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Understanding experience beyond university: the development of an Employer Feedback Survey

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Most established ways of gaining information about the student experience at university are from the students themselves. Limited input is gained from other stakeholders such as staff or employers. Many universities have well developed statements about the qualities or attributes that they develop in their graduates and focus considerable attention on employability outcomes. Although there have been attempts to gain feedback from employers about graduates, this has often been problematic or limited. In 2008 the University of South Australia piloted an Employer Feedback Survey. This paper briefly describes this experience, highlighting some of the challenges that were faced and how they are being addressed. Employer perspectives are an important source of information and assist in completing a more holistic picture of the student experience.

Keywords: employer feedback, employability, graduate attributes

Introduction

Universities today have a range of different ways of understanding the student experience throughout the time a student studies with them. In Australia information can be drawn nationally from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the AUSSE (Australian University Survey of Student Experience). At an individual institutional level all universities administer versions of a course/program experience evaluation and/or a student evaluation of teaching questionnaire (Barrie, Ginns & Symons, 2008). This information is often supplemented with student focus groups to obtain specific feedback or broader university surveys to capture the university-wide experience of students.

While a university education can have a very broad remit, for universities today it is very much about preparing a professional for the workforce. Most universities now have articulated a set of graduate attributes which guide their curricula in preparing students for work beyond university. More recently there has been a significant shift in involving employers as stakeholders in the learning process, of integrating work experience into the curriculum and measuring the employment outcomes of students through the Graduate Destinations Survey. Career services within universities are moving beyond teaching students how to prepare a curriculum vitae and are now embedding career management skills within the curricula and forming strong links with industry partners.

Although there are a range of instruments and methods of capturing the student experience, there has been a large gap in understanding the preparedness and experience of graduates from an employer's perspective. During 2008, the University of South Australia (UniSA), as part of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's (ALTC) Teaching Quality Indicators (TQI) project, developed and implemented an Employer Feedback Survey. The specific aims of the pilot project were to design and trial an employer feedback tool and process, and to

access feedback from key industry stakeholders and graduate employers about graduate qualities and other learning outcomes. This paper will briefly describe this experience, discuss the outcomes of the survey and make recommendations for future applications.

Employer feedback surveys – gaps in the market

There has been limited comprehensive information gathered about employer satisfaction with graduates and this continues to be an under-researched area. One of the main reasons for this gap is the ability to methodologically design a survey instrument which is robust in gathering the specific information required. In particular, identifying this feedback at a school or discipline level has been even more difficult to obtain. UniSA was certainly faced with these challenges as will be discussed below.

The most recent large scale multi-industry analysis of employer satisfaction in Australia was conducted by AC Nielsen in 2000. This research was undertaken to ‘establish the extent of employer satisfaction with the skills of new graduates entering the labour market and areas of dissatisfaction’ (ACNielsen Research Services, 2000, p1). Limitations of this survey related to industry sample size and the methodologies used and it was acknowledged that at the time of the survey due to the over-supply of graduates, employers were able to select graduates; hence the results were not truly representative of the graduate market.

The Graduate Outlook Survey (which has been conducted four times by Graduate Careers, Australia) surveys employers. However, the focus of this survey is more on recruitment strategies and trends and although graduate attributes from the perspective of an employer is surveyed, this has been completed at a more generic level.

Other Australian universities have attempted to gain feedback from employers. The most comprehensive survey has been undertaken by Monash University (Centre for Higher Education Quality, Monash University, 2007). They have administered surveys in 2003 and 2007 to primarily obtain employer feedback on graduate attributes and skills. To do this, they used a call centre to gather survey data demonstrating how resource intensive the process is. Similarly the University of Western Sydney has recently conducted two surveys (2005 and 2007) focussing in particular on the employer’s image of UWS, the quality of their graduates and their ratings of graduate capabilities. Other universities have been involved in smaller scale surveys and projects, many of which target specific discipline areas, explicit graduate attributes or particular aspects of work related learning. If a more consistent approach to gathering this information was applied and a greater number of employers were surveyed, nationally an opportunity would be presented to begin to benchmark across data across institutions and discipline areas.

The attempts of a range of different universities to gather employer feedback data on their graduates indicate the growing importance and significance that institutions place on this information. However as demonstrated by others, while the need is there, this is a task that is not easily accomplished.

Implementing the Employer Feedback Survey

The University of South Australia (UniSA) has a very strong mission relating to ‘educating professionals’ and ‘engaging our communities’. The majority of the programs offered at undergraduate and graduate level are vocationally orientated. UniSA was one of the first

Australian universities to articulate a set of graduate attributes (Nunan, George & McCausland 2000). UniSA's seven qualities were adopted across the undergraduate curriculum in 1996 and have been reaffirmed in a new Teaching and Learning framework (Lee, 2007) along with a commitment to engaging all students through experiential learning. UniSA also has a very extensive evaluation framework and accesses a large range of data about the student experience (using both external and internal instruments). Although UniSA has good relationships with its industry partners and strong connections are made with the employers of UniSA students at a school or program level, there is only anecdotal feedback about our students' preparedness for the workplace. There has been no systematic way of capturing a graduate's experience beyond university.

