

# Evolving role of the lecturer in employability learning of students

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## ABSTRACT

### CONTEXT

Employability is an essential capability for career survival and success in dynamic and uncertain labour markets. This has created an urgent need for students to develop their employability capability and for academics to evolve for effective employability teaching. Although the importance of education for employability has been recognised for decades, the literature is ambiguous about the role of the lecturer in employability education (Daly, 2016). Challenges faced by lecturers and lack of clarity in their role in employability education are inhibiting their capabilities to incorporate employability teaching into the curriculum, contributing to deficiencies in student employability. As the students are a major stakeholder in employability education, it is important to understand the student perception, but the student voice is missing in the literature.

### PURPOSE OR GOAL

To examine how students' perceive the role of the lecturer in their employability learning in terms of developing awareness and competencies towards employability.

### APPROACH OR METHODOLOGY/METHODS

Data were collected as a part of a larger study, through focus groups and interviews with engineering students (mixed year group) from an Australian university. Data were analysed, a behaviour change model (Michie et al., 2011) providing theoretical underpinning.

### OUTCOMES

The study showed that students perceive lecturers to be a strong source of motivation to develop accurate perceptions about employability. Further, the findings indicate the potential of the lecturer to be a source of opportunity awareness for students, including the facilitation of learning outside curriculum. The results support evidence from previous observations about employability teaching being 'ad hoc' (Cotronei-Baird, 2020) rather than embedded.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results strengthen the importance of employability-oriented lecturers, with implications for lecturers to re-think the powerful role they can perform as the 'primary knower' in the teacher-student equation. The study results also have implications for higher education, calling for clarity over the role of the lecturer and providing necessary motivation and support for systematic employability teaching and learning. Future work is to develop an employability teaching and learning framework to support teachers on how to incorporate employability teaching into their curriculum and delivery.

### KEYWORDS

Employability, role of the lecturer, student perception, employability learning, employability education

## Introduction

Today's turbulent labour market demands employability - "the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998, p. 2). Technological advancements, globalisation, gig economy together with unprecedented events, are leading to rapid changes and uncertainties in the labour market. There is an increasing rate of job and career transitions with decreasing job security. In such a labour market, employability has become an essential capability for career survival and success.

Such labour market demands have brought the importance of employability education to the forefront (Khoo et al., 2020). Although employability is not seen as the only purpose of higher education, there is growing pressure for HEIs to deliver an employability-driven curricular (Morrison, 2014). There is an urgent need to produce graduates who are not only able to find employment, but who are employable as well (Magnell & Kolmos, 2017).

Despite many years of focus on employability by higher education, lack of employability and industry readiness in engineering graduates are being reported (Chan & Luk, 2022; Nyamapfene, 2017). This has augmented the need to start developing employability capability in students from the onset of undergraduate studies (Bae et al., 2021).

For students to start developing employability from the onset of undergraduate studies, one important factor is the role played by the teacher in employability education. Teachers are identified as 'crucial change agents' in employability education (Sadineni & v Joshi, 2012), with evidence of the powerful role played by engineering academics' in students' career preparation (Bae et al., 2021; Bae et al., 2022). Despite this, there are challenges faced by lecturers in meeting industry demands, contributing engineering students' ill-preparedness for careers Bae et al. (2021).

There is a consensus that academics are expected to develop and deliver an employability-driven curriculum. Beyond that, the role of academics in students' employability education is unclear, with questions over academic's perception of their role in students' employability development as well as their capabilities for employability teaching (Morrison, 2014). Further, there are calls for more research on how teaching practice influences student employability given the growing importance of making graduates career-ready (Cotronei-Baird, 2020).

In summary, while the importance of education for employability has been recognised for decades, the literature is ambiguous about the role of the lecturer in employability education.

This paper reports on a study on engineering students' perception of lecturer's influence on their employability learning (developing perceptions and competencies towards employability). This is an effort to narrow down the identified gap in the literature, by exploring how students perceive the teacher's role in their employability learning.

## Lecturer's role in employability learning of students

There is a consensus that lecturers should facilitate students' employability development, as lecturers are the main medium through which higher education institutes can deliver an employability-driven curriculum. Although developing the employability of students might not be the primary role of academics (Khoo et al., 2020), it is nevertheless regarded as an important role (Harvey & Knight, 2005). One reason for teacher's involvement in career education to become important is that embedding employability into subject content is favoured (Daly, 2016) and found to be effective (Lees, 2002) over delivery through separate stand-alone modules (Daly, 2016; Lees, 2002). Miller (2015) points out that mainstream engineering education should embrace professional skill development of students in view of preparing students for future careers as - "No longer can we afford to pass the responsibility to someone else" (pg. 15). Further, there is an expectation that lecturers embrace employability competencies themselves, not only technical competencies, but

professional competencies as well (Miller, 2015). For example, academics possessing high level of emotional intelligence were reported to contribute positively in equipping students to be ready for the challenges posed by the turbulent nature of the gig-economy (Rasiah et al., 2019).

