

Capturing stakeholder perceptions of graduate capability development: Challenges associated with Graduate Employability Indicators

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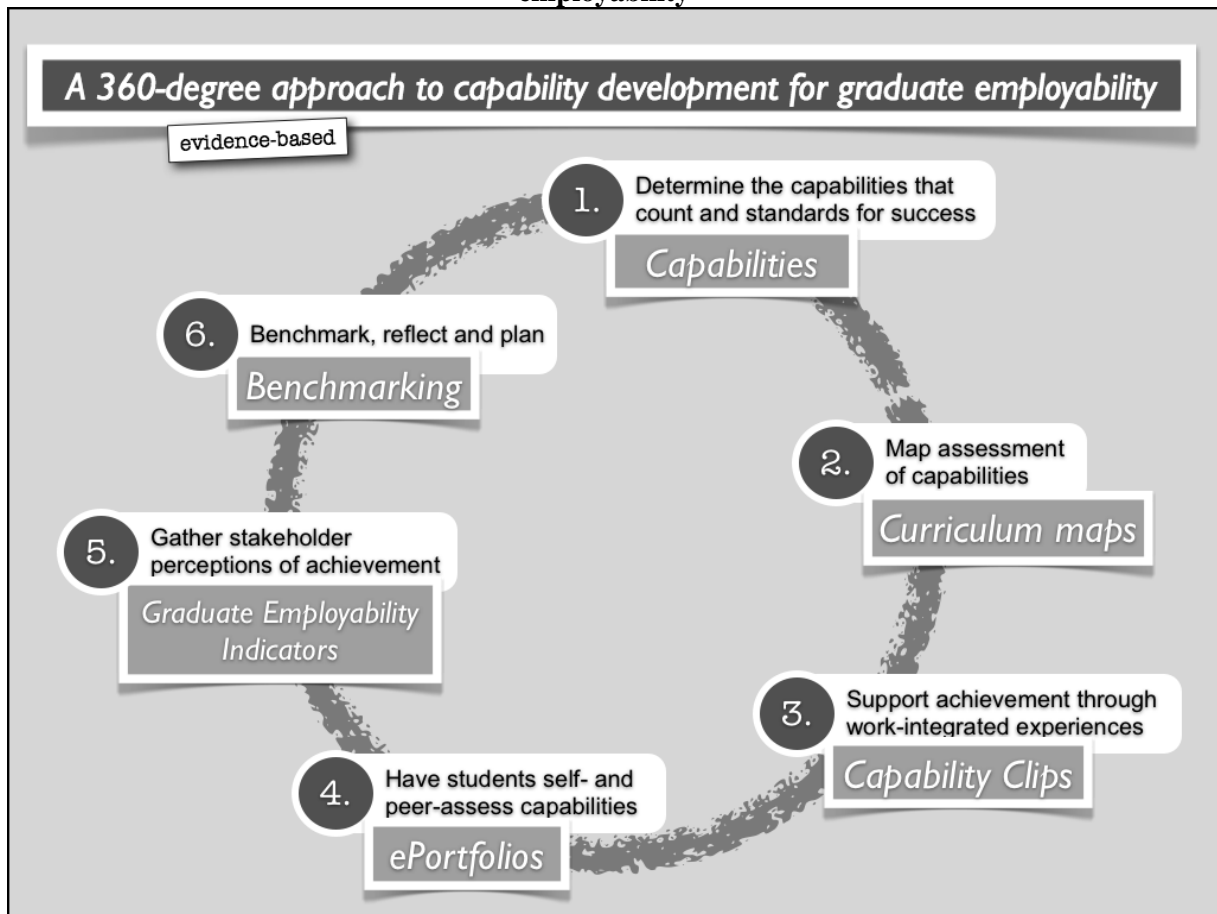
This paper reports on the use of the Graduate Employability Indicators, a suite of three online surveys for graduates, employers and members of the course teaching team, developed through the ALTC Project *Building Course Team Capacity for Graduate Employability*. The surveys were administered to graduates, employers and faculty staff for accounting and public relations/communications courses at four Australian universities in early 2010. Strategies used to identify and engage employers are discussed along with the impact that these strategies had on the total responses. Factors the ALTC Project Team found important were identifying and collating employer contacts, sending out reminder emails and establishing personal contact with stakeholders wherever possible. The paper also presents the lessons learnt through this survey process that may apply to activities undertaken by other researchers.

