvious area to pursue.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of a career planning subject for undergraduate students at Victoria University has been an important initiative which, on first evaluation, appears to have met student expectations. The evaluation showed that students initially anticipated the subject would concentrate on developing skills in resume writing and obtaining career counselling. They learnt that they have the ability to take control and manage their career through the development of self-awareness skills, goal setting and development of plans for their long-term career aspirations. They reported that these benefits far exceeded their expectations of the subject.

The students' responses support the view that higher education should take a role in the providing students with appropriate career management skills. Stewart and Knowles (2001), Nabi and Bagley (1999) and Simonsen (2000) recommend a strategic approach to career development – this approach both deepens and broadens the range of initial positions available to young graduates. In particular the wide range of positions available to graduates in small and medium sized organisations should be further exploited (Moy & Lee 2002).

A study of career development also has benefits for other subjects taught to management students. Many subjects taught in management schools concentrate on process rather than content and some students fail to see the rationale for this. The career development subject offers students the opportunity to appreciate the value of the skills, competencies and understandings gained from role play, case studies, debate and discussion which typify the discipline. They recognise that understanding of themselves and others is essential to a successful management career.

The work being done by the Student Career Development unit, together with the development of suitable curricula available to all undergraduate students, marks a significant response to the needs of students wishing to move from study to a rewarding and meaningful career. Victoria University has recognised the changing nature of graduate employment and has moved to effectively meet the challenges of a more demanding and competitive employment market.

This paper reports on a small, exploratory study. The results, though positive and convincing, require substantiation by way of further broad-based research. The targets set by the University's strategic plan must be measured and graduate job success monitored. Accordingly subsequent studies are planned including a longitudinal study of student outcomes.

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