

**0002**

## **Integrating employability skills in the university curriculum: Setting a research agenda that responds to stakeholders' expectation**

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### **Changing expectations of universities**

Educating today's university graduates with employability skills required for the workplace represents a significant shift to the role of universities. Key drivers of this expectation are industry and governments who are concerned that graduates lack the employability skills required for a rapidly evolving labour force and economy (Birrell & Edwards, 2009; Coaldrake & Stedman, 2013; Marginson, 2000). Prominent among the employability skills are analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork skills.

While there have been government policies developed and a number of approaches promoted for the integration of employability skills with university curriculum (AQF, 2013; Atkins, 1999; Barrie, 2006; BIHECC, 2007; Birrell & Edwards, 2009; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), there continues to be a concern that many of the employability skills that industry expect of new graduates are not included in current university curriculum (Alshare, Lane, & Miller, 2011; Curtis & McKenzie, 2001; Grant-Smith, Cathcart, & Williams, 2016; Herrington & Arnold, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Jackson & Chapman, 2012a, 2012b; Jackson & Hancock, 2010; Osmani et al., 2015).

A range of explanations have been given for the divergence between promotion and practice, including: the lack of clarity, consistency and theoretical base of the skills demanded (Cranmer, 2006; Knight & Yorke, 2004), lack of understanding by the main stakeholders of the range of factors that may influence graduates acquiring and transferring the skills (Jackson, 2014, 2016a), difficulty in engaging academics with generic skill development (Baker & Henson, 2010; Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 1999; Crebert, 2002; de la Harpe & David, 2012; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000; Hills, Robertson, Walker, Adey, & Nixon, 2003; Jackson, 2016a; Oliver, 2013; Radloff, de la Harpe, Dalton, Thomas, & Lawson, 2008; Tariq & Cochrane, 2004), time constraints faced by academics (Oliver, 2013) the lack of adequate support for academics to integrate generic employability skills in the curriculum (Barrie, 2006; Radloff et al., 2008) and the problems associated with confining the concept of graduate employability to a skills-based approach (Jackson, 2016b).

As outlined above, there is considerable concern about the divergence between the promotion and practice of employability skills development. Despite the research that has attempted to explain the divergence, there has been little systematic examination of academics' enactment of employability skills development through the teaching and assessment of the curriculum.

### **Setting the research agenda to examine stakeholder expectations of academics**

Research that can contribute to filling the gap between promotion and practice can start by examining academics' beliefs about the importance of employability skills, academics' self-reported practice and their actual teaching and assessment practice. A lack of knowledge about academics' beliefs, what they say they do and actual practices is a significant omission in the literature on employability skills in higher education given that the beliefs of academic staff can inform teaching practice in important and valuable ways (Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2002; Pajares, 1992).

Since the university curriculum is understood and enacted within degree programs, academics' teaching and assessment practice of employability skills needs to be investigated within disciplines in order to understand how employability skills are conceptualised and enacted by academics responsible for the design, delivery and assessment of university curriculum within a specific discipline of a degree program.

### **Theoretical framework to guide the research design**

Argyris and Schön's (1974) 'Theories of Action is an applicable theoretical framework for examining academics' beliefs and practice. There has been a considerable amount of work undertaken on the differences between beliefs and practice in higher education (de la Harpe & David, 2012; de la Harpe et al., 2000; Jones, 2009; Kane et al., 2002; Nghia, 2017). Previous research, however, has been limited because it has not examined what academics actually do in their teaching and assessment practice. As argued by Kane et al (2002), previous research has drawn conclusions about practice based on self-reported statements about practice and not on observed practice. The observation of actual teaching and assessment practice extends the previous research by examining the relationship between beliefs and practice by taking into account both what academics say they do and what they actually do in practice.

In addition, most of the previous research (Baker & Henson, 2010; Jackson, 2016a; Moore & Morton, 2017) has been limited because specified skill sets have been used to examine the relationship between espoused beliefs and practice rather than asking academics about their understanding and beliefs about the skills mostly discussed by the main stakeholders. Knowing how academics' understand employability skills will enable an examination as to what extent their understanding and beliefs has been influenced by external drivers and/or their discipline.

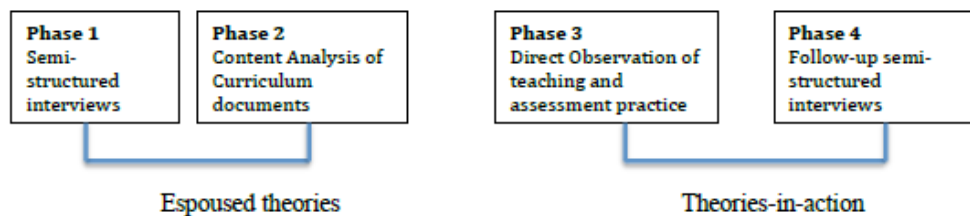
To conduct a study of this kind, we need to ask: To what extent are employability skills enacted in the university curriculum? The following subsidiary questions should be explored:

- How are employability skills conceptualised by academics?
- How do academics understand the role of the university curriculum in developing graduates' employability skills?
- How do academics understand the role of the academic in developing graduates' employability skills?
- To what extent is employability skills enacted in the curriculum (curriculum design and teaching and assessment practice)?

### **Research phases and methods**

In conducting the proposed research study it is advised that data should be collected over four phases which enables access to both academics' espoused theories of action (what they

understand and aspire to do in their practice) and theories in use (what they actually teach and assess in practice) (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Figure 1 below shows the overall research design for the proposed research including the methods of data collection for each of the four phases.



Academics' espoused theories of action can be collected via academics' self reported accounts of their understanding of employability skills and their self-reported teaching and assessment practice of employability skill development. Data on academics' theories in use can be collected by observing what academics do in their teaching and assessment practice in relation to the development of students' employability skills. Insights into the academics' espoused theories of action can be gathered through semi-structured interviews, and the collection and analysis of curriculum documents. The academics' theories-in-use can be obtained via the direct observation of actual teaching and assessment practice.

## Conclusion

As employability skills are now considered an important graduate learning outcome, it is necessary to investigate to what extent academics integrate employability skills in the university curriculum. An examination of the beliefs and experience of teaching and assessment practice will allow for the development of a practice driven understanding of curriculum development. This knowledge can contribute to the development of future university curriculum that adds clarity and provides concrete examples of what works and what does not in the teaching and learning environment in relation to the teaching of employability skills. Furthermore this research can contribute to the professional development of both early career and experienced academic staff in the area of discipline specific teaching and learning strategies that embed employability skills within their teaching practice.

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