Exploring student futures as business graduates

'Work-ready' curriculum initiatives include helping students to conceptualise their intended career, yet students often have a poor understanding of what their careers might look like and rarely plan their careers prior to graduation. One way of assisting final-year students is to support their development of career and self-awareness. Our qualitative research explored the career and self-awareness of 35 final- year, undergraduate business students enrolled in a work-integrated-learning capstone unit at an Australian research intensive university in 2017. Leximancer mapping of student responses to a two-part, career-literacy focused inquiry showed that students associated proficient communication skills, being confident with people and being adept at teamwork with successful business graduates. Students believed that the main differences between themselves and these characteristics were their lack of career awareness and their ability to communicate. Though the findings showed some alignment between skills that students attributed to successful business graduates and skills that employers are known to seek in graduates, there is much room for improvement, particularly in communication.

Keywords: employability; work-ready; business studies

Introduction

Undergraduate students tend to have a poor understanding of what their careers might look like and they rarely conceptualise their future careers (Jackson & Chapman, 2015; Perrone & Vickers, 2003). Concerned with the lack of career preview, Weisz (2000) developed a measure of student attributes focusing on generic skills and both student and employer views. Weisz found that employers rated teamwork, initiative and communication as important, while students rated communication skills and initiative as two of their weakest capabilities. A decade later, Freudenberg et al. (2011) demonstrated that professional development programs for students approaching graduation can enhance those students'generic career and vocational skills if they connect students' learning with their future work (Freudenberg et al., 2011).

While graduates are increasingly aware of the importance of generic capabilities and skills, recent research suggests that two factors are particularly important for career success: namely, career awareness and self-awareness (Bennett et al. 2016; Bennett & Ferns, 2017). These two factors are encompassed in the notion of self and career literacy, defined as "awareness of industry structures and potential roles and the ability and confidence to locate oneself within them." (Bennett & Robertson, 2015, p. 13).

Against this background, the research reported here sought to explore specific student-attributed characteristics of successful business graduates, and students' self-reflections on the characteristics associated with business graduate success.

Methodology

Participants were undergraduate business students enrolled in a final-year employability embedded capstone unit in various majors. Of the 75 enrolled students, 35 volunteered to participate. They are identified here using participant numbers P1 to P35.
Students were asked to respond to the following two-part inquiry:
    a) Name 3 characteristics of a successful business graduate; and

        b) What differences are there (if any) between you and the above characteristics.
Responses were analysed using Leximancer software (2011, version 4).

Leximancer Mapping

Leximancer is a qualitative text analytics tool that assists analysis of collections of text to produce maps illustrating data themes and relationships. This provides an illustrative depiction of words that essentially 'travel

together' within a given text (Campbell, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2011; Smith & Humphreys, 2006) presented in groups termed 'themes'. Each map translates text from natural language into semantic patterns with concurrent information extraction occurring at two levels: semantic and relational (Crofts & Bisman, 2010). Different algorithms are used for each semantic and relational level (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The algorithms used by Leximancer are statistical, but employ non-linear dynamics and machine learning methods that have been validated and are considered stable and reproducible by many social science researchers (see Dudley et al., 2015; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Using Leximancer, each concept (word) that is sufficiently frequent is included in the map output. Each frequently occurring concept is presented in a small grey sphere and is depicted relative to other concepts with equal relative proximity as shown in the original dataset (presented in a relevant theme colour). Larger concept spheres demonstrate more frequent concepts, and smaller spheres demonstrate less frequent concepts. Each cluster of concepts is collated into what Leximancer refers to as themes. Themes differentiate collections of concepts that appear together in a given text. Each theme is presented sequentially and in a colour-coded sphere with the most frequent and dominant theme in a given text (the warmest colour), transitioning toward less frequent colours.