Keywords: academic, attributes, employability, employer, feedback, graduate

Introduction

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is becoming increasingly emphasised in Australian university curricula (Patrick et al., 2009). It must be borne in mind, of course, that WIL is a means to an end, and its goal is to enhance graduate capability development, particularly in relation to graduate employability. Graduate Employability has been an increasing focus of higher education institutions both in Australia and internationally, prompted by moves of government and the needs of industry. Graduate employability is not simply a graduate's ability to find work; it is more about ensuring graduates possess the skills, knowledge and attributes (herein after referred to as 'capabilities') required for future employment success (Precision Consulting, 2007; Yorke, 2004). This is illustrated in a quality assurance framework, called a 360-degree approach to capability development for graduate employability, developed as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship (B. Oliver, 2009). Fullan and Scott maintain that the appropriate outcomes for a university course must be based the 'capabilities that count' for the graduate's early professional success in their first five years (Fullan, 2009). In the 360-degree approach, the goal is to design the curriculum to enable appropriate capability development so that graduates can be "successful in their chosen occupations to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy", particularly in their first five years of professional practice (B. Oliver, 2009) as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 6: A 360-degree evidence-based approach to capability development for graduate employability



More specifically, this 360-degree approach focuses on six aspects, culminating with benchmarking: Determining the capabilities that count for early professional success; Mapping where those capabilities are assessed in the formal curriculum; Supporting their achievement through work-integrated learning experiences; Having students self- and peer-assess, in reflective practice; Gathering stakeholder perceptions of achievement; and Engaging in benchmarking for continuous improvement of the curriculum (B. Oliver, 2009). All of these aspects are important and interconnected: stakeholder perceptions on the capabilities that count (aspect 5) can be used to determine the types of work-integrated experiences (aspect 3) that would support the achievement of these capabilities.

This paper focuses on the fifth point in the quality cycle described above: stakeholder perceptions of capability achievement for graduate employability. Currently, national indicators capture limited stakeholder feedback on the importance of graduate capabilities and their demonstration by new graduates. The ALTC project, *Building Course Team Capacity for Graduate Employability*, is a collaborative project between Curtin University of Technology, RMIT University, Victoria University and the University of Southern Queensland which is attempting to bridge this data gap and capture key stakeholder feedback (from graduates, employers and course teaching teams) on the importance and demonstration of employment capabilities by new graduates (up to five years). This feedback is obtained through the Graduate Employability Indicators. These new surveys are being used to capture perspectives on the ‘capabilities that count’ by graduates, employers and members of the course teaching team for two courses at each of the partner universities (Accounting and Public Relations/Communications). These two courses have been chosen as examples of an accredited course with clear industry links (Accounting) and courses with less clear accreditation links to industry

(Public Relations/Communications). Progress to date highlights the challenges of engaging stakeholders to provide their perspectives, particularly through online surveys which have become prevalent in many fields. The paper focuses on the strategies used to identify, contact and engage stakeholder groups, particularly employers, and suggests which approaches appear to be more successful, and which challenges continue.

Background

Many previous studies have highlighted the gap between what skills employers find important and what skills are demonstrated by new graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; UK Commission for Employability and Skills, 2009) with “soft” skills (or graduate attributes) often considered to be more important than subject knowledge (or the particular degree studied) (Archer & Davison, 2008; Harvey, 1997). Previous studies have shown that the perspectives of employers differ from those of other stakeholder groups, such as students, graduates and academic staff members (Bhanugopan & Fish, 2009; Coll & Zegwaard, 2006) and differ based on the discipline area (Ng Poh Yen, Kamariah, Hw, & Huong, 2009).

Despite the importance of graduate employability, the major source of current data collected nationally and systematically on the employment of graduates is the Graduate Destination Survey: this captures information on new graduates’ employment or further study status, their employer and starting salary. There are no annual national indicators that regularly report employer feedback on the fitness for purpose of new graduates, although some Australian universities seek feedback from employers about the demonstrated capabilities of their graduates (B. Oliver & Whelan, 2010). Two examples are the Employer Feedback Survey developed by the University of South Australia as part of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Teaching Quality Indicators project (Chalmers, 2010) and the *eVALUate* employer survey developed at Curtin University of Technology (Beverly Oliver, Jones, Tucker, & Ferns, 2007). The ALTC Competitive Grant, *Building Course Team Capacity for Graduate Employability*, is a national initiative that aims to capture and triangulate the perspectives of employers, graduates and the course teaching team on the importance and demonstration of fourteen capabilities Drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2001), the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2009) and the Graduate Pathways Survey (Coates & Edwards, 2009). The surveys also contain demographic information and qualitative items for each of the stakeholder groups. More information on the survey instruments is available at <http://tiny.cc/boliver>

