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This is the Published version of the following publication

Lock, Edward and Kelly, Kate (2022) Gateways not pathways: student perceptions of the portals to employability. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 13 (1). pp. 65-78. ISSN 1838-3815

The publisher's official version can be found at
<http://dx.doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2022vol13no1art1499>
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Gateways not pathways: Student perceptions of the portals to employability

Edward Lock¹ and Kate Kelly¹

Corresponding author: Edward Lock (Edward.lock@vu.edu.au)

¹ First Year College, Victoria University, Melbourne, Victoria

Abstract

The expectation that tertiary education leads to employment is one that most commencing students hold. A problem arises when there is a gap between the knowledge and skills students expect to acquire and the knowledge and skills course designers and teachers expect students to develop. The present study interviewed 22 first year students and 12 final year students to explore their expectations and experiences of employability teaching and learning, and compared these to the conceptions of employability articulated in their institution's policy documentation. The findings suggest that most students believed that, to achieve their career goals, their primary focus should be on completing their academic studies, and that all relevant knowledge and skills would be unveiled during this process. As such, they viewed their time at university as a distinct stage in their development, one that must be completed before they move on to engage with the challenge of employment. Such expectations differ in important ways from those of the institution at which participants were enrolled, which sets employability within the context of an ever-changing job market and the consequent need for life-long learning. Moreover, while the institution clearly articulates the skills that they believe are embedded within their units and courses, this is not being conveyed to students. Implications of this research highlight the need to carefully consider what expectations students are bringing with them regarding the enhancement of employability and how institutions can best act to bridge the gap between students' expectations and their own.

Keywords

Employability teaching; graduate capabilities; non-traditional students; career planning; expectations gap; transitional pedagogy; career pathways; life long learning

Introduction

The idea that university study enhances a person's employability is a central feature of the higher education landscape both internationally and in Australia (Oliver, 2015). In the past, this idea has been a central driver of the shift towards widened access within the Australian higher education sector. University education was understood as having improved employment and economic outcomes, both for individuals and for the broader economy, and so widening access to that education was and is deemed to be very much in the public interest. This message has been transmitted to students, a majority of whom now enrol in higher education institutions (HEIs) with improved employment opportunities in mind (Baik et al., 2015). Enhancing graduates' employability is now a central goal of both HEIs and the policymakers who regulate and fund them: institutions market themselves and their products using claims related to the enhancing of employability, and policymakers are increasingly

seeking to evaluate university teaching and learning in terms of institutions' delivery on such promises (Dawkins et al., 2019). Put simply, in today's Australian higher education sector, students, HEIs and governments hold high expectations regarding the capacity of university study to enhance employability.

While the widening access agenda has led to HEIs having a greater interest in employability, an additional consequence of this agenda has been the rise of pedagogic challenges associated with the delivery of higher education to 'non-traditional' students (O'Shea et al., 2021). Investigation of these challenges has generated a large volume of research, with a particularly prominent branch focused on the development, implementation and evaluation of transitions pedagogy (Kift, 2009; Kift, 2015; Baik et al., 2015; Tinto, 2009). One of the key findings of this research is the recognition that, in order to be successful, higher education teaching and learning needs to bridge an expectations mismatch or gap. This can be understood as the gap between the expectations that students on the one hand, and HEIs on the other, hold regarding the nature, purpose and operation of teaching and learning at university (Kift, 2015; Krause et al., 2005). The basic proposition that arises from this literature is that, to the extent that such an expectations gap exists, students are unlikely to achieve all that higher education study has to offer.

What has been less fully investigated is whether or not expectations gaps exist in relation to those aspects of higher education teaching and learning that are most targeted at enhancing employability. Or, in other words, we do not yet know whether the expectations that students and HEIs have regarding employability teaching and learning are aligned with one another. This matters because, as transitions research has demonstrated, the presence of such an expectations gap may threaten the efficacy of the efforts of HEIs to support students' development of employability skills, knowledge and aptitudes. In simple terms, if such an expectations gap exists, even the best-intended efforts of teachers and curriculum designers may involve them merely 'talking past' the students they are seeking to support.