Results

Primary theme concepts

Map 1 shows the Leximancer display of primary theme concepts. Working was associated with being 'hard working' (P1, 3 and 30), while student P2 referred working as his or her experience as an intern. Students referred to skills in different ways: for example, problem solving skills, leadership skills, plus leadership and social skills combined. The strongest skill association by far was with communication, which P19 described as 'great communication'. P 15, 16 and 30 defined as 'good communication'. One student explained that a successful business graduate needs refined communications skills in order "to convey ideas to people". Whilst the students connected communication with leadership in terms of interpersonal skills, communication skills in the more general sense were considered a crucial characteristic of the successful business graduate.
Within the second most common theme, teamwork, multiple students referred to being confident as a key characteristic of the successful business graduate. This illustrates the importance of students developing their teamwork skills and confidence during their studies, including with learning experiences that are less successful. Teamwork was also mentioned independent of confidence, as was being 'teamwork-ready' (P18) and 'great with people' (P9). Fewer participants mentioned being 'smart and having intelligence'.
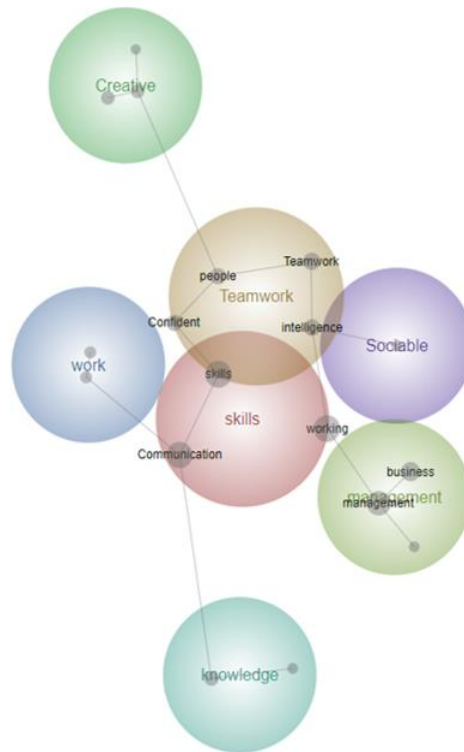
Map 1: Characteristics of a successful business graduate: Skills, Communication and Working as primary concepts

Students' perceived differences between themselves and a successful graduate

Map 2 illustrates students' perceptions of differences between themselves and their definition of a successful business graduates. map 2 shows that business and knowledge emerged as two of the most frequent concepts within the most common theme, business (shown in red on map 2). Business was only slightly more frequent than knowledge (from which the business theme derives its title). This refers to knowledge that is connected to the concept of work - shown on the cusp of the most common theme - and the second most common theme, communicate (in yellow). Communicate shows a similar word count to the most common theme (business) which is most frequently associated with knowledge. Students were in their final year of study, and they often presented their business-related comments in the context of the competitive graduate labour market: for example, "I should work on my creativity to differentiate myself from other business graduates" (P6)..."many more things to learn in order to be competent and on par with other successful business graduates (P6). Business and knowledge were also reported together - I don't have enough knowledge about business to use and I'm not good at communicate [sic] with others' (P10). …'not good at professional knowledge…I don't know how to apply theoretical knowledge to my life (P14). Some students criticizes their ability to communicate: …not really persistent, do not communicate (P16). The difference is I'm not good at communicate [sic] with other people. (P16). Students' self-report of under-developed skills, knowledge and confidence was also aligned with their statements about needing to learn. Within the concept learn, 'students made comments such as "Not so confident and prepared" (P27); "Many more things to learn in order to be competent and at par with successful business graduates': and "I'm not good at use [sic] what I learn into the work" (P35).
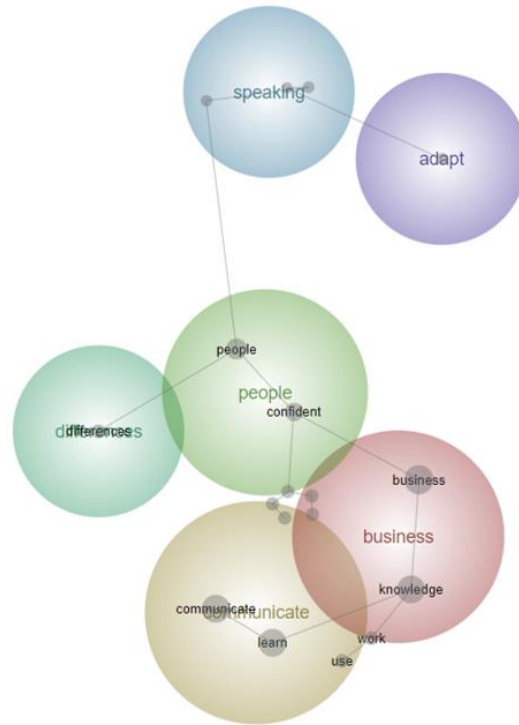
Map 2: Differences (if any) between students and map 1 characteristics: business, knowledge and work shown as primary concepts

