

# Combining quality work-integrated learning and career development learning through the use of the SOAR model to enhance employability

GREGORY REDDAN<sup>1</sup>

MAJA RAUCHLE

*Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia*

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This paper presents students' perceptions of the benefits to employability of a suite of courses that incorporate both work-integrated learning (WIL) and career development learning (CDL). Field Project A and Field Project B are elective courses in the Bachelor of Exercise Science at Griffith University. These courses engage students in active and personalized learning experiences that have been designed utilizing the principles of the SOAR model (Self-awareness, Opportunity awareness, Aspirations, Results). Four students who completed both courses participated in semi-structured interviews. Data was collected using thematic analysis of student responses. Results indicated that employability was enhanced as students developed realistic aspirations based on sound information and WIL experiences that can help achieve their personal career goals as they transition into the workforce. The courses provide a practical model for university academics and career development practitioners to work collaboratively. Importantly, they give students a competitive advantage, enabling them to become more proactive, confident and motivated in maximizing opportunities to manage their careers and lifelong learning. (*Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education, Special Issue, 2017, 18(2), 129-139*)

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## BACKGROUND

### *Employability*

The term 'employability' is perceived to be a key contributor to career success (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). Discussion of the concept has moved away from the traditional view of 'obtaining a graduate position' to an interpretation which includes values and attributes, as well as values, engagement and critical reasoning (Reddy, Lantz, & Hulme, 2013). Patton and McMahon (2006) developed the systems theory framework and reconceptualised work-integrated learning through the lens of career development. Their framework encompassed individual, social and environmental influences (past, present and future), as well as chance events. Patton and McMahon (2006) suggested that the choice of one's career should not be viewed as a singular decision with a pre-determined pathway and inferred that part of the role of higher education is to develop particular capacities that will permit graduates to be proactive and self-directed learners.

### *Career Development Learning*

Career development has recently increased in importance in Australian universities. Career development is viewed as the process of managing learning, work, leisure and transitions throughout life to assist individuals in determining their future in the workplace (Careers Industry Council of Australia, 2006). Enhancing career development has been demonstrated as highly motivational for students commencing university through the provision of authentic work experiences and opportunities for career exploration (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013), which allow students to 'broaden their horizons' rather than reducing their possible options. Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of career development to individuals (Cramer, Herr, & Niles, 2004; Purcell et al., 2008). For example, empirical meta-

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author: Gregory Reddan, [g.reddan@griffith.edu.au](mailto:g.reddan@griffith.edu.au)

analytic studies of career development have indicated career development to be an efficacious, useful human service for individuals (Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998). Longitudinal investigations have also demonstrated a sustained positive impact upon individual guidance (Kirschner, Hoffman, & Hill, 1994). Career development plays important roles within Australian higher education in relation to access, equity and social justice. A review of the literature (McIlveen, Everton, & Clarke, 2005) indicates there has been an enhanced focus upon the career development needs of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds including persons-of-colour, indigenous peoples, women in non-traditional occupations, individuals with variant sexual orientation and expression, mature-age persons, those from culturally and linguistically diverse heritage, and those who have experienced rural isolation or lower socio-economic status.

#### *Career Development Learning and Employability*

The term 'career development learning' (CDL) is seen as a key component of employability (Watts, 2006; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) and can include self-awareness, occupational exploration, decision-making and career management. Bridgstock (2009) suggests that career management is a primary factor in regards to employability and proposes a slightly different model, stressing the importance of providing graduates with the skills to "proactively navigate the world of work and self-manage the career building process" (p. 34). This is particularly important as career development learning has the potential to make positive contributions to social equity and human capital (Access Economics, 2006). Watts and Hawthorn (1992) indicated that interventions which assist students to explore possible future career directions are very effective in promoting the relevance of employability and its associated benefits to students. Traditional instructional methods are unlikely to be as successful as more personally engaging methods, including role-plays, self-audits, problem-based group work, work-integrated learning and peer review of resumes and portfolios (Bridgstock, 2009). These strategies tend to be time- and resource-intensive and require extensive planning (Watts, 2006). This scenario can be further complicated by large student numbers, which make the implementation of these strategies a challenge to put into practice. In order to be effective, CDL should commence early in university programs and should be a mandatory and assessable component of coursework (Bridgstock, 2009). When integrated carefully into academic programs, with ongoing input and feedback from faculties, industry, careers staff and students, career development learning provides an opportunity for students to focus on developing their own employability (Benton, 2015).

