



## Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Competitive sports, athletes and employability

Kinash, Shelley; Crane, Linda H; Judd, Madelaine-Marie; Knight, Cecily; McLean, Matthew; Mitchell, Kirsty; Dowling, David

*Licence:*  
CC BY-SA

[Link to output in Bond University research repository.](#)

*Recommended citation(APA):*

Kinash, S., Crane, L. H., Judd, M.-M., Knight, C., McLean, M., Mitchell, K., & Dowling, D. (2015). *Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Competitive sports, athletes and employability*. Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-supporting-graduate-employability-generalist-disciplines-through-employer-and-private-instit>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.



**GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY**  
GRADUATES • STUDENTS • EMPLOYERS • EDUCATORS  
[GRADUATEEMPLOYABILITY.COM](http://GRADUATEEMPLOYABILITY.COM)



Australian Government



Office for  
Learning & Teaching



# CASE STUDIES TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

2015 Competitive Sports, Athletes and Employability



Support for the production of this report has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.



With the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, and where otherwise noted, all material presented in this document is provided under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (accessible using the links provided) as is the full legal code for the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.

### **Requests and inquiries concerning these rights should be addressed to:**

Office for Learning and Teaching Department of Education  
GPO Box 9880,  
Location code N255EL10  
Sydney NSW 2001

<[learningandteaching@education.gov.au](mailto:learningandteaching@education.gov.au)>

**Please cite as:** Kinash, S., Crane, L., Judd, M-M., Knight, C., McLean, M., Mitchell, K., & Dowling, D. (2015). *Case studies to enhance graduate employability: Competitive sports, athletes and employability*. Sydney, Australia: Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. <http://graduateemployability.com>

2015

ISBN 978-1-76028-327-8 [PRINT]

ISBN 978-1-76028-328-5 [PDF]

ISBN 978-1-76028-329-2 [DOCX]

# CONTENTS

|    |                                                                                                                 |
|----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 26 | Introduction                                                                                                    |
| 29 | A true story of competitive sports, athletes and graduate employability                                         |
| 30 | What is unique about employability through engagement with sports and employability within sport organisations? |
| 36 | Advice for students, graduates and educators                                                                    |
| 37 | What's next? Sustainability and development                                                                     |
| 39 | Reading, resources and discussion questions                                                                     |

## Preface

This is one in a series of case studies to enhance graduate employability. The theme of this case study is:

- Competitive sport, athletes and employability

The 10 other case studies in the series are on the themes of:

- Employment through multi-national corporations
- Entrepreneurship (graduates in start-up businesses and graduates employed by entrepreneurs)
- Government as employer
- Private higher education and employability implications
- The role and contribution of higher education career development centres
- Indigenous employment and supports

- Employability for-profit business endeavours
- Generalist disciplines and employability
- Focus on graduate attributes
- Emerging careers (preparing students for careers that do not yet exist)

The project took place between January and November 2014. The study was designed to investigate, disseminate and enhance graduate employability. Knight and Yorke (2004) are the world-renowned authorities on graduate employability. They define employability as, “a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations” (p. 9). In a large part, the role and function of these case studies is to make the implicit strategies and supports for employability explicit for heightened sustainable impact.

Throughout the project, four stakeholder groups have been fully consulted:

- Graduates
- Students
- Employers
- Educators/Career Development Centre professionals

The project data was collected through surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups.

- 1500 surveys were distributed. 821 surveys were submitted for a 55 per cent response rate. 705 surveys were fully completed.
- 86 in-depth interviews/focus groups were conducted, fully transcribed and analysed.

This case study on the role of competitive sport, athletes and employability is based on interviews and focus groups with 11 people across the stakeholder groups of employed graduates, students, employers, educators and career development professionals from four different universities. It also incorporates data from the surveys and in-depth interviews/focus groups described above.



