

From employability to employment: A professional skills development course in a three-year bachelor program

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This paper explores the employment and further education outcomes of students studying criminology who participate in professional skills development and work-integrated learning courses at a major Australian university. Three years of data were obtained from the Australian Graduate Survey, which is completed by university graduates four months after they complete their tertiary studies. The results indicate that students enrolled in a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice who complete a career and professional development course in conjunction with a work-integrated learning course are approximately twice as likely to be engaged in industry relevant employment or further study four months after graduation. They also are more likely to use a wider range of search techniques to find employment. This suggests that it is possible to improve employment outcomes for students by providing a university-based course that focuses on employability and professional behaviors in conjunction with work-integrated learning programs.

Keywords: Employability, further study, industry relevant employment, criminology, work-integrated learning, university graduates

One key aim of universities is to increase student employability (Feldmann, 2016; Tran, 2015). Employability as a concept is not clearly defined within the literature (Harvey, 2001; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017; Tomlinson, 2007; Williams, Dodd, Steele, & Randall, 2016). However, one main factor is the *ability to obtain* employment (Coetzee, Ferreira, & Potgieter, 2015; Harvey, 2001) as opposed to being employed. Therefore, it includes the dispositions, attitudes and professional identities of those seeking a career (Tomlinson, 2007). Employability also includes the ability to maintain employment and to successfully transition between organizations and positions within organizations (Coetzee et al., 2015). Williams et al., (2016) conducted a systematic review of the literature relating to employability and noted that there were three dimensions to employability: capital (including human, social, cultural and psychological components), career management (including signal management and dimension development) and contextual components. However, students appear to view employability differently and with a more narrow focus. For example, a study with approximately 400 university students in business, marketing and human resource management suggested that they saw employability as very important, although they believed that it was more strongly focused on *being employed* (Tyman, 2013) which is understandable if they are not currently employed.

Tomlinson (2007) undertook a qualitative study with tertiary students within the United Kingdom. This study suggested that students can not directly link their educational achievements with employment outcomes. However, students do appear to be recognizing that they need to undertake additional activities, as well as their university degrees, to improve their employability (O'Leary, 2017; Tomlinson, 2008). Additionally, gaining employment is affected by the university graduates' personal lives (Finn, 2017).

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Employers value generic skills such as communication and interpersonal skills more highly than other factors such as the reputation of the university where the student attended (Finch, Hamilton, Baldwin, & Zehner, 2013). There are a number of factors that are mainly outside the influence of the student and the university that relate to employment (Jackson, 2013), including workplace/organizational awareness (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1999; Cui, 2014) and a willingness to change jobs if required (Wittekind, Raeder, & Grote, 2010). Given the limited evidence that teaching employability related skills within the classroom is effective, some researchers caution against using class-based activities to teach employability skills (Cranmer, 2006).

Internationally, individuals with a tertiary education have higher employment rates than those without (Nilsson, 2017). They are also more likely to earn greater amounts of income. Most Australian graduates are employed within five years of leaving university. Of those who are not employed, many are undertaking further study (Coates & Edwards, 2011). However, these results differ by gender with males tending to earn more money when employed and more likely to be employed five years after they obtain their degree. Women are more likely to be employed within the first year after they completed their degree (Coates & Edwards, 2011). Additionally, prior work experience appears to influence employment outcomes for both undergraduate (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett, & Richardson, 2017; Salas-Velasco, 2007) and PhD students (Jackson & Michelson, 2015). Although paid work in the final year of undergraduate study did not affect graduate employment, outcomes from a different Australian study (Jackson, 2014) suggest that this area requires further examination.

It also is possible to consider employment rates within particular areas of study such as criminology. Criminology is a relatively recent discipline to be taught at Australian universities (Bartels, McGovern, & Richards, 2015). Although dated, a survey of Griffith University criminology alumni was undertaken by Wimshurst and Allard (2007a). The survey was provided in early 2001 to all individuals who had graduated between 1993 and 2000. They identified that 97% of the participants had obtained employment in a range of fields including criminology, policing and human resource management.

WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs or units of study have become widely used amongst universities in order to improve the employability of graduates. There is a wide range of types of WIL, including service learning, community based learning, internships, apprenticeships and cooperative education (Groenewald, Drysdale, Chipka, & Johnston, 2011; Jackson & Wilton, 2016). WIL provides students with a more interactive learning-by-doing experience, whereby they actively engage in work tasks under the close supervision of working professionals (Woolley, 2015). Jackson and Wilton (2016) argue that typical WIL training focuses on non-technical skills such as communication and problem solving. In addition, WIL can enable graduates with career management knowledge in combination with work-based projects to create work ready graduates (Jackson, 2015).

There are a number of benefits of WIL programs. These include an increase in self-efficacy (Freudenberg, Brimble, Cameron, MacDonald, & English, 2012), including work self-efficacy (Bates, Thompson, & Bates, 2013; Raelin et al., 2011; Raelin et al., 2014; Thompson, Bates, & Bates, 2016) and career decision making self-efficacy (Reddan, 2014). WIL can also assist students to select an appropriate career (Jackson, 2015), clarify their career (Zegwaard & Coll, 2011) and develop their professional identity (Bates, Bates, & Bates, 2007). Recent graduates are able to articulate their perceived benefits of participating in WIL (Bates & Bates, 2013).

However, WIL placements are resource intensive (e.g., Beattie & Riley, 2015). This is for a number of reasons including difficulties in maintaining a reliable supply of industry placements for students (Hay, Ballantyne, & Brown, 2014). Additionally, these types of courses require academic staff to undertake a greater range of roles and responsibilities (Bates, 2011). Therefore, universities should help students maximize the potential of their WIL experience. One way in which universities could do this, and possibly improve employability for their students, is to integrate career management skills development into their degrees. These types of courses also would prepare students for WIL placements.

The aim of this study was to explore how a unit of learning focused on professional development skills and a work-integrated learning course affected employment and further study opportunities for students who have completed undergraduate studies. Given that students find it difficult to directly link their education to employment outcomes (Tomlinson, 2007), and that employment within the criminal justice field is extremely diverse (Bates, Bates & Prenzler, 2018), there may be benefits in providing students, as part of their studies, explicit opportunities to develop their professional skills.

STUDYING CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE AT GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

Griffith University began offering bachelor level programs in criminology and criminal justice in the early 1990s (Wimshurst & Allard, 2007a). The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice offers a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, which is a three-year full-time undergraduate degree. Additionally, the School offers five double degrees where students graduate with a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice as well as a second qualification. The second degrees available include a Bachelor of Human Services, Bachelor of Psychological Science, Bachelor of Forensic Science, Bachelor of Laws (Wimshurst & Manning, 2017) and Bachelor of Information Technology. In 2014, there were approximately 1,280 students enrolled in criminology degrees with about 50% enrolled in the single degree (Wimshurst & Manning, 2017).

Wimshurst and Allard (2007a) posted a survey in March 2001 to all individuals who graduated from the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice in the period 1993 to 2000. Of the 147 individuals that responded, the average age of participants was 27.5 years when they graduated. This study identified that over 60% of the sample were employed in criminal justice related positions such as police officers, administrative roles (including project officer and policy advisor roles) and community or human services positions (such as youth crime prevention worker or residential care officer). The study did not take into account whether the students completed a WIL course. However, this study was completed some time ago. The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice now has a stronger focus on employability and it is, therefore, important to re-visit student outcomes.

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY CRIMINOLOGY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND WIL

Within the programs offered by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, employability is scaffolded throughout students' studies (Bates & Hayes, 2017). In recent years Griffith University's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice has implemented a professional skills development course, *Developing Professionally*, to complement the WIL course, *Professional Practice* (Bates, Walker, Marchesi & Hayes, 2016). Both courses are taught in third year and were developed to enable students to apply the knowledge and skills learnt in their more traditional academic courses (e.g., criminology theory and research courses) to real world work situations.

Developing Professionally is a professional skills development course. During the thirteen-week course, students develop an overall understanding of the criminology careers available; however, they are encouraged to focus on their individual interests. Throughout the semester students learn to link theory and practice together and to critically reflect on these linkages and learn to communicate and extend their knowledge about their own strengths and weaknesses. As well as helping students pull together the existing knowledge learnt throughout their studies and develop career management skills, the course is a pre-requisite to Professional Practice. Students from Developing Professionally who wish to undertake Professional Practice need to apply what they have learned by participating in an application and interview process in order to secure a placement.