Discussion

Communication

Students attributed communication as the most important characteristic of successful business graduates (shown in map 1); nevertheless, students also reported that they did not communicate well and that they had much to learn (map 2). The majority of participants were not native English speakers, and participant grammar on many of the students responses confirms that students need more support to develop their written and oral communication. Effective communication is central to both employer (Jackson & Chapman, 2012) and student (Weisz, 2000). It follows that the explicit communication skills within multiple contexts might underpin students' employability development and could positively influence graduates' ability to achieve success in the workplace (Dietz, 2017). Of interest, students acknowledged and associated professional (soft) skills such as teamwork and interpersonal skills with graduate success (Bennett et al. 2016; Bennett & Ferns, 2017), as areas of difference between themselves and a successful graduate.

Business Knowledge
Of interest and illustrated in map 2 are the final-year students' perceived differences between themselves and a successful business graduate. These differences were particularly evident in relation to 'business' and 'knowledge', despite making little mention of knowledge in question 1 (see map 1. Where knowledge is one of the less prevalent themes in green). This suggests that although students emphasise knowledge as something which differentiates themselves and a successful business graduate, they do not frequently associate knowledge with success as a business graduate. Further research is needed to identify the types of 'business' and 'work' 'knowledge' to which they refer. Do they, for example, perceive the knowledge that they develop at university to be somewhat irrelevant to the business knowledge they associate with work (map 2)? Is it possible that they expect to 'pick up' the necessary knowledge under the guidance of an employer? Do they anticipate further study as a

necessary component of their transition to work?

There is an unquestionable alignment between employers emphasis on 'teamwork' and 'communication' skills (see also Jackson & Chapman, 2012) and Weisz's (2000) measure of student attributes. The same emphasis is also clearly illustrated in the comments of students who participated in this study (as shown in map1). However, 'initiative', either as a term or a concept, was not present in any of the responses from students in our research. This could mean that students perceive their success to be more dependent on other people rather than on their individual efforts, including the need to take initiative in the development of their future work and learning. Given that initiative is valued highly by employers (see Jones, Baldi, Phillips & Waiker, 2017), its absence in student thinking could indicate a crucial mismatch between business students' expectations of graduate transition and employment.

Conclusions

Educators, including those delivering capstone units, can support students' self and career literary by incorporating the explicit exploration of student perceptions (within a disciplinary or multi-disciplinary cohort) of self, graduates, and the discipline. This might be achieved through a simple self-reflection document as was used in this study. If the exploration were conducted early in semester, educators could use the student data to inform specific employability development opportunities within and beyond the class. Educators might also emphasise that the initiative needed to embrace these opportunities is much desired by employers. In our case, implementing self and career literacy into teaching and learning highlighted our students' concerns about communication and enabled us to emphasise the need for strong communication skills. The research builds on the emerging perspective of employability approached as a process supported by career self-management (Somerville & Scholarios, 2015). By encouraging students to be proactive in career management, the focus expands from the labour market to inquiry that is experienced by the individual. This is important because career success is underpinned by self- and career awareness (Bennett et al. 2016; Bennett & Ferns, 2017). In short, the work enables us to redefine 'employability' as the cognitive and social development of students as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens able to create and sustain meaningful work (Bennett, 2016). In addition to the questions posed above, further research could help identify the types of communication that would best prepare students for graduate life. This might emphasise communication through technology and digital literacy both within business and in navigating the changing labour market. It is likely that supporting communication that is enabled through digital literacy will become increasingly important to graduates' futures.

Acknowledgments

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