

## Constructing a Career Mindset in First Year Students: The Building Blocks for Curriculum Design

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### **Abstract**

*Higher Education Institutions are under increasing pressure to produce competent and qualified graduates for the ever-changing labour market. However, this is no easy feat. This paper shows how a transformational change in Victoria University's teaching model created an opportunity for teachers to redesign first-year, employability-related curricula. The approach to this challenge focuses on the development of a career mindset in first year university students. Through the examination of two courses, one from the Bachelor of Arts and one from the Bachelor of Psychological Studies, this paper demonstrates a number of active learning and engagement strategies that can be incorporated into the classroom to empower first year students to develop a career mindset that can help them to develop and integrate employability related skills throughout their degrees and beyond.*

**Keywords:** *Employability; First Year; Block Model; Career Mindset; Student Engagement; Innovative Pedagogy.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Stakeholders have long acknowledged that higher education institutions (HEIs) have an important responsibility to prepare tertiary students for the evolving workforce (Buchanan et al., 2009). However, due to the complex and dynamic nature of this task, and the difficulty that universities often have in adapting to change (Bullock, 2013), the success with which this role has been carried out remains questionable. The complexity of the task is a product, in part, of the different meanings associated with the term ‘employability’. Firstly, universities face a pressure to ensure that graduates are equipped with the discipline based skills and competencies expected by external stakeholders such as professional accrediting bodies and prospective employers. Secondly, it is widely assumed that graduates ought also to be equipped with transferable skills and attributes that will allow them to succeed within the twenty-first century workplace (Lowden et al., 2011). Finally, universities recognize that individuals’ development of employability skills is not confined to the period spent in higher education, but rather is a ‘whole-of-life’ endeavour (Solomonides, 2012).

The scope of this task presents employability-related curriculum designers in HEIs with a challenge: how to conceptualise and pursue the goals of employability teaching within what is often an already-crowded curriculum. First-year curriculum designers face a specific but very important component of this broader challenge: how should the ‘employability issue’ be introduced to students in their first year of study? This paper discusses an innovative response to this first-year curriculum-design challenge, one that centers on the goal of developing within students a strong career mindset.

This paper proceeds in two stages. Firstly, the paper briefly describes an institutional transformation that has occurred at Victoria University (VU), Melbourne. Understanding this transformation is important as it empowered staff to reimagine and redesign employability-related (and other) curricula, and it produced a new Block Model of Delivery (BMD) that set the context in which new curriculum ideas were applied. Secondly, the paper elaborates the approach to first-year employability teaching noted above. It defines the concept of ‘career mindset’ and demonstrates how this concept has shaped the design of two courses, each of which supports students as they build career mindsets relevant to their respective degrees.

## **2. Block Model Delivery in VU’s First Year**

The transformational change that has occurred over the past three years at VU represents a rare instance of an HEI acting in ways that significantly disrupt existing approaches to the design and delivery of teaching. At the heart of this transformation, which has generally been focused on the enhancement of the first year experience (FYE) of students, lies what is termed VU’s BMD (Victoria University, 2017). Traditionally, VU (like many other HEIs) delivered full-time students four subjects in parallel across a 16-week semester. Alternatively, teaching

'on the block' involves students taking four courses, each four-weeks long, that are delivered sequentially across a 16-week semester. VU's ambitious goal in 2017 – to convert all first year courses to block mode prior to the start of teaching in 2018 – was a daunting task. What quickly became apparent was that this change would require the modification of most aspects of curriculum design, as well as many university systems and processes (McCluskey et al., 2018). However, with this disruption came a rare opportunity: to redesign curricula in order to better meet challenges, including those associated with employability-related teaching.

As well as providing an opportunity for substantive curriculum redesign, introduction of BMD also provided the context in which curriculum redesign took place. Perhaps the defining characteristic of BMD is that courses are taken by students one at a time. This provides an opportunity for educators to implement active and engaging activities, even if those activities stretch beyond 'normal' teaching times and classroom settings, as there are no competing demands from other courses. Focusing on one course at a time also enables students to reflect back on classroom experiences prior to moving on to their next course. Furthermore, due to the sequential nature of BMD, course designers are able not only to specify what objectives ought to be served by each course within a degree, but also to tailor the timing of the delivery of courses so that they best enable students to meet those objectives.