This paper reports on exploratory research comparing the expectations of an Australian HEI with those of its students regarding employability teaching and learning. The purpose of this research is to identify whether or not an expectations gap exists and, if so, to explore the characteristics of this gap. The research was carried out in Victoria University, Melbourne, a large Australian university that teaches courses across many disciplines and that caters to a diverse cohort of students, including relatively high proportions of culturally diverse, low-socio-economic status (SES), first-in-family and mature-age students (Samerawickrema & Cleary, 2021).

Literature review

An awareness of the pedagogic challenges that arise when students experience an expectations mismatch has arisen primarily in the context of research into the success with which diverse students make the transition into and through their first year of study. A core strand of such research is focused on transitions pedagogy. Proponents of transitions pedagogy have themselves drawn on research from related fields, including the first-year experience (Krause et al., 2005; Baik et al., 2015), the challenges of improving student retention (Tinto, 2009), the importance of promoting student engagement (Kift, 2009) and the value of university adaptation to the needs of diverse students (Zepke & Leach, 2005). Together, this research highlights the challenges that students face in transitioning towards and into university, particularly if they experience a gap between their expectations of university and the reality of their first-year experience (Briggs et al., 2012). A mismatch between a student's expectations and their first-year experience has been found to be related to increased rates of withdrawal (Kift, 2015). In addition, Briggs and colleagues (2012) note that many students do not attend extra-curricular events, visits, or activities that are on offer, citing work commitments, a reluctance to give up their spare time, and a lack of understanding about how and why to become involved in such experiences. Finally, research in Australia has shown that the alignment of student

expectations with experience is connected to achievement levels (Krause et al., 2005). Such findings highlight the importance of the identification of expectations gaps and of the efforts that institutions take to bridge these gaps (Briggs et al., 2012; Kift, 2015).

As well as highlighting the importance of expectations gaps, transitions pedagogy research has shown that, while transitioning into university can be challenging for all students, it is typically more so for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Briggs et al., 2012). Non-traditional students can include those who are the first in their family to attend university, mature age or from underrepresented cultural groups within the university's population. Such students can face particular challenges associated with the transition to university, including the development of feelings of isolation and frustration if they do not feel that they 'fit' into the university's expectations of them (Briggs et al., 2012). In addition, such students may struggle to succeed at university if they lack the cultural capital needed to understand the implicit rules of and expectations for learning success (Kift, 2015). Given this point, those students who are the first in their family to attend university can be particularly vulnerable. Within an Australian context approximately half of the university student population are first in family (Baik et al, 2015). Generally, these students are considered to be disadvantaged in comparison to their peers who have immediate family members to assist them with navigating the higher education space, making first in family students more likely to experience a gap between their expectations regarding and experiences of higher education. Given the risks that are associated with the presence of such a gap, it is unsurprising that addressing the needs of non-traditional students has come to be seen as increasingly important (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016). Indeed, many of the recommendations that have emerged from transitions pedagogy literature are tailored to the needs of non-traditional students (Kift, 2009), and targeted at the challenge of bridging expectations gaps (Leese, 2010).

The challenges caused by an expectations gap can affect specific areas of higher education learning. Therefore, investigation into the potential presence of expectations gaps in relation to employability teaching and learning would seem warranted. While there is little research in this specific area, that in related fields serves to highlight both the potential for such expectations gaps to exist, and the likely importance of those gaps should they exist. We already have ample evidence that students enter higher education in Australia with future employment in mind. Comprehensive research regarding the first-year experience of Australian undergraduate students shows that 87% enrolled in a higher education course to improve their job prospects, and 77% did so with a specific job in mind (Baik et al., 2015). Further research confirms these findings (Lock & Kelly, 2020), which leads one to conclude that the subject of employment (or employability) is likely to be present in the expectations that many students hold regarding higher education.

The precise content of prospective students' expectations about this aspect of university study are less clear, but existing evidence certainly points towards the potential presence of expectations gaps (Greenbank, 2014). Research shows considerable variation in secondary students' access to careers information, with that variation being caused especially by differences in the socio-economic background of those students (Dockery et al., 2020). Research also indicates that many prospective students lack clear understandings of and knowledge regarding the education-employment pathways that they choose to pursue (Lock & Kelly, 2020; Parks et al., 2017). With a wealth of knowledge available to them, even those prospective students who access that knowledge may find it difficult to discern what information is of value to them, which results in them tending to make intuitive rather than rational decisions about their future education-employment pathway (Greenbank, 2014). More worrying still, recent evidence suggests that despite students often attending university with a career destination in mind, their knowledge of the pathways and requirements to get there can be limited (Lock & Kelly, 2020). If many students do not have accurate understandings of the employment outcomes associated with their chosen degree, we might well worry that they will also lack an accurate expectation of how HEIs intend to support the development of students' employability knowledge and skills.

Finally, it is worth noting that these same patterns regarding the presence of expectations gaps and their increased impact on non-traditional students are evident as students transition out of higher education and into employment (Lizzio, 2012). Students can struggle to understand the nature of, and opportunities within an increasingly complex employment market (Donald et al., 2018). Furthermore, O'Shea and colleagues (2021) have shown that students who come from diverse backgrounds face greater challenges in preparing for graduate employment. For example, they may not take advantage of the necessary extra-curricular activities needed to be competitive in today's job market. While an unwillingness to engage in such extra-curricular employability activities may be explained in part by such students' need to juggle competing demands such as part time/full time employment and caring responsibilities, it is also due to students' lack of the knowledge and cultural capital needed to support this aspect of learning. Similarly, Bathmaker and colleagues (2013) discuss the idea of those entering the job market needing to 'play the game effectively' which acknowledges the increasing requirement for students to graduate not only with specialised knowledge but also with the skills needed to understand how their knowledge and transferable skills connect to the needs of employers; to know how to sell themselves and their prior learning. There is evidence that students believe that the more education they have the better, which can encourage them to believe their degree/s are a ticket to the career of their choice (Lock & Kelly, 2020). Such beliefs can lead some students to miss out on opportunities known to be associated with enhanced employability (O'Shea et al., 2021). Overall, we have reason to presume that an expectations gap about employability teaching and learning might well exist, but there is little definitive evidence articulating either that such a gap exists or, if it does, what the characteristics of this gap might be.

The present study

Purpose

This project explores the expectations regarding employability teaching and learning of first and final-year students enrolled in a diverse array of degree programs at an Australian higher education institution and compares those expectations to the conception of employability articulated by that institution. The purpose of this research is to investigate whether or not a gap exists between the two and, if so, in what ways student expectations differ from the model of employability teaching and learning advanced by the institution.

Context

The institution that forms the case study in this research was selected for two reasons. Firstly, the narrative of employability advanced within Victoria University, Melbourne, as expressed through, for example, its graduate capabilities statements, is typical of those utilised by providers across the higher education sector. Secondly, the means through which this institution seeks to embed employability skills throughout its degree programs is similar to that of many Australian universities, with graduate capabilities being mapped across curricula and assessment tasks (Daniels & Brooker, 2014). As such, the approach to employability teaching and learning of this institution is characteristic of other providers within the Australian higher education sector, which suggests that findings from this research may well be of relevance to other institutions in this sector.

Participants

Drawing on a three-part categorisation of degree types advanced in previous research (Lock & Kelly, 2020), participants were recruited from generalist degrees (including arts and science), mixed degrees (including psychology, law, and criminal justice) and specialist degrees (including nursing, engineering, and paramedicine). Participants were recruited via their student email, and emails to students included a flier and an information form.

Participants comprised of 22 first year university students in their first semester of study and 12 university students in their final year of study. First-year participants had a mean age of 21.9 (SD=5.23) with ages ranging from 18 to 33. Of these students, 63.6% (N=14) were the first in their family to attend university and 31% (N=7) were considered to be 'mature age'. The 12 final-year students had a mean age of 24.58 (SD=4.70) with ages ranging from 21 to 33. In this group, 75.00% (N=9) were the first in their family to attend university and 33.33% (N= 4) were considered 'mature age.' Across the participants, the ratios of those who were first-in-family and mature-age were high relative to average participation of such groups at this institution, an outcome that may be a product of the reliance on students to self-select into this recruitment process. No other demographic information was collected to ensure confidentiality. Students were able to withdraw at any time and no incentives for participation were offered.

Method and procedure

This project was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC-17-192). To explore the alignment between the expectations of the institution and its students, the following steps were taken.

