



## How are CSU Advertising students being prepared to be industry-ready graduates?

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### Abstract

The need for University graduates to be industry-ready on completion of a tertiary degree is a topic which is being examined with increasing interest (Frawley & Litchfield, 2009). There is concern that Australia is facing a shortage of professional, qualified talent in the advertising industry (Corlette, 2010; Ma, 2012; Hayes Quarterly Report, 2013), thus placing an increasing demand on universities to produce industry-ready graduates who can fulfil advertising jobs and make an immediate and meaningful contribution to their employers. In an effort to successfully prepare graduates to make a meaningful initial workplace contribution, Charles Sturt University (CSU) is adopting strategies that aim to close the gap between the lecture hall and the workplace. One such strategy enables Advertising students at Charles Sturt University to spend their final year in the on-campus student advertising agency, *Kajulu Communications*. To transition easily into full time employment, students must apply best industry knowledge, practice and skills to a range of authentic situations to develop the abilities employers require of them in order to enter the workforce industry-ready. Whilst much has been written about graduate employability and the skills and attributes students need (Andrews & Higson, 2010; Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Bridgstock, 2009; Lowden, Hall, Elliott & Lewin 2011; Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009; Thomson, 2013), this paper examines the students' perceptions of being industry-ready and identifies the key attributes relevant for course design.

Key words: industry-ready, advertising, authentic, key attributes, graduate employability

### Introduction

Employers in the advertising industry are concerned that Australia is facing a talent shortage and are looking overseas to fill roles (Corlette, 2010; Ma, 2012; Hayes Quarterly Report, 2013). In a 2011 survey conducted by the Communications Council, 80 per cent of the advertising agencies who responded indicated that they faced *chronic talent shortages* with 92 per cent reporting that at any one time there were up to 10 percent of their positions vacant due to the difficulty of finding experienced staff (Hendy, 2011). Ma (2012) suggests that this talent shortage has arisen as a result of universities not adequately preparing graduates to be industry-ready and questions whether practical experience is sufficiently addressed in University degrees. In examining Australian training and education schemes, David Blight (2013) highlights that TAFE and university graduates are not trained to be job-ready and may require six or even up to twelve months before they can contribute meaningfully to their employers. However, the advertising industry is seeking to employ university graduates with the specific skills to be work-ready, thus reducing the burden on employers to invest professional development time with entry-level graduates.

According to Dave Sayer of Ogilvy, (as cited in Ma, 2012, p. 14) most graduates appear to have little knowledge of the various functions within an agency and are unsure about their career path in advertising. John Butterworth, Chief Executive, Australian Interactive Media Industry Association, (as cited in Blight, 2013, p. 26) expressed concern that some university courses are slow to incorporate new industry learning outcomes into their curricula and many skills are not examined at all.

*As a national University for the professions, Charles Sturt University prides itself on providing practical, hands-on courses that ensure graduates are prepared for a range of employment opportunities* (Charles Sturt University, 2012). According to CSU's Strategic Plan 2011-2015, industry relevant courses and workplace learning support CSU's learning and teaching objectives (Charles Sturt University, 2011). CSU course profiles aim to provide high quality graduates to meet professional workforce needs (Charles Sturt University, 2012), and one strategy employed to achieve this outcome is embedding capstone subjects into the curriculum thus providing students with the opportunity to develop, rehearse and refine a range of personal and general capabilities that are required by their industry employers. The authentic learning embedded in the advertising capstone subject assists students to develop the real-work knowledge and skills to enter the workforce industry-ready.

This research is based on the authentic learning environment of the CSU on-campus student advertising agency, *Kajulu Communications*. The foci for investigation are the constructively aligned, authentic assessment tasks (Biggs & Tang, 2007) in the three final subjects in the Advertising course: i) Advertising Client Management; ii) Advertising Strategy and Campaign Planning; and iii) the capstone subject Professional Advertising Practice. More specifically, the aim of the study is to investigate the efficacy of the Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) and Bachelor of Communication (Advertising)/Bachelor of Business (Marketing) final year sequence of subjects, and in particular the capstone subject, as being representative of a culmination of students' knowledge and skills of the course.