BMD was driven by research pertaining to the enhancement of the (FYE), particularly in an Australian context (Kraus, 2011; Nelson et al., 2014), and it consequently incorporates many of the features of what Kift (2009) has referred to as a 'transition pedagogy'. Transition pedagogy has been crafted with the context of widening participation in higher education and the needs of contemporary students firmly in mind. In particular, this encourages educators to adopt student-centered approaches to teaching, approaches that involve teachers working collaboratively with students in the processes of knowledge construction. In VU's BMD, small classes, each working with a single teacher, foster the formation of authentic learning communities. Within such communities, mutual trust empowers students to engage in meaningful collaboration with staff and with peers. It was with these characteristics in mind that the following instance of employability curriculum design took place.

### **3. Developing a Career Mindset in First Year Students**

It has long been acknowledged that teaching employability related content in higher education is an onerous task (Wheelahan et al., 2012). Tailoring degrees to particular vocational outcomes is undermined by the complexity of employment sectors, by the rapid evolution of the employment market, and by increasing expectations that, in the future, individuals will hold multiple careers (Yu et al., 2013). Teaching for employability is particularly difficult, however, in the first year space. First year university students are a unique cohort as many of them are undergoing a transisitional period, not only from high

school to tertiary education but also from adolescence to adulthood (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Adding pressure, is the perception that during this period individuals should identify and begin pursuing clearly defined career pathways. It should not be surprising that first year students are often both anxious and uncertain about degree choice, their career goals, and the links between the two. Indeed, this is evidenced by the fact that students are more likely to transfer degrees and/or change majors during their first year of study (Beggs et al., 2008). Given the rapidly changing world of work, such uncertainty is entirely reasonable, but it still presents a challenge to first year employability educators.

The response at VU has been to centre first year employability teaching around the goal of developing in students a career mindset. Mindsets are beliefs that orient an individual's reactions and tendencies (Dweck, 2008). An individual's mindset plays a pivotal role in how they understand their experiences, cope with challenges, and perceive their future. More particularly, an individual's career mindset helps them to integrate knowledge and skills in order to become autonomous and purposeful participants in their own career development. Building such a mindset in first year empowers students to grow their employability skills throughout their studies, and even beyond the classroom.

Supporting students to build career mindsets requires consideration of the following. Firstly, career mindset teaching must be student centered; educators must take seriously the choices students have made in terms of degree, not necessarily as final career choices, but instead as expressions of students' existing knowledge regarding their skills and career goals. Secondly, engagement with discipline-specific content and skills is valuable, partly in its own right, but also because this can help students understand the context-specific nature of skills development. Thirdly, supporting students to reflect on their own values, skills and career aspirations, and on their engagement with discipline content and skills, is an essential step in building a career mindset. Overall then, in terms of process, curriculum design aiming to introduce employability to first year students should involve periods of introspection, of research and exploration and, finally, of reflection (Dressler, 2008). The small class sizes and intensive nature of BMD enhance make it possible to integrate this process into courses – such as the two considered below – in a student-centered manner.

### ***3.1. Academic Discourse and Experience***

The first course considered here, *Academic Discourse and Experience* (ABA1000), is a compulsory first-year course within VU's *Bachelor of Arts* (BA). Tasked with supporting the employability of BA students, the course faces the following two challenges. Firstly, VU BA students are uncertain and often anxious about the links between their course choice and potential employment outcomes. Secondly, this uncertainty can be exacerbated by the fact that the BA is widely recognised as a generalist rather than a vocational course. Because many students who enter the BA are unsure about where, in terms of employment, such a

course might take them, course designers at VU decided to locate ABA1000 at the very beginning of the first year of the degree. This offered course designers a unique opportunity to frame the BA, both as an academic endeavour and in terms of employability, and to build a narrative that draws together the two.

At the heart of this narrative is the notion of ‘social values’; a phrase that is used to refer to a range of concepts (e.g. security and beauty) that are of interest to students, of academic importance, and of practical social and political relevance. The breadth of the range of values that are available for consideration, combined with the teacher-student engagement that small-class teaching offers, allows students to be supported as they investigate those values to which they are drawn. Students are then introduced to an array of academic literature that relates to their chosen conceptions of value. This approach helps students to transition into academic life; they are able to explore academic discourse surrounding concepts that are of importance to them.

Crucially, however, the course also asks students to explore the practical application of such concepts in real community settings. The course is built around two small-group field trips. It is through these field trips that students search for, gather and analyse evidence of investment in social value, and of the organisations that engage in such investment. By examining how their chosen values are expressed in the community, and the employers that invest in these values, students are able to construct an initial career mindset that can motivate and guide their studies within the BA. Put simply, students are able to link together the values that interest them, academic discourse regarding those values, and the employers that invest in those values in the local community. This process is designed not only to show students real employers that share their own values, but to help students to construct their own knowledge regarding the relevance to employability of their current and future studies within the BA.

