

"I graduated from uni and all I got was this piece of paper": Addressing the challenge of employability, self-employment and lifelong learning in the 21st century through a bespoke magnet capstone course for marketing students

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Work matters

Jobs are a big part of peoples' lives and being engaged in meaningful work in an occupation and industry of our choosing influences our quality of life in profound ways (Savickas 2002; 2013). Beyond the economic rewards of paid work, there are social and psychological consequences. Work gives people purpose and getting a university degree is a much-touted pathway to a high income earning occupation of a persons' choosing. But times are changing, and this pathway to a defined and stable occupation is no longer the reliable 'rule of thumb' that it once was (Savickas 2009).

In Australia, the 'massification' of higher education via the recently defunct demand driven system has brought with it unprecedented benefits—like significant increases in participation by people from disadvantaged backgrounds (NCSEHE 2017)—but also some unintended consequences. Put simply, there are more university graduates than ever before, including in marketing, yet the labour market has not expanded at the same rate and there has been a steady decline in full-time graduate employment rates (see Graduate Outcomes Survey 2018). Furthermore, in more recent times concerns have been voiced by employers about the job-readiness of graduates and questions about the value-add that a university degree provides (e.g. Business Council of Australia, 2017; World Economic Forum 2016).

On a higher plane, work in the 21st century is changing rapidly. Driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (or Industry 4.0), today we have a budding platform-based, gig economy and the job-for-life notion is being increasingly replaced with the idea of portfolio careers comprised of a series of occupational mini-cycles (see De Stefano 2016; Hall and Krueger 2015). Near-graduates are also concerned as to their work future and job-readiness upon completion of their degree. To respond to this imperative in a substantive way, I

designed a bespoke capstone course for the marketing major program at the University of the Sunshine Coast¹.

Course origins and authoring

Course authoring is a protracted process. This course was seeded in 2011. The course purpose and design are an accumulation of my numerous teaching-related leadership roles, such as inaugural Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching for the then USC Faculty of Arts and Business, which were integral to my 2017 Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK) award. Course documentation was progressed in 2013 with the first offering of the course in 2014.

The course is the inaugural capstone course of the marketing program and is underpinned by a robust case based upon evidence from academic, government and industry sources that demonstrates short, medium and long-term employment opportunities for graduates locally, nationally and internationally. A large volume of reading and critical thinking about published material on pedagogy/andragogy, graduate attributes, curriculum design, employability, career preparedness and capstone courses was undertaken to ensure the course was built on best practice. National benchmarking with other marketing programs and capstone courses was supplemented with regular interaction and exposure to the remit and needs of businesses of all sizes (profit and non-profit), professional accreditation bodies, the requirements and practices of a wide variety of programs beyond business (e.g. counselling, social work, public relations, education, environmental science and creative writing), and national university accreditation bodies and frameworks (e.g. Australian Qualifications Framework). These activities occurred predominantly over a two-year course incubation period (2011-2012) that coincided with the beginning of the demand

¹ MKG324 Contemporary and Emerging Marketing Perspectives. At this institution there is a courses and

program structure while other institutions may refer to these as units and courses.

driven system in Australia. The result is an intricate yet intuitive course design that equips students for personal and professional success beyond graduation.

This is a bespoke course. I developed the course from the ground up to help transition students out of university and to future-proof them for the first five years of their careers. It is the only course of its kind in Australia. The downside of this being that it's uniqueness raised challenges in terms of students seeking cross-institutional and in need of an equivalent course.

This course is different – in a good way

The course intentionally and explicitly embraces adult learning principles (andragogy) and is learner-centred rather than content-centred. Capstone courses are the last course in a degree program and magnet capstones, like this course, are centred on a major and draw the learning threads through to reveal the major's full tapestry (Bailey, Acker and Fyffe 2012). The term 'capstone' is widely used to describe a course that 'looks backwards' and 'looks forwards' (Bailey, Acker and Fyffe 2012).