There are constant debates over the role and responsibilities of academic in employability education, with academics wondering about their role, especially with the existence of dedicated career support centres for students (Daly, 2016). Academics seeing employability as an agenda driven by governments and policy makers rather than the higher education institutes is contributing to the less than positive perception of academics for employability teaching (Lees, 2002). They are also reported to be viewing employability education as an encroachment on their academic freedoms (Lees, 2002). Academics argue for better university-industry engagement as engineering requires both technical and professional competency development for students to be work-ready (Khoo et al., 2020). Further, academics perceive that they could help students develop employability skills but acknowledge that there are areas beyond teachers' capacity for intervention, for example the disadvantage posed by students' social class (Morrison, 2014).

Even with such ambiguities and concerns, generally, lecturers are reported to have a positive impact on students' employability skill development. Engineers Australia identifies that the move away from traditional teaching methods (which are mostly teacher-centred) towards more student-centred teaching practices are helping engineering students to develop their competencies and capabilities to be future ready (Crosthwaite et al., 2018).

However, there is also evidence that lecturers could be attributing deficiencies in the curricular limiting competency development to make graduates work-ready (Khoo et al., 2020). Although lecturers are carrying out interventions to prepare students for careers, these are mostly based on their own experiences and beliefs rather than through empirical evidence (Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014). Further, lecturers lack the motivation and knowledge to make changes to the curriculum based on the occasional feedback they receive on current practice (Pavlin & Svetlik, 2014). Engineering academics have a tendency to give priority to technical competencies over other professional competencies as well as giving more value to outcomes of pedagogical activities rather than the process of student learning (Chan, 2001).

The challenges faced by lecturers inhibit their capabilities to incorporate employability teaching into the curriculum, which could explain some of the deficiencies reported earlier. While academics are held responsible for employability learning of students, some limitations and demands hinder the systematic integration of employability teaching into the curriculum (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). One such limitation is about academics do not have the luxury of dedicating course credits for career-focused teaching (Daly, 2016). The considerable input required for embedding such teaching into existing modules could further elevate the issue (Daly, 2016). The difficulties faced by academics in assessing employability skills, especially professional skills have resulted in a variety of teaching and assessment methods, which according to Cotronei-Baird (2020), could explain the deficit of employability skills in graduates reported by the industry. Further there are no adequate support for them to make changes in an informed approach, rather than in an ad-hoc manner (Cotronei-Baird, 2020).

In engineering, there are some unique challenges faced by lecturers to engage in employability education. One such challenge is about academics who are recruited mostly for their technical expertise. Such academics could find it challenging to teach professional skills (Miller, 2015), a vital competence of employability. On the other side, there are unique challenges faced by academics with industry background. With calls for strengthening employability education, engineering higher education institutes adopt a strategy of recruiting lecturers with industry background to better prepare students for the labour market (Nyamapfene, 2017). Such academics are facing transition issues with universities' research culture (Nyamapfene, 2017), which could then limit their full potential to enrich employability education. Another limitation in terms of embedding employability into the

curriculum could be the numerous factors that engineering academics have to consider at the time of curriculum design, such as student expectations, requirements of accrediting bodies, best practices in teaching and resource constraints (Thomson, 2020), as well as authenticity of assessments (Chan & Luk, 2022).

Despite the challenges, lecturers are urged to rethink how they perceive their role in employability education. One such consideration is about academic freedom. According to Lee (2002), it is important that academics are convinced that the request to incorporate employability into their teaching not as an encroachment to their core academic freedoms, but as a consideration of 'how' they teach (Lees, 2002). Since then, some progression seems to have been made, example - a study exploring engineering academic perspective of leadership education for student employability, showed a consensus around the 'level of professional skills attainment of students' and 'how' professional skills are to be developed, but with been mixed responses over 'when' education towards employability should be provided (Bae et al., 2021). Another consideration is for teachers to see themselves as the 'last stop of the education train' for students entering the working world and therefore, the vital role they play in preparing students for careers (Miller, 2015).

Students are a key stakeholder in employability education. However, less attention has been given to student perspective in the employability literature (Thirunavukarasu et al., 2020). Since students are the ultimate beneficiaries of employability education, their perspective deserves to be explored, to gain insights onto how teacher's role could be shaped for more effective employability teaching.

In summary, lecturers play a vital role in preparing students develop employability capabilities, but there is a lack of clarity about their role in employability education (Daly, 2016). What is mostly written in the literature about preparing students for employability is about the interventions taken by the lecturers, with minimal written about the role of the lecturer. Further, in employability literature, less attention has been given to student perspective, even though students are a major stakeholder.

