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Evaluating the Certificate in Global Workplace Practice: meeting international student needs

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The Certificate in Global Workplace Practice is a new program offered for the first time by Careers Service at the University of Wollongong in 2008. It targets international students and seeks to improve their graduate/employability skills, which literature shows is a need common to Australia and Australian universities. This paper describes the program and in particular the first student evaluation, offering demographic and qualitative feedback to support incremental improvements to the program and to try and explain the student attrition rates. This program's strategy for improving International Student Satisfaction has had a positive impact. The majority of students not completing can primarily be attributed to their inability to juggle the seminars and activities on top of their main degree commitments – something that has always been a factor in Careers Service Programs which are 'add ons' to full or part-time study.

Keywords: international student, workplace skills, new program, evaluation, employability

Background to the project

The Certificate in Global Workplace Practice is a new Careers Service program with the objective of improving the employability of international students, through a focus on English Language, Workplace Practice & Culture, Job Search Skills, and Work Experience Placements. A three-month short pilot was implemented in late 2007, and the one-year UOW 2008 program has been delivered, concluding with a three-month work experience placement for selected students. Development of the programs materials and supporting website and ePortfolio has involved content developers working on different aspects of the program (language, culture, job search skills) coordinating deliverables, supported by the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR).

The program focuses on the following topics that are delivered via on-campus seminars: English language, workplace practice & culture, job search skills, and work experience placements. The seminars culminate in a mock work placement interview that is video-recorded for later feedback, and integrates an ePortfolio (Word document template) to assist students to prepare for this by identifying strengths and weaknesses in terms of employability skills framework.

The program was supported by eLearning Space forums that were used to keep in touch out of seminar times, and to ask questions. The eLearning Space allowed students greater time and location flexibility to deal with the content and assignment issues at times that suited them – primarily around their main course assessment and activities. Some students used the resource to review material in the break period, when they had more time, some coming back to the material months later.

Literature review

According to The Australian Government: Australian Education International (AEI) our nation saw over 180,000 student enrolments in higher education in 2008. Some of the more popular origins for international students included China, India, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Malaysia. In the 2006 international student survey conducted by AEI 81% of all international students intended finding a job in Australia, and a only a small 13% planned to seek employment back in their home country.

Most international students who came to this country did so in the hopes of obtaining Permanent Residency status (Stupans, Rao, March & Elliot, 2008 and Saenger, 2007).

Many international students from non-English speaking backgrounds found the transition between cultures very stressful. The literature supports a full emersion into the host culture and language (Saenger, 2007), to not only make their time in the country more enjoyable but to improve critical English language communication skills. Those students that lived among English speakers, participated in culture events and had mostly English-speaking friends had better communication skills.

Literature supports the need to improve international student's employability skills in Australia (Jackling, 2007). Some graduates lacked the basic and essential communication skills required by the employer to uphold effective client relationships. A study conducted by Graduate Careers Australia (2008) found that international students had far less confidence about finding a job in Australia than in their home countries.

Certificate in Global Workplace Practice (CGWP): planning and delivery

The Careers Service has seen first hand these particular challenges for the international students as identified in the literature review, and the steps on the road to the planning and delivery of this program are as follows:

- 1998–2004: general employability programs offered to all students
- 2005-06: Mentoring Program for international students
- Nov 2006: Graduate Employer Hiring Survey
- 2007 Pilot program run
- May 2007: funding proposal developed and accepted, staff hired
- Aug 2007: positions filled, planning commences
- Jan-Feb 2008: promotion of the new CGWP program to students
- March 2008: CGWP program launched, teaching of modules and seminars begins
- June 2008: Univative Illawarra Program run (CGWP students undertake this group activity as an essential part of the program)
- August 2008: mock job interview activity
- September 2008: placement selection process begins, assessment centre activity completed, October 2008: placement selection interviews, program evaluation
- Dec08–March 09: students undertake work placements.

