

# Students as Staff: Earning where they Learn

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## Abstract

Although a high percentage of Australian university students work whilst studying, relatively small numbers are employed on their campus. Few Australian Universities systematically or actively recruit and prepare students for employment on campus. The focus of this paper is to outline a university wide initiative that is being currently piloted at Victoria University (VU): Students as Staff.

As with all Australian universities, Victoria University has a strong commitment to the enhancement of its student's employability skills and is currently undergoing a far reaching restructuring of its activities and programs to ensure VU graduates are job, career and future ready. VU's students are amongst the most linguistically and culturally diverse cohort in Australia with a higher relative proportion of "first in family" and are heavily involved in the labour market.

This paper reports on an initiative at Victoria University which is closely aligned to the universities strategic mission by linking student employment, learning in the workplace and community with the largest employer in the region, Victoria University. The initiative responds to the challenges presented by the VU student cohort and seeks to enhance student's engagement with their studies and augment their employability skills. The paper draws on the findings of a 2007 feasibility study, experiences of a partner university, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and outlines the rationale for the pilot at VU in 2008 / 2009 including the context and strategic drivers for the project.

**Keywords:** learning in the workplace and community, employability skills, culturally diverse, student engagement, work integrated learning, student experience

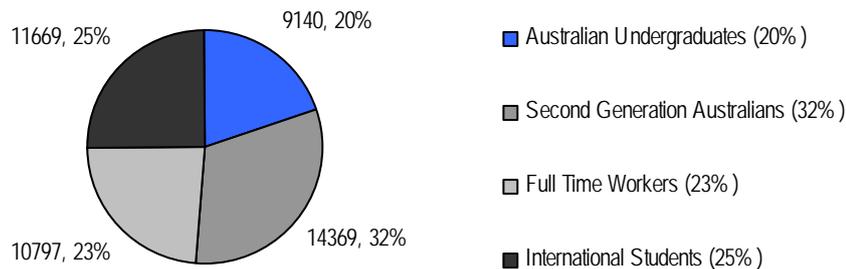
## Introduction

Australian Universities, in response to increasing demands from industry and community, are strengthening their commitment to enhancing their student's employability skills. A recent Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) report (Cleary, Flynn, Thomasson, Alexander & Mc Donald 2007) found industry satisfaction with students discipline specific skills and recognition of the critical role work integrated learning can play in developing students employability skills which are seen by some as "underdeveloped". The WIL report outlines the growth of work integrated learning programs across the nation in both universities "at the corporate strategic level, within disciplines and from careers and employment elements" (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, p3 2009) and in industry and community.

Currently there is a heightened focus on social inclusion in Australian universities, due to the recently elected Australian Government's productivity and participation agenda, with its links to enhancing student experience and engagement. This focus will be progressed further as the findings of a major review of Higher Education in Australia, the Bradley report, are implemented from 2009. This paper outlines the development of one initiative at Victoria University that seeks to enhance students employability and at the same time enhance students engagement through a program, Students as Staff which facilitates employment for students on campus. This program is one of a suite of initiatives being developed to implement major strategic changes at VU.

## The Context: Victoria University

Victoria University is a large multi campus university encompassing further education, vocational and higher education sectors with 45,000 students, including more than 2,500 international students on-shore, over 4,000 off-shores. The University is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne Australia, a region of significant disadvantage and the university, as the only major Higher Education institution plays a key role the region. A recent study, The Diversity and Performance of the Student Population at Victoria University ( Messsinis, Sheehan, Miholcic 2008 ) has identified four major groupings of students in the student cohort illustrated in the diagram below through analysis of the student population over the period 2003 – 2007



VU has one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse student cohorts in Australia and is the only Australian university to be in the top 10 for both low social and economic status and language diversity. Key features of the VU student population include

- 80 % of VU students are either working or seeking work
- Over half students either domestic or international students speak a language other than English
- Students on average come from socio economic backgrounds well below the Melbourne average “with 75 % of students in the university come from families in the bottom half of Melbourne’s socio economic distribution” ( Messsinis, Sheehan, Miholcic 2008 p7)
- 66% of students are first in family at university

Therefore “VU deals with a complex pattern of disadvantage ‘(Harman 2008) which provides many challenges in completing its mission to transform the lives of its students.

VU is currently undertaking a radical restructuring of its programs and activities through a program called Making VU 2016 which focuses on 5 commitments which will together result in “providing students with good employment outcomes following graduation ( Making VU ) The commitments guiding this vision are:

- Collaboration : with industry and community
- Career : making 25 % of all programs assessment learning in the workplace and community
- Choices : enhanced experience and choices for students
- Connected : linking to enterprises for workforce development

- Community: resource new initiatives aimed at improving life in Western Melbourne

A series of interlinked strategies are being progressively implemented to achieve this major shift in the delivery of the core programs and services to students at VU. The Students as Staff initiative has been developed to contribute to achieving the goals of several of these commitments notably Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC), VU's term for Work integrated learning, and the student experience and expanding choices for students.