**"I LOOK FOR A RESUME THAT ALMOST LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE BEEN WORKING FOR FOUR YEARS IN ADDITION TO STUDYING. THEY'VE BEEN PLAYING SPORT, VOLUNTEERING OR DOING COMMUNITY WORK. I LIKE TO FIND PEOPLE THAT LOOK LIKE THEY'VE BEEN BUSY, HAVE A FULL LIFE, THAT THEY'RE DOING A LOT OF THINGS APART FROM JUST STUDYING AND SITTING IN THEIR ROOM."  
(AN INTERVIEWED EMPLOYER)**

# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this case study is to present evidence that student participation in co-curricular activity, such as competitive sports, has the power to lift graduate employability.

This case study addresses competitive sports, athletes and employability from two perspectives. First, it addresses sport organisations as graduate employers. As explained by one of the interviewees, there are ten sectors within the sports industry. Graduates can become employed in: 1) local government, 2) state government, 3) federal government, 4) international, 5) professional sporting organisations, 6) not-for-profit, 7) facilities, 8) equipment manufacturers, 9) retail companies (including shoe and clothing) and 10) media. While most of these sport industry roles require a university degree, employers tend not to restrict recruitment to sports management or other types of degrees specifically within the sports discipline. Employers tend to hire for a degree, personality, skills and experience that best fit with the profile of the role. For example, if hiring in a media role, recruiters are likely to hire graduates from Public Relations, Journalism or other such university programs. Employers stated openness to generalist degrees such as Humanities, Life Sciences, Performing Arts and Computer Science.

The second perspective of the case study concerns students who engage in sports while enrolled in university. Whether or not students plan to pursue a sports-related career upon graduation, it was clear throughout the interviews and focus groups and supported by prior research, that participation in sport enhances employability in most, if not all, sectors and industries. Notably, most students are unaware that the attributes they

develop by participating in sport are valued by employers and often make the difference between who is interviewed, hired and promoted. Raising awareness of students/ graduates and teaching them how to articulate their sports-related employability assets is the main goal of this case study.

## From the research

Researchers (Allen, Bullough, Cole, Shibli and Wilson, 2013) described evidence providing an affirmative answer to the following question: *Does engagement in sport impact positively on graduate employment and longer term employability?*

The researchers concluded their report with the words: “The research concludes that sport does matter and can contribute positively in various domains. It is a *force for good* and a sound investment from the perspective of the graduate, employer and universities. Now is the time for all partners and stakeholders to realise the potential of sport and to act accordingly.” (p. 56)

## Career development professional

“I can’t think of many graduates that I am aware of that have been truly successful who haven’t had a broader experience than just being a student. Generally, those students that we recognise as elite athletes are high achievers in all they do, and sport is just part of it. Students who are engaged with those activities while they are studying are getting jobs more easily, better quality jobs and are contributing more so to society thereafter.”

# INTRODUCTION

## University student (Ironman participant)

“I think as a student, it is really helpful to listen to the research, employers, graduates and career development professionals to understand that employability is more than just academic achievement. It was an eye-opener to see that sport and community engagement play a big part in the company’s selection criteria.”

## Why is it that student participation in sport has such a strong impact on employability?

The research introduced on the previous page, produced by British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS), listed 31 attributes used by employers to describe what makes athletes excel as employees. Listed in no specific order, these attributes are:

Teamwork, motivation, communication, networking/social skills, confidence, time management, competitiveness, resilience, personal drive, commitment, able to take instruction, self-awareness, respect for others, sense of fun, tenacity, breadth of interests, leadership, organisational skills, flexibility, good health and mental wellbeing, self-discipline, determination, ambition, problem solving skills, planning and strategic skills, passion, energy, ability to multi-task, initiative, self-respect and pride.

These attributes were echoed throughout the interviews and focus groups forming the basis of this case study. For example, a student services specialist within a university shared,

“It’s around leadership, teamwork, people management, managing complex tasks with not a lot of resources, influencing groups of people where you don’t have a natural authority (a team), which I think is a really important skill. It’s okay to be able to *tell* somebody because you are their boss, but if you can *influence* a group of people when you are their peer, I think that is a significantly more powerful skill to have.”