In the course, students 'look backwards' in the first instance, indeed, from the very first lecture with interactive in-class activities. Students 'look back' at the knowledge skills and experiences they have gained and through critical reflection map the connections between courses and their learning over time. Students give voice to positive and negative experiences and at the end of the course are asked to 'design their perfect marketing major' which is a rich resource for program improvement.

Students look back on their past university experience so as to provide insights that could help them plan their professional future. That is, they need to 'look backwards' in order to plan forwards. In 'looking forwards' students participated in private, in-class reflection prompted with questions like: *“what does success mean to me”*; *“what is my personal brand”*; and *“what is my point of difference that makes me*

stand out from other marketing graduates”?

Whole class discussions centre around questions including: *“what was their intended outcome of going to university”*; and *“does GPA matter in marketing and business careers”*? Also, in 'looking forwards' students begin to develop their professional identity and begin the transition to a post-university future be it as an employee, self-employed or engaging in lifelong learning (being further education and training that may be formal, informal or self-directed).



The course is intensely personal

While not apparent on the surface, this course is intensely personal. Students write about their hopes and dreams and how they plan to achieve them. For some students this is quite confronting—to articulate their ambition on paper meant they had to confront some uncomfortable realities around pain points like employability, the labour market, wanting/not wanting to move far from family, expectation they work in the family business and the necessary shift from their familiar and comfortable identity as a student towards a professional identity. As such, I take exceptional care to recruit an atypical teaching team that have professional experience, are emotionally intelligent, highly empathetic, who can build rapport quickly, make people feel at ease, who can effectively create a safe space in class and exercise the utmost discretion with assessment which details individuals' future professional plans. It is imperative that all teaching staff are approachable and relatable and that they provide extensive and constructive

feedback that promotes self-efficacy and encourages initiative. Indeed, teaching staff on occasion assist students instrumentally by connecting them with potential employers in their own professional networks.

Unique tri-component ‘pathways out’ model

There are many innovations in this magnet capstone course, but the chief innovation is that the course is built around a tri-component ‘pathways out’ model comprising a) employment, b) self-employment and c) lifelong learning. The tri-component ‘pathways out’ model is customised to meet today’s marketing students ‘real world’ needs. Beyond the typical employee-oriented focus of capstones, I integrated two additional post-Bachelor pathways being self-employment (e.g. ‘starting your own business’ exercises) and lifelong learning (e.g. exploring postgraduate options, short training courses).

My rationale for this tri-component ‘pathways out’ model included to push-back on the notion of vocationalism and to promote professionalism, empowerment and self-actualisation. The tri-

component structure gives students some direction forward without being prescriptive. To frame the tri-component model, I integrate an Alice in Wonderland metaphor throughout the course, with reference to the liminal space that the course represents.