This paper reports on the experiences of the students as one group of stakeholders in this research and seeks to address the question of how relevant and useful the students perceive the capstone subject to be in preparing them as industry-ready graduates. Holdsworth, Watty & Davies (2009) identify the need to understand how capstone experiences help students in this transition. An analysis of student perceptions of their experiences in this research will make a significant contribution to developing such an understanding.

The final year advertising subjects are designed to give the students hands-on experience before they enter the industry. *Kajulu Communications*, which functions as a professional advertising agency, is used as one of the key strategies to incorporate professional practice into the curriculum. Students work in authentic industry roles in advertising agency teams as they would in the industry. In the subject 'Advertising Client Management', students learn the structure of advertising agencies, the roles and responsibilities of management and staff, and the systems and procedures required to operate an agency. In the second subject, 'Advertising Strategy and Campaign Planning', the teams work on a brief provided by a paying client.

For the final year advertising students, the capstone subject is the opportunity to again work on a real client project. Student teams are mentored by the subject coordinator as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of *Kajulu Communications*. The aim of the students participating in *Kajulu Communications* is to develop integrated marketing communications campaign recommendations for fee-paying clients. The process mirrors industry practice. The important attributes developed through the *Kajulu* experience include a thorough understanding of the structure, the roles and responsibilities and the day to day operations of

an agency, the ability to use industry project management tools, and a complete understanding of the process of integrated marketing communications campaign development. All of these aspects are encompassed in the capstone subject and developed in the two subjects preceding the capstone subject. The capstone subject represents the culmination of academic experiences which integrate coursework, knowledge, skills and authentic learning to enable students to demonstrate their understanding of industry requirements and their abilities as industry-ready practitioners at the completion of their course. The objective of the capstone experience is to link learning outcomes to employability (Feldgen & Clua, 2010; Holdsworth, Watty & Davies, 2009; Learning & Teaching Forum, Macquarie University, 2008; Moore, 2005; Willey, Jarman & Gardner, 2008). This research supports and adds to the contemporary conversations regarding desirable attributes for industry-ready graduates.

## Literature review

There is a wealth of literature that examines the notion of graduates, across a range of university degrees, being *work-ready* (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bridgstock, 2009; Cranmer, 2006; Litchfield, Frawley, & Nettleton, 2010; Lowden, Hall, Elliott & Lewis, 2011; Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009; Pool & Sewell, 2007; Rae, 2007). However, the inclusion within the recognised graduate skills of attributes of personal development required to meet workplace demands, is a more recent phenomenon. Contemporary research examines the need to include critical thinking, ethical practice, sustainability and teamwork as assessable standards (Rigby, Wood, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Leveson, Petocz, Thomas & Vu, 2010).

Moreland (2006, in Rae, 2007) defined employability, often referred to as work-readiness (Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009), as 'a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'. Employers expect graduates to possess generic skills in addition to the discipline specific skills developed in their university degrees. These generic skills include working in a team, self-management and planning skills, management of others, oral and written communication skills, numeracy skills and working under pressure (The Pedagogy for Employability Group, 2004, p. 5 in Pool & Sewell, 2007).

Andrews and Higson (2008) add to this and have identified that for business graduates to be work-ready they were expected to not only have high levels of industry specific skills, but also more generic 'soft skills' including interpersonal and communication competencies, being able to work with a minimum of supervision, and presentation skills. Similarly, Lowden et al. (2011) identify additional work-ready graduate skills (other than the discipline competencies achieved from their university course) to encompass team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving. Pool and Sewell (2007) suggest a further skill set to include self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. In addition, Bridgstock (2009) also notes that not only do graduates require generic skills for employability; they also need the skills to manage and build their own career path once they enter the workforce.