Professional Practice gives students the opportunity to be actively involved in the completion of a project within an industry workplace. Students are required to attend placement at their given organization for one day a week over the thirteen-week semester until they complete a minimum of 100 hours. The first author convened both Developing Professionally and Professional Practice for several years.

The aim of this study was to examine how a professional skills development course and a WIL course affect employment and further study opportunities for undergraduate students. Below we examine whether the courses Developing Professionally and Professional Practice improved employment and further study rates for students enrolled in the Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice or the Bachelor of Psychological Science/Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, the two undergraduate degrees managed by the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

METHOD

Data

The Australian Graduate Survey is a national survey of individuals who graduate from Australian tertiary institutions. The survey records graduate outcomes twice annually, four months after each graduation. Through the use of open and closed questions, it also records personal attributes including gender and age, where they attended university, what they studied and whether they studied full time or part time. Response rates for domestic students tends to range from 60% to 65% (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016). Data from the Australian Graduate Survey has been used in a number of other studies (e.g., Corcoran, Faggian, & McCann, 2010; Jackson, 2014; Jackson & Michelson, 2015; Pitman et al., 2017). Since 2016, the Australian Graduate Survey has been replaced by the *Graduate Outcomes Survey* (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2018). The Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee considered that ethics approval was not required for this work as the data, through the Australian Graduate Survey, has already been reported and had prior ethical approval.

Participants

Data were collected from the *Australian Graduate Survey* for the years 2012 to 2015. The data set for this study included students who graduated from Griffith University with a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice or Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science.

The mean age of the 403 survey respondents was 27.07 years ($sd = 8.24$) with a range from 20 to 69, which is consistent with previous research conducted with this cohort (Wimshurst & Allard, 2007a, 2007b). Most participants were female (71.5%) which accurately reflects the gender proportions of those studying criminology at Griffith University (Wimshurst & Allard, 2007a). The vast majority

indicated that they were either an Australian citizen or a permanent resident (96%). Within the sample, 76.7% were enrolled in a Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice and 23.3% were enrolled in a Bachelor of Psychological Science/Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Measures

Variables included age, sex, grade point average, type of work (full time or part-time), industry of current employment, position title, job search methods and details of further study. Survey data also included whether graduates had completed the courses Developing Professionally and Professional Practice, as well as the grade received for each course and cumulative grade point average (GPA).

The variable 'justice-related/non-justice-related' was added by manually recoding the data to reflect whether graduates were working in criminal justice-related roles or engaged in further study in criminology and/or criminal justice degree programs. Related/non-related roles were determined according to the industry and position title. A similar approach has been used in earlier research (Carroll & Massimiliano, 2013). Related roles included roles associated with law enforcement, corrections, research, legal support, associated government roles and further study. While working in the justice industry does not necessarily equate to graduate level employment, it can be used as a stepping stone by graduates to obtain this type of employment.

Analysis

In order to address the research aims, a non-parametric chi-square test was used to analyze the categorical data regarding the various job search strategies used by students to gain employment. Logistic regression was used to predict the binary dependent variable whether participants are employed in justice related positions and/or undertaking further study or not in either of these situations. This type of regression allows the statistical identification of whether a number of independent variables predict the dependent variable. The significance level for both forms of statistical analysis is set at .05.

RESULTS

The Impact of Career Development Learning

The average overall grade point average (GPA) of participants was 5 (measured on a scale from 1 to 7 with a 4 being the lowest passing grade; $sd = .73$). Just over one-quarter (26.6%) took the elective course Developing Professionally either by itself or in conjunction with Professional Practice. The average result in this course for these students was 5.52 ($sd = .91$) with a median of 6. Of the students who completed Developing Professionally, 74.8% also completed Professional Practice. Of the 387 who provided information regarding whether they undertook paid work in their final year, 80.1% indicated that they had. Just over half of the sample (51.6%) was continuing to look for work four months after graduating. Of those who were working, 53.5% indicated that they were working in a justice-related industry and 46.5% were working in a non-justice related industry.