#### *Integrating Career Development Learning and Work-integrated Learning (WIL)*

The importance of providing students with work-related experiences, which allow opportunities for career exploration, enhancement of self-efficacy, career guidance and development is an important component of career development learning and employability (Benton, 2015). Students appreciate the embedding of CDL in WIL programs with opportunities to develop generic skills in practical industry settings whilst they are still in a learning environment (Smith et al., 2009). Research has recommended that university students should be exposed to a combination of CDL and WIL as part of their formal program of study to maximise their employment potential for optimal economic and social outcomes (Reddan & Rauchle, 2012). The key benefits of CDL in regard to lifelong learning relate to self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-making and transition learning (Watts, 2006). These processes were initially developed as the DOTS analysis (Law & Watts, 1977), which proved useful as a model for organize work-integrated learning experiences.

Planned experiences were designed to facilitate the development of self-awareness (in terms of interest, abilities, values), opportunity awareness (knowing what work opportunities exist and their requirements), decision-making skills and transition learning (including job-search and self-presentation skills). Watts (2008) proposed that CDL significantly supplements the quality of WIL by placing students as the focus of such programs and assisting students to be both career ready, as well as work ready. Smith et al. (2009) promoted similar beliefs in regard to the value of CDL to WIL through the integration of students' workplace experiences, clarification of their career plans and providing a better understanding of the curriculum and relevance of academic experiences within university programs. Watts (2006) indicated that evaluations of the effectiveness of career development learning programmes in the UK were very limited. A review in the USA of 40 evaluation studies of career planning courses within higher education institutions (Folsom & Reardon, 2003) found that in regards outputs (e.g., career thoughts, career decision-making skills, vocational identity), 88% of the studies reported positive gains whilst 12% reported no change. Furthermore, in regards to outcomes (e.g., persistence in studies, satisfaction with field of study, job satisfaction), nine of the 11 studies measuring such outcomes reported positive gains, and two reported no changes.

#### *The SOAR Model of Career Development Learning*

Kumar (2007) extended the DOTS analysis (Law & Watts, 1997) to develop the SOAR model of CDL. The four key principles of the SOAR model include Self-awareness, Opportunity awareness, Aspirations, and Results. Self-awareness enables individuals to discover and build their unique identity positively and pro-actively through effective participation in learning. Students discover opportunities both within and outside the formal curriculum to form realistic personal aspirations based on sound information, achieving more intentional results as they move towards and beyond transition points (Kumar, 2007). The model assists teachers to operationalize and contextualize the ideals of CDL. Students can personalize their experiences through the processes of reflection, action, analysis and lateral thinking in order to promote personal inquiry, self-discovery and the development of their unique personal identity through opportunities within and outside of the curriculum (Kumar, 2007). The SOAR model had three main aims: to refocus DOTS in line with contemporary concepts and needs; to broaden the CDL framework to integrate personal, professional and academic development, thereby enhancing employability; and to link theoretical concepts with practical examples. The following assumptions underpin the SOAR model:

- Students are unique individuals full of potential;
- The world is full of opportunities, but access to these is not equal;
- There is no single predetermined 'opportunity' that suits an individual in every way;
- Conversely, there may be many choices that are suitable and possible;
- How students draw on their potential to seize different opportunities depends mainly on their motivation, ability and personality;
- To interact with the world effectively and make informed choices, students need to enhance their self-awareness and self-efficacy in relation to tutors' expectations and employers' requirements;
- Focusing attention on each stage of the SOAR process can make it 'appreciate in value'; and
- This is a recurrent process in a changing world (Kumar, 2007).

A review of the literature found only one study evaluating the use of the SOAR model. Both the CareerEDGE and the SOAR model were used in the development of 'Personal Development for the Sports Industry', a core year-long module for all Sports Management students (approximately 100) at Buckinghamshire New University. A detailed evaluation (provided as part of the model) was completed with a sample of 31 students. 80% of the respondents reported that their skills in 11 different areas had improved, whilst 76% reported an increase in knowledge over eight key areas within the module (Pegg et al., 2012). This particular study sought to add to the literature related to the use of the SOAR model as a pedagogical framework for courses incorporating both CDL and WIL.