Specific studies designed to obtain employer feedback have used various methods to engage respondents, such as mailed surveys (Ng Poh Yen, et al., 2009), online surveys (both email and web-based) (Yun & Trumbo, 2000), telephone surveys and focused discussion groups (Liangrokapt, Samanlioglu, Leonard, Nault, & Harrison, 2002) with some utilising more than one of these approaches in an effort to boost response numbers (Yun & Trumbo, 2000). While the strength of mailed surveys lies in the ability to submit anonymous feedback (Yun & Trumbo, 2000), low response rates are a potential problem (Ng Poh Yen, et al., 2009) as the number of respondents is typically small and decreases with time as more higher education institutions seek employer feedback (Liangrokapt, et al., 2002). Emailed surveys generally receive lower overall response rates than paper-based surveys (Yun & Trumbo, 2000); however, for universities with limited resources, online surveys are less labour intensive. Mixed-mode approaches that utilise more than one contact method, plus a follow-up with contacts have resulted in more robust response rates.

The most effective approach to engaging respondents appears to be focused discussion groups or interview approaches, as these allow the researchers to examine issues in detail (Liangrokapt, et al., 2002). However, focus groups generally involve a small sample of potential respondents, are time-consuming and resource intensive and there is a limit to the number of topics that can be discussed. In addition, while focus groups can provide additional insights about the explanation and emotion behind

answers, they do not usually provide hard quantitative data or generalisable samples (Sink, 1991). Finally, focus groups require a skilled and experienced moderator to allow free discourse but maintain focus in group discussions, and this makes them less likely to be financially sustainable.

Given that there is no one method that is substantially more effective for obtaining employer feedback than any other, this study chose an online survey approach (communicated through email) for obtaining stakeholder feedback, with follow-up through personal contact wherever possible. This method was considered the most appropriate given that the aims for the project required quantitative data rather than qualitative information. Furthermore, as the purpose of the project of the data collection was to gather information that could be generalised for benchmarking purposes between partner universities, this survey method was thus considered to be the most appropriate and sustainable.

Methodology

The *Graduate Employability Indicators* are generally administered online. The project team augmented the online method by manual collection and collation of employer contacts from various sources in the institution, establishing relationships with academic teaching teams to identify possible employer contacts for the surveys and the dissemination and follow up of the survey instrument to employer contacts. The Heads of School of each of the chosen areas were also encouraged to provide employer contacts.

Course teams were fairly easily accessible within each institution, although work and time pressures did present some challenges. Members of the course teaching teams at each university had met with their project team member and the project leader to engage them in the project. Heads of School were contacted to distribute the surveys to their staff. Project team members were kept aware of the number of survey responses and continued to engage with the Heads of School to increase the responses. At one university where staff responses were low, academic staff members in one course were asked to fill in a paper copy of the survey at a staff meeting, with extra copies left at reception for those who did not attend. Their responses were then manually entered into the database.

While lists of graduates were fairly easy to obtain at some universities through alumni email mailing lists, not all of the partner universities had these systems established at the start of this project. Considerable time was spent prior to the implementation of this survey ensuring workable systems were in place, and such systems were trialled in the earlier pilots of the Graduate Employability Indicators. Graduates were contacted directly by alumni using these systems, and reminders were sent out to encourage responses. Some technical difficulties were encountered in the systems; for example, in one university there was a technical problem resulting in only some graduates receiving the emails. Such problems were identified and dealt with by alumni and the relevant project team member, with technical solutions or work arounds, such as manually emailing the graduates as was done in the previously mentioned example.

