NAGCAS ALTC SYMPOSIUM - 19th JUNE 2008, MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

COMMUNIQUE

Students, employers, professional associations, career development practitioners, academics, and policy makers from the higher education and labour market sectors grappled with new approaches to learning, partnerships and workplace productivity issues at the interface between a university education and work.

The contribution of students, employers and professional associations provided a "reality check" throughout the day as the Melbourne Symposium placed Career Development Learning (CDL) under the spotlight - looking particularly at how CDL can maximise the contribution of Work-integrated Learning to the student experience. The symposium was part of a project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) being led by the National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (NAGCAS), the peak professional body of careers and employment services for Australian students and graduates.

Symposium delegates also included Deputy Vice Chancellors and Pro Vice Chancellors whose portfolios included learning, teaching and engagement activities.

A strong tone which underpinned the collective voices of the Symposium delegates was the commitment to put students' Career Development Learning at the centre of Work-Integrated Learning program offerings.

Visiting UK keynote speaker, Professor Tony Watts noted that Career Development Learning significantly enhances the quality of Work-integrated Learning in its various formats, placing the student more actively at the heart of such programs, and adding value to their quality, by helping students to be career ready (in terms of lifelong and lifewide transitions), as well as work ready.

The role of Career Development Learning in making a positive contribution to career and academic planning was noted (as supported by the literature and the Symposium papers) as well as it's positive impact on attrition, graduate outcomes, and workplace productivity.

The second major outcome was in relation to the potential for expanding work-integrated learning and other forms of experience-based learning across Australian universities.

The key drivers for this expansion derive from rapid changes in the world-of-work for a flexible and well prepared graduate labour force and the link to economic prosperity. To sustain effectiveness and employability within the contemporary world-of-work, individuals require lifelong career management skills which prepare them for change and long-term employability. Career Development Learning is seen as a vehicle for managing the delivery of those outcomes, from the broader perspective of the labour market and from the individual perspective of making transitions through the labour market at various points in life. Accordingly, Career Development Learning was seen by the delegates of the Symposium as an appropriate framework for Work-integrated Learning.

Whilst Work-integrated Learning is a powerful model of learning, there is scope to enhance its role in higher education. There are merits in validating a wider range of experiences, including those not constructed by academics. This includes what students have already done or are already doing: a growing number of students are entering university not immediately after school but after substantial periods of work; most students engage in part-time work for earning rather than learning purposes alongside their studies; and account also needs to be taken of the development of graduate attributes through other student activities, which have a Service-Learning focus, such as volunteering, and also extra curricular activities such as student societies, sports and cultural contributions.

The third major outcome focused on the theme of connections and partnerships – across the university sector and into the world of work.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry's Mary Hicks said that "from a business perspective, encouraging partnerships with the business community will extend the resources available for learning in the higher education sector". Further, it will provide benefits to business through outcomes based on "quality constructed learning experiences for students". She noted "the need to look to the future through different ways of learning, different forms of knowledge and different ways of teaching. This will foster innovation and achieve improved standards of excellence in the higher education arena."

The other aspect of partnerships was in regards to connections between this ALTC project and other related projects – most specifically the Graduate Attributes project, the ePortfolio project and the more generic Work-integrated Learning project.

The fourth major Symposium outcome focused on mechanisms for giving experiences value - in terms of the currency of higher education, which is assessment and accreditation.

Reflection was identified as the key to effective experiential learning: it is the process that converts experience into learning. This is true in relation to academic learning, but also in relation to career development learning.

Students tend to be very instrumental and utilitarian: what is not assessed and accredited is unlikely to be valued. The issue, then, is how to build attention to graduate attributes, and ways of supporting their development – including career development learning – into assessment and accreditation processes. This can be addressed as part of the degree itself, or through an additional award, linked to efforts to clarify what it means to be a graduate of a particular institution rather than of another.

Connected to this is the need for graduate attributes (and their employability skills subsets) to be reflected in more intentional design of constructed learning experiences, within a frame which recognises and values a broader range of learning experiences, rather than assuming that their development will be the accidental outcome of conventional teaching processes.

In summary

1. universities need to provide mechanisms for students to take ownership of their university transitions and validate their related experiences, through mechanisms such as assessment, including ePortfolios and informal transcripts (eg AHEGS)
2. the status of learning in universities needs to be elevated, specifically involving students actively in such learning experiences, including explicit attention to processes designed to inform, support and enrich their career and life aspirations and goals – which is what Career Development Learning specifically brings to the table
3. Partnerships between universities, business and industry, and wider community resources should be fostered
4. Strengthening and expanding systems, processes and practices are relatively expensive: hence the case for government support, at least for the brokerage and support processes involved.

Future activities of the NAGCAS ALTC Project include:

1. development of models, tools and resources which will support all stakeholders in the development of effective practices
2. staging of a forum where larger numbers of students and employer representatives provide feedback
3. recommendations to government re strengthening the funding base to support the sector

Symposium papers available at:
http://www.usq.edu.au/nagcascarrickproject/symposium/prereading.htm