Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjhe20

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To cite this article: Paula Baron & Silvia McCormack (22 Apr 2024): Employable me: Australian higher education and the employability agenda, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2024.2344133

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2024.2344133

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Published online: 22 Apr 2024.

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JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND MANAGEMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2024.2344133

Employable me: Australian higher education and the employability agenda

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ABSTRACT

Few issues have attracted as much policy interest in the tertiary sector as graduate employability. Graduate employability positions universities and their students as key players in the national economy. At the same time, the standard conception of graduate employability, as it has evolved from human capital theory and modified by neoliberal ideology, has met with significant criticism. This paper reports on our analysis of the strategic plans of Australia's 42 operating universities current in 2018 to better understand (1) the extent to which employability was embedded in each university's strategic priorities and (2) the ways in which employability was characterised in those plans. Our paper provides empirical evidence of the way in which Australian universities universally and uniformly adopted a particular model of employability, simultaneously claiming its distinctiveness. Our analysis suggests the need for Australian universities to take a more thoughtful and nuanced approach to graduate employability.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 25 August 2023
Accepted 4 April 2024

KEYWORDS
University practices; employability; human capital theory; neoliberalism; agency; student identities

Introduction

Graduate employability (GE) has been, and continues to be, of significance to universities and other stakeholders in Australia. It posits universities and their students as key players in the economy and is a core performance metric for Australian universities. The concept of GE is, however, contested and lacks clarity (Bennett et al., 2017). The conventional view of employability as premised on 'government-driven economic instrumentalism' infers 'an idealised type of worker' (Stoten, 2018, p. 9). At the same time, critiques challenge this discourse and contest its underlying assumptions (Stoten, 2018). This has created a variety of ways in which GE may be characterised and understood.

We analysed the public-facing strategic plans of Australia's 42 operating universities current in 2018 to better understand (1) the extent to which employability was embedded in each university's strategic priorities and (2) the ways in which employability was characterised therein. In particular, we wanted to determine the extent to which the characterisation of employability could be said to be performative.

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Concerns about the performative character of GE have been raised by P. Brown (2013), W. Brown (2016) and Frankham (2017). In the neoliberal environment excellence and value must be visible and measurable, leading to the concept of performativity. This is a 'powerful and insidious' public technology that 'links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output'. Reporting replaces doing, productivity replaces experience, and individuals must inflate and promote themselves (Ball, 2012). The performances of both individuals and organisations provide measures of productivity and displays of 'quality' that represent value within a field of judgement (Ball, 2000). Thus, student success and the value of higher education are measured in terms of 'graduates' returns in future jobs and earnings' – that is, GE (Tomlinson, 2015).

We found the goal of increasing GE to be universal in the strategic plans of Australian universities; that the characterisation of GE was uniform; and highly performative for both students and universities in Australia. The strategic plans reproduce a particular set of discourses with similar themes: employability education as heavily skills-based, an emphasis on competition and gaining a 'winning edge' through education, and the responsibilisation of the individual student: that is, 'responsibility for managing one's life, and hence one's learning trajectory, is increasingly placed on individuals (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014, p. 3). In this article, we have termed this set of recognisable themes as the 'standard concept' of GE. This is a model that has met with considerable criticism in the literature (see, for example, Bennett, 2018; Hora et al., 2020; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

As Bennett et al. (2017) assert, research into GE rarely examines the strategies adopted at an institution-wide level, instead, tending to focus on activities across a single or small group of institutions or departments. Our study thus contributes to existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence of the model of GE used strategically across public Australian universities at a point in time. We acknowledge that there may be nuances in the application of university policy that may be found in the practice within universities or in teaching and learning plans. However, our interest was in broad strategic intent and the ways in which universities present themselves to the outside world and to prospective students.

We also acknowledge that strategic plans introduced since 2018 May evidence a different understanding of employability. However, our study provides a snapshot of policy on employability across the university sector and, as will be discussed, the plans evidence a very particular model of employability, despite the fact that, by 2018, there was a substantial body of literature that was highly critical of that model.

We begin by providing some background to the rise of what we term the 'standard concept' of GE and its relationship to universities. We then provide an overview of the critiques of the standard concept of employability. From this point, we outline the method and findings of our study, before proceeding to discussion of the issues and implications.

The standard model of GE

Despite the fact that the term 'employability' has been used since the early twentieth century, its use has increased significantly in policy discourses (Moreau & Leathwood,

2006), so much so that the term is now used 'widely and loosely' (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017, p. 41).

The concept of employability derives originally from human capital theory (HCT). Human capital is the intangible economic value of the individual's experience and skills. Thus, investment in education and skills training can improve productivity and contribute to economic growth (P. Brown et al., 2020). Evolving in the US in the 1960s, and strongly associated with the work of economist Gary Becker, HCT originally provided a rationale for the expansion of government funded mass education (Marginson, 2019). The rationale for this expansion was an assumption that the relationship between education, earnings and the public good is direct and linear (Marginson, 2019).