## CASE STUDY

Griffith University has several campuses located in Brisbane and the Gold Coast, Queensland. Griffith University's teaching and learning programs aim to provide opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and skills that can be applied in the community. This paper focuses on the development of a suite of courses that present an ideal model for universities interested in providing both career development learning (CDL) and work-integrated learning (WIL) in order to produce successful work ready graduates. Career development is an essential part of tertiary education, especially in regards to generic degrees such as Exercise Science. Field Project B (FPB) has been a final year course in the Bachelor of Exercise Science program at Griffith University since 2000. The current course includes a 140-hour WIL placement, in addition to weekly workshops which alternate with career development workshops and presentations by professionals and practising lecturers. The rationale for including this course in the program is to make students aware of the requirements of the industry they wish to enter and to expose them to the working environment of various organizations in which they may wish to seek employment. The course is designed to link and complement the student's program of study by preparing and introducing them to the work environment. The course includes both CDL and WIL with 13 two-hour workshops. Students are introduced to professional and personal techniques to assist them to gain entry into the workplace and to function successfully once they are in the workplace. The course is staff intensive, with input from lecturers from the School of Allied Health Sciences, Careers and Employment Services and relevant industry representatives. The workshops include the following:

- Career development workshops: career planning, job search, resumes, applications, selection criteria, interviews, mock interviews, cultural inclusiveness,
- Presentations by industry representatives: strength and conditioning, cardiac services, sleep disorders, sport and recreation, physiotherapy, nutrition, rehabilitation, and
- Student presentations of reflections before, during and after placement.

Assessment items for the course were selected from both CDL and WIL and included: resume and application for a specific position (20%); interview performance and reflection (20%); oral presentation of placement reflections (20%); and completion of log of hours and performance compared to professional competencies (40%).

Students in FPB regularly suggested that work experience in the second year of their program, rather than in the final semester, would improve their employment prospects following graduation. As a result, Field Project A (FPA) was introduced in 2011 as a summer

school course at the end of the second year of the program. The development of the new course provided an ideal opportunity to engage students in the other three elements of SOAR (Self-awareness, Opportunity awareness and Aspirations) in order to complement the activities in FPB that focused on the final element (Results). The authors collaborated to develop a unique course, incorporating the principles of SOAR into a series of 25 hours of workshops and student presentations, in conjunction with a 140 hour work placement. As with FPB, placements were organized for each student, following a one-on-one consultation, thus providing them with the opportunity to explore at least two possible career pathways through these two courses. Thus, the combination of FPA and FPB allowed students to engage with SOAR elements to empower them to take control of, and deal constructively with, the variety of factors that influence their personal, educational and professional success in an age of 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 1999).

FPA was organised with two days of workshops immediately following the examination period in November and one day of presentations in the week prior to orientation week in February of the following year. Self-awareness activities included: a discussion of career theory; explanation of the SOAR model; the Personal Style Inventory (Champagne & Hogan, 1979) ; sensing dimensions; Lifeline exercise; identifying skills and abilities; work values; Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1987); influential external factors; and the Systems Theory framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999). Opportunity Awareness concepts consisted of: information gathering; gaining industry knowledge; informational interviews; the labour market and employment information. The activities related to Aspirations involved: making decisions; the life-raft activity; and setting career goals. The assessment tasks for the course have been modified over the last five years to include: a personal profile essay and career action plan (20%) and a personalized job study based on an informational interview (20%). The other two assessment items were similar to those in FPB - work placement performance and completion of a detailed logbook (40%) and an oral presentation of reflections before, during and after placement (20%). The course objectives, learning experiences and assessment items were constructively aligned to ensure student engagement. FPB focused on the Results element of the SOAR model, with an emphasis on the development of a resume, sourcing employment, writing applications, meeting selection criteria and mock interviews, as well as providing an 140 hour placement in an area of student choice associated with Exercise Science, for example, clinical exercise testing, rehabilitation, strength and conditioning.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *Participants*

The research was conducted using four third year Exercise Science students who completed both FPA and FPB. All study subjects were female final year Exercise Science students with a career focus on exercise science or physiotherapy. As they were the only students who had completed both FPA and FPB, they agreed to volunteer for a one-on-one recorded interview to explore their perceptions of the benefits to employability gained by completing both courses. The students were informed that the results would be used to improve the course outcomes for future students.

### *Interviews*

The semi-structured interviews were administered by the researcher who was also the convenor for both courses. The questions that the participants were asked were the same as the seven research questions:

1. What motivated students to enrol in both Field Project A and B?
2. Did students perceive they had made the correct decision to enrol in both courses?
3. What benefits did students consider they received from completing both courses, rather than Field Project A or B?
4. What were student perceptions as to the impact of completing both courses on their career decisions and their job readiness?
5. Which features of the courses did students consider to be most beneficial?
6. How did students perceive the completion of both courses affected their confidence?
7. In what ways did students consider the grading of the courses affected the benefits gained from completing the two course?

### *Procedure*

The research was conducted with the four subjects after completion of the second course and all assessments had been completed and marked. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were audiotaped. Data was later analysed by the researcher, using thematic analysis of student responses. No software was used and the results were not triangulated with other sources.

