

## Leveraging work-integrated learning through on-campus employment: A university-wide approach

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At Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia, the majority of students engage in paid employment alongside their studies; and, every student has the opportunity to engage with work-integrated learning as a key component of their academic course. This paper explores an innovative structured approach the university has initiated to align these two activities: the *Students as Staff Program*. The 2011 Students as Staff evaluation found that 20 per cent of respondents received academic credit for their on-campus employment and more indicated their roles were related to their discipline of study. Additionally, respondents reported feeling significantly engaged with the university and that work on campus had contributed to developing their graduate capabilities. These evaluation results indicate that on-campus employment through a structured program enhances student learning outcomes. This paper discusses key ways in which tertiary institutions can expand their capacity to support and enhance student learning and develop graduate capabilities through on-campus paid work opportunities. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 2013 14(3), 185-193)

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**Keywords:** Work-integrated learning, Graduate capabilities, Part-time work, On-campus employment

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The employment of students on campus at Australian universities is not a new phenomenon, and indeed has been occurring for as long as universities have existed. Students working on campus results in a unique relationship between the student and the institution. A growing number of Australian universities are implementing on-campus employment programs for students; however few have taken a systematic approach to linking on-campus employment with students' disciplines of study.

Victoria University (VU) is a multi-sectoral institution with 10 campuses across the western suburbs of Melbourne. In the heart of one of the fastest growing population corridors in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), VU has a student cohort of 50,000, predicted to double in the next 20 years, and a staffing profile of approximately 2000 academic and 1500 professional staff. The student population is a richly diverse community with many students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, being first in family to attend post-compulsory education, and living in an environment where English is a second language.

In 2009 VU implemented a pilot known as the *Students as Staff Program*. This pilot aimed to facilitate the employment of current VU students on campus with Black, Kay, and Penagandara (2010, p. 34) noting "the impetus for the program relate[d] to:

- Boosting engagement with the University to impact on the attrition rates;
- Providing avenues to gain financial support on campus, not off campus; and
- Linking work and learning to enhance employability skills."

The results of the pilot were overwhelmingly positive with students self-reporting improvements to their employability skills, and graduate and professional capabilities. In addition they reported a greater connection to VU as an institution and an improvement in their studies.

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Following the successful pilot, VU committed to a full-scale implementation of the *Students as Staff Program* in 2011 with a key focus on enhancing the link between on-campus employment and students' discipline of study. Across 2011 VU recruited and employed 1000 Students as Staff, which allowed the program team to explore factors that linked that work through to VU's highly successful Learning in the Workplace & Community (LiWC) initiative which is VU's work-integrated learning (WiL) program.

A survey of all Students as Staff in 2011 found that a higher than expected percentage (20%) of students were receiving some form of credit for their on-campus employment. The results also confirmed the pilot findings with students reiterating the role that remuneration played in retaining them in post-compulsory education, and the enhancement of their employability skills, and graduate and professional capabilities.

The remainder of this paper discusses implementation of the program, explores factors which have contributed to the success identified by the evaluation findings, and suggests mechanisms which tertiary institutions can utilize to support student learning and develop graduate capabilities through paid work opportunities, particularly through expanding the link between on-campus employment and work-integrated learning.

## STUDY AND WORK

Despite the identified adverse effects of working whilst studying (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) employment is becoming a standard component of student life with recent Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) data indicating that 69% of Australasian University students work for pay on or off campus (ACER, 2010). Overseas studies (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Moreau & Leathwood, 2007; Robotham, 2012) have linked high rates of part-time employment, particularly during term-time, with issues such as students not attending class, poorer academic results, and impacts on their leisure time, often the first aspect to give when balancing the various demands associated with study. In contrast, nearly all of the above studies noted many positive outcomes for students who worked part time. These predominantly related to professional and graduate capabilities including aspects such as improving their ability to deal with other people, helping them to organize their time better, and improving their communication skills and self confidence (Robotham 2012, p. 71).

In recent US research, on-campus employment has been positively related to enhanced student progress and completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although far less prevalent than off campus employment (Coates, 2011), it is increasing in prominence in Australia with over half of Australian Universities having some form of formal student employment program on campus. This has been supported through the establishment of a LinkedIn group to draw together the various coordinators and share practice. The University of Technology Sydney, StudentJobs@UTS program has been in existence for three years with over 2800 students offered part time/casual employment on campus during that time. The program, targeted at all students, was initially funded through a Vice Chancellor's Strategic Funding Grant and allows wage subsidizations to be given to employing departments. (M. McKenzie, personal communication, 1 March, 2013)

Unfortunately limited research exists in relation to on-campus employment both in Australia and overseas. Given that universities' play a critical role in producing work ready graduates, there is now a strong impetus for universities to play a greater role in linking part-time work

to students' learning and development activities to ensure students can articulate and leverage these extra-curricular activities for their future career outcomes. As noted by Hamish Coates, Executive Director Research, Australian Council of Educational Research, "this is a significant facet of Australia's higher education life that is slipping between the cracks" (Coates, 2011, p. 2).