2008 cohort

After marketing via email to all students and posters at careers events, 213 students enrolled in the course. 178 were still actively attending seminars by 21st April, and 55 met the required attendance and assignments to officially complete the course.

Of these students, 29 were eligible for work placement (excluding students who were only available for 'paid' placements, who did not meet the eligibility criteria, whose visas did not allow for them to work, or who withdrew).

All eligible students bar three were found and offered a suitable work placement for their industry (students declined placements or failed to respond due to all sort of reasons including skills, interests, location and expectations – note there were ultimately 12 unfilled placements opportunities).

Twenty-two students accepted a work placement, noting that three subsequently withdrew either immediately before or just after commencing because they obtained other employment.

At the time of writing, 19 students would be on track to complete or have completed their placement and, as far as the Career's Service is aware, there two students have been offered three-month contracts following their placements.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation plan included OOR ethics clearance, paper-based survey of students who completed the course and email survey of those who did not complete. The aim of the evaluation was to get feedback to improve the teaching program and the marketing of the program, and to understand the reasons for student attrition. There was intense interest in the program at the outset, but significant numbers of students dropping out prior and during the program.

The survey instrument had two sections: one for student demographic data and the other for qualitative open-text feedback regarding aspects of the program.

Surveys were typed up and, where there were common responses, these were data coded to data themes. NVivo software was used to perform additional data analysis and producing theme cluster diagrams.

Evaluation results: overview

Forty-one surveys were returned from the completing students and six from those who did not complete. The survey included some useful demographic data on the student cohort, as well as feedback on aspects of the teaching program. There was plenty of very positive feedback about the initiative and some minor matters for improvement in the program, as well as some information about timetabling and other expectation factors which need to be communicated to students considering the program to enable them to decide if they will be able to fulfil the commitments to completion.

Survey results – demographics

As can be seen from the following tables, the typical student enrolled in the program is likely to be: Chinese (59%), female (67%), postgraduate (82%), and studying Commerce (54%). Most of the students (54%) have 1–3 years work experience. The high rate of female students is notable from the data, and the reasons for this are worthy for further investigation. The program manager noted that the Chinese female participants were extremely keen during the course and performed well in the workplace interview process. It is not clear if the female

students are keener to take on extra activities generally, or if they are finding it even harder than their male colleagues to get local employment and are thus more motivated to increase their local employment chances. Whilst most participants had 1–3 years work experience, there were still considerable numbers (8) who had more than 3 years work experience and who were clearly struggling to get local employment.

Table 1: Demographic data by course level

Demographic data		Course level	
		Postgraduate	Undergraduate
Gender	Female	22	4
	Male	10	3
Nationality	Chinese	20	3
	Nepalese	2	0
	Malaysian	2	0
	Hong Kong	2	2
	Indonesia	4	0
	Vietnam	3	0
	Colombia	2	2
	Russian	2	0
	Pakistani	2	0
	Iranian	2	0
	Fiji	2	0
	Thai	3	0
	Indian	3	0
	Japanese	0	2
Work Experience	1–3 Years	21	6
	Less than 1 year	3	0
	Never worked	5	0
	More than 3 years	8	0
	More than 10 years	2	0

Table 2: Demographic data by faculty

Demographic data		Faculty					
		Commerce	HBS	GSB	Informatics	Engineering	Science
Gender	Female	15	4	2	4	2	3
	Male	6	2	2	4	2	0
Nationality	Chinese	11	2	2	9	0	2
	Nepalese	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Malaysian	0	2	0	0	0	0
	Hong Kong	2	2	0	0	0	0
	Indonesia	3	0	0	0	2	0
	Vietnam	3	0	0	0	0	0
	Colombia	3	0	0	0	0	0
	Russian	0	0	2	0	0	0
	Pakistani	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Iranian	0	0	0	2	0	0
	Fiji	2	0	0	0	0	0
	Thai	0	0	0	2	0	2
	Indian	0	2	0	0	2	0
	Japanese	2	0	0	0	0	0
Work Experience	1–3 Years	14	4	3	5	2	3
	Less than 1 year	2	0	0	2	0	0
	Never Worked	3	2	0	2	0	0
	More than 3 years	5	0	0	3	2	0
	More than 10 years	2	0	0	0	0	0

Survey results – data analysis

The students were asked about the various components of the course, and were asked via open-text boxes to explain:

1. what they learned from each aspect
2. what was the best thing about each aspect, and
3. what could be improved for each aspect.