In addition VU has drawn on the experiences of partner universities notably University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) which has similar challenges in terms of its student cohort and has been proactive in developing the strategies to enhance the UTEP student experience and relationships with the region.

### **Student Engagement**

Student engagement, defined as “student’s involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning “(ACER 2008 p iv), is of increasing focus particularly its link to negating student attrition in Australian and North America universities. A number of theorists including Pascarella have focused on a range of effective student engagement strategies to minimise attrition. These include strategies relating to academic in class activities and extracurricular activities ( Gabb, Milne & Cao 2006 ).Attrition rates for VU higher education students is high compared to other universities and has been around the 25 % mark for the last ten years (Gabb p2).Gabb describes a range of factors that impact on attrition and identifies those of particular relevance to VU including low socioeconomic status, students with parents with low qualifications and the difficulties associated with juggling work and study. As the recent study of the VU student population confirms these are characteristics of large numbers of the VU student cohort with the result that VU students are at greater risk of attrition.

A number of student engagement instruments have been developed to measure student engagement internationally and more recently in Australia. The AUSSE, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement was conducted by the Australian Council of Educational Research in 2008 involving 29 institutions from Australia and New Zealand. This survey focused on students and their learning, how it is influenced by student involvement in educationally purposeful activities and how the university stimulates the conditions for that involvement. It identified 6 key areas of student engagement and produced individual scores for each participating university with comparisons with benchmark universities, all Australian universities and universities in the USA. This survey also confirms that in Australia more engaged students report doing better in their studies.

The institution specific AUSSE (ACER ) results for VU would appear to support Gabb’s findings that “VU students are less attached to their university than other students” (Gabb, Milne & CAO 2006) with VU students performing less than the national average on a range of dimensions including spending less time on campus out of class than students at either benchmark universities or all Australasian universities and spending less time at campus events and activities than other Australasian students and US students. This may be the result of the

high participation rate by VU students in the labour market for fundamental financial needs resulting in less time to be involved in such activities. VU is currently implementing a comprehensive student experience strategy to address some of these issues and enhance students experience at VU.

### **On Campus Employment: Impact on Student Learning**

One important aspect of student engagement is the link between work and learning. Pascarella ( 2005 ) details studies showing the negative impact employment has” the more students work the more likely they are to shift from full time to part time enrolment and the less likely they are to persist from one year to the next “( Pascarella p414 )These negative impacts are demonstrated across a wide range of studies. However Pascarella concludes that working on campus “had positive net effects and can enhance “student progress and completion (Pascarella p414 )This was also supported by the findings of Astin in 1993 “ holding a part time job on campus is positively associated with a bachelors degree and with virtually all areas of self reported cognitive and affective growth “( Kuhn p280)

Kuhn outlines the characteristics of effective educational practice or DEEP ( Documenting Effective Educational Practice ) institutions. One strategy he endorses is the widespread use of students in paid paraprofessional roles and links this to benefits for the students in their learning as well as staff and the enhancement of the University as a learning community. A strategy well advanced at UTEP documented by Kuh (p134). A significant feature identified by Kuh as a success enabler is the sophisticated pre training for students taking up these roles.

Results for the AUSSE confirm these benefits of on campus employment in the Australasian context with students working for pay on campus having an active learning score of 43.1 compared to 35.5 for those not working on campus. In the AUSSE, the Work integrated learning score measures the extent to which learners have blended academic learning with workplace experience. (ACER p 18). Though 58.9 percent indicated they were improving their employability, only 33.9 percent reported blending academic learning with workplace experience. Paid employment was linked to higher work integrated learning scores with on campus work with scores of 48.9 compared to scores of 44.1 for those with no campus based employment. On campus employment is proposed to offer students a greater sense of community inclusion as well as opportunities directly related to interactions with academics “(ACER P15)

The report states that “students feel their educational experience has been most valuable when they are challenged to learn in a supportive environment and have encountered work relevant learning experiences “(ACER p23)

The AUSSE results for VU shows that 9 % of VU students work for pay on campus about same as for benchmark and other Australasian universities and less than the USA 37% worked more than 15 hours per week off campus for pay.

