

# Choosing Employment Futures

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**Abstract:** *This paper reports on a three point unit A277: From University To Workplace that has been run for the past three years at Murdoch University. The overall aim of the unit is to improve students' ability to make key choices in their lives and to enhance their self-efficacy in making the transition into employment. The future is always unknown and this unit assists students to develop skills to move between university life and the unknown future of the workplace and to create bridges between different demands, different experiences and different cultures. The unit examines current workplace policies and practices and includes significant input from industry. The practical component of the unit complements this with experiential tasks which develop skills and confidence to enhance employment prospects, whilst providing strategies for utilizing the knowledge and skills gained at university. This paper, written by the unit coordinators, reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of this unit, the changes introduced over the past two years in response to student feedback and in recognition of the importance of students developing into independent, creative and resourceful learners.*

**Key Words:** *Transition from university to workplace; self-efficacy.*

In the current climate of uncertainty and the changing nature of work patterns, universities have both a role and a responsibility to equip graduates with skills to enhance their employability. All public universities offer career support services to their students (Miles Morgan 2002). No longer is there a sense that having a degree (at whatever level) will guarantee employment. Even degree courses that have specific vocational outcomes no longer guarantee their graduates a job at the end of their studies.

Change is inevitable through a lifetime of work and that change can involve major transitions between careers and loci of work. Career development is now seen to be a continuous and ongoing aspect of a person's working life. In this climate the notion of self-efficacy and lifelong learning links directly to managing choices and developing competencies in a changing environment. As part of the restructuring of the world of work, people no longer plan careers with a clearly defined trajectory and they often face periods of unemployment, casual part time work as well as the necessity to retrain, sharpen or further develop their skill set. In all of this, a

key aspect of successful negotiation of a career is the capacity to respond adaptively in a creative and critically engaging manner to new challenges.

The changing nature of the workplace and the massification of higher education have led to a devaluing of the bachelor degree in terms of initial workplace entry (in contrast to the situation of say 20 years ago). In response to this, many universities in Australia have developed pathways for their graduates and undergraduates to develop competencies and skills in the area of employment. As part of Murdoch University's response to the challenge of equipping graduates with the competency of life-long learning, the unit *A277 From University to Workplace* has been developed.

This unit is intended for students who are completing their degree and intend to graduate. As an elective unit worth three points, it is offered to students from all disciplines across the university. Murdoch University (along with Edith Cowan University and RMIT) is one of the few universities in Australia to offer a fully credited unit in career management to students. (Miles Morgan, 2002)

Three key assumptions underpin the unit design:

- career development is a process of life long learning
- life long learning involves self-efficacy; that is the sense of being capable and confident when faced with a new task
- students are always active participants in their own learning.

The overall aim of the unit is to improve students' ability to make key choices in their lives by developing an increased understanding of the workplace alongside a robust sense of self-efficacy. The philosophy of the unit is underpinned by the basic constructs and hypotheses for self-efficacy developed by the social learning theorist, Albert Bandura.

Bandura defined self-efficacy as

...people's basic beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave...A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided (Bandura 1994, p.1).

Linking career development into an accredited university course involves more than the traditional career counselling approach of assessing individuals' skills and aptitudes in order to advise them what type of vocation they would be most suited for, an approach that McMahon & Patton (2002) characterises as 'test & tell'. Rather the aim is to engage the students with the questions behind the issues of work such as, why do we seek jobs, what does it mean to work, what can/could /should work mean for me as an individual, what should I contribute to the community, how may my notion of work change over time, how do I negotiate relationships within a job, how do I the balance the competing demands of home and work and how do issues of globalisation and new technologies affect me in seeking employment?

The point of this approach is to support students in the development of holding open possibilities, and having a degree of comfort with not knowing and a sense of confidence in their ability to find out or live with partial answers and a series of questions, which is a key aspect to self-efficacy.

This approach also assumes that students are responsible and active participants in their own learning and will construct their own sense of meaning about what work will /does mean to them. Students' self-constructed meaning will intersect with society's views on work at some points and diverge at other points. Given that students come from a variety of different cultural backgrounds with a range of aspirations, critical engagement through self-constructed meaning is important.

The most effective way to develop self-efficacy is through providing students with mastery experiences in a situated learning context. Orey and Nelson (1994) maintain that "learning requires more than thought and action, or a particular physical or social situation, or just receiving a body of factual knowledge; it also requires participation in the actual practices of the culture" (p. 623).

Consequently, this unit is designed to provide theoretical and practical knowledge and experiences, which enhance students' career development and their transition to the culture of the workplace. It is also organized to provide an authentic learning environment, which enables the learner to apply their knowledge in new ways in new situations.

Students are introduced to the workplace through a lecture series delivered by a diverse range of practitioners in business and industry. Students' theoretical understanding of work, its meaning and significance is developed through their engagement with issues related to the sociology of work, the effects of globalization and the future of work. They also consider and debate ethical issues and familiarize themselves with legal frameworks (which includes awareness of equal opportunity legislation) within tutorials.

The practical component of the unit complements the theoretical by developing in students the skills and confidence to enhance employment prospects. It provides them with strategies for utilizing the knowledge and skills gained at university and encourages them to apply these in different contexts. Interpersonal and communication skills are strengthened through role-plays and conducting interviews, both as members of an interviewing panel and as interviewees.

Students are encouraged to enter into the work environment by selecting a field of interest and exploring a specific career trajectory through a process of interviewing people engaged in careers that the student anticipates they will possibly pursue. This provides a form of "cognitive apprenticeship" where students "...acquire develop and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity"(McLellan 1994, p.5). Students often report that their understanding of the work place and a specific career, post this research, is significantly different to what they had anticipated. Having to report on these findings in a formal writing assignment enhances the students' critical reflection of the work place and enables them to make informed decisions about their career pathways.