A research participant who works for an Australian university employing students as volunteers and temporary staff in order to scaffold their employability, explained,

“Our first charter is to really make sure that the students have a balanced student life, and sport obviously plays an important role in that in terms of socialising, in terms of building confidence, in terms of health and fitness as well, and really having something outside study. It is also a great vehicle for building not just confidence but leadership skills. Those skills are transferable and those students who work in those co-curricular programs have better career opportunities. That’s always been known or thought anecdotally but we’ve never had the evidence to prove that.”

The object of this case study is to present evidence that student participation in **extra-curricular** and **co-curricular** activities, such as competitive sports, has the power to lift graduate employability.

There is an important distinction between extra-curricular and co-curricular, even though those interviewed and participating in focus groups sometimes used the terms inter-changeably. Extra-curricular means that the activity takes place outside of, or beyond the curriculum.

# INTRODUCTION

Classifying sport as extra-curricular assumes that it is not a core component of the university learning experience. Co-curricular, on the other hand, means that activity is completed in conjunction with, alongside or as a part of the learning experience. A shift is taking place in universities whereby sport and other such activity is increasingly acknowledged, supported, reflected upon, badged and credited as part of the university learning experience. One of the interviewed educators explained, “If you believe in the idea of co-curricular then it’s about developing the whole person, not just having the technical skill.”

In order to turn sporting participation into an employability-plus factor, the graduate must be able to articulate the attributes that were gained, practised and evidenced through that activity.

“It’s about how quickly you can stand out from the page and how succinctly you can demonstrate that you can actually deliver on the selection criteria. It’s about demonstrated capacity. It’s the language you use in applications. It’s, ‘I have demonstrated the capacity to articulate the organisation’s objectives through my experience in ‘x’ and providing an example.” *Interviewed employer*

Beyond listing their sporting activity, graduates need to be able to be explicit about what attributes they developed, or in other words, specifically what the sporting activity demonstrates about their capacity as future employees.

“You learn in recruitment training, a piece of paper isn’t worth much. Anyone can write anything on a piece of paper. If I want them to tell me about the event I’ll ask, ‘What

did you do there?’, ‘What was your role?’ and then they’ll need to talk me through it.” *Interviewed career development professional*

“Even though the students have had the experience, they’re not very good at selling the experience. To use a non-sports example to illustrate the point, our next step will be to make sure that students understand that by painting a fence you learnt these skills and you should make sure that you talk about these when you go for an interview.” *Staff person within a University Leadership Program*

## Case study aims and objectives

- Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.
- Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.
- Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees with sport attributes and/or in sport organisations.

## Keywords

- Sport
- Engagement
- Co-curricular
- Initiative and self-motivation
- Resilience
- Passion
- Community involvement
- Leadership
- Volunteerism

# A TRUE STORY OF COMPETITIVE SPORTS, ATHLETES AND GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY

## **Don Knapp, CEO of Australian University Sports Ltd**

I am a product of the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) system which is an integral co-curricular component in the US higher education system. NCAA member universities support around 150,000 student-athletes on full scholarships annually at a cost of approximately \$1.5 billion. The NCAA system is an example of a dual career and education approach which values and promotes excellence in sport, education and training while preparing athletes for working life after sport.

My experience was that combining sport and education in preparation for the “real world” was very empowering. I believe that many of the skills that I developed through co-curricular activity provided me with a distinct set of skills and attributes that enhanced my chances of securing employment and advancing my career as both an educator and professional sports manager. Specifically, I am referring to the acquisition of professional leadership skills such as:

- Goal setting and communication
- Intrinsic motivation and the ability to motivate others
- Teamwork and working collaboratively
- Strategic planning and the ability to achieve alignment, and
- Competitiveness

My belief is that sport is a wonderful co-curricular activity when combined with higher education as a means for developing skills that prospective employers find attractive. In fact, it should be of an overt aim for higher education institutions to ensure that most, if not all, co-curricular offerings on campus aim to develop similar skills sets to those that are so often acquired through participation in sport.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

The sport culture and athletes, sometimes have a reputation of being stereotypically highly competitive, non-academic, self-centered and uncaring. These reputational characteristics were not perpetuated through the research informants. All of the people informing this case study worked with numerous athletes on a regular basis and most were athletes themselves. Not a single disparaging word was said against athletes. One of the interviewees specifically described the current generation of student athletes as “generous” and “socially minded.” He also described a growing student commitment to “the ethical stuff.” An employer within the sports industry stated that he hires people who “effectively articulate their values and their mission and what they’re all about.” A number of the interviewees spoke about “sport for development” or in other words “using sport as a tool for other developmental outcomes.”