The literature in this field suggests that employers are making ultimate recruitment decisions based on generic rather than industry specific professional skills. Graduates can be taught professional, job specific skills, but employers find it too difficult and are reluctant to try to teach the generic skills (Frawley & Litchfield, 2009). Thus, employers are seeking graduates who can make 'productive contributions to their organisational objectives' soon after entering the workforce (Mason, Williams & Cranmer, 2009). Andrews and Higson (2008) similarly noted that employers identified business acumen and interpersonal competencies along with soft business-related skills as being important attributes in graduates' employability.

Employers consider that to be work-ready, graduates need the combination of these skills together with the discipline specific knowledge gained from their university course.

Indeed, changes in both the labour market and university education have placed greater emphasis on the need to produce employable graduates (Bridgstock, 2009). Most Australian Universities have identified their own graduate attributes aimed at improving employability. Graduate attributes include students' core capabilities and the learning outcomes achieved as a result of completing their university degrees. The National Graduate Attributes Project (National GAP) identified a framework of eight interacting elements which can be considered in fostering curriculum renewal to achieve graduate outcomes (Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009). One of these elements, the student-centred outcome, highlighted the need for students to perceive having been actively engaged in achieving worthwhile attributes.

Since employers are seeking graduates who have acquired work competencies and professional skills rather than those who have not yet learnt these (Barrie, 2011), the development of soft skills, such as working in culturally diverse teams, needs to be scaffolded into university courses thus enabling students to demonstrate the skills and attributes prior to graduation. Barrie (2011) cites service learning, experiential interaction and work integrated learning as beneficial in achieving some of these skills.

In examining work-related graduate attributes Oliver, Tucker, Jones and Ferns (2007) highlight that most universities list graduate attributes which are clearly work-related and are often described as employability skills. They found that graduates were seeking more practical experiences, more real life examples and more work experience to be included in their courses. Employers also mentioned the need for more work-related experience.

Responding to the question of how graduates can become work-ready draws on a multitude of practice-based educational opportunities, including work place experience. Indeed the significance of work place experience in contributing to graduates being work-ready is an important consideration for course developers, given the uncertainty about whether the necessary skills and attributes can be developed in a classroom (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Cranmer, 2006; Litchfield et al., 2010; Lowden et al., 2011; Mason et al., 2009). Mason et al. (2009) question whether universities have much to gain from seeking to develop work-ready graduates before they commence employment and propose that work skills might be best learnt 'on the job'. Others suggest that it is possible to integrate some aspects of work places into university courses. For example, Holmes (2001) argues that there is the opportunity to design authentic assessment tasks which can be considered as examples of the reality of practice by graduates, while Treleaven and Voola (2008) point to the value of constructive alignment in integrating graduate attributes into teaching, learning and assessment programs within a university course. Others contend that the opportunity for improvement in the development of graduate attributes lies in curriculum development, contextualising activities for specific professions and integrated learning (Thomas, Petocz, Rigby, Clark-Murphy, Daly, Dixon, Kavanagh, Lees, Levison & Wood, 2009; Litchfield et al., 2010). Along similar lines, Lowden et al. (2011) suggest that design of university courses could better reflect the needs of employers without compromising the courses' purpose and integrity and highlight the benefit of the involvement of employers in course design, this latter point also reflected by Mason et al. (2009).

The Australian Government report *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework* (2013) describes many soft skills which contribute to being work-ready. Each skill area focuses on the application of non-technical skills which are core requirements for successful contribution in the workplace. Whilst there are multiple definitions for employability or being work-ready, this paper focuses more on the development of soft skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Lowden et al., 2011; Pool & Sewell, 2007) rather than the discipline specific skills acquired during a graduate's university course.

## Method

This is a qualitative case study aimed at investigating students' perceptions of their readiness to participate fully in a professional role in the Advertising industry. Research participants were recruited using purposive sampling (Burns, 2000) from students enrolled in their final year of the Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) and Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) / Bachelor of Business (Marketing) subjects in 2011 in the capstone subject ADV315 (Professional Advertising Practice). A requirement of this subject is for students to complete a four week industry internship, providing opportunities for 'hands-on' industry experience, before they graduate. This group of students was selected for this reason; some had already completed their internships and others were planning to undertake their placement in the immediate future.