Engaging employers was perhaps the most challenging of the stakeholder groups. Many different lists of employers may exist within a higher education institution held by various groups such as careers, external relations and teaching academics. As there is little sharing between the lists, and often no coordinated approach to contacting employers, the resulting employer list requires careful collation to ensure that the same employer contact is not sent multiple invitations from the partner universities. This makes determining who to contact far more problematic for employers than it is for graduates or members of the course teaching team. The first challenge the project team encountered, therefore, involved obtaining a list of employer contacts, which required the collation of several different employer lists provided by academic teaching staff, careers centres, external relations and web searches. For the purposes of this project, employers were not limited to those who had employed graduates from the partner universities, but were interpreted more broadly as those who had employed

a 'new' accounting or PR/communications graduate. Australian employers from public and private companies were targeted, as well as organisations of varying sizes, to gather data on the breadth of graduate jobs within the industry. The project team originally considered offering an incentive prize to employers who participated, but this was not included based on advice from the project's external reference group.

The first employer lists generated for the project were collated from contacts held by individual academics, careers centre contact from the partner universities, external body websites (such as CPA Australia, Public Relations Institute of Australia), Career websites (both internal and external), Seek advertisements, and internal employers such as university accounting and public relations departments and relevant employers on university council or senate. The second employer lists were additional contacts from the above sources that had been obtained after the first mail-out, as well as Google searches for accounting firms and public relations agencies in Australia, targeting major companies operating in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia. External Relations, a department at Curtin University, provided additional contacts. Emails were sent out to members of university council who were accountants and internal HR and accounting departments prior to the mail-outs from the project officer. These sources resulted in a list of employers totalling 313 unique email lists, of which 152 were accounting employers and 161 were public relations or communications employers.

The second challenge faced by the project team was getting contacted employers to respond to the survey. All employers were contacted by email by the lead university, to avoid confusion. In at least one case, the head of school assisted with a personal email to the employers. Although the literature suggests sending up to three reminders to increase responses (Yun & Trumbo, 2000), this was not possible to do this for all employer contacts by the time this paper was written. Additionally, the project team at one partner university attended a CPA Australia (formerly Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants) meeting of employers with paper copies of the survey to increase the response rates..

Results

Graduates represent the largest of the stakeholder groups, so it is unsurprising that this group had the largest number of responses (450 in total for all courses in Accounting and PR/Communications). Graduates were contacted directly by the partner universities' alumni centres, which might have added an element of familiarity to the request. Graduates responded quickly to the surveys and reminders, as shown in Figure 1. Response rates are not reported here because of the unknown number of 'live' email addresses.