### **Learning in the workplace and Community (LIWC) at VU**

VU has undertaken a major commitment to adopt a minimum of 25 % of assessable learning in LIWC in all courses across the university. During 2008 the

LiWC policy was reviewed. A Discussion paper informing the policy development outlined the intention of the LiWC initiative as providing “ a context for student learning which enhances the learning experience , improves employment and career outcomes, provides students with opportunities to contribute to their communities and prepares students to be future ready “( Kay 2008) Therefore at VU employability is viewed as enabling the student to be work, career and future ready and recognises that “powerful learning can occur in workplaces and community settings”(McLennan p4)

During the university wide consultation and subsequent endorsement of the LiWC policy, a range of contexts where learning could occur were approved including industry, community and simulated contexts. The policy also endorses maximising the use of the university itself an authentic site for learning especially as VU both plays an important role in the region and is one of the largest employers in the west of Melbourne

### **Students as Staff Feasibility Study: Findings**

Employment of students on campus was therefore seen as having the potential to enhance student engagement and learning, impact attrition and provide LiWC opportunities with systems and support to accommodate the needs of a diverse VU student cohort. These were in addition to the usual benefits host organisations gain from involvement in such programs including accessing potential employees and utilising new skills. Therefore in 2007/8 the Portfolio of Learning for Work and Community Service at VU undertook a study “to investigate the feasibility of developing a university wide system to encourage and support the employment of VU students as Staff “(Nott p5)

The study focused on paid employment in general roles and not in teaching or tutoring roles. The project team undertook an audit of existing practice of student employment and interviewed both students employed on campus and their managers to identify both benefits and constraints of existing employment practice. The findings informed the development of proposal with an implementation plan for the Students as Staff pilot which is currently being implemented.

In addition valuable experience from the various student employment programs on campus at UTEP informed the proposal. UTEP programs provide employment for approximately 2,000 students each year. A key feature of the successful UTEP programs and existing VU programs was the structured preparation of students to facilitate them taking on their role as staff members.

The study identified a broad range of student employment across VU from longstanding structured programs often linked to student learning such as the Student Rover program and IT internships through to departments hiring students for various casual roles with no explicit links to their study. No University wide systems or policies existed for promoting or employing students and therefore determining the exact numbers and models of student’s employment at VU was problematic.

Students working on campus identified only benefits and no disadvantages to on campus work. The benefits identified by VU students were consistent with research

findings and included flexibility and convenience, linking study and work and building stronger relationships with staff across the university. Similarly VU staff supervising students were very positive about the performance of students they employed, both in relation to their technical skills and their general contribution to their departments. However the audit revealed managers had a range of concerns which was limiting employment of students at VU. Issues identified by managers included:

- Human resource issues and a lack of knowledge regarding recruitment, tenure, training and induction of students
- Role and obligations in relation to Learning in the Workplace and Community linking the work to students study
- VU policy in relation to the employment of students
- Confidentiality and privacy issues including risks involved with students accessing university data

These issues and barriers together with knowledge of the VU student cohort and context were used in designing the Students as Staff model which is being piloted. The model includes a range of support mechanisms to assist students in transitioning into employment generally and on campus employment specifically. Features of the model include:

- Establishing a central university wide register of students seeking work in the university
- Implementing a range of career development activities to support the participating students including the use of e portfolios to record and reflect on skills and experiences
- Students undertaking, prior to recruitment ,a Preparation for Employment at VU workshop to support students in moving from a student to staff role with topics including VU policies and processes , confidentiality and privacy
- Marketing strategy to promote the program to students and the university
- Information and support for VU Managers supervising students
- Advisory group with all university key stakeholder representation to support the pilot

See Appendix A for a diagram outlining the Students as Staff model process and role of each stakeholder.

The pilot is currently being implemented during 2008 / 2009 and is part of both the University LiWC strategy and the Student Experience Strategy. The aim is to significantly increase the numbers of students as staff across the university and integrate the activity as a sustainable component of University operations. The pilot incorporates strategies to support students and promote and actively encourage university departments to become involved .Although many positions available to students can be linked to students learning and assessment ensuring that all employment is linked to students learning is a longer term challenge for the university.

## **Conclusion**

Australian and International research demonstrates the benefit of WIL activities on employability skills and the enhanced impact on engagement and learning of paid

employment on campus. The majority of VU students are heavily engaged in the labour market for fundamental financial needs which is one of the factors impacting their learning and exposing them to greater risk of attrition than other student cohorts. Therefore an initiative that can enhance engagement through paid on campus employment and also boost employability skills is highly beneficial to VU students.

The Student's as Staff initiative is being developed and implemented in response to this context and within the broad strategic direction of the university. It is a specific component of two commitments: Learning in the Workplace and Student Experience. The Students as Staff pilot will proactively encourage the use of the university as a potential site for employment of VU students. The pilot has been designed to respond to the unique nature of the VU student cohort, address the constraints identified in the feasibility study as well as utilise the experience of programs at UTEP. The pilot is providing pre training to support student's transition into staff roles, a range of career services for students and information sessions to managers to overcome identified barriers. It is clear that paid employment on campus is highly beneficial to student learning although ensuring that all employment on campus is linked to student's assessable learning and part of the LIWC in their courses is a longer term goal.

So from 2009 Victoria University will increasingly be encouraging students to earn where they learn.

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