Many Australian institutions have moved towards systematic work-related, experiential learning activities that take many guises: work-integrated learning, learning-integrated work, and service learning to name but a few. At the core of WiL is any form of intentional, organised and accredited educational activity that integrates theoretical learning and application in the workplace (Flinders University, 2012), or as defined by the 2008 WIL Report "An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al, 2008, p. 8). At VU this has been termed Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC), and is a key strategic initiative for the institution. All students must complete 25% of the assessment of their studies through some form of LiWC activity and these traditionally take the form of practical placements, industry and/or community projects, cooperative education, or internships. Now, under the banner of Students as Staff, linking on-campus employment with LiWC has become a new focus that will start to go part-way towards closing the gap between part-time work and studies.

#### STUDENTS AS STAFF AT VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

The *Students as Staff Program* was formally launched in August 2010 by the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Elizabeth Harman, who set a stretch target of 1000 positions on campus by the end of 2011. At the time she noted the need for VU to "walk the talk" in terms of becoming an exemplary host organization, and that the *Students as Staff Program* was one of a range of strategic initiatives aimed at achieving that outcome. If VU was out in its community asking partner organizations to take on VU students for all forms of LiWC, VU needed to be leading the way in providing these opportunities to its own students.

Among the initial challenges was defining, and then implementing systems to measure and evaluate the *Students as Staff Program* at VU. Through the ratification of a positioning paper in late 2010 Students as Staff were defined as:

"Any student who is also a paid member of Victoria University's staff profile, will be defined as a Student as Staff. Inherent in this is that the primary reason the student interacts with VU is as a student, rather than a staff member" (Mitchell, 2010, p. 1).

Early data analysis through the Human Resources Department at Victoria University identified approximately five out of every 10 casual staff members as undertaking significant study loads. This lead to the estimation that VU probably had close to 500 Students as Staff already on the payroll, however this needed to be further quantified. Working closely with Human Resources a Student as Staff tick box was added to every employment contract across both the higher and vocational education sectors. This allowed the project team to track student employment on campus across 2011. A key focus in the initial stages was to create a permeating cultural shift towards the employment of students whenever possible. A range of mechanisms were used to achieve this cultural shift, one mechanism being 12 months of

funding provided by the Vice-Chancellor to subsidize student salaries and establish the program.

#### EVALUATION AND KEY FINDINGS

In July 2011 the first full-scale evaluation of all identified Students as Staff was conducted – a total of 650 students at that point in the year. An electronic survey was utilized with a 40% response rate, which gave significant weight to the results.

Key findings from the *Students as Staff Program* evaluation included:

- Students employed on campus self-reported that they felt significantly engaged with Victoria University as an institution. 89% of respondents indicated that working at VU had made them more connected to University life;
- The remuneration paid to Students as Staff had a major impact on student's abilities to continue with study commitments at VU;
- 20% of Students as Staff received course credit for their work, and 78% of respondents reported their work related to their academic course or field of study;
- Students reported that their work on campus had contributed to their development of the six VU graduate capabilities listed in Table 1 (Mitchell, 2012); and
- One limitation of the findings is that many Students as Staff were also actively involved in separate LiWC activities as part of their study programs, and/or other extracurricular activities, and this may have impacted the evaluation results.

The question about LiWC resulted in 20% of students indicating that they received academic credit for their employment on campus. Examples included students working in the gymnasiums who were often undertaking Sports and Exercise Science qualifications and credit was granted for some of their work. Student Connections (Service Centers, Admissions and Enrolments, Graduations) also offered all Students as Staff the opportunity to undertake a Certificate IV in Frontline Management, with all study components replaced with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for on-the-job training, and a significant reflective writing process in place alongside the work.