Figure 1: Graduate responses to the Graduate Employability Indicators over time

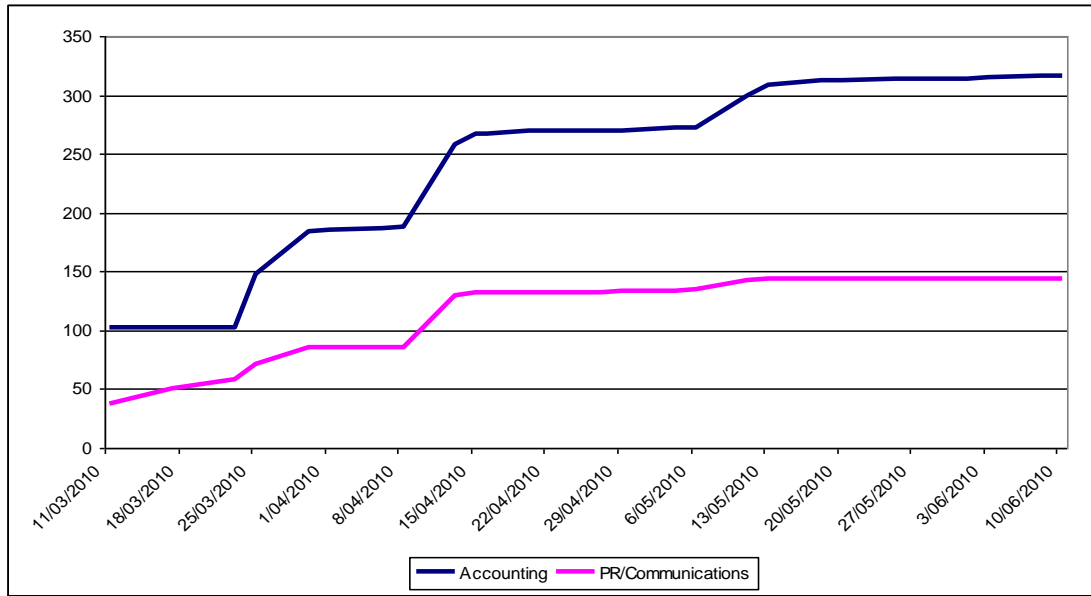


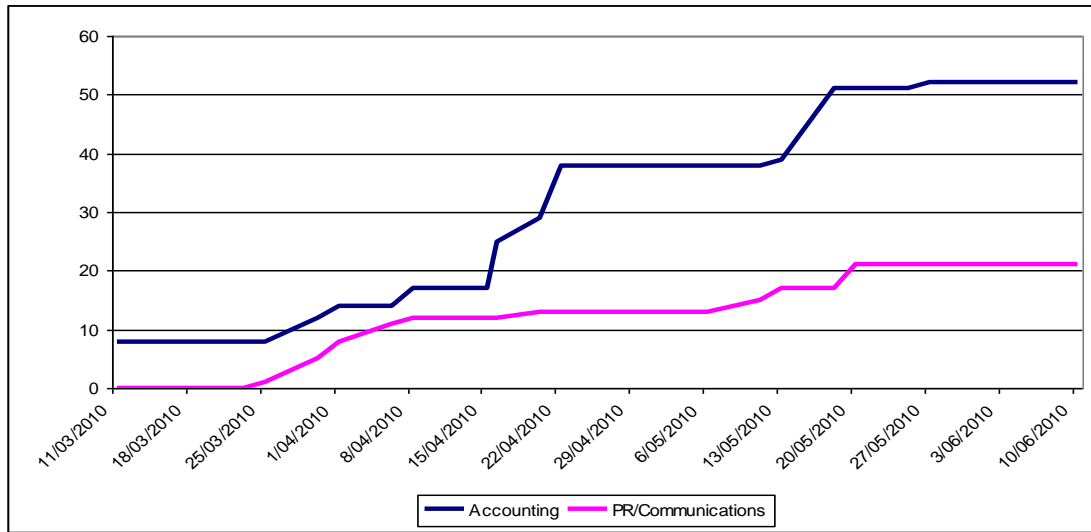
Table 1 shows the impact of sending out multiple follow-up emails to stakeholder groups, in this case graduates from one course at one of the universities. As can be seen from this table, the vast majority of total survey respondents provided their feedback as a result of the original email or follow-up, but sending additional follow-up emails did increase the total number of responses.

Table 1: Impact of multiple follow-up emails on graduate responses

	Total Number of responses	Cumulative percentage
Email + Follow-up	103	88.8%
Second follow-up	115	99.1%
Third follow-up	116	100%

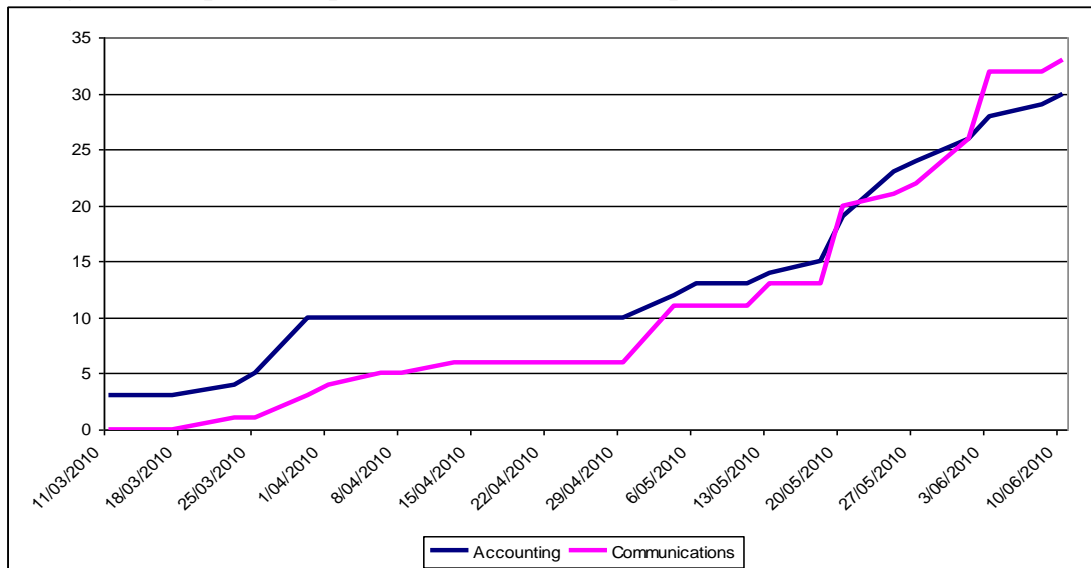
Members of the course teaching team responded more slowly to the survey than graduates did (see Figure 2), appearing to respond to the survey based on their workload and time constraints, rather than based on when they were notified about the survey. Seventy-three full-time, part-time and sessional or casual staff members of the course teaching teams at the four partner universities responded to the surveys, with full time staff making up the largest cohort (88.9% compared to 2.8% for part-time staff and 8.3% for casual or sessional staff members). Members of the course teaching team were contacted directly by their Head of School, which may have added an element of seniority as well as familiarity to the request. Targeting academic staff members in staff meetings greatly increased the responses.