An important aspect of involvement with sport is volunteering within sporting organisations and/or sporting events. All of the informants, across all stakeholder groups, emphasised the importance of community service and volunteerism. Volunteerism was depicted as an opportunity to *pay it forward* and *give back*. Notably, while the details of the volunteer experience were described as *voluntary* and variable, completing at least one volunteer experience was not presented as *voluntary* at all.

- “We find a lot of volunteering opportunities for students to really get their hands dirty and to experience the community and working with disadvantaged students.” *An interviewed educator*
- “If you don’t go and volunteer somewhere you won’t get a job. You have to! It’s the industry.” *An interviewed educator*

## Approach to achieve aims and objectives

- **Students – To increase awareness of the importance of engaging in employability initiatives and build-in formalised support for these initiatives.**

Throughout the interviews and focus groups there was strong thematic evidence of a growing university priority to foster employability in students and thereby graduates. All four universities whose staff interviewed for this particular case study had formalised teams and supports to improve employability. The priorities and mechanisms had two main facets. The first was instrumental supports to ensure that students have access to co-curricular employability initiatives. The second is to communicate *to students* the importance of these initiatives and the impact on employability. University staff are finding numerous, diverse strategies to engage students in employability approaches.



**YOU CAN'T EAT OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALS!**

“BEING AN OLYMPIAN PROVIDES YOUNG TALENTED INDIVIDUALS WITH A DISTINCTIVE VALUE PROPOSITION TO PROSPECTIVE EMPLOYERS. BUT RARELY IS A SPORTING ACHIEVEMENT ENOUGH TO GUARANTEE SUCCESS IN LIFE AFTER SPORT. IN AN INCREASINGLY COMPETITIVE CAREER MARKET, TODAY MORE THAN EVER HIGH PERFORMING ATHLETES NEED TO COMBINE THEIR SPORTING PURSUITS WITH EDUCATION AND CAREER PLANNING FOR LIFE AFTER SPORT. IF OUR YOUNG OLYMPIANS ARE GOING TO CONTRIBUTE TO MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE, EDUCATION IS AN EQUALLY IMPORTANT INGREDIENT AS SPORT IN HELPING THEM DO SO.”

FIONA DE JONG, SECRETARY GENERAL, AUSTRALIAN OLYMPIC COMMITTEE

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

- **Higher Education – To develop well-rounded graduates with employability attributes.**

Many universities acknowledge the powerful role of combining sport and leadership initiatives to foster enhanced graduate employability. Universities are thereby forming specialised student support teams who educate students and help them to coordinate and succeed in volunteer work and other forms of work experience such as internships. These units themselves supervise student experiences and coordinate external experiences.

- **Employers – To provide continued learning opportunities for graduate employees with sport attributes and/or in sporting organisations.**

Employers from sporting organisations appear to welcome the opportunity to host student volunteer and work experience through such initiatives as internships. It is the culture of the sporting industry that professionals support student development as altruism and *paying it forward*. Special events, competitions and other such periodic surges in sporting activity provide heightened opportunities for meaningful experience. When such events are taking place, there are opportunities for many students to participate in learning experiences such as promotions, budgeting and event management. Many of the employers also addressed formal continuing education for employees within the organisation to assist the transition to employment within the sporting sphere. Employers particularly acknowledged necessary supports to employed graduates within their first year. Employers described mentorship and formal training for such early career professionals as one of the factors of successful graduate employability.