To address this gap, UniSA conducted a pilot Employer Feedback Survey as part of the ALTC TQI project. A more detailed report (Walker, 2009) of the project can be accessed from UniSA's website so only a brief description will be included here. There were two stages to collecting this information. The first stage involved the identification of employers of UniSA graduates. This was initially done by drawing information from UniSA's alumni data-base and industry contacts at a school level, but involved considerable follow-up telephone contact to determine who the right person to respond to the survey was (someone in a supervisory role), and that a UniSA graduate was still or had been recently working in the identified place of employment. A significant limitation of this initial contact was the inability to name the student due to the need to maintain student confidentiality. In terms of future surveys this issue is being addressed by the addition of a question to the GDS asking students' permission to use their name for follow-up surveys with employers.

Once a UniSA employer was identified, the second stage of this process involved an online survey being forwarded to the employer. There were four parts to the survey. Part A collected demographic information about the employer's organisation/business. Part B asked the respondents to rate a series of statements (24 statements) in relation to importance (how important are these qualities) and how they believed UniSA graduate(s) rated. Open responses were asked to a further ten questions asking employers to identify additional employee qualities, their assessment of the employer's role in graduate job readiness, any additional on the job training required, and comparing UniSA graduates with other graduates. The last two parts asked for contact details (optional) and feedback on the survey tool and process.

Results

The survey team sent 333 emails to supervisors of recent graduates containing a link to the survey and a unique PIN. Of these, 189 employers submitted completed surveys (a response rate of 56%) and all of UniSA's four major discipline areas were represented (Business and Services, including Computer, Research and Communication Services – 32.2%; Health – 30.2%; Education – 15.9%); and Industry, Mining and Trades – 14.8%).

A gap analysis between importance and performance ratings was conducted on the 24 statements relating to graduate attributes or qualities. Due to the confidential nature of the results they have not been given in full in this paper.

Employers rated working under pressure, time management and written skills as the three most important skills needed. In terms of performance, these were also the skills with the most significant gaps between importance and performance rating. The lowest gaps related to understanding indigenous perspectives and the ability to operate in international and

multicultural contexts. This is not unique to UniSA, but has been acknowledged across the sector in Graduate Careers Australia data. However this also substantiates UniSA's commitment to indigenous content in all our programs and internationalisation (UniSA's graduate quality No. 7). Various sub-groups were explored to identify significant differences in importance across the groups. For example differences were considered in terms of the type of organisation, number of employees, type of industry, type of employment. There were significant differences recorded between government and private employers in relation to written skills and the importance of understanding different viewpoints. This has provided important information for the University in terms of graduate preparedness.

Nearly 75% of all respondents agreed with the statement 'we employ UniSA graduates confident that they will readily meet our requirements'. However, there was strong acknowledgement (and this has been an issue highlighted in other surveys) that it is difficult to attribute all or some of the qualities to a unique UniSA experience. There are many other factors which contribute to job-readiness.

Discussion

The Employer Feedback Survey was a useful pilot project for UniSA and it will be built on for ongoing surveys of employers of our graduates. It is planned to administer a version of the survey on a bi-annual basis. It has provided the University with some important information about graduate preparedness (both strengths and weaknesses) which can now be addressed in terms of curriculum development and other intervention strategies. It has also been an excellent way to connect with and engage employers with the University. Respondents were asked if they would like a summary of the results and to attend a follow-up event and the majority of them responded positively to this request.

Methodologically, surveys of this nature have been difficult to administer. Throughout the project an improvement register was kept and these improvements will inform both future UniSA surveys and employer feedback surveys more generally. There were some minor modifications to questions and statements; however the most significant change will be gaining the permission of students to use their name when contacting employers. One of largest difficulties was being able to match a graduate with an employer and this has to be achieved to be able to complete more detailed analysis of the data (at an industry, school and/or program level). UniSA is facilitating the permission of students to do this through an additional question to the Graduate Destination Survey. Identification at the interview and/or survey level (which can be removed when reporting) will save considerable time during data collection and also improve validity.

Conclusion

The information that universities have and draw upon about the student experience is quite restricted to one source – the students. Limited views are collected from the teaching staff themselves, the community or employers. A comprehensive picture of the quality of the teaching and learning and the full student experience from multiple perspectives is needed. Many universities make very public statements about the 'work readiness' of their graduates, yet there have been few ways to substantiate these claims from credible feedback. Obtaining employer satisfaction data complements information gathered about the student experience through other surveys. However once a student graduates from university it is often very difficult to track this information, hence data collection needs to be carefully planned.

Through the development and implementation of an Employer Feedback Survey, UniSA has made some progress in closing the loop in regard to the full student experience and ensuring that a more complete picture of student experience and achievement is obtained.

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