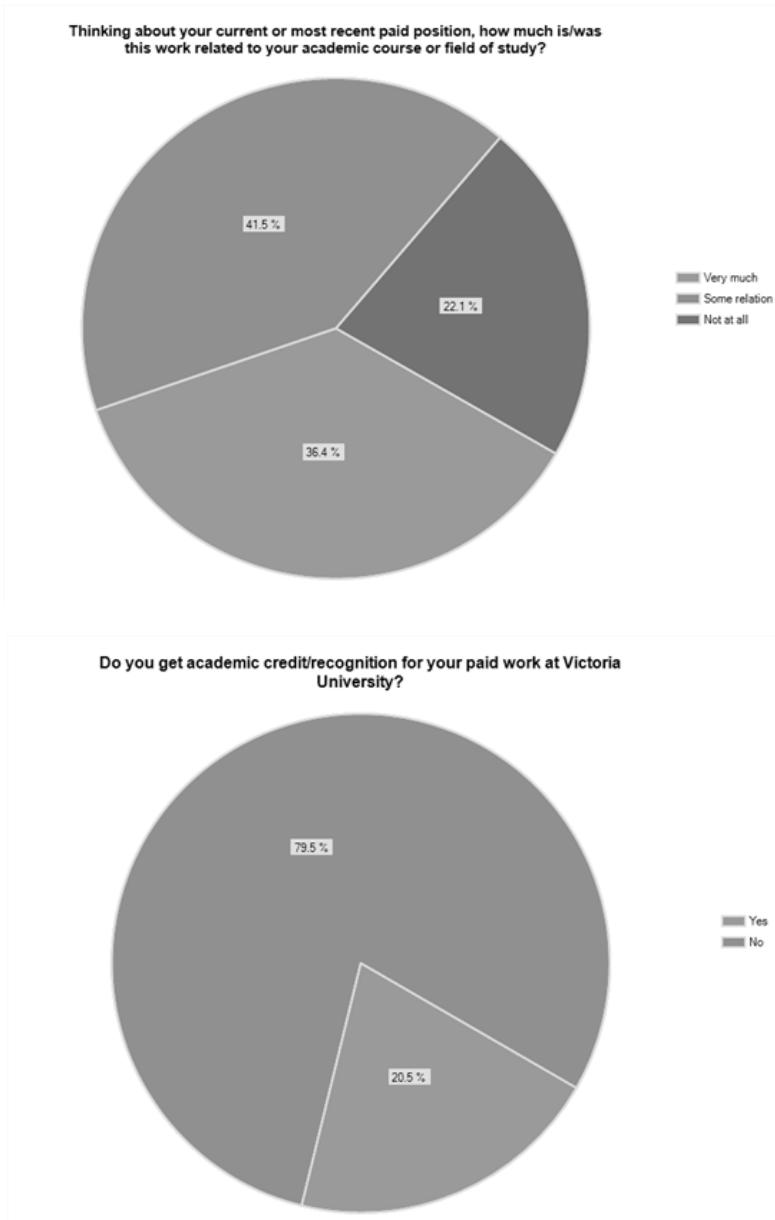
In addition Students as Staff were asked whether they felt their work was very much, somewhat, or not at all related to their study discipline. 78% indicated work was somewhat or very related to their discipline of study which was a stark contrast to the 20% of students receiving credit for their study. This finding has initiated discussion within the University community and a key future focus will be on finding mechanisms to support, enhance and grow the formal link between on-campus employment and study. See Figure 1 (Mitchell, 2012). In contrast Robotham's UK study indicated that less than 1% of the sample stated that the job they held was related directly to their course of study or their intended future career (2012, p. 69). Hall's longitudinal study of students at the University of New South Wales noted that they found it hard "to find work related to their study unless it is organized as part of the course as work experience, or one of the campus-based research assistance jobs that are occasionally available" (2012, p. 441).

TABLE 1. Graduate capability development

VU Graduate Capabilities	None % (N)	Some Contribution % (N)	Significant Contribution % (N)	Rating Average	Response Count
Ability to problem solve in a range of settings	1.6 (4)	56.5 (143)	41.9 (106)	2.40	253
Ability to locate, critically evaluate, manage and use written, numerical and electronic information	7.9 (20)	55.3 (140)	36.8 (93)	2.29	253
Ability to communicate in a variety of context and modes	2.0 (5)	42.9 (108)	55.2 (139)	2.53	252
Ability to work both autonomously and collaboratively	3.2 (8)	47.8 (121)	49.0 (124)	2.46	253
Ability to work in an environmentally, socially and culturally responsible manner	4.4 (11)	44.4 (111)	51.2 (128)	2.47	250
Ability to manage learning and career development opportunities	8.4 (21)	49.8 (125)	41.8 (105)	2.33	251

Note: This table shows the results of student responses to the question "To what extent has your paid work at Victoria University contributed to your knowledge, skills and personal development in the following areas?"

FIGURE 1. Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC): Relationship between part-time work and studies (Mitchell, 2011)



## DISCUSSION

The results of the Students as Staff evaluation at VU are consistent with previous research findings and highlight the role part-time employment can play across dimensions of graduate capability development, student engagement, and learning outcomes. In contrast, the findings from this study show an increase in opportunities for students to undertake work related to their studies, and the ability to reduce some of the negative impacts such as balancing work and class attendance due to reduced travel requirements (Rowbotham, 2012).