Students were invited to participate in semi-structured focus group interviews that drew on their experiences in their final year subjects and the capstone subject to prepare them for their roles in the industry. The researchers initially contacted the ADV315 cohort of students in tutorials/workshops in week 1 (Session 2, 2011) to explain the nature of the research and call for willing participants. An outline of the nature and role of the research was presented and the Information Sheet and Consent forms were distributed. The Chief Investigator confirmed students' participation by email once they have advised the researchers of their willingness to participate. Students were interviewed in four focus groups comprising four students in each group. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, using a professional transcription service. Interview transcripts were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Data was analysed using inter-and intra-textual thematic analysis (Maykurt & Morehouse, 1994). The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Charles Sturt University (protocol number 2011/052).

## Results

### Student Focus Groups – Thematic analysis

Lowden et al., (2011) identified that employers require graduates to have broader skills and attributes than simply the technical and discipline competencies from their university course in order to be considered work-ready. These broader skills include team work, communication and leadership skills, problem solving and critical thinking abilities. In examining some of these attributes, it was important to understand the participants' interpretation of the meaning of the phrase 'industry/work-ready'. As evidenced by the analysis of the data, there were four distinct themes that emerged:

1. Adding value immediately;
2. Understanding of process/environment;
3. Skills in team work; and
4. Confidence.

#### 1. *Adding value immediately*

Participants considered being able to *add value* was very much a part of being industry/work-ready. Adding value to the participants meant they saw themselves as capable and able to contribute in the industry rather than having to be trained by their employers before they could do so.

They don't have to train us; we can just jump straight in; when I did my internship I found that I was capable of doing that.

Being ready to participate was identified as an important employability skill in the UKCES report 'The Employability Challenge' (2009a) cited by Lowden et al. (2011).

I actually understood why that needed to be done; it's your ability to ... start adding real value to wherever you're working.

In addition, participants saw the importance of timing as contributing to the notion of industry or work readiness. They voiced their understanding that they needed to be able to *hit the ground running*. They felt confident they could *immediately* contribute in the workplace and saw this as important in being work-ready.

They [employers/intern hosts] didn't really have to teach us as much as they thought, so we got to ... actually work on proper accounts and briefs ... which I think they were really happy about. They didn't have to waste time.

This ability to contribute from day one was seen by these students as being important to their employers and thus significant in their being work-ready.

I did feel like that they [agency intern hosts] were impressed with us. I feel like I went in and they were quietly surprised at how much we knew. They felt really confident giving us their work and there was no sort of cross-checking everything that we'd done.

We can transition straight into the workforce; they don't have to spend so much time training us.

## 2. *Understanding of the work environment and the processes associated with that environment*

The second theme identified by the participants was their understanding of the work environment and the processes associated with that environment. They believed they could transfer their skills to an array of contexts straight out of their Advertising course. Participants felt they had gained sufficient understanding of the structure of agencies and how they operate to immediately fit into the agency environment.

Knowing that each different type of agency has a different structure and different roles within it.

Participants expressed that they had achieved an understanding of the terms and processes through the course and through the practical, hands-on experience they had gained working in the CSU on-campus agency.

[Being industry-ready means] understanding the environment you are going into, like an agency environment; in-depth industry knowledge already, prior to going into the industry, from the course.

Graduates must have the ability to proactively manage their careers within the work environment and generic employability skills alone will not achieve this outcome. In order to obtain and maintain work, graduates must have a deeper understanding of the specific industry requirements and familiarity with the industry (Bridgstock, 2009).

We've had the practical experience that we would have in the real world...prepared for all the challenges that could come our way. Being industry-ready is just to understand what you're doing.

The students felt they had gained a good understanding of the theory, but also understood agency hands-on processes, roles and areas of responsibility. They felt they had developed

the skills necessary to work in an agency through the course and their authentic experience in Kajulu. Participants perceived that they knew what was expected of them.

You expect to know the basics and be able to adapt easily.

Lowden et al. (2011) identified that knowledge of the business was a particularly relevant graduate attribute valued by employers.