## Challenges

- **Nature of employment**

One of the challenges of employability in sporting organisations is in the context of the nature of the industry. Many of the employment opportunities are described as *cyclical, periodic* or *seasonal*; there are ebbs and flows in employability. During major sporting events and competitions, numerous staff are required and the roles and functions are various and challenging. In between these surges, less staff are required and the work is described as more routine and even mundane. The salary of people in continued roles was described as lower than in equivalent roles in other industries. This particular employment context poses challenges to both employers and employees. It can be difficult for employers to find a sufficient number of qualified staff to take on heightened responsibilities during surge-times. Employees may be unhappy to wait for periodic contracts or require permanent, continued employment to pay their expenses including university loans (HECS fees).

- **Gender imbalance in senior roles**

Some of the interviewees described gender inequity in the sport industry. One of the interviewees depicted the gender profile as “the top is heavier male, and the bottom is heavier female.” Some of the issues include “teenage girl drop-out” from sports, meaning an interrupted history if they choose to return to the industry later. Other interruptions in career profiles are introduced through “child-bearing years” and then sometimes by heightened “caring responsibilities” for older generations.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

In addition, it was indicated that some athletes are sceptical of having women in executive positions in male sports.

## Successes

- **Internships**

All of the interviewees and focus group participants suggested internships as a solution to the challenges of sports employability. For example, one of the interviewees stated, “If students do it well and they get the partnership right, then they can be employed at the end. That has started to happen as the good interns are getting offered work at the end of the internship.” Many of the interviewees and focus group participants noted an availability decline in the number of internships. They commented that this decline was problematic when combined with a lowered graduate employability rate overall and a recognition that internships are a key factor. One of the research participants commented, “I think the cap on this is ultimately going to be business’ capacity to provide real opportunities. The government should consider giving employers money to employ apprentices because it clearly comes at a cost to your business.”

- **Combined sports and entrepreneurial skills and consultant acumen**

As many of the sporting positions require niche skills and short-term contracts, students who develop a mindset and skills of entrepreneurship and consultation are better placed to thrive. Entrepreneurial thinking involves graduates recognising needs and pursuing ideas and developing skills to match. Forming identity as a consultant enables a graduate to cope

with, and appreciate the novelty and excitement of, changing opportunities and budget accordingly. One of the described innovations to support students to develop these mindsets was titled the *Big Idea Subject*. It was described as “a social entrepreneurship program so students get together in groups and they develop something to solve a social program and that is in partnership with *The Big Issue*.” Other university programs combine sports with leadership initiatives and training to again develop graduates who are change implementation savvy.

- **Understanding competitive sports as an employability approach for industries other than sporting**

As stated throughout this case study, the experience of participating in competitive sports helps athletes develop attributes that make them marketable and allow them to shine in any industry. In other words, athletes are not confined to employment within sporting organisations. One of the staff from an in-house university support service explained that sporting awards are recruitment “conversation pieces.” Another interviewee stated that “students who are engaged with those types of activities (such as sport) while they are studying are obtaining jobs more readily, the jobs are better, and they are contributing more so to society thereafter.”

- **Balancing study with other pursuits**

Interviewees and focus group participants consistently stated that grades are only one factor of graduate success and should not be pursued to the exclusion of other components of the student experience.

# WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT WITH SPORTS AND EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN SPORT ORGANISATIONS?

One of the interviewees stated that “grades are not the same as capabilities.” Further advice is that “students need to play to their strengths.” Employers stated that they would rather a graduate profile in which the student excelled in a subset of subjects and articulates these domains as particular strengths. Rather than achieving honours in all subjects, the student is advised to balance intense study with sport participation, engaged connection, volunteerism and other co-curricular pursuits. One of the employers explained, “The cover letter, what they’ve studied and where they’ve been employed most recently are the three key things I would look at when short listing. Also, how their skill set matches the position description. But their grades haven’t generally been something that we’ve been provided or would probably want to look at anyway.” Another interviewee stated, “I’m not interested in your brightest. Most of those kids cannot function in my environment because all they know is study. So we need to look beyond that. So the brightest aren’t necessarily the best.” Several of the research participants informing this case used the image of the letter T. Students have their discipline and their study, which is the vertical line. In order to be employable they need to top it off with the horizontal line, expanding their reach across a wider range of areas, domains and pursuits.