TABLE 1: Job search strategies used by recent graduates when seeking employment

| | Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice | | Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science | |
|--|---|-------------|--|-------------|
| | Yes n (%) | No n (%) | Yes n (%) | No n (%) |
| Undertook 3007CCJ Developing Professionally | | | | |
| Use university careers service** | | | | |
| No | 61 (73.5) | 189 (83.6) | 17 (58.3) | 47 (67.1) |
| Yes | 22 (26.5) | 37 (16.4) | 10 (41.7) | 23 (32.9) |
| Careers fair or information session* | | | | |
| No | 59 (71.1) | 198 (87.6) | 20 (83.3) | 58 (82.9) |
| Yes | 24 (28.9) | 28 (12.4) | 4 (16.7) | 12 (17.1) |
| Other university source | | | | |
| No | 72 (86.7) | 209 (92.5) | 22 (91.7) | 60 (85.7) |
| Yes | 11 (13.3) | 17 (7.5) | 2 (8.3) | 10 (14.3) |
| Advertisement in newspaper or other print media | | | | |
| No | 64 (77.1) | 167 (73.9) | 18 (75) | 54 (77.1) |
| Yes | 19 (22.9) | 59 (26.1) | 6 (25) | 16 (22.9) |
| Advertisement on the internet | | | | |
| No | 34 (41) | 101 (44.7) | 10 (41.7) | 35 (50) |
| Yes | 49 (59) | 125 (55.3) | 14 (58.3) | 35 (50) |
| Resume posted on the internet | | | | |
| No | 60 (72.3) | 175 (77.4) | 17 (70.8) | 58 (82.9) |
| Yes | 23 (27.7) | 51 (22.6) | 7 (29.2) | 12 (17.1) |
| Family or friends | | | | |
| No | 61 (73.5) | 173 (76.5) | 19 (79.2) | 55 (78.6) |
| Yes | 22 (26.5) | 53 (23.5) | 5 (20.8) | 15 (21.4) |
| Approached employer directly | | | | |
| No | 63 (75.9) | 176 (77.9) | 18 (75) | 59 (84.3) |
| Yes | 20 (24.1) | 50 (22.1) | 6 (25) | 11 (15.7) |
| Employment agency | | | | |
| No | 63 (75.9) | 185 (81.9) | 20 (83.3) | 65 (92.9) |
| Yes | 20 (24.1) | 41 (18.1) | 4 (16.7) | 5 (7.1) |
| Work contacts or networking | | | | |
| No | 63 (75.9) | 187 (82.7) | 18 (75) | 58 (82.9) |
| Yes | 20 (24.1) | 39 (17.3) | 6 (25) | 12 (17.1) |

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .05$

Table 1 indicates the range of search strategies used by students who completed the course Developing Professionally and students who did not. As shown, students in the BCCJ who took Developing Professionally by itself or in conjunction with Professional Practice were more likely to use services offered by the university to secure employment, including using the Careers and Employment Service ($\chi^2(1) = 4.04, p = .045$) and attending a Careers Fair or Information Session $\chi^2(1) = 11.85, p = .001$. There were no other significant differences between the groups on the other job search variables or for students enrolled in the double degree with psychology.

A logistic regression was used to identify the effects of age, gender, participation in Developing Professionally, cumulative GPA and whether the student worked in their final year on the likelihood that graduates were employed in either a justice or a non-justice related industry. The tolerance and variance inflation factors were examined for the predictor variables and multicollinearity was not present within the model. The model was statistically significant for both BCCJ ($\chi^2(5) = 34.3, p < .001$) and the BCCJ/BPsySci ($\chi^2(5) = 12.99, p = .024$) graduates. The regression explained 19.0% of the variance (Nagelkerke R^2) for BCCJ graduates and 23.8% for BCCJ/BPsySci graduates. Within the BCCJ sample, 68.3% of the cases were correctly predicted, and within the BCCJ/BPsySci sample 77.9% of the cases were correctly predicted.

As shown in Table 2, the significant predictor within the model for the BCCJ sample was completion of the course Developing Professionally (Wald = 3.99; $p = .046$), with those students who completed the course 1.99 times more likely be employed in justice related positions or engaged in further study. Additionally, age was a significant predictor with those who are older more likely to be employed in justice related positions or engaged in further study (Wald = 15.81; $p < .001$). There were no individual significant predictors for the model for the BCCJ/BPsySci sample (Table 3).