### 3. *Participate effectively in team work*

The third theme arising from the data was the importance of understanding and being able to participate effectively in team work to be work-ready for the advertising industry. Working as part of a team in advertising is crucial to success in this industry, as it is in most industries.

What I did take from this course was the whole team work aspect and even in the job [internship], I kind of noticed there were people who did more work than other people... It was very similar to uni work. It was similar to team work in general really... and it doesn't finish at uni. It kind of flows through to work.

Soft skills and competencies, in addition to hard business-related knowledge and skills, are integral to graduate employability. Communication and interaction within teams is an essential element, and the ability to use these softer business-related skills is an important consideration (Andrews & Higson, 2008).

Dealing with different people within the team and learning how to manage each of someone's skills and also their weaknesses, so you get the best team you can.

It gives you a better appreciation for working in a team.

The ability to work well in a team is considered by most organisations to be essential. To be industry-ready, graduates need to understand not only how to work well in a team, but also how to communicate with others and to work collaboratively to solve problems. There is also the need to have the flexibility to work in different teams over various lengths of time (Litchfield et al., 2010). Students felt the exposure they had to team work and working in different teams during not only their final year, but also throughout their course, has helped to make them industry-ready. The participants acknowledged the role of the course in developing these skills, and particularly through the authentic experience of working in industry teams on client projects in Kajulu.

### 4. *Confidence*

Self-confidence, along with self-efficacy and self-esteem, play an important part in graduate employability (Pool & Sewell, 2007). Students felt the knowledge and experience gained in the course had given them the self-confidence they needed to perform to industry standard when they enter the work force.

Having the confidence of talking about what you know. It's scary going off to do your internship, but when you get there and you realize how much you actually know. I [felt] really comfortable and really confident in what I was doing.

The depth of knowledge and the experience students had already gained, supported their self-confidence. Students also expressed confidence in the particular skills they had developed in the authentic assessment tasks in subjects leading into the capstone subject. In particular, the subject Advertising Client Management gave them a clear and comprehensive understanding of the roles and responsibilities of agency staff and of the

structure of the various types of advertising agencies. Knowing the structure and knowing what to expect when they entered the workforce gave them confidence and made them feel they could fit in and contribute from day one. Rothwell and Arnold (2007) cited by Lowden et al. (2011) suggest employability should be measured on interrelated components including students' confidence in their skills and abilities, perhaps linked with the reputation the university has in the particular course.

I think going to any job there's going to be a period where you're settling. And it helps you get through that stage much faster than some other [university] people would. Gives you a lot of confidence having done it and it sort of shows throughout.

[During my internship] when I've told them that I've come here [CSU], they were just all really impressed by the depth of how we're taught about the industry.

A further area highlighted by the participants was the need for well-developed presentation skills. Identified as being an important 'soft skill' graduate attribute by Andrews and Higson (2008), presentation skills are deemed to enhance graduate employability and industry readiness in the increasingly competitive business environment.

Yeah, [I now have] good presentation skills. I was good at presenting at school but it's just so different. It's just being casual and being able to just have a conversation with people; it's just something really good to have. The best skills [I learnt] I think were the presentation skills because I had to make a presentation at my internship.

Presentations are a huge thing ... I've always been pretty good at presentations but I think over the course of this subject I do presentations really well. And because we're presenting to industry professionals, it makes us want to live up to a standard.

In examining not only what the participants felt they had learned to contribute to their being industry/work ready, but also how they had learned this, one particular theme arose, that of the authentic subjects, authentic assessment and the constructive alignment of the assessment tasks.

I think the structure of especially the capstone subject; you appreciate the process of what you have to do and you do work to these standards and these commitments and the pressures are real.

The constructive alignment of assessment tasks, assessment criteria and learning activities is essential to achieving the learning outcomes of these subjects (Biggs & Tang, 2007). When these constructive alignment factors are considered in terms of graduate attributes they are instrumental in developing employability skills needed in marketing education (Treleaven & Voola, 2008).