Firstly, the expectations regarding employability advanced by the institution were ascertained through an examination of relevant documentation. Findings were drawn from examination of documentation (including course webpages) related to both the institution's operationalisation of graduate capabilities and its broader employability strategy.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews were used to identify the expectations regarding employability teaching and learning of two cohorts of students: those in their first semester and those in their final year of study, respectively. The approach taken here, which utilised a smaller number of more detailed interviews rather than a large-scale survey, was adopted because it allowed for deeper exploration within an authentic context of an issue that is characterised by ambiguity (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Interviews were conducted initially face to face and then online as a result of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Students had the project explained to them, were made aware of their right to withdraw from the project at any time, and then gave verbal consent regarding their participation. All interviews were recorded, and each took between 20-30 minutes.

Each interview began with coverage of demographic details. The structure of the remainder of the interviews was dependent on whether the participant was a first or final year student. For first year students the goal was to draw forth a description of the participant's journey to being enrolled in their chosen program of study (with a particular emphasis on the role that intended employment outcomes played in that journey) and a description of that participant's expectations regarding the remainder of their studies (again, with a particular focus on the place of employability teaching and learning within those expectations). Final year students were asked to reflect on their experience of employability teaching and learning and to describe their expectations regarding the transition from education to employment.

The third and final step involved the transcription and analysis of student interview recordings and the comparison of findings regarding the employability expectations of students with those of the institution. Thematic analysis was employed to code, analyse, and interpret interview data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The researchers applied the six-step model of thematic analysis developed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The process of transcription enabled a development of familiarisation with the data set. The two researchers, using ATLAS.ti software (Version 1.9), operated independently to generate initial codes and to organise these into themes. Comparison of the two coding products allowed for review, alignment, and validation of a final selection of themes, each of which is discussed below.

Results

Institutional expectations

To understand the expectations regarding employability learning and teaching advanced by the institution, three sources of documentation were explored: degree program webpages, graduate capabilities statements and the institution's employability strategy.

Degree program webpages are one of the primary mechanisms through which the diverse array of offerings delivered by this institution are marketed to prospective students. The layout of webpages for all degree programs is standardised, and all place a primary emphasis on the employment outcomes associated with their respective degrees. Career outcomes are noted briefly in the 'overview' section that heads each program webpage, and these outcomes are then presented in greater detail in the section immediately following this introductory overview. Connections are drawn between the content of the degree program – including, where relevant, placement opportunities available within it and the accreditation status of the course with relevant professional associations.

In addition to the linking of degree programs to specific career outcomes, all programs are expected to develop in students Victoria University's (VU) graduate capabilities. The graduate capabilities articulated by this VU are detailed below:

In addition to discipline knowledge, skills, and their application [higher education study] is intended to contribute to students developing the capabilities needed to be:

1. Adaptable and capable 21st century citizens who can communicate effectively, work collaboratively, think critically, and solve complex problems.
2. Confident, creative lifelong learners who can use their understanding of themselves and others to achieve their goals in work and learning.
3. Responsible and ethical citizens who use their inter-cultural understanding to contribute to their local and global communities. (VU, 2021)

Each of these statements is supported by a list of underpinning concepts, many of which are closely related to transferable skills. The operationalisation of these graduate capabilities statements is mandated within policy and procedures documents (VU, 2012) and facilitated through teaching and learning governance structures and processes. More particularly, these processes require that each unit of study maps assessment tasks against one or more of the graduate capability statements, and that coverage of the suite of graduate capabilities is mapped across all degree programs. As such, the development of graduate capabilities is articulated by the institution as something that occurs alongside and in conjunction with the development of discipline or professional knowledge and skills throughout a student's program of study.

Finally, the operationalisation of employability teaching and learning within the institution is supported by a specialised business unit (VU, 2020) which, as well as providing support services to students and to teachers, is tasked with producing and implementing an institution-wide strategy for the promotion of student employability. As such, a key role of this unit is to articulate how employability teaching and learning are to be understood within the institution. That strategy builds on the vision of what students need to develop in terms of employability that is described below:

[T]he key to career success in the future lies in the mastery of career management skills such as adaptability, flexibility and being able to filter and redirect skills and knowledge into as-yet unknown employment contexts, rather than having had the prescience to choose an in-demand sector or job role years in advance (VU, 2020, p. 6).

Overall, the expectation held by the institution is that employability learning will be a central part of students' experience throughout all aspects of their journey along their respective higher education pathways.