Figure 2: Teaching team responses to the Graduate Employability Indicators over time



Sixty-three employers responded to the employer survey, of which 30 were accounting employers and 33 were public relations or communications employers. Like with the academic staff responses, employer responses are more staggered than graduate responses and lack the distinct increases associated with email-outs (see Figure 3). This is likely due to the staggered contact of employers by the project team, as outlined earlier. While increases in responses are seen that correspond to email-based mail-outs (25/03, 9/05, 11/05, 18/05) and reminder emails (29/04, 18/05), it is not clear if employers are responding to the emails sent out, or if they are previously contacted employers who have returned to the survey at a more convenient time.

Figure 3: Employer responses to the Graduate Employability Indicators over time



Discussion

Responses from graduates show the benefit of sending out reminders to stakeholders to increase the overall response rate (see Table 1). Graduate responses show clear and rapid increases in the number of responses at distinct periods associated with the alumni mail-outs and reminders (see Figure 1).

This quick response time has been cited as a major benefit of online surveys as opposed to traditional mail-outs (Yun & Trumbo, 2000). As the second and third reminders sent to graduates provided more responses, sending out more than one reminder should be considered in future and related surveys if time permits. The survey of graduates also highlighted the need to monitor the responses to surveys of this nature, in order to identify potential issues such as non-delivery of emails.

Members of the course teaching team, on the other hand, responded far more slowly than graduates to the request for feedback. This is likely due to time constraints faced by academic staff members, but the staggered responses seen in Figure 2 suggest that many academic staff members did return to the indicators at a less busy time period. Collecting paper-based surveys from academic staff members in staff meetings also greatly increased the response rates. The large number of responses from academic staff members suggests that members of the course teaching team will provide feedback if sufficient time is given. This aspect of the study also highlighted the importance of having high level engagement in such an exercise, as the Head of School played such a vital role in gathering course team feedback.

As the surveys are anonymous, we are unable to compare the employers who responded to the survey with the original survey lists. This makes it impossible to compare the response rates of employers known to the institution as opposed to those identified through seek advertisements and Google searches. However the total number of employer responses increased with each original mail-out, suggesting that employers will respond to a survey of this nature even if they do not have strong or established links to the institution. This suggests that, in the absence of established and coordinated approaches to contacting employers, effort should be made to identify a wide range of employers when seeking feedback of this nature, rather than limiting the contact to employers known to the institution. Universities should consider establishing a coordinated approach to contacting employers, as increasing contact and familiarity may improve engagement and responses from employers.

Conclusion

Many agree that university curricula should be designed to maximise new graduate achievement of the capabilities that count for early professional success, and that to do this within an evidence-based approach is essential. This paper confirms the challenges in obtaining the evidence, particularly from employers, graduates and teaching staff. This paper reports on a variety of strategies implemented within this project, and offers useful reflections that might also assist in boosting response numbers. . Enlisting the support of the teaching team is crucial, as they can provide additional assistance in identifying, contacting and engaging employers. In the main, they are also in the best position to effect change in the curriculum based on the evidence from other stakeholders. While it is possible to collate and collect additional contacts throughout the survey process, as was done in this study, the collation of a comprehensive list prior to the administration of the survey is preferable. Collating the list throughout the survey process requires ongoing comparison with existing contacts to ensure that employers are not approached multiple times, and results in multiple mail-outs that need to be managed. Finally, it is important to consider alternative ‘fallback’ methods of data collection (for example, paper versions of the survey where feasible) to enhance response rates at the beginning of the process. Such methods of data collection contribute towards the collection of evidence that may be used to indicate that work-integrated learning activities—in conjunction with the other aspects of the 360-degree approach described in this paper—are effective in enhancing graduate employability.

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