For the first two parts (what did they learn, the best things) there was a relatively small number of common answers, thus allowing us to data-code the responses into categories. Please see the Figures 1 and 2 for the issues raised.

For example, you can see from the Figure 1 that, in answer to the question “What did you learn from the Learning Activities and Assessments”, the majority response (15 replies) was “telephone interview skills”. This particular activity to teach students how to handle phone interviews with potential employers (or recruiters on their behalf) was rated extremely highly and clearly fills a skills gap. The phone interview is a common culling process for job selection and potentially stressful for international students.

Students clearly learnt interview skills from the placement interview activity, but also of considerable value was resume writing skills (a pre-cursor activity) and the identification/clarification of their strengths and weaknesses.

In regards to ideas for improvements, these were generally quite varied. Here are some of the more common responses:

- Little more practical action may keep students awake.
- If possible, invite different managers in different industry to talk about the employees they want.
- Enable students to have more access to Assessment Centre, so they can do it many times.
- Invite HR interviewers from some companies - the interview could be more real, although I will be more nervous.
- May we can change the time into other time instead of dinner time.
- Make the program shorter, since some students went out of patience to participate in the program.
- EEO has to be finished in once run through. Is it possible to set marks on each section so that we can do it separately?

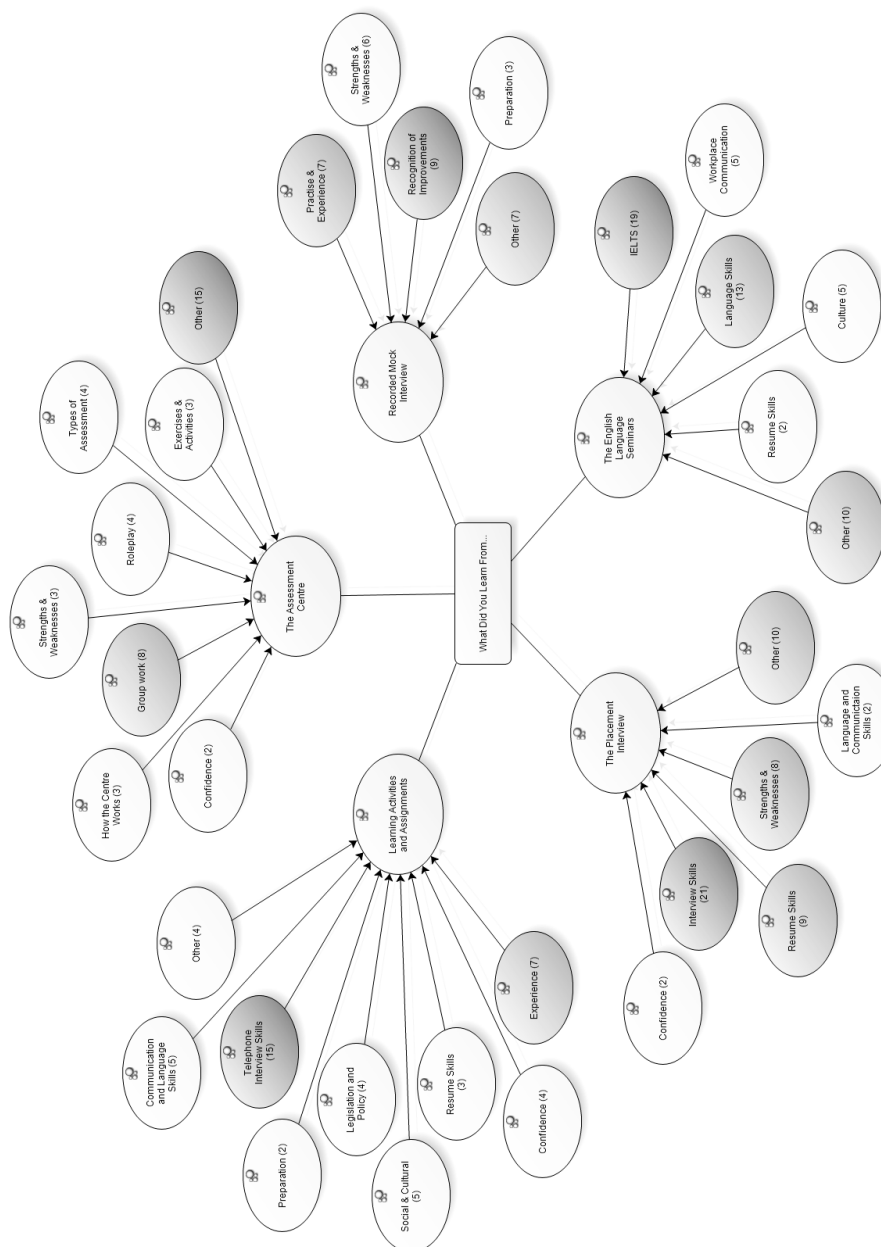


Figure 1: What students learnt
 Student open-text data themes
 Questions 2.05, 2.08, 2.11, 2.14 & 2.17
 “What did you learn from...”