### **3.2. Organisational Skills 1**

*Organisational Skills 1* (APP1015), is an employability-focused course that is delivered to all first year psychology students. Many of those who enroll into a psychology degree do so with the mindset that they will be pursuing a career as a psychologist. What is often unknown to students as they begin their tertiary education is that this pathway is highly competitive and that following it to completion requires the gaining of postgraduate qualifications. Thus, the challenge in APP1015 is not so much to help students to build a career mindset, but instead to modify and broaden the career mindset that many of them bring with them to the course. Through the fostering of strong learning communities, facing what is normally a confronting reality is able to be reframed into a positive learning experience, one that empowers students to take control and plan for their own futures. Positioning this course towards the end of student’s first year allows them to reflect on how the discipline based

content and skills they have already acquired will be useful to them in a broad range of career settings and, in turn, will allow them to evaluate their future experiences more critically.

Identifying what motivators underpin the desire of students to pursue their degree is fundamental for fostering a positive career mindset. Through class activities and discussions, students are exposed to a number of phenomena related to organisations in general. Encouraging students to evaluate various aspects of organisations is a useful and engaging first step to encouraging them to think about their own values in relation to employment. Once students have identified their values they then collaboratively, with other similarly minded students, investigate a range of careers and pathways that align with those beliefs. This reflective practice forms the basis for the classroom activities and assessments for the first third of the course.

Later in the course, students are encouraged to further explore their values and to link those values to a range of realistic and tangible career outcomes. Guest speakers, who have undergraduate psychology degrees but pursued pathways unrelated to clinical work, speak to students about graduate programs and careers in industry that utilize what are sometimes thought of as primarily discipline based skills. This enables students to begin building a network of individuals in their field, outside of university, and to appreciate the breadth of career pathways that are relevant to their studies. Furthermore, bridging the experiences students have in the classroom with real-world examples of what employers are looking for can provide students with purpose and context for their higher education experience. Students also engage in the analysis of job advertisements from a variety of vocational sectors; this helps them to construct connections between career pathways and the employability skills that are needed within them.

In the final stage of the course, students are supported as they work to integrate the knowledge that they have built, about themselves, about potential career pathways, and about the content and skills related to their studies. Students are encouraged to evaluate the employability skills being sought in the advertisements they have reviewed, to reflect on the skills they have already begun developing (by evaluating their discipline based knowledge and experiences), and to identify methods for addressing any skills gaps that may have been noted. This process culminates in each student producing personalized online (LinkedIn) and offline career portfolios. Students leave the course with a tangible product that can support the ongoing construction of their career mindset, one that can be utilized in later courses, and in later periods of their professional lives.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

This paper describes an innovative approach to first-year employability teaching, one that focuses on building in students a strong career mindset. It then explains how the goal of developing a career mindset has shaped curriculum design in two courses.

The adoption of this approach to first-year employability teaching requires further attention. On the one hand, research is needed into student uptake of these ideas: evaluation of the mindsets with which students enter courses, and of the impact of subsequent career-mindset teaching, will enhance our understanding of the factors that impact on teaching quality in this area. On the other hand, research is also needed into vocational patterns and career destinations suited to distinct degrees so that career-mindset curricula can be authentic and targeted.

VU's BMD facilitated the restructure and design of the courses, and it also empowered educators to tailor the timing of delivery of these courses to best serve the needs of their respective cohorts. However, the underlying principles considered above can be applied to courses in various teaching modes. Furthermore, while this paper presents the design and strategies utilised in two courses, these methods can be adapted for incorporation into any degree or discipline. The general features of the approach adopted in both ABA1000 and APP1015 are clear. Building a career mindset requires supporting students through three stages of development. The first involves students engaging in introspection so that they understand the employability-related values, knowledge and skills which they have brought with them into their chosen course. The second requires educators to help students to explore discipline-relevant employment, preferably through the use of active and authentic teaching strategies. Again, this stage is of value even if some students later go on to shift majors, degrees, or even careers, because it helps students to develop an understanding of the contextual nature of employability-skills. A final, and vital stage, involves students engaging in reflection so that they can begin to integrate knowledge and skills within a coherent career mindset, thus setting them on a path of life-long-learning about employability.

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