TABLE 2: Summary of logistic regression variables predicting employment in justice related professions or further study by recent graduates of the Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice

| Variable | B | S.E. | β | Wald | P |
|---------------------------|------|------|---------|-------|-------|
| Age | -.12 | .03 | .89 | 15.81 | <.001 |
| Gender | -.57 | .34 | .57 | 2.86 | .091 |
| Developing Professionally | .69 | .34 | 1.99 | 3.99 | .046 |
| GPA | -.02 | .23 | .99 | .00 | .947 |
| Work in final year | -.69 | .46 | .5 | 2.23 | .136 |

TABLE 3: Summary of logistic regression variables predicting employment in justice related professions or further study by recent graduates of the Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science

| Variable | B | S.E. | β | Wald | P |
|---------------------------|-------|------|---------|------|------|
| Age | -.31 | .19 | .73 | 2.73 | .099 |
| Gender | .73 | .79 | 2.1 | .86 | .353 |
| Developing Professionally | -1.04 | .64 | .35 | 2.62 | .105 |
| GPA | -.72 | .51 | .49 | 2.01 | .156 |
| Work in final year | -1.56 | 1.1 | .21 | 2.02 | .155 |

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that students enrolled in a three year Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Griffith University benefit by undertaking Developing Professionally and Professional Practice. These students were more likely to use a wider range of search strategies, that were discussed in Developing Professionally, to find employment, including availing themselves of the university's Careers and Employment Service. They also were more likely to be employed in justice-related professions or undertaking further study when compared with their peers that did not complete this course. However, these effects are not seen in students who completed the double degree, Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science. One reason for this may be that we did not consider employment in psychological areas as 'related industries' for the purposes of this study, unless the position was also in the criminology field. Given the costs associated with delivering a placement form of WIL (e.g., Bates, 2011), it was important to identify the benefits of including a professional skills development course in conjunction with a placement course.

In contrast to previous research (Pitman et al., 2017; Salas-Velasco, 2007) but similar to Jackson (2014), there was no effect found within our study of participating in paid work in the final year of study. This may reflect that there are greater nuances at play within this area. For instance, the type or amount of paid work experience as well as length of service in this role may be important in predicting future employment. However, these nuances are not captured within the Australian Graduate Survey dataset. It may also reflect that paid work experience in the final year of study is more important for certain sectors of the undergraduate population, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or international students.

This research is important not only for those students studying criminology programs at Griffith University, but also for other degree programs that embed employability and WIL elements. The outcomes of this research indicate the benefits of including a course that has an emphasis on employability in conjunction with a WIL component within the final year of a degree program. This is a positive outcome given that research suggests not all employability education at university is successful (Cranmer, 2006).

Further research will help disentangle the benefits of a classroom based professional skills course from more traditional WIL courses and explore why courses such as Developing Professionally improve

employment and further study outcomes. This should include qualitative work to gain an understanding of the most important elements from the students' perspectives, as well as research with potential employers (to identify the reasons why they hired these particular students over others). The replication of this study across different disciplines and contexts is important and could help to identify why Developing Professionally improved outcomes for three year Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice students but not those enrolled in the Bachelor of Criminology and Criminal Justice/Bachelor of Psychological Science.

There are a few limitations associated with this study. The main limitation is that the data collected by the Australian Graduate Survey is measured four to six months after students graduate. However, given that finding professional employment is influenced by a range of factors including the unemployment rate, intensity of job search effort, family background and age (Salas-Velasco, 2007), it is feasible that a sizeable proportion of criminology graduates find employment after the survey is conducted. An additional limitation is given that Developing Professionally is a pre-requisite course for Professional Practice; it is difficult to fully disentangle the influences of these courses from each other. Finally, due to the resource intensive nature of Professional Practice, there are limits on the numbers of students that can enrol. We are unable to identify those students that could not enrol in Professional Practice because the course was full.

The findings of this study suggest that tertiary institutions could improve student employability and employment rates by including a professional context course within their degree programs to support work-integrated courses. When planning this type of course, universities should take into account discipline specific knowledge that is required and ensure that they work closely with the university-based careers service and potential employers of graduates.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL. In response to these changes, the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning in 2018.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum*". Examples of such practice includes work placements, work-terms, internships, practicum, cooperative education (Co-op), fieldwork, work-related projects/competitions, service learning, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, applied projects, simulations (including virtual WIL), etc. WIL shares similar aims and underpinning theories of learning as the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training, however, each of these fields are seen as separate fields.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data. And a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Best practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or is situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.



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