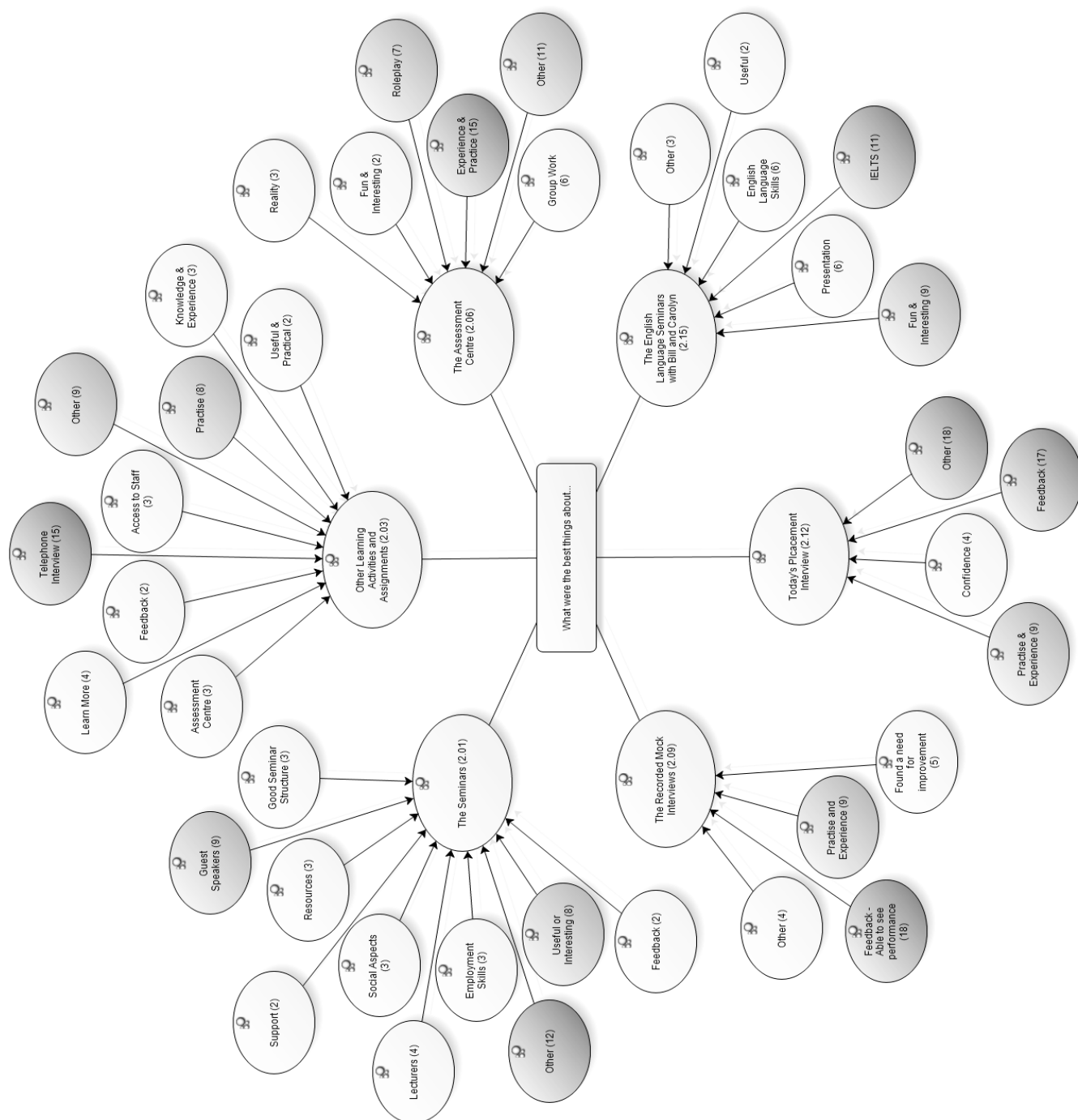


Figure 2: Students opinions of the 'best' aspects
Student open-text data themes
Questions 2.01, 2.03, 2.06, 2.09, 2.12 & 2.15
“What were the best things about...”

Student survey data: eLearning Space

About 30 students made a comment about the eLearning space (website in the University's learning management system, Blackboard Vista) or ePortfolio (Word document) aspects. Here are some of the comments:

- The discussion forum disappeared or petered out at the end.
- It was very useful, all the links and extra information great.
- I can find so many information about interview and resume.
- Very helpful in organising skills, strength, and job-related information.
- I am not sure whether employers will seek our portfolio on there that means I am not sure how usefulness the ePortfolio is.
- The discussion board is a bit messy.