Student expectations

Students starting with a career focus

A majority of participants (86% (19 of 22) of first year and 75% (9 of 12) of final year students) reported that they had chosen to start their current university course with a career outcome in mind. Interviews then probed more deeply regarding the factors that, according to participants, had influenced the formation of their career destination and higher education choices.

The roles of family and friends

When describing how their pathways towards their current course of study (degree program) had commenced, the most common source of influence referred to by both first and final year participants was that of close personal contacts, be they family members or friends. This is depicted in the following quotes:

I have always been semi surrounded by nurses. My partner's sister is an emergency department nurse, so I have always had her sort of input and she has been nursing about 5 or 6 years and she has always had good insight, I guess. A couple of my friends, really close ones, are also doing nursing as well (Student 27).

Well, I didn't really know in year 12. I have a family friend who is a paramedic, and she was talking about it. I don't know, the way she was talking about it really captured me and I'd never thought about doing paramedicine before. But she was saying how much she loves it and how rewarding it is and I was like, that could be good for me too (Student 28).

My dad actually suggested police ... I have had family who have worked in the police. My grandfather did and I have an uncle and aunty who did so I suppose that was something that made me want to do this (Student 6).

When I was in high school, I didn't really know what to do, and my mum chose all my subjects (Student 9).

As the quotes above highlight, the nature of these influences varied: for many participants, conversations with family members or friends played a key role and for some parental decisions or advice was pivotal.

The roles of schools and career counsellors

With regard to additional sources of influence on decision-making regarding course choice, 14 of the participants spoke of engaging with their schools and their careers counsellors. Some participants made reference to the positive role played by careers counsellors in their decision-making processes.

I got all the information about the [institution] from my guidance counsellor. She was really good and asked me what I wanted to do. I said I have no idea: maybe architecture, maybe psychology, I don't know. She was like, well, these are your options (Student 1).

The school I went to gave me a lot of help in figuring out what university I wanted to go to and what course and a bunch of different information (Student 12).

Our careers lady basically said I know you are not in the course you originally wanted but you are going to be alright because you are a life-long learner. I have just kinda kept that in mind and she is kinda right because I am kinda comfortable getting old and still doing courses and stuff (Student 3).

The majority of students who commented on this source of advice highlighted that it was not helpful to them.

I talked about it with careers people but like, I found them not helpful cause they just kept pressuring me with all these options, but I was like I don't know what I want to do. And I didn't know what I didn't know (Student 17).

The school heavily encouraged as I wasn't 100% sure what I wanted to do but getting VTAC applications done as soon as they came out was super important to my school. I felt pressured, stressed and confused (Student 2).

Finally, it is worth noting that, while many participants made at least some reference to having looked online to learn about their options, most described this online research as having been limited in scope, and only 5 reported having attended open days to explore higher education options.

Knowledge of and expectations about education-employment pathways

Following discussion of the role of career destinations in choices about degree programs and the sources of influence that related to those choices, interviews focused on students' knowledge of and expectations regarding the relationships between their studies and career destinations. First year students were asked to describe how they saw their studies leading towards career destinations, any important actions or decisions they had to take along the way to improve their prospects of attaining career goals, and how confident they felt in terms of their ability to reach those destinations.

The 19 first year participants who identified a future career they were interested in pursuing were asked if they had an idea of what the required steps to achieve this goal were, aside from completing their degree. Of the 19 asked, only 3 were able to articulate clearly and accurately what was required of them. Furthermore, only two students believed that they would personally need to seek extra up-skilling and skill building to be ready for future employment: both students were mature age with significant experience in the workforce already. Much more common in participants' responses were descriptions of uncertainty regarding what, beyond completing the requisite number of units, university study would require of students and what it would offer to them in terms of preparation for employment:

I haven't looked extensively. I've had a little peruse, I guess, but I haven't done any definite research (Student 11).

Absolutely no idea. I don't know. I know I have to do a lot, but I don't even know where to start (Student 4).

No idea what to do, maybe another degree probably but whatever (Student 1).

Yeh, I don't really have a plan as such. I have basically just gone with the flow. So no, no plan really (Student 15).

The implications of uncertainty

While a number of students were comfortable in acknowledging their lack of knowledge regarding how to reach career destinations, of more concern was the prevalence of participant responses that suggested that completion of a degree represented a distinct step that should be undertaken prior to further consideration of the next steps needed to reach an employment destination.