The final year subjects are taught in the authentic learning environment of the on-campus student advertising agency, *Kajulu Communications*. The participants also expressed the positive benefit of working on a brief from a real client of the Agency. Participants expressed that they felt the work experience gained particularly in the capstone subject in *Kajulu* contributed to their being industry-ready. Cranmer (2006) identified that work experience needs to be in an authentic location, closely related to that of industry, if it is to be of real benefit and productive. Structured work experience can have a positive effect on graduates' outcomes.

You feel like you're already part of the industry in a way. Already working. You feel like you're in it, especially when we did those couple of assignments

last semester: it felt like we're actually in an advertising agency and everything, and I'd never been... inside one.

Where work experience is integrated into a degree, particularly if it is within assessment tasks that replicate as closely as possible the practices of the work place, there is the opportunity for students to develop their skills in a 'rehearsal' context (Holmes, 2001).

Like the whole thing with this year is that it's not so much like classes, it's actually kind of like having a job.

...because it's realistic; it is hands-on.

It's much more realistic, and there's a timeframe to it.

The students demonstrated an understanding of the rationale for the authentic work-setting, an appreciation for being exposed to what actually happens in a real agency and the sense of real purpose in the tasks they undertook, as validated by their internships.

You do meet up with your team every week and you understand why you do it.

The internship, because it's compulsory, we all had to do it, just gave us the knowledge of what actual, real industry is compared to the course and there are so many overlaps, they're pretty much identical to what our expectations were.

I think also with this [capstone subject], and with the last two subjects we've done, you really learn the details about the industry, for example the client relationship, how in the industry they deal with clients professionally. You learn that, where in an essay you can't exactly learn that. It's been more hands-on, and talking about what it's really like which has been good.

It [capstone subject authentic assessment task] does feel like it's getting us to draw upon everything we've learnt and that way we'll remember it. And then when we go straight into the advertising industry we've just done a huge assignment that summarises our entire degree. So it'll be a lot fresher in our minds.

## Conclusion

The changing relationship between universities, students and employers is highlighted by Boden and Nedeva (2010), and points to employers now seeking to employ work-ready graduates rather than to train new workers. Consequently, there is a greater demand for universities to deliver industry-ready graduates to the market.

As discussed in this paper, the researchers have designed curriculum that adopts an authentic work-place simulation context; *Kajulu Communications*, and the assessment requirements of the associated capstone subjects as means to successfully prepare Bachelor of Communication (Advertising) students at Charles Sturt University to take an immediate, meaningful place in the advertising industry. The results of the research have provided evidence of the efficacy of the curriculum design strategies as students have voiced their perceptions of how these experiences have, in their opinion, more than adequately prepared them to 'hit the ground running' and to 'know what you have signed up for'.

As evidenced by the participant interview data, providing students with the opportunity to experience real industry work, in an integrated and controlled learning environment, in addition to their four week industry internship, it is clear that they gain the skills and

attributes they perceive are needed to demonstrate to employers that they are industry-ready practitioners.

Participant interview data revealed that there was the shared perception that students had acquired the necessary graduate attributes and were ready to value-add to their employer organisations immediately upon commencing work. Furthermore, the data analysis highlighted that participants already understand the nature of the industry environment into which they were going, in addition to understanding the processes involved in the industry and what was expected of them. Participants' comments illustrated their perceptions of having developed the team work skills necessary to immediately join a team and contribute in an advertising agency and having developed the essential confidence needed to enter the workforce industry-ready.

The educational benefit of the course, and in particular the capstone subject, is to empower CSU advertising students to be industry-ready. Economically industry partners benefit from employing students with the specific skills to be work-ready reducing the requirement of employers to invest professional development time with entry-level graduates. Whilst many employability skills may need to be learned on the job (Mason et al., 2009) the hands-on student experience gained in the authentic learning environment of *Kajulu Communications* has afforded these students the opportunity to develop valuable soft skills, in addition to their discipline specific skills, before starting their employment. Indeed, the development of soft skills enabled the students to demonstrate their discipline specific knowledge and skills immediately and with confidence in the workplace.

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