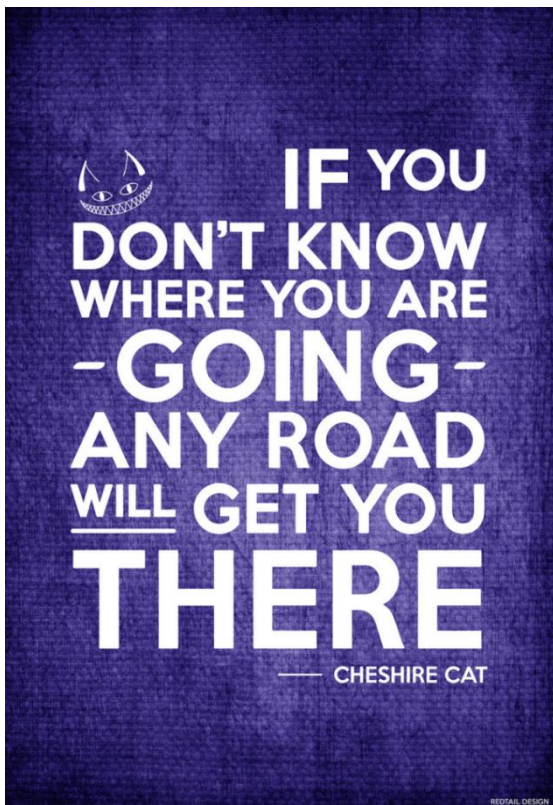


In their assessment, students are encouraged to think autonomously—after all, there is no right or wrong way forward. I challenge students to resist the status quo and socially acceptable ideas of what it is to be ‘successful’ in business and in life. Where students do not want to pursue a marketing career, they are free to plan the career that they wanted to create. Designing handbags, creating a live music event, becoming a professional comedian and becoming a motivational speaker for young people are some examples of non-marketing careers from the course. There is no bias as to the order in which students could plan their careers around the three pathways. Many students have expressed that this is the first time in their degree that they could state their own, unfiltered opinions and write what they thought instead of writing about what other people thought and said in a sanitised way. This is andragogy in action, and this is what happens when students *know* they are in a safe learning environment.

Additional course innovations

In brief, some of my course innovations include:

- scaffolded assessment with a focus capability building exercises (e.g. infographic business pitch, social media content, wireframes for mobile apps or websites for own business concept) and practical activities that prepare



marketing graduates for self-defined success such as creating LinkedIn profiles and writing a professional biography.

- assessment includes a short-term professional development plan for the next 2 years, followed by a medium-term professional development plan for the following 3 to 5-year timeframe.
- integrated future-focused, work-ready professional development training (e.g. embedded resume writing, interview skills and hidden job market search strategies)
- early offerings of the course from 2014-2015² included a range of incursions (e.g. cultural competency training by an external presenter, on-campus business incubator visit with talks from ‘start-up’ businesses and the entrepreneur-in-residence) and for each of these participants were provided with USC-endorsed certificates.
- highlighted and provided access to e-portfolios for all students (in early offerings of the course access to e-portfolios was limited at the institution hence I negotiated what eventually became lifetime access for students in this course)
- a networking excursion where interested students were chaperoned by myself and a small number of Faculty staff involved with external engagement occurred in early course offerings.

Success takes many forms

Beyond the high teaching ratings that I received for this course (4.8/5 in 2014; 5/5 in 2015; 5/5 in 2016 and 4.9/5 in 2017) with their accompanying, heartfelt written feedback, it was the positive word-of-mouth about the course among students in the wider university community that saw course numbers expand rapidly. Course enrolments more than doubled between the

² As the institution evolved into a multi-campus structure and this course was to be delivered across four campuses in 2016 and six campuses in 2017, incursions were not portable were (sadly) removed

initial offering in 2014 and the second offering 2015 (no other program changes were at play) and then doubled again between 2015 and the last offering in Semester 2 2017. Most of this growth was from students not enrolled in the marketing major.

Beyond teaching ratings and course enrolment statistics it is the intangibles that really matter, those transcendental elements that evade capture in any cross-sectional teaching measure—the building of relationships with students beyond graduation, helping students not only secure their first jobs but subsequent jobs as well, the deep satisfaction of watching graduates’ careers blossom, and the ad hoc visits or emails by graduates in the years that follow when they ‘just wanted to say hi and thanks again for your help’. It is these intangibles, these markers of transformation, which cannot be reduced to numbers and for which words can do no justice, that are my measures of teaching success.

At present, I have the privilege of being the 2018 NCSEHE³ Research Fellow. Hence, while I am not coordinating my course this year, this Fellowship has provided me with the space to reflect on and document this bespoke course. My Fellowship topic evolved in part from the development of and teaching of my course. My Fellowship draws attention to the contemporary career context



following the 2015 offering and other non-portable innovations removed following the 2016 offering.

³ National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education

where traditional ways of planning careers no longer work.

This course is special—it has launched the careers of numerous students, helped them face their fears about their employment (and the associated pressure from family about landing a job). For me, this course is more than learning outcomes,

constructive alignment and scaffolded assessment—it is about the getting and sharing of wisdom and awakening or re-awakening among students that sometimes the river of life takes you to places you did not expect to go and if they look, they can find opportunity wherever they come ashore.

About the Author



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Maria is an Associate Professor in Marketing, co-leader of the USC Indigenous Studies Research Theme, Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (UK) and 2018 Research Fellow with the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Maria has an interest in the bonds formed between organisations and their stakeholders and the pursuit of pro-social endeavours.

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