Honestly, I can't say with any specifics. I'm assuming over the course of three years...I'm gonna assume that things will come up that will help me (Student 7).

I'm just taking it step by step. University first (Student 8).

I just need to do all the work with my course to continue with my degree, to get a job (Student 12).

To be honest, about decisions, it's more like...cause all I wanna get from this unit, this university in general, is that...I just wanna get the certificate, and be able to go somewhere...for now it's just...I wanna get this degree done (Student 5).

Like I said I am more focussed on [thinking about career destinations] when it gets closer to that point, maybe in the third year of this degree. I haven't really thought that much about transition and that kind of stuff. Just will focus on it when I get closer to it (Student 22).

I know this course gets me from point A to point B, and it doesn't really matter what happens in between, so I'm just gonna ride it out (Student 7).

Final year students: Expectations and experiences

Lastly, we asked final year students to discuss both their expectations regarding their future employment and their experiences of employability teaching and learning. When asked about their confidence in acquiring a job after graduation, a number of students acknowledged this being a source of stress and frustration as they felt that, despite nearing the completion of their degrees, the future was still uncertain.

I would say I didn't realise the job prospects when I entered the degree. I thought there is always a need for emergency help so there will always be jobs, whereas it is really hard to get a job here. I only found this out in my final year (Student 28).

I am not sure what the future holds, I would love to think at the end of this I would get a job but realistically that is not 100% so I need to start questioning do I want to go and do something else (Student 26).

I try not to think too far in the future as it gets a little intense (Student 33).

I am in a space of being stuck on what I am doing now. More information to students or a class where students can ask where their degree is taking them, what they need to do to get there would be good. I know so many people are having trouble with that (Student 29).

Of the 12 final year students only 3 students still felt that they were confident in their initial degree choice and career goal.

No I decided before I got into the course my destination and the specifics. Pretty much in year 10 and 11 (Student 24).

I have always found myself interested in it, and wanted to seek the course and then the career. This has never changed (Student 30).

From when I first applied and until now, I am equally confident. I was happy to do the course. I know that this is what I want to do and I still feel like it was a good idea (Student 34).

All three students acknowledged having a keen interest in the area long before university applications were due, and all three were able to clearly articulate what the steps were to reach their career goal. In describing the pathways that they expected to follow, these three students made reference to knowledge that they had sought independently of their studies. According to one:

I did lots of seminars and went to lots of external workshops about the different pathways [in my field] (Student 30).

This is telling, as the majority of first year participants in this study appeared to be working under the assumption that they would either acquire relevant employability knowledge and skills passively as part of their degree or that they would figure out what they needed at the conclusion of their current degree.

Discussion

A comparison of the expectations of the institution's expectations regarding employability teaching and learning and those of its students reveals a concerning gap between the two. From the perspective of this Australian HEI, employability teaching supports students as they venture along educational pathways, developing the lifelong-learning skills that they will need to enhance their employability. The key features of the vision of employability teaching and learning advanced by this institution are both clear and, we would argue, recognisable to most working in the Australian HE sector. These features include the following:

- Employability is placed at the centre of the teaching and learning project of the institution and is conceived in terms of students' development of both discipline and transferable knowledge and skills.
- The importance of students' development of transferable skills and knowledge is pitched in terms of the increasingly uncertain world of work.
- The development of employability skills are seen as occurring throughout all units of study within a degree program.
- Emphasis is placed on the need for students to develop the right metacognitive approach to employability learning, one characterised by the adoption of an ongoing, reflexive attitude towards employability learning.

Comparison of these expectations with those of students reveals a concerning story: one that begins with superficial alignment between the two but that then quickly fractures, resulting in the presence of an expectations gap. Superficially, there exists alignment between student choices regarding undergraduate degree programs and the marketing of those programs by institutions. As is noted above, more than four fifths of participants identified their rationale for choosing to study as the gaining of employment in a specific career. These results are consistent with existing research: Lock & Kelly (2020) found that 74% of students were entering university with a specific career destination in mind, and Baik and colleagues (2015) found that 77% of Australian students see higher education as a means of helping them to get training for a specific job. This simple expectation – that higher education leads to employment – is largely consistent with the broader discourse of higher education. The institution considered here, like many others in Australia, actively fosters this expectation by making career outcomes a prominent feature of the marketing of specific degree programs.