### *Limitations*

The data collected from this small sample of students points to particular views, but requires further investigation before they can be demonstrated. However, this study provides insight into students' experiences of courses that include both CDL and WIL programs in higher education. Future studies need to be conducted on the use of the SOAR model with larger sample sizes and with students from varying academic programs to determine the effectiveness of embedding CDL into WIL programs in higher education.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings have been reported using the seven research questions as headings:

### *What Motivated Students to Enrol in both Field Project A and B?*

The provision of a work experience placement with real-world experience in both courses was considered an important aspect by all four students in motivating them to enrol in both FPA and FPB. Student D suggested that no other course in their program of study offered this opportunity. Other reasons provided were "to gain an edge over other students" and "to boost my grade point average". Student A enrolled in Field Project B to "learn about the important information to get a job, particularly resumes and interviews". Following completion of FPA, several students were motivated by the benefits of an additional placement when deciding to enrol in Field Project B. Student B suggested that "more work experience creates more connections and preparation for the real world" and also indicated that FPB taught students how to tailor their resume and applications to meet the

requirements of specific positions. Positive experiences in similar courses frequently motivate students when selecting courses at university. Student D thoroughly enjoyed Field Project A, which provided her with strong motivation to enrol in Field Project B. "FPA was so beneficial. I learnt so much about myself. The self-awareness gained enabled us to write successful resumes in FPB".

*Did Students Perceive they had made the Correct Decision to Enrol in both Courses?*

All students were positive in their decision to enrol in both courses. Student A indicated that both FPA and FPB were beneficial, but in different ways. "They worked well together and provided a more rounded view on things. FPA focused on personal development, learning about self, values and expression of abilities. It enabled us to gain a positive aspect of ourselves and clarify a career direction that suits our personality. On the other hand, FPB concentrated on professional development that promoted our particular skills in a positive way". She considered that students gained a better understanding of their personality through the preparation and feedback provided during the mock interview process. "The courses worked well together – it was a good thing to do going into the future". Student B indicated the courses were complementary with an emphasis on personal development in FPA and professional development in FPB. Student C suggested enrolling in the two courses provided her with increased confidence and enabled her to experience two placements in different industries related to Exercise Science which would be of assistance in her future career. She also appreciated the significant improvements in her oral and written communication skills and portfolio that would be beneficial to her employability.

*What Benefits did Students Consider they Received from Completing both Courses, Rather than Field Project A or B?*

The complementary nature of the two courses was considered by all students to provide significant benefits. Student B suggested that completing FPA facilitated the development of her resume and her ability to respond to selection criteria in FPB. "You became aware of your strengths and weaknesses, values and skills from FPA, whilst FPB prepared you for the work environment, which you don't get in other courses". Greater awareness of the services provided by Careers and Employment was also perceived to be a common benefit, for example, assistance with resume writing and preparation for interviews. This awareness was enhanced through the participation by staff from Careers and Employment in both courses. Student D noted that FPA developed confidence in herself and her abilities, with the self-discovery activities allowing her to match her values with particular career options that were explored in more depth in FPB.

*What were Student Perceptions as to the Impact of Completing both Courses on their Career Decisions and their Job Readiness?*

All four students were agreed that the completion of both courses strengthened their career decisions. The opportunity to experience two different placements in areas of their choice, in combination with presentations from professionals, enabled students to become more aware of their career options and develop alternative plans to reach their career goals. Furthermore, all students indicated a considerable improvement in their job readiness. Responses included: "My resume is a much higher standard and I am better prepared for a professional interview" (Student A); "Completing the two courses has provided me with increased confidence – I can see that I am an employable person" (Student B); "The two courses opened

my eyes to what I can do with a whole range of skills that I have developed" (Student C); and "I now know what to expect in the workplace" (Student D).

*Which Features of the Courses did Students Consider to be Beneficial?*

Several students suggested that the work experience placements were particularly useful as they provided their first opportunity to apply knowledge gained in other courses in a real-world setting. Student B indicated the activities in FPA allowed the students to "discover ourselves a bit more by determining our personality type and suitable career options". Greater awareness of a student's strengths and weaknesses was perceived by Student D to be an important outcome of FPA. "No other subject takes time to consider our reasons for selecting particular careers". Student A indicated that the professional presentations in FPB "opened my eyes to other pathways I had not considered. I can now see so many different areas for future employment". Student D noted that FPB had more impact as it was more relevant to gaining employment with an emphasis on resume development and job applications. Students appreciated that each course provided different but complementary content and learning activities. "I liked all of it! There was no single non-benefit - no repetition between the courses" reported Student C.