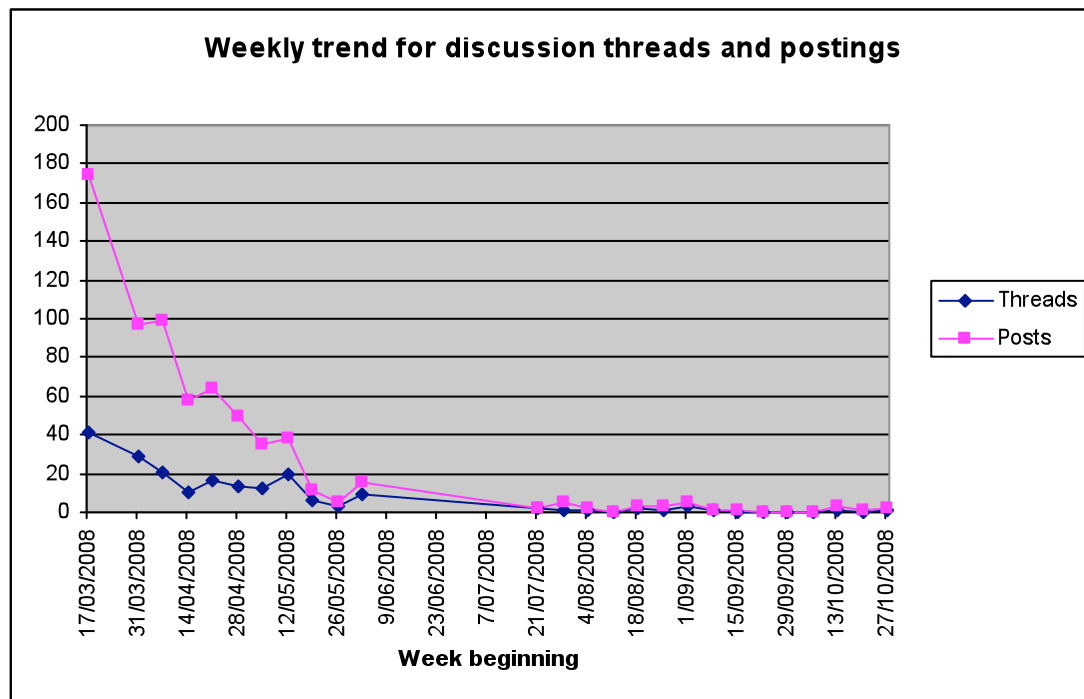


Figure 3: eLearning Space discussion board usage

Notes: week beginning 17/3 is two week period including Easter break;
week beginning 2/6/08 is 6 week period including mid-year break

Some observations from discussion threads and postings:

1. Largest thread was 16 postings over a 4 week period in April
2. 4 threads of 13 or more postings
3. 19 student initiated threads had no responses and these were made by 13 different students
4. 21 lecturer initiated threads had no responses
5. Students returned to some threads after periods of up to 8 months after initial posting
6. Longest break between posting and response was 5 months (25th Mar- 29th Aug)
7. Many threads had last posting with unanswered question
8. Of the 13 students who had lone postings, 9 did complete course and 4 did not – of these last four, two had multiple lone postings. Of those who did complete Interview rankings ranged from 1A to 0 suggesting this may not have had effect on those completing but may have influenced those who did not complete.

Evaluation data: non-completing students

The survey data returned via email indicates that the students who did not complete signed up for the same reasons as the completing students (to improve their skills and chances at local employment).

The reasons for non-completion given were: workload too high, family emergency (2), confused about assessment/placement requirements, travel time from Sydney/schedule conflict, timetable conflict.

Here are some of their comments on the program:

- Respondent A: Four subjects one semester do not have time to do the CGWP's assignment. Spend whole time focus on the subjects get a good mark.
- Respondent D: I just got some missing points and sometimes the schedule was conflicted, so I did not complete the program. But I do really want to finish it.
- Respondent E: I chose not to complete the course for load of my course study staffs and time management problem. Time management is a significant issue as the classes of this programme clashes with some of my subject timetables or the programme classes might take place in the evening. I was unable to take evening classes because I live in Sydney. So the long distance is another issue.