On further investigation of students' expectations regarding the pathways leading to their identified career outcomes, and of their understanding of how their chosen degree programs could contribute to their successful navigation of those pathways, worrying gaps in knowledge are revealed. Only three of 19 first year participants who named specific career outcomes were able to describe accurately how those outcomes could be reached. This reinforces the findings of research that shows that high proportions of commencing undergraduate students do not have accurate knowledge regarding the education-employment pathways they have commenced (Lock & Kelly, 2020). Furthermore, the findings regarding final year students suggest that this lack of understanding of how career outcomes can be pursued can, in some cases, persist well into the latter stages of a student's studies.

This lack of certainty on the part of students regarding education-employment pathways is, perhaps, not surprising given what we know regarding the difficulties that non-traditional students in particular face in transitioning both into university and into graduate employment following university. We know that secondary students from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to access fewer resources relating to careers advice (Dockery et al., 2020). We also know that non-traditional students face challenges with regard to the transition into university (Briggs et al., 2012), such as experiencing feelings of uncertainty and pressure in the making of education choices, feelings of isolation and disconnectedness when starting university, and decreased levels of success while at university. In

terms of transitioning out of university, researchers have shown that non-traditional students often lack the necessary personal and relational capital needed to successfully compete in a hyper competitive graduate employability market (O'Shea et al., 2021). The responses of participants in this project echo many of the findings from such research. Participants acknowledged the pressured context in which decisions regarding future study and employment had been made, described the prominence in the shaping of their choices of close personal contacts such as family members and friends, and acknowledged that, for many of them, only limited additional research had been undertaken to inform their choices.

Interestingly, the fact that students do not have a clear understanding of their education-employment pathway may not be as problematic as first perceived. Firstly, many of the participants in this study communicated an awareness of and a comfort with the limits of their knowledge. As such, student lack of knowledge about how employment destinations could be reached was, for them, a known unknown, and, therefore, a problem that they might reasonably be expected to address. Secondly, the expectations regarding employability learning that are expressed by the institution, particularly through its articulation of graduate capabilities and an employability strategy, clearly emphasise the need to enhance student employability skills and knowledge throughout all aspects of every degree program. In other words, it is clear that, from the perspective of the institution, students enrolling into undergraduate programs are not presumed to possess the knowledge and skills needed to gain employment; the development of that knowledge and those skills are important components of the value offer of higher education as it is understood by the institution. Thirdly, the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of the graduate employment market would seem to make understanding how to develop a career in the twenty first century an objectively difficult intellectual challenge (Foundation of Young Australians, 2015). It might be no wonder, therefore, that students in general, and non-traditional ones in particular, lack detailed knowledge of how to attain desired employment outcomes. Furthermore, we might expect that, as the employability strategy of the institution considered here makes clear (VU, 2020), it is the responsibility of a HEI to help prepare students explicitly for their pursuit of success in this challenging economic context.

The most striking finding from this research is that many of the participants understood their lack of knowledge as a problem that should be addressed either after or, at best, towards the end of their degree program. This was evident in the responses of many of the first year participants, including those who suggested that their primary goal was to focus on their studies rather than worry about the separate problem of employability. Such findings are consistent with research that shows that, for lower socio-economic and first in family students in particular, higher education can be conceived as a realm that, while perhaps being a requirement for employment, is also a fundamentally distinct phase of one's life (Greenbank, 2014). The responses of final year participants also supported this finding, though in varied ways. While some participants – notably, mature age students with prior experience in work – were able to articulate how they had enhanced their employability throughout their studies, others either expressed regret about how late in their studies they had turned to this issue, or even maintained an ongoing expectation that employability would be a problem for another day.