The reasons for this unexpectedly higher incidence of VU students undertaking on-campus employment related to their studies are unclear. Possible explanations could relate to the high visibility of LiWC in the universities' strategic mission together with the implementation of a range of strategies to drive cultural change and staff engagement. During the same period the *Students as Staff Program* was implemented with high level and pervasive support by all VU staff. This may have resulted in a culture within the university which fostered and encouraged staff to link these initiatives resulting in increased numbers of students being employed on campus in areas relating to their studies. When examining VU departments where a direct link between a Student as Staff position and gaining academic credit under LiWC has been achieved, three clusters of drivers have been identified:

1. Historical Discipline Focused Programs: A range of long standing programs already in place at VU, particularly in areas of distinctive specializations such as the link between the sports and fitness center and sports and exercise science students which have grown and been aligned over time;
2. Innovative General Programs: Led by champions of Students as Staff who have built on both LiWC and Students as Staff as key strategic mechanisms for developing students employability outcomes at VU. In these instances the strong advocates of the program have been encouraged by the current university-wide support for the program, seen the benefits of student employment in their own work areas, and then creatively linked the work to study programs and WIL. An example of this is the Student Connection area and their offering of the Certificate IV in Frontline Management which extends a student's experience at University and adds to their employability upon graduation; and
3. Individual Student-Led roles: Students opting for positions within the university that have a strong link to their particular discipline of study and thereby creating the link themselves to enhance employability outcomes. In some instances the student has then needed to advocate within their discipline area to gain the credit for this work.

The evaluation of the program in 2011 and its successful outcomes has invariably identified a number of challenges in the employment of Students as Staff which are guiding program initiatives moving forward:

- Evidence of a highly casualized workforce;
- Variations in the provision and quality of supervision of students within work areas;
- Variations in the work readiness of students as staff;
- Ensuring broad access to opportunities and avoiding an "elite" cohort of Students as Staff who get every role;

- Ensuring the student can understand and articulate their own learning; and
- Increasing the opportunity to link on-campus employment and studies and their LiWC.

## LOOKING FORWARD

US literature (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) draws some favorable links between on-campus work and a range of engagement indicators, which unlike off-campus work, provides a growing argument for institutions to move in the direction of systematic on-campus employment opportunities for students. Not only does this initiative provide an income stream (in a safe environment) for students, but it also enables universities to develop good practices in the provision of work-integrated learning on campus which can be transferred to partner organizations in the broader community. Examples include enhanced guidelines and training for supervisors of Students as Staff, and sharing of best practice through face-to-face and online Communities of Practice.

Benckendorff and Blackman's (2010) evaluation of business students and the role part-time work plays, found that students perceived part-time work as a useful way of improving transferrable skills. They suggest universities exploring options for WIL may find a deliberate link between part-time employment and study, "a useful alternative to more costly WIL programs" (Benckendorff & Blackman, 2010, p. 20).

All of these insights can be utilized to develop further strategies to enhance the links and take the *VU Students as Staff Program* to the next level. Strategies can include:

- Showcase existing programs to department managers highlighting how the links with study and LiWC have been achieved;
- Developing strategies to inform and encourage students to forge the link with their study programs as part of their on-campus employment briefing;
- Provide institution-wide incentives for university departments developing employment programs with the link to study incorporated; and
- Broker conversations between academic areas and university departments to collaborate when developing on-campus employment and curriculum innovations.

## CONCLUSION

The *Students as Staff Program* has been a major institution-wide initiative that has resulted in 1000 students employed on campus at VU during 2011. A recent evaluation has confirmed the success of the program for students and the institution. The linking of the program to study and LiWC had not been a major focus in the initial stages but despite this has grown organically in a number of university departments and areas. The evaluation of the 2011 program identified a higher than expected level of linkage between students on-campus employment and credit towards their studies. However the data also indicates an untapped potential for strengthening the link between on-campus employment and study. Understanding different drivers within VU which has resulted in this linkage and shaped the various models for Students as Staff will inform strategies to enhance learning through on campus employment at VU and other Australian universities in the future.

The evaluation has also highlighted the potential role on-campus employment can play in retaining students in post-compulsory education through increasing student engagement with the institution, and further research linking these two aspects would be recommended

moving forward. In support of previous research both in Australia and overseas, the evaluation found positive outcomes of part-time work in relation to professional and graduate capabilities, and further research would benefit from a focus on the deliberate differentiation between on-campus and off-campus employment and the impact on students reporting against the negative effects previously identified. Further research, and investigation, is required in examination of discipline specific impacts on particular cohorts reporting of higher levels of work/study congruence, and whether part-time employment can become a viable alternative to other WIL approaches such as internships and simulations.

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