Therefore, a study has been conducted to explore the evolving role of the lecturer in employability learning (developing perceptions and competencies towards students' employability), through student perspective.

## Method

The results reported in this study are from a broader qualitative research study exploring engineering students' perception of their employability learning, conducted at an Australian university. Data in the broader study were collected through 10 focus groups and 10 interviews with 38 engineering students, both domestic and international from mixed year levels and disciplines. This paper reports on how students perceived the influence of the lecturer, as employability-oriented lecturers were identified as a key influence for employability learning of students in the broader study (Ranaraja, 2022). In this paper, that role is further explored through the research question 'What is the engineering student's perception about the role of the lecturer in their employability learning?'

The behaviour wheel (Michie et al., 2011), provides theoretical underpinning for the analysis, which is a model developed from successful health behaviour change interventions. The model focuses on three behavioural elements required for a change in behaviour. They are capability, opportunity and motivation. Using these foci, two themes emerged from the comments of the participants – lecturers providing students 'motivation through career awareness' and lecturers guiding students towards developing 'competence through opportunity awareness'. The reason for the second theme to discuss competence over capability is to better represent study results. Competence is defined as skill proficiency (Bromley, 2019) while capability is "a broader concept than that of competence... Capability is an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively – not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstance" (Bromley, 2019, p. 269).

# Results

## Motivation through career awareness

Motivation can be seen as "... a motivating force, stimulus, or influence; incentive; drive; something (such as a need or desire) that causes a person or student to act (Merriam-Webster, 1997); and the expenditure of effort to accomplish results (DuBrin, 2008)" (Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 2). Michie et al. (2011) posit *building awareness* is a major intervention for motivation. This emerged as a theme in this study, where participants discussed how lecturers are a source of motivation when they raise awareness of industry demands and career journey, helping students identify competencies to be developed, and encourage practice of those competencies.

Students talked about how the lecturer described the needs and expectations of industry, to raise awareness of what competencies students need to develop.

*He [the lecturer] always tried to motivate us in a way to say this is what employers would look for, so those are the skills you're going to have to develop. So that's how I became aware. (S25)*

Lecturers were also perceived to be encouraging students to develop and integrate technical and professional competencies -

*I've been getting hammered a lot not just about the theoretical knowledge of how to put two things together, how to construct physical properties, but communication time management leadership... by one lecturer in particular. (S8)*

In addition, lecturers also helped students form more accurate perceptions about the 'engineering' profession.

*In that course, the lecturer always told us the importance of being able to problem solve and being able to be on top of your work in your chosen field. ... Before I wasn't entirely sure what engineers [employers] really did except. (S25)*

*It's from one of my professor's words when we first started up. He said that it doesn't matter what your discipline is right now in my class. What I'm teaching you is engineering, and engineering is more of a mindset. Where it's about how you can think outside of the box. We are not teaching you to be masters of that particular discipline, but masters of how you can use your logical self to try to get out of the situation. And in some situations, succeed. And that's stuck with me in a way. (S39)*

Overall, these findings support those of (Bae et al., 2022), where a study with engineering students indicates that "...management and academia can help improve students' employability by communicating knowledge and skills required in the workforce" (p. 1). Discussion of employability skills is a first step in integrating employability into mainstream education (Cotronei-Baird, 2020), as it aids more accurate perception building for students about industry demands and what competencies they should be working towards.

The results also imply that lecturers can make strong impressions on students about employability with terms such as "I've been getting hammered a lot" (S8) and "that's stuck with me" (S39) being used by students to describe interactions with the teacher on employability. Further, it was observed from the data that some casual conversations with lecturers were also taken seriously by students and later compared with their own experiences related to work. This could be because the teacher is considered as the 'primary knower' in a classroom setting whether the conversation is pedagogical or casual (Nassaji & Wells, 2000). Therefore, lecturers can be a powerful source of perception building for students.

The results also indicate a gap in the teaching approach in these programs: motivating students to enhance their employability is not something that is consistent across the engineering degree programs, with students mentioning "by one lecturer in particular" (S8) or "in that course" (S25). This

is characteristic of employability education that is approached in an ad-hoc manner (Cotronei-Baird, 2020).

Cotronei-Baird (2020) and Daly (2016) argue that greater impact on student behaviour will be achieved by consistently embedding employability learning into the curriculum.

This gap in these programs suggests the teachers need more guidance and support to be more consistent in embedding employability teaching.

### **Competence through opportunity awareness**

This theme discusses how lecturers enhance awareness in students about opportunities to develop employability competencies.