## What are the impacts?

Impacts of the success initiatives described on the previous pages include:

- Heightened awareness of educators, career development personnel, students and graduates.
- Acknowledgement of co-curricular, activities including sport.
- Students starting earlier on their graduate employability development.
- Collaborative efforts and initiatives between students, graduates, educators, career development personnel and employers.
- Reflection on pragmatic employability goals combined with value-based approaches to learning and contribution.

## How has the approach developed employability?

As acknowledged by many of the participants in this case study research, most of the initiatives are new and commencing. University focus on graduate employability and recognition of (and funding towards) employability supports are too new to evaluate the impact. Formative evaluation indicates that efforts are extended in the right direction, but time will tell whether graduate employability rates continue to decline or will experience a rise alongside university heightened awareness and initiatives.





# ADVICE FOR STUDENTS, GRADUATES AND EDUCATORS

## For students

### Get to know your professors.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“If I don’t know your name by the end of this subject, I am not going to recommend you for a job. So the advice that we give our students is to get out there and get themselves known, be professional and engage. That stands in the classroom as well.”

### Engage and connect.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“In sport, everyone knows one another. So get yourself out there, go to things, learn new stuff, talk to people. Sport is really small and everyone [seems to] know everyone, so the ones who are successful are the ones that everyone knows, are good operators and the word gets out and they get employed before they even start looking.”

### Be proactive and show initiative.

*FROM AN EMPLOYER:*

“I think it’s more about what the student gets out of university. I think it requires more proactivity on the part of the individual. I look for the person who you can’t stop from engaging, the person who’s really a go-getter and doesn’t need to be encouraged to be engaged.”

“Sport is important as it demonstrates time commitment, the ability to work with teams and fellow peers in both the competitive environment and in time management. It plays to a lot of different core competencies that we would be looking for when it comes to leadership, team interaction and so forth.”

## For graduates

### Network.

*FROM A UNIVERSITY CAREER*

*DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONAL:*

“The issue around employability is also that of being involved in any organisation through extending your networks. That, by nature increases your employability because of the people in the extended group that you now know, providing opportunities for you to have conversations in the workplace.”

## For educators

### Orient the employability curriculum around skills rather than specific jobs.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“Educators need to provide from the get-go to students, the idea of the breadth of roles out there. You also need to encourage them to think about skills rather than jobs because the jobs that the students are going to end up [employed in] in ten years’ [time] don’t exist yet.”

### Do not over-emphasise employability.

*FROM AN EDUCATOR:*

“You need to teach them transferable skills; how to think and how to write, how to form an argument, weigh evidence. I think as an industry we are losing that. There is a lot of focus on academe of just being job-ready, and I agree with that, but you need the caveat of ‘What job?!’ because the job that you are ready for now exists, but the job you have in ten years might not [currently exist]. There needs to be an acknowledgement that the broader skills and creativity are what makes stuff happen.”

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Higher impact sustainability can be accomplished through dedicating more financial and human resources to internships, placements and work experiences. In the survey research, the literature was systematically reviewed to derive strategies for which there was empirical evidence for positive impact on employability. Twelve strategies emerged (listed here in alphabetical order):

- capstone/final semester project
- careers advice and employment skill development
- extra-curricular activities
- graduate portfolios, profiles and records of achievement
- international exchange
- mentoring
- networking or industry information events
- part-time employment
- professional association membership/engagement
- social media/networks
- volunteering/community engagement
- work experience/internships/placements

The survey questions were articulated as follows on the four stakeholder versions of the surveys:

- Students – What strategies are you using to improve your graduate employability?
- Graduates – What strategies did you use to improve your employability?
- Higher Education Personnel – Which of the following employability strategies do you provide for students?

- Employers – Which of the following strategies undertaken by students does your organisation value when recruiting graduates?