*How did Students Perceive the Completion of both Courses Affected their Confidence?*

All four students commented on improved confidence following the completion of both courses. Student A indicated that she had developed "an increased confidence in skills that I can promote. The two placements have allowed me to become more relaxed when communicating with other professionals. Previously I would have been intimidated in these situations". Student C suggested she had become more proactive and better prepared for the workforce through improved abilities in communicating with a range of individuals in the workplace. A similar response was provided by Student D: "I am so much more confident. I can now talk to clients and ask them questions. Previously I would wait for instructions from my supervisor - now I am more proactive and can use my initiative in completing tasks".

*In what ways did Students Consider the Grading of the Courses Affected the Benefits Gained from Completing the two Courses?*

All students in the study reported the fact that the courses were graded, rather than non-graded, influenced the benefits they had gained. The opportunity to improve their grade point average was a common response that also affected students' motivation to increase their efforts during the courses. Student C suggested: "I am so glad the courses were graded. We were rewarded for being proactive. Placements were invaluable opportunities for us to achieve highly due to the practical setting". Student D noted that the courses were not easy, but "you can do well if you put in the time and effort".

## DISCUSSION

This research supports the benefits of Career Development Learning (Cramer, Herr, & Niles, 2004; Purcell et al., 2008; Whiston, Sexton, & Lasoff, 1998) in motivating students in higher education to broaden their career horizons. The findings are in agreement with Bridgstock (2009) in regards to the importance of developing students' skills to navigate a path through the 'world of work' and take a greater personal role in the management of their careers. Many work-integrated learning programs do not include career development learning and students may be unaware of and miss the opportunities provided that may enhance their

employability. Thus, it would appear prudent that WIL programs in higher education should include CDL as part of the formal curriculum and assessment processes. The careful integration of CDL and WIL into the two courses in this study supports Benton's research (2015) in enhancing student employability. This research adds to previous work (Smith et al., 2009; Reddan & Rauchle, 2012; Folsom & Reardon, 2003), indicating the benefits to be gained by embedding CDL into WIL programs to maximize their employment potential. The SOAR model and the resources in Kumar's text (2007) were found to be of significant benefit in the organization of student activities in the curriculum of both courses to sequentially develop the four elements (self-awareness, opportunity awareness, aspirations and results), considered vital in the development of student employability. The integration of WIL and CDL assisted students to be both work ready and career ready. The only negative concern expressed by students related to the time commitment of 140 hours of placement required to complete the WIL component of the course, in addition to the CDL component, for a 10 credit course.

## CONCLUSIONS

The results of this research clearly indicate positive responses in students' perceptions in regards to the benefits of completing both of these courses, which combine work-integrated learning and career development learning. Students appreciated the complementary nature of the two courses and the foundation that the activities (related to self-awareness, opportunity awareness and aspirations) in FPA provided for the professional development (results) activities in FPB.

In summary, there were several important findings from this study:

- Students were motivated to enrol in both courses for a variety of reasons.
- The focus on self-development in FPA was complemented by an emphasis on professional skills in FPB. Students became more aware of their personal strengths, weaknesses, values and skills which enabled them to personalize their resume, job applications and be more confident in mock interview situations.
- Students considered the completion of both courses, rather than FPA or FPB, had significantly enhanced their career decisions and improved their job skills and readiness for the workforce.
- The work experience placements, self-awareness activities, professional presentations, resume development, job applications and mock interviews were perceived as important features of the courses.
- All four students reported an enhanced level of confidence following the completion of both courses, which allowed them to be more relaxed in their interactions with professionals and proactive during placements.
- Grading positively affected students' motivation and efforts in all aspects of both courses in order to enhance their GPA and maximize their employability potential.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study support the use of the SOAR model for university academics and career development practitioners. The importance of providing activities that develop all four elements of the model (self-awareness, opportunity awareness, aspirations and results), rather than simply the final element, has been demonstrated in student responses. These elements require significant time in development and would appear best spread over two

courses, rather than condensed into a single course over a shorter period. The structure and interrelationship of the two courses provides students with a competitive advantage for employment and enables them to become more proactive, confident and motivated in order to maximize opportunities to manage their careers and lifelong learning. Furthermore, the combination of quality WIL with CDL as part of students' formal program of study enhances their employability with significant economic and social benefits to the individual and society. Collaborative input from academic staff, Careers and Employment Services and industry representatives adds significant value to such courses. If specific WIL courses are not available in an academic program, CDL activities should be included in courses that are most industry-relevant. It is preferable that these experiences are provided early in academic programs to ensure students are stimulated to focus on the development of their personal employability and gain maximum benefits from their studies.

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