The Career Ready portfolio: From rhetoric to reality

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The Context

In 2017, La Trobe University released a new Strategic Plan. One of the key pillars was a commitment to Student Employability. The stated goal was a major focus to continually improve graduate employability outcomes. A program of work called Career Ready Advantage (CRA) was implemented with this key objective.

> *"The capabilities our students develop are compiled into a personalised Career Ready Portfolio, which demonstrates to future employers the skills and attributes they have developed, and the experiential learning activities they have undertaken."*

La Trobe University (2017)

The Problem

Career Ready Advantage was a comprehensive program developed with industry partners. It included many career development workshops and networking events which students could attend and experience to develop skills and graduate attributes. As these activities were run in the co-curricular space, connecting CRA with student learning and skills development in the curriculum was a challenge. It was important for CRA to be a coordinated, cohesive program for the learning journey of students at university.

We were aware that engagement with academics would be a challenge in diverse subjects across many courses. We wanted to ensure that the program would be meaningful for students across the breadth of a course with many subjects. The process of career development needed to begin well before the end of the course. For the strategy to be successful, it needed to be

scalable across many varied disciplines and available to as many students as possible. These were difficult challenges for an institutional strategy to implement at scale.

The Approach

The implementation was based on a Collect/Select/Reflect/Present portfolio model (Barrett, 1999). Students would progressively collect evidence of learning and experience across their course, and from this collection they would select key examples of evidence to demonstrate their skills and abilities (Ambrose, Delaney-Klinger, Hoeppner, Ngo and Polly, 2017). Personal reflections about these experiences would consolidate their confidence in their abilities. Their personal statement about identity would be presented in a professional portfolio for future employers to review.

PebblePad was utilized to support this model and the design was developed to address the specific challenges identified.

Collection of evidence – combining co-curricular activities and learning

CRA co-curricular activities were supplemented with a custom mobile application to encourage engagement and record reflections. These reflections were uploaded directly to PebblePad. We then needed a simple method for students to upload relevant assessment activities from our Moodle LMS to PebblePad. The solution was achieved using custom Worksheets that were "published to the web". This allowed simple one click access to worksheets for students to write a reflection and upload evidence of learning. This simple approach helped staff who were not experienced with PebblePad and was key for scalability and adoption.

Reflections of co-curricular activities and evidence of learning were saved to individual student PebblePad repositories. These assets needed to be placed into some cohesive order rather than one unordered repository. A cohesive collection was available for every student in the form of the Career Ready Evidence Library. This was essentially a Workbook with pages for students to record information about themselves, sections for tag-based Collections, and self-evaluation activities. The Career Ready Evidence Library would become an important personal collection for multiple purposes and touchpoints including key activities across the course in midpoint and capstone subjects.

Select and Reflect Workshops

Having a collection of evidence of learning would be meaningless without critical reflection on key pieces of evidence of personal development and learning (Buyarski, Oaks, Reynolds and Rhodes, 2017). The critical reflection process would need to be facilitated at specific times within a course, such as the typical midpoint and capstone subjects where students consider and review their learning in light of their course and their intended professions. The Career

Ready Program provided opportunities to support these key course touchpoints with specific workshops about personal goals and graduate identity for employability. These self-evaluation records would also be recorded in the Career Ready Evidence Library and would guide students about future pathways and help keep them on track. Teaching staff used these subjects to help students develop professional profiles and students evaluated themselves against professional, discipline specific standards.

<u>Present – Career Ready Portfolio</u>

The Career Ready Portfolio in our program is not necessarily a PebblePad portfolio. The Career Ready Portfolio is more a development process which can produce many different outputs. These can be a comprehensive Curriculum Vitae, a strategy to address job selection criteria, a method to build confidence in interview responses, a professional LinkedIn profile, or a comprehensive PebblePad portfolio. The Career Ready Portfolio can be many things depending on the individual student's needs and decisions. Career Ready workshops and Capstone subjects facilitate the Career Ready Portfolio development process.

Our approach was cognizant of the fact that each course and discipline had different professional requirements for their graduate students and different desired outcomes for each course. The Career Ready Evidence Library was used as a supporting infrastructure for any course to access and adopt. Customisation of the Evidence Library was very important for different disciplines. The many varied graduate skills/standards required by professional bodies could be built into each evidence library.

Through this approach, the model was meaningful for individual students through their personal collections and reflections. It was meaningful for staff to facilitate reflection of learning within a subject. It was also meaningful to help achieve the course outcomes as it was a method to facilitate the recording of expected professional standards and skills development for each student across the course.

The Results

The outcomes of this implementation are currently not yet recorded, as this program is a course wide program and we are only at the beginning of the 3-4 year implementation process. At this stage we can report on the current adoption and feedback from our stakeholders.

The Careers team are pleased that student activities from the curriculum are being easily incorporated into the career development program. Integrating these activities in a systematic way has been a challenge in the past. The CRA activities are now referenced and promoted within previously closed LMS subjects.

Adoption into courses has commenced in various courses in Education, Health Sciences and Science. Discussions and implementation plans are under design and negotiation in many other disciplines. The general feedback has been very positive. It has been considered a useful common framework that spans many subjects, work experience programs and skill development activities; and can be referenced for other career development programs and graduate readiness activities.

The feedback received so far indicates that the model is viable in many different courses, hence scalable. The ability for the model to be customised to discipline specific professional standards/skills is considered to be highly valuable and is attractive to discipline leads who wish to embed these industry requirements into their courses.

Lessons Learnt

A key learning from this project relates to the strategy required to begin an implementation of this scale across the institution (JISC, 2012; PebblePad, 2018). A successful project is only as successful as the people who own it and take it forward.

The original concept was sound in design, clever in technical implementation, solved the anticipated challenges and met the desired objectives. In presenting the concept and idea to various stakeholders, real commitment was much slower than anticipated. A good design was not enough to convince people to use it for large scale implementation. The model needed ownership by each different stakeholder group.
This process required many stakeholder consultation meetings to discuss opportunities, identify their needs, review designs and provide solutions. Multiple meetings were required before key stakeholders were convinced that the model would be a key enabler to solve a number of their challenges/problems and help meet their objectives. Having a model that was flexible and customisable to the requirements of various stakeholders was important in this process. Once a custom design was established to address an identified challenge, the stakeholder group assumed ownership and were more committed to engage in the project. It was important to understand and identify key objectives for each different stakeholder group and discuss how the model could support them.

Sufficient investment of time should be allowed for this key process to develop and unfold.

Key stakeholder groups were Senior Management, Careers Development team, Directors of Teaching & Learning, Academic Communities of Practice, and Work integrated Learning Programs.

Take home messages about 'Scaling up'

- Ensure your project is addressing an institutional strategy and is promoted as an enabler to support discipline/business stakeholders to address the strategy.
- Invest sufficient time to build partnerships with key stakeholders to co-own the project. The project should help them fulfil their objectives/requirements.
- Design the model to be flexible and customisable to address individual needs and various assessment scenarios.
- Make sure the model is meaningful for all stakeholders, students, staff and the institution.
- By following these key points, they will ensure your PebblePad project will have more chance of success at scale across your institution.

References

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