A Graduate Employment Program
for Bachelor of Arts Students.
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Abstract
In 1996 and 1997, an innovative graduate employment program for final year Bachelor of Arts (humanities and social sciences) students was developed at the University of Ballarat. The program aims to enhance arts graduates’ competitiveness in the professional employment market. It addresses some of the employment barriers encountered by graduates with a generalist, non-specific vocational degree. This paper describes the program so that it may be adapted for use elsewhere, and reports on an evaluation of the program. Positive outcomes of the program reported by participants include an enhanced understanding of their skills and knowledge, learning effective job-seeking strategies, and an awareness of the labour market.

Rationale for the program
In February, 1996, a questionnaire was distributed to all 1995 graduates and 1996 graduands (n=141) with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Ballarat. The survey sought information on current employment or study activities, as well as summative evaluation responses about the course. Of the 69 graduates who responded, only 23% were employed in graduate-level positions, and 25% were unemployed. The remainder were either in further study or non-graduate level employment. While the overall rating of the course was high, and many respondents commented favourably on the development of their generalist skills and thirst for knowledge, many were disillusioned about their employability. Typical comments included:

At the end of the day, I don’t seem to be qualified for anything
I feel students are misguided doing a B.A. It simply fills in three years.
It leaves you with a piece of paper that is so general and unspecific. You still have no aim in life.
I’m just getting so many knockbacks for jobs. It makes you wonder whether the whole thing’s been worth it.

These experiences are borne out by national statistics. While labour market conditions for graduates are gradually improving (Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 1996), recent data show that University of Ballarat graduates have the highest level of unemployment (28.5%) of all universities (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1996). Moreover, arts graduates generally have among the highest rates of both unemployment and further study. More than 30% of social sciences and psychology graduates are still seeking full-time work four months after leaving university (Graduate Careers Council of Australia, 1996). This situation is partly attributable to Ballarat’s high regional unemployment rate; when labour market conditions are accounted for, the employability of Ballarat’s graduates is about average for all universities (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994).

The structural unemployment problems are compounded by the generalist nature of an arts degree. Unlike qualifications in accounting, engineering, and medicine, arts graduates are not professionally trained for specific careers. Arts students develop generic and lifelong learning skills in oral and written communication, information literacy, analysis and research and so on. These transferable skills are highly sought after by employers (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1992), however, humanities and social science graduates are not commonly targeted by employers.

Given these disadvantages, one might expect that arts students make extensive use of the university’s careers services. However, anecdotal evidence at the University of Ballarat suggested that arts students made little use of the services and rarely participated in on-campus recruitment programs.
In response to these survey findings, a graduate employment program specifically targeting final year Bachelor of Arts students was developed in collaboration with staff from the graduate careers service at the University of Ballarat. The program was based around several linked ideas. First, because arts is a generalist degree, students must become aware of its strengths and limitations for gaining professional employment. Second, arts graduates must become strategic job seekers; by relying only upon “passive” techniques such as responding to advertisements, they are disadvantaged even more than those with vocationally-specific degrees. Finally, because of the long lead time in strategic job seeking, arts students must prepare for and pursue employment from the beginning of their final year.

**Program objective and content**

The objective of the Bachelor of Arts graduate employment program was to increase the competitiveness of arts graduates seeking professional employment. A modular program was developed based on two hour workshops held each fortnight throughout the academic year. The modules were sequenced to coincide with public and private sector graduate recruitment programs. The program was open to all final year students completing the Bachelor of Arts (humanities and social sciences). Participation was voluntary. Students were notified of the program through classroom announcements, and noticeboard messages. However, most importantly, there were regular mailouts to students’ term addresses.

Briefly, the content of the program included:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Inventory of skills, knowledge and attributes gained through the arts degree</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Analysis of skills sought by employers of graduates</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Career directions for arts graduates</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Strategic job hunting for final year arts students</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Presentations by arts graduates now in professional employment</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Resume preparation: demonstrating “added value” in an arts degree</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Addressing key selection criteria in job applications</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Inside information: advice for arts graduates from a recruitment consultant</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Personal presentation to prospective employers</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Interview role plays</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Post graduate study options for arts graduates</td>
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Workshop activities were supplemented through drawing upon guest speakers and facilitators, as well as written and visual material including the recent video “Out In Front With An Arts Degree” produced by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia.

The workshop format over the whole year allowed participants to (1) develop a deeper understanding of their skills and attributes, (2) identify where they needed to strengthen their resume through, for example, doing voluntary work or becoming involved in team projects, and (3) actually commence strategic job seeking by midway through their final year.

**Evaluation**

Formal and informal evaluations strategies were employed to assess the impact and outcomes of the program. Participation rates were generally good, though tended to drop when assignments were due. An average of 34% (mostly made up of a core group of regular attenders) of final year students participated in all the modules throughout 1996 and 1997, and 53% of students attended at least one workshop. Each workshop was assessed by feedback sheets. In all but two workshops, more than 80% of participants rated the workshop as “helpful” or “very helpful”. Some typical comments from the students included:

* I learnt that I am more skilful than I thought I was! *

* I found out how to relate the skills acquired from the B.A. to the workforce. *

* I know it’s necessary to research what employers’ expectations are. *
It’s increased my self-confidence.

I learnt that my skills are relevant to a large number of jobs.

The graduate careers officer also reported much higher utilisation of the service by arts students, and much improved application rates for graduate recruitment schemes. Approximately half of the regular participants in the program prepared a high standard resume during the year. Participants also frequently reported back that they had commenced voluntary work to gain additional skills, experience or networks, or had initiated visits to prospective employers. The strongest indicator of success - improvements in professional employment rates by participants - has not yet been researched.

**Conclusion**

The graduate employment program for Bachelor of Arts students was developed to assist participants to become more competitive in seeking professional employment. The program was successful in giving final year students a better appreciation of the skills and knowledge gained from an arts degree, and the relevance of these to employment. It also equipped participants with a range of strategies for securing graduate level employment. The program can not affect the structural issues causing regional unemployment and underemployment among graduates. However, it offers those with a generalist degree a strategic advantage in securing employment. In 1998, the program is being extended by offering a half day workshop in February for unemployed graduands.

**References**

Department of Employment, Education and Training (1994) *Higher Education Report No. 22*


Graduate Careers Council of Australia (1996) *Graduate Destination Survey*


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