

Employability of Bachelor of Arts Graduates

INTRODUCTION

In March 2007, a scoping project of Arts programs across Australia was initiated by the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) after the group secured funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in the form of a Discipline-based Initiative grant. The central focus of the study was the collection and analysis of data that could reveal the nature and models of Bachelor of Arts degrees offered in Australia, the impact of BAs on graduates' learning over the long term, and the types of curriculum decision making which result in positive outcomes for students (Trent, n.d., online). Allied to this scoping, analysis and mapping of Australian BA programs was the desire to offer guidance and options to BA providers through future crucial investigations that would address issues identified during the initial scoping project.

In August of 2008, the Principal Investigator of the scoping project, Professor Faith Trent submitted the project final report, *Nature and roles of Arts degrees in contemporary society* (Gannaway, 2007), to the ALTC, in which the project deliverables were outlined. Among the deliverables were six summary reports that are particularly intended for decision makers for BA programs. One of these summaries, *Emerging future studies*, highlights the need to extend the findings elucidated by the scoping project; and suggests a series of additional investigative projects designed to determine the long-term impact of the BA, both educationally and socially, including in the labour market (DASSH, 2008). The project identified four areas requiring more in depth investigation:

- ways to articulate the value of the BA in order to dispel misconceptions, many of them negative, among students and the wider community;
- the nature of internationalisation in the BA and the level and types of international student participation;
- renewal of the curriculum; and
- the employability of students graduating with a BA.

The project proposed here will tackle the fourth of these, focusing on the employability of the BA graduate. This focus is encompassed by the ALTC Funding Priority 1: Research and development focussing on issues of emerging and continuing importance.

1 PROJECT RATIONALE AND AIMS

Rationale

In terms of the best sorts of curricula to deliver students so that they enter a dynamic labour market with the appropriate skills and attitudes for success, evidence advocating specialisation continues to conflict with evidence supporting generalisation. A Spanish study, for example indicates that a more specific (professional) curricula broadens job opportunities for graduates (Martin-Moreno, Garcia-Zorita, Elias Sanz-Casado, 2005); whereas an Australian White Paper indicates that employers and industry groups value graduates with a broad educational foundation (Waugh, 2001), such as that supplied by courses and programs found in a BA. In the contemporary educational climate, which is vocationally focused, the relevance of the Arts degree continues to be questioned (Waugh, 2001). The majority of graduates, themselves, however, prefer further study to improve vocational skills, and do not favour overt preparation for work in their undergraduate Arts programs, according to Waugh (2000), reporting on a limited study based in Melbourne.

Other studies have focussed on whether technical and professional education create better labour market networks that help graduates throughout their professional lives compared to those associated with a general education (Margolis & Simonnet, 2002). Unfortunately, these investigations have only added to the general confusion, since the researchers observed that the networks were not sustained for long following the period of education. Furthermore, where networking was enduring and successful, it originated among students who graduated from academically demanding courses and programs or institutions that have established high academic and social standards.

The scoping project preceding this proposal also located many studies that sought to establish exactly what characteristics are regarded as essential by various types of future employers. The result of these investigations has been the development in the tertiary sector of lists of attributes employers find desirable in graduates and to which students should aspire. These 'graduate attributes' appear as both statements of generic capabilities and as attitudes regarded as desirable by the whole of a society, such as 'exhibits an appreciation of the points of view of others', as well as qualities specific to programs, such as 'can speak, read and write a foreign language with sufficient fluency to be understood by a native speaker of that language'. Attribute development is considered to be incremental, often with the growth of attitudes and abilities synchronised across entire programs. Because students studying in BA programs self-select many courses, however, it is difficult to be confident that they have had the full range of experiences that would result in the development of the desired characteristics by the time they are awarded their degrees (Gannaway, 2008). Furthermore, it is clear that students, although possessing these attributes, aren't always aware of their importance when pursuing their careers and tend to understate their accomplishments.

The employability of Arts graduates is likely to be further complicated by the nature of the Arts degree for which they enrol. As demonstrated by the ALTC funded BA scoping project, it is misleading to refer all Arts graduates as a homogenous cohort in terms of their employability prospects (DASSH 2007). In fact, the scoping project (DASSH, 2007) identified five key models of the contemporary BA that reflect the debate among educators:

- the generalist model (critical thinking, problem solving, an understanding of the human condition and how society operates);
- socially engaged models (aims to develop an awareness of social responsibility, where students develop the skills required to facilitate community engagement);
- professional models (has a clear curriculum intention to educate entry level professionals for a specific job market);
- the apprenticeship model (a BA is seen to be an 'apprenticeship' into the academy);
- the focused model (aims to provide a structured program in a particular field of study, creating a graduate with specialist knowledge) (DASSH, 2007).

The main focus of this BA employability project is to conduct in-depth research into selected Australasian case studies of BA programs in different institutional and geographic contexts in order to provide insight into the employability of the respective graduates in these different settings. These case studies will be complemented by comparative but less detailed investigations into a broader suite of BA programs across a number of Australian universities. It is anticipated that this significant coverage of BA programs will provide a robust underpinning to the validity of results from this study and the strong support of DASSH will facilitate dissemination and application of the findings throughout the sector.

The five models will be considered when examining the employability of Arts graduates and the role of vocational training within the BA. This employability project, therefore, is one of four further studies proposed by the previous ALTC Arts scoping project. It builds on the findings from that project. It is likely that there will be strong linkages between elements of this BA employability project and a proposed further study related to the value of the BA. In particular, the nature of the BA graduate skills and attributes and the perception of these by students and employers will not only influence the value of the BA but also employability of graduates.

Aims

This project aims to address the following objectives relating to employability within Arts programs:

- to investigate and document the linkages between curriculum design, practicum experiences, and graduate attributes relative to prospective employer expectations
- to investigate and document the extent to which the institutional outcomes for Arts graduates relate to industry/community expectations

- to analyse how graduate attributes are implemented, evaluated and assessed in Arts across the sector and communicated to industry
- to analyse the implications of work integrated learning programs in the Arts, and for program managers in coordinating placements
- to determine the extent to which integrated learning in the BA provides training or skills for future workplaces.