## **Strengths and weaknesses of the unit**

In both 2001 and 2002, students reported that the best feature of the unit was the section on employment interviews. Tutors spend three weeks preparing students for the interview process. Each student is required to select a particular position with specific selection criteria. The tutorial group is divided into groups of four to five students and two groups are paired. Each group is then required to examine the positions that have been selected by members of the paired group and formulate questions for the interview which are related to the selection criteria. Students are given some examples of what suitable questions might be and are encouraged to ask open questions which allow the interviewee to demonstrate their skills through providing evidence and illustrations of their various competencies.

Each group then forms an interview panel where each member of the panel has a specific role (for example Human Resources Manager) and where each member of the panel asks the interviewee prepared questions for the specific job. The tutor videotapes each interview and the video is given to the interviewee so that they can reflect on their performance in the interview. In addition to this, each student is given feedback by the interview panel and the tutor.

Students report that being a member of the interviewing panel is an invaluable experience as it gives them the opportunity to examine the process from the perspective of an employer and to understand what employers are looking for and how selections are made.

They also find the process of being interviewed in a formal setting helpful, as the greater majority of students have never had a formal interview. Being able to watch the video and see how they have conducted themselves provides another level of useful feedback.

We think that we could continue to improve the procedure by providing students with specific criteria for analyzing and assessing the interview process both for themselves and for the students they are interviewing. In future, as part of the reflection process we will ask students to comment in their Working Log on the experience of being on the interviewing panel.

In 2001, which was the first year that we co-coordinated the unit, we had a limited number of guest lecturers from business and industry. Students reported that they found these sessions very beneficial and consequently in the following year we increased the number of guest lecturers. Feedback about the unit suggests that this change was appreciated although we felt that there was some unnecessary repetition, which we hope to overcome by giving the guest lecturers specific areas to cover in their lectures.

In both 2001 and 2002, students reported that they found the job application folio a useful exercise as many of them had never had the experience of applying for a position, presenting a convincing resume and addressing selection criteria in a focused, convincing and thoughtful manner.

The research assignment, which asks students to research a specific career pathway by interviewing people engaged in positions that would be of interest to the student upon graduation, has been seen as useful by some students and of little value to others.

It has succeeded in encouraging students to make contact with people in the workforce and give them a more realistic understanding of what a particular career requires and demands.

In previous years we asked students to present their findings in a report, which detailed the career, the company and the specific aspects of the position that in which they were interested. A considerable number of students resorted to providing information which they had gleaned from the Internet and which was used to 'pad' the report. This year we intend to change the structure so that students can provide a more personal account of their experiences in the workplace, detailing the nature of their contact with the potential employer, the information that they were specifically seeking and how they went about securing relevant information about the culture of the workplace and the particular profession.

In 2004 this unit will be offered on the Rockingham Campus (a satellite campus of Murdoch University) and will be articulated with a Structured Workplace Learning program where students spend a semester working in a selected and relevant work place. It is proposed that students complete *A277: From University to Workplace* as preparatory to entering the workplace on a full time basis. This would give students a greater opportunity to participate in the actual practices of the culture and develop self-efficacy within a structured context.

### **Overview of the unit**

An important aspect of this unit is its capacity to focus students' attention on the prospect of making the transition from university to the workplace. Many students acknowledge that they have not considered the requirements of moving from university studies into regular employment and a number of students in their third year of study are unsure as to what career they would like to pursue. Often students have 'romantic' notions of what their anticipated career will involve and have not understood what it would require on a day-to-day basis. This unit helps students to orient themselves towards making this transition through enabling them to acquire a better understanding of the workplace and what a career pathway in a particular field would necessitate.

The experiential aspects of the unit, both the interview and making contact with companies and personnel in the workplace, are highly valued by the students. The emphasis in this unit is to link in a coherent manner both theoretical and philosophical understanding and questioning about work with a rehearsal of practical skills. By linking thinking, feeling and doing in the interview and research project we attempt to engage with our students as whole people and not only at an intellectual level. Students take the mock interview extremely seriously (both in the interviewer and interviewee role) and manifest all the usual signs of anxiety: dry mouth, sweating and nervous movements. The opportunity to rehearse and to practice important skills prior to the full performance, at a job interview or in researching potential job situations, is an important and valid learning tool that is often overlooked in tertiary level courses.

Graduates are increasingly faced with the task of 'performing' in the context of an assessment center. For some individuals this is a daunting task as they are required to participate in a range of work related activities whilst being observed and assessed. In this unit we currently talk about the demands of assessment centers, but do not provide students with any time for rehearsing the skills required to successfully compete in this context. We would like to offer students this

opportunity, but time constraints and the importance of striking a balance between theory and praxis means that this currently remains an ideal.

It is possible that once the unit is articulated with the Structured Workplace Learning program (which enables students to work within organizations appropriate to their course of study) students will be placed in contexts where their knowledge and skills can be rehearsed and developed in real-life situations.

In conclusion, the mandate of universities is to facilitate the development of engaged, critical and creative thinkers and learners. Consequently we now have to acknowledge that seeking employment in the twenty-first century, with all of its change and uncertainty, requires we accept that teaching our students to negotiate this uncertainty is our responsibility. This places a unit such as *A277: From University to Workplace* at the center of the university curricula.

As teachers in this unit, our process is not dissimilar to that of our students as we have to rehearse, reflect and renew the curriculum and our teaching practice in order to walk the fine line between the practical and the theoretical. Shaping a unit to meet these fluid and dynamic transformations in the workplace for a diverse population of students, calls for a flexible and creative teaching praxis and for a demonstration of the teachers' self-efficacy in terms of devising innovative teaching and learning strategies, which respond to students' differing needs.

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