In general, therefore, participants articulated expectations regarding the function and operation of their chosen degree programs that were, in important ways, distinct from the development of employability skills and knowledge. Participants' motto might be summed up as: 'first get through the education gateway, then find an employment pathway.' The expectation that completion of a degree program constitutes a gateway to employment differs markedly from the expectations of higher education providers. For this institution, as for others within and beyond the Australian higher education sector, the dominant metaphor used in discussion of the relationship between education and employment is one of pathways (Raffe, 2003). The metaphor of pathways, while not unproblematic, serves a number of functions within education discourse. These include the examination of relationships and interconnections among pathways and, of particular importance here, the identification of the role that students are expected to take as navigators of higher education

pathways (Raffe, 2003). This notion is reflected in the expectations expressed by the institution and reported above: in the emphasis on lifelong learning, which relates to expectations about the complex interweaving of pathways into, out of and between educational and employment experiences, in the discourse associated with the mapping of employability learning and teaching across units within a degree program, and in the representation of students as active participants in the learning experience (VU, 2021; VU, 2020). It is not particularly congruent, however, with expectations expressed by participants, who saw university as something to get them from 'point A to point B' before moving on to consider employment.

Conclusion

If students understand employability to be a problem to be solved at or towards the end of a degree program, then they are less than likely to take on the role of an active navigator of education-employment pathways that is expected of them. Active engagement is often predicated on the prior possession of a certain amount of capital; students reflect on the experiences that are known to them and bring that knowledge to their educational contexts (Lizzio, 2012). If students feel that they do not have the 'right' knowledge and skills, they may be more likely to become passive in their consumption of education. More generally, and as research into the first-year experience has shown, gaps between the expectations of HEIs and their students can result in decreased rates of student success, both in relation to their education in general, and their learning in specific disciplines or fields (Briggs et al., 2012).

The findings of this research suggest that such a gap may well exist between institutional expectations regarding the nature of employability teaching and learning and those of their students. Such a gap poses a risk to the successful operation of employability teaching; it may lead to teachers, operating with the best of intentions in terms of their support for student employability, merely talking past their students. Where it is found to exist, the work needed to bridge an expectations gap must be undertaken, which requires those engaged in employability teaching to both actively uncover the expectations that students bring with them regarding employability, and to make explicit throughout their curricula the understandings of employability that those within universities hold.

Limitations and implications for research and practice

The limitations of this research project are clear. This was an exploratory, qualitative research project that was designed to seek out early indications regarding whether or not an expectations gap regarding employability teaching and learning exists at one Australian institution. Because of its exploratory nature, the participant cohort examined in this project is small, and a reliance on qualitative research methods means that there is little capacity to extrapolate from findings general knowledge about the expectations of prospective Australian undergraduate students. However, the importance of employability teaching means that the indications of an expectations gap existing in this area of higher education warrant attention. It has been commonplace in the past for HEIs to presume that any differences in the success of students resulted from inherent strengths and deficits of individuals, rather than from the varied levels of preparedness of students due to their diverse backgrounds and social and cultural capitals. The findings here, which echo those in research in other higher education sectors (Greenbank, 2014), suggest that some students, even while being committed to the achievement of success at university, might misunderstand what success looks like in terms of the enhancement of their employability. As a consequence, their uptake of relevant opportunities and their performance on relevant assessment tasks may be lower than is true of other students. Future research should examine both whether or not expectations gaps regarding employability teaching exist at scale across education systems, and whether or not variation exists across students enrolling into different degree types. Given the findings expressed here, such research must examine not merely whether future employment is a driver for student enrolment into higher education degrees,

but also what students expect their degree programs to offer them in terms of employability teaching and learning, and where within those programs students expect such teaching and learning to take place.

With undergraduate degrees becoming more commonplace and the graduate job market becoming more competitive, it is increasingly likely that having a degree will not be enough to gain employment. Employers may expect students to have additional qualifications or relevant work experience upon graduation (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020), and they also seek graduates who can articulate how their studies relate to their chosen path of employment, and who can identify transferable skills and knowledge that they have learned during their studies. While the scale of this research is small, the problem that it is addressing is not. Furthermore, while this research does not, itself, provide evidence of the presence of an employability expectations gap across the Australian higher education sector, its findings offer potential value to researchers interested in seeking such evidence. Finally, this research draws attention to the need of HEIs to make employability teaching explicit in curriculum design and delivery. The solutions to expectations gaps described in existing research involve teachers and curriculum designers supporting the transition of students into university through the active uncovering of individuals' preconceptions about university life and study, and the purposive bridging of gaps that might exist between those preconceptions and the expectations held by their institution. On the one hand, this requires teachers and curriculum designers to make explicit the assumptions regarding employability that underpin their efforts to support student learning. On the other hand, however, teachers must work to uncover the prior expectations that students bring with them in order to bridge the knowledge gap.

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