By a substantive margin, the strategy set to be selected on the greatest number of survey responses was:

### **Work experience/internships/ placements**

This strategy set was indicated on 74 per cent of student surveys, 74 per cent of graduate surveys and 87 per cent of employer surveys. It was selected on a minority of higher education personnel surveys. This difference between stakeholder groups was addressed in many of the 86 in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted after the surveys. All of the interviewed higher education personnel support the idea and value of work experience, internships and placements. However, these employability strategies are expensive and time consuming.

One of the strongest themes across the project was that more resources should be invested in work experience, internships and placements, in order to have a sustainable impact on graduate employability development. In the context of competitive sports, athletes and graduate employability, those interviewed and participating in focus groups were strong advocates for more and higher quality internships.

## WHAT'S NEXT? SUSTAINABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

### Part-time work versus volunteer work

In the survey research, the possibility of part-time employment as a graduate employability strategy was perceived only by students and graduates. Fifty-three per cent of both stakeholder groups ticked this strategy. This seems to indicate a need for perspective – alignment between students and graduates with employers and educators because a minority of the latter two stakeholder groups ticked part-time employment as an employability strategy. One of the interviewed employers shared, “I don’t really care that they worked at Coles or Woolworths, I’ll be honest, [it is] how they supported themselves at university.”

On the other hand, all of the interviewees and focus group participants emphasised the importance of volunteerism in the context of sport. On the surveys 50 per cent of graduates and 53 per cent of employers ticked this strategy. A minority of students ticked the strategy, thereby indicating that at the time of survey completion, students did not plan to volunteer throughout their studies. Educators did not tick the strategy, presumably because this was not something that their university formally supported as an employability strategy. It appears that this discord between perspectives is an indicator that perception checking, attitude alignment and further education is warranted.

### Slight negative correlation between accessing career supports and employment

The survey asked students and graduates to indicate whether they had secured career employment at the time of completing the survey. Notably, there was a negative correlation (albeit small) between accessing career supports and employment. In other words, those that ticked that they planned to, or had accessed career services, were less likely to have found a career. This should not be interpreted to mean that career services are harmful. What is indicated is that career services are often used as a measure of last-resort. In other words, those students who are nearing their final weeks, and graduates who have not yet found employment will finally contact university career services for help. This lends support to the proposition offered throughout this case study that employability activities such as competitive sport are undertaken as co-curriculum and presented as components of the well-rounded graduate profile of evidenced attributes.

# READING, RESOURCES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Reading and resources

Allen, K., Bullough, S., Cole, D., Shibli, J., & Wilson, J. (2013). *The impact of engagement in sport on graduate employability: Final report*. London: British Universities & Colleges Sport. Retrieved from [http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS\\_Employability\\_Research\\_Report.pdf](http://c1593.r93.cf3.rackcdn.com/BUCS_Employability_Research_Report.pdf)

Knight, P., & Yorke, M., (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Volunteering WA. (2014). *Volunteering to learn*. Retrieved from <http://volunteeringwa.org.au/about/research/volunteering-to-learn.aspx>

## For further information and resources:

<http://graduateemployability.com>

### Thank You To:

- Fiona de Jong
- Martin Doulton
- Janelle Farley
- Tony Jermyn
- Michael Jones
- Andy Hsien Wei Koh
- Don Knapp
- Tim Lee
- Emma Sherry
- Tim Smith
- Joy Villalino
- Rod Warnecke

- Australian Olympic Committee
- Australian University Sport
- Bond University
- La Trobe University
- Melbourne University
- Monash University
- RMIT University

The list of names and organisations is a partial list, as some interview and focus group participants requested that they remain anonymous.

## Discussion questions: To use this case study for educational purposes

- Is it a moral obligation of universities to cap course enrolments based on balance with employment vacancies?
- Is working on a sporting event or competition, an appropriate and viable internship if not aligned with a fulltime, continuing vacancy?
- How do students balance study with co-curricular pursuits such as competing in sport?
- What are the most effective means of teaching students and graduates how to articulate the attributes that they develop through co-curricular activities such as competitive sports?