- Respondent F: At the beginning of the program, I could not attend any seminar during Autumn session due to time table conflict.
- Respondent B: I'm very much interested in finishing the program if I'm given another chance. As a matter of fact I'm doing Univative Illawarra program offered in Feb, 2009.
- Respondent E: In my opinion, the missing feature is flexibility in time schedule.

Outcomes of the evaluation

The evaluation has had two positive impacts. Firstly some changes to the academic program can be made and some minor improvements to the delivery to avoid duplication, and make some learning outcomes more explicit. Also the eLearning Space may be additionally monitored and managed to allow greater time/location for content exploration by these busy students.

Secondly with regards to marketing the program, more realistic expectations can be set from the outset by making the times for the seminars and the completion requirements clearer. It is hoped that this will result in a smaller number of more realistic applicants, who understand the time commitments and choose on this basis, and are thus more likely to complete and get the full benefits from this innovative program.

Conclusion

This new program for improving international student satisfaction looks to have had a positive impact. The majority of students not completing can probably be attributed to their inability to juggle the seminars and activities on top of their main degree commitments – something that has always been a factor in Careers Service programs which are ‘add ons’ to full or part-time study, such as the Black Opal Leadership Challenge and the Careers Interns Program. The evaluation has helped refine the delivery of the program for 2009, and additional research is planned at the conclusion of this cohort.

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