Lecturers were guiding students to learning opportunities outside the curriculum. A student recalled how a lecturer provided guidance for students about an outside opportunity to develop discipline-related (technical) competence -

*Make sure you do this even though it's not in the coursework. I know it's not in the coursework, but make sure you complete this certification because employers are looking for this, this kind of stuff in your resume. (S39)*

Lecturers were seen to facilitate competence development of students by *directing them to work-related opportunities* -

*So the first one [work opportunity] I had was as a CAD draftsman for a small company. That opportunity was actually provided by a lecturer at the university. (S18)*

Lecturers also drew on others to broaden students' awareness of opportunities for competency building outside the curriculum—

*I think it was back in second year, early second year or first year, [Professor in RMIT, the course coordinator of a WIL based course] came in and spoke about different ways you can increase your employability during uni and at the end, which websites and where you can go to try and get internship or graduate position. (S19)*

Providing students career education by supporting resume preparation and training for job interviews and providing work are usually identified as the role of career services (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). However, a recent study shows that students perceived employability is enhanced by lecturers taking an active role in students career education by providing information about job opportunities and engaging in career discussions (Petruzzello et al., 2022).

Therefore, a re-think of the roles may be needed to provide better guidance for students, with careful consideration of the dual roles of career services and lecturers in employability education with implications on bestowing clarity about the role of the lecturer in employability education.

The findings also indicate the potential of lecturers to more systematically identify learning opportunities beyond the boundaries of what is being covered within the curriculum, to augment students' awareness of opportunities outside the curriculum for competence development. This is rarely associated with the role of the lecturer.

In terms of learning outside the curriculum, Petruzzello et al. (2022) highlights the importance of teachers encouraging their students towards activities outside the curriculum such as networking events, career services and workshops to foster students' perceived employability. However, the findings of this study extend the concept of learning outside the curriculum, by suggesting that teachers could also be explicit about the boundaries of the curriculum, and direct students to learning opportunities outside the curriculum.

## Discussion

In this paper we set out to examine how students perceive the role of lecturer in their employability learning. The study showed that students perceive lecturers to be a strong source of motivation to develop accurate perceptions about employability. Further the findings indicate the potential of the lecturer to be a source of opportunity awareness for students, including the facilitation of learning across boundaries. The results support evidence from previous observations about employability teaching being 'ad hoc' (Cotronei-Baird, 2020) rather than embedded.

Implications for better employability teaching include lecturers understanding the powerful role they can perform as 'primary knowers' in the teaching and learning environment. Further, lecturers should be aware that a more systematic implementation of current actions would yield substantial benefits for students: "...taking employability seriously doesn't mean staff having to make huge changes or completely restructure programmes. It usually involves thinking creatively within existing frameworks: making small changes to content, delivery and assessment" (Harvey & Knight, 2005, p. 10).

This study has wider implications for leadership of higher education, calling for clarity over the role of the contemporary lecturer compared to career service staff for effective employability teaching and learning. It is pointed out that HEI leadership's role is to ensure that academics are prepared to deliver on industry expectations (Bae et al., 2022). Apart from knowledge, motivation level of the teacher is considered the next most important element that contribute to students' learning (Pekrun, 2021; Williams & Williams, 2011). Therefore, it is important that the staff are clear about their role, are adequately supported and motivated to perform that role in the higher education sphere.

The findings reported here shed new light on the evolving role of the lecturer in developing employability of students, a topic which lacks consensus in the literature. This study is important as the ambiguity over the role of the lecturer in career education of students is reported as a barrier for successful implementation of changes needed in higher education (Daly, 2016). The approach of using a behaviour change model to analyse impact of employability teaching may be useful in other studies related to education interventions.

A limitation of this study is that the data are from voluntary student participants and therefore might not be representative of the general student population. Further, it is important to note that the results reported in this paper are extracted from a larger study where employability-oriented lecturers were seen as one key influence for employability learning of students. In spite of its limitations, the study adds to our understanding of the students' perception and is anticipated as a starting point for further discussion on the role of the lecturer in employability learning of students.

A fruitful area for future work would be to examine how to support lecturers to play a more effective role in students' employability development. While interventions for students' employability learning are already being undertaken by academics, this may be in an ad-hoc rather than embedded manner (Cotronei-Baird, 2020) This suggests a need for greater support and guidance for lecturers to adopt more effective practices to incorporate employability into the curriculum and delivery. Future work is to develop an employability teaching and learning framework to support teachers on how to incorporate employability into their curriculum and delivery.

## Conclusions

The study concludes that the lecturer can be a powerful source of motivation for students by enhancing awareness about the nature of industry and career journey, the competencies to be developed, and encouraging competency development. A re-consideration of the roles of lecturers and career services is suggested in providing better awareness and guidance to students about opportunities to develop employability.

Rather than providing a solution as to what the role of the lecturer should be, this study is expected to encourage further discussion and research towards clarity over the role of the contemporary lecture in employability education.

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