This original concept of HCT and its application evolved in the context of global neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is generally understood as an ideology and policy model associated with laissez-faire economics and a belief in the value of free market competition (see further, Thorsen & Lie, 2006). The focus is on the individual 'as the basic constitutive active agent in the construction of his or her fate and of society-at-large' (Krause-Jensen & Garsten, 2014).

HCT sits well with neoliberalism and under its influence had renewed impetus: indeed, the discursive production of everyone as human capital is a distinctive feature of contemporary neoliberalism (W. Brown, 2016). However, whereas traditional HCT justified state investment in education, neoliberalism posits that investment as an individual responsibility. Education has become self-investment in one's own capital position, weakening the financial obligations of governments, and their moral obligations to promote equality (Marginson, 2019). Consequently, the 'employment question' has become the 'employability' question, a shift from a systematic view of the labour market to a focus on individuals and their qualities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). And the terms employment and employability are often conflated (employment generally considered to be having a paid job, while employability denotes attributes that enable the individual to gain and maintain employment) so that governments measure crude employment outcomes and report these as employability (Bennett, 2018). This conflation can be seen in Australia where graduate outcomes are used as a proxy for employability in the *Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning* (QILT), discussed further below.

These changes have reshaped the sector (see further Marginson, 2013), including the expansion of higher education into a mass system and the increasing shift of financial costs onto individual graduates (Tomlinson, 2017c). Universities must provide evidence that they provide value for money to governments, taxpayers and student consumers. Their role, under this model, is to develop GE skills, and university marketing often promises prospective students a competitive advantage in the labour market. In turn, the student is ultimately responsible for their employment success or failure, and, increasingly, their tertiary education cost, so they seek out a positive return on investment and that promise of a competitive edge.

Thus, when we refer to the 'standard conception' of GE: we refer to a model derived from HCT, influenced by neoliberalism and viewed in the context of a competitive and consumerist model of tertiary education. But this model has attracted considerable criticism.

Critiques of the standard model

Although we have outlined the issues separately below, they are intimately intertwined and cannot be viewed in isolation.

The standard concept of GE ignores the social, cultural and economic factors that impact on the ability to gain employment. The relationship between education and graduate outcomes is not as linear as the model would suggest. Relevant variables include family income, social class, support for early childhood development, cultural attributes, university attended, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, social and familial networks (Marginson, 2019; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). The model also ignores variables that determine earnings, such as customs and hierarchies in professions and workplaces, the wage determination system, the configurations and fluctuations of economic systems (Marginson, 2019) off-shore migration of graduate jobs and 'as yet unknown threats to employment sustainability posed by predicted high levels of automation of many types of work . . . ' (Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017, p. 42).

The standard conception of GE depicts employability as the formal acquisition and transfer of 'key skills' and 'attributes' but these are characterised as neutral, when they are in reality gendered, classed and racialised (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006).

The standard concept of GE is seen to reinforce the consumerist model of higher education. Students are viewed as 'rational' consumers (Tomlinson, 2017d) who seek 'value' from higher education. In turn, to attract learners to university, learning itself has to be 'easy, attractive and exciting', that is, devoid of risk. Learning is increasingly goal-driven and instrumental, driven by concerns as to return on investment (Tomlinson, 2016). At the same time, it has been argued that prevailing neoliberal ideology means that questions about the content and purpose of education cannot be asked (Biesta, 2005). A similar point is made by Doidge and Doyle (2022) who state that post-covid we must reflect on the values underlying Australian higher education: 'This discussion has been constrained in recent decades by the growing marketisation of higher education'.

Following on from the criticisms in the previous paragraphs, the standard concept of GE is said to call into question the value and purpose of higher education (Tomlinson, 2017c). Emphasis on employability and its skills agenda reflect a narrow view of education (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006), one that is inherently masculine, rational, technical and utilitarian (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006 . See also; Bennett, 2018). The emphasis on economic return and accountability renders the relationship between student and university increasingly transactional (Tomlinson, 2017a). This narrowing of purpose is, perhaps, most starkly evident in the denigration of arts and humanities in Australia, disciplines that are often viewed from the neoliberal perspective as lacking in tangible employment (McCormack & Baron, 2023). Courses 'which fail to deliver an instant graduate premium in the job market – are coming under increasingly aggressive scrutiny' (The Guardian, 2022). But Tholen and Brown (2017) argue that employability skills taught in universities bear little relationship to how employers recruit graduates. In consequence, reliance on GE to compensate for increasing employment insecurity and to respond to inequalities of labour market access and outcomes is fundamentally flawed.

The standard conception of employability is criticised as heavily performative (P. Brown, 2013). GE is both 'a performative function of universities, shaped and directed by the state' (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, p. 37) and a manifestation of managerialism in higher

education (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017). Managerialism creates a performative culture by its focus on performance indicators (Kalfa & Taksa, 2017). This, in turn, gives rise to student performativity, that is, the ways in which students are evaluated on the basis of their university performance in 'bodily, dispositional and emotional' terms transforms learning from a private space into a public performance (Macfarlane, 2015, p. 338). Indeed, performativity is such a feature of the standard conception of employability that Frankham has argued that the 'performative culture of higher education contributes to *not* preparing students for the workplace' (Frankham, 2017, p. 628).

Performativity is intertwined with competition, acknowledged by the many references universities make to the 'competitive' environment. As commentators point out however, competition can be turned inwards, so while some students might demonstrate a reluctance to engage in an openly competitive manner, competition may be directed at the self, expressed in a desire to be a 'better' and 'more employable me' (Scharff, 2016, p. 118).

Although the rhetoric of the standard conception of employability claims to further meritocracy and social equality in the labour market, Brown argues that it creates a 'performocracy', based on market ideology, where it is winning performance that counts. There is little emphasis on how success is achieved, the injustices of market competition being a necessary evil (P. Brown, 2013). 'Equality gives way to a ubiquitously competitive world of winners and losers' (W. Brown, 2016, p. 3). This ethos can place considerable pressure on individual students. For instance, within mass education, credentials lose much of their value to employers. Thus, an undergraduate degree has become a threshold requirement, rather than a competitive advantage (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). In this circumstance, demonstrating 'soft skills', extracurricular activities and social networks provide individuals with that elusive 'competitive advantage'. This increases pressure on students to perform (P. Brown, 2013). Performative environments can thus engender inauthentic behaviours as individuals endeavour to conform (Macfarlane, 2015).

At the same time, today's students are '*children of the market*' (Keddie, 2016, p. 109), whose identities, opportunities and experiences are shaped by neoliberal ideologies that have been ubiquitous and largely normalised. Thus, for instance, around eighty-five percent of students who are undertaking a bachelor degree provide a job-related reason for studying (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016).

This focus on individual student performance can be problematic. As discussed above, GE is primarily determined by a number of variable factors, rather than the capabilities of individuals (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; see also W. Brown, 2016). An individual can be unemployed or underemployed (Bennett, 2018), revealing the gap between human capital for itself and human capital for the wider economy: that is, the individual 'can be a responsible investor in every respect, yet end up jettisoned by uneven and unpredictable twists' in the labour market (W. Brown, 2016, p. 3). Similarly, Tomlinson (2017c, p. 5) observes that while one side of the employability coin projects an ideal of 'flexible opportunity and fluid mobility', the other side shows precariousness and uncertainty. Indeed, the growth of insecure or precarious work across the labour market is ubiquitous (Bennett, 2018).

Moreau and Leathwood (2006) provide empirical evidence of these concerns. They found that the conjunction of equal opportunity ideology and GE discourse reinforces

the construction of the labour market as meritocratic and failure as personal. This view is internalised by the graduates they surveyed, who not only had fewer opportunities in the labour market but were more likely to blame themselves for failure. The authors concluded that this has potentially damaging consequences for graduate mental health. Similarly, Bennett's work shows that disadvantage and inequities are pervasive in students' employability experiences, both at university and afterwards (Bennett, 2018).

Our study and methodology

Given this body of critical literature, and acknowledging that these critiques have existed for a number of years, the aims of our study were to look across the sector to better understand: firstly, the extent to which employability is embedded in each university's strategic priorities; and secondly, the ways in which employability is characterised in strategic plans, and specifically, whether those characterisations evidence employability as performative.

We undertook a qualitative empirical study in 2018 by analysing the content of strategic plans of Australia's 42 operating universities current in 2018, omitting one university with a specialist focus on theology. A strategic plan establishes an institution's mission, vision, objectives, strategies and actions with success measures. Strategic planning is cyclical, generally over a five-year horizon, and evolves after an environmental scan of opportunities and challenges for the institution. A plan's horizon depends on the institution and its needs. As one strategic plan nears the end of its horizon a new planning process begins for the next cycle (Society for College and University Planning, 2023). Therefore, the analysis of this study pertains to the strategic plans current in 2018 and before the global pandemic became a concern in 2020. As such, the study provides a point of reference in future strategic planning and researching graduate employability post pandemic.

Our qualitative empirical study applied qualitative content analysis (CA) as the most appropriate method for analysing large amounts of text. CA is referred to as 'a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). We followed a systematic set of procedures as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) for the rigorous analysis, examination and verification of the contents of written data allowing 'replicable and valid inferences to be made from texts to the contexts of their use' (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 563).

Coding process for employability

We examined the text of each strategic plan and recorded initial ideas and impressions of the data which specifically described the ways in which universities embedded GE into the student experience. We coded the visible and surface content meaning of text evident rather than the underlying meaning(s). Words or short phrases were used as codes and served as a way to categorise and organise the identified texts. To maintain coding consistency and boundaries, we developed key attributes for each code-category and applied these during our regular quality control meetings when sense checking and verifying interpretation of meaning.

Table 1. Statements related to employability extracted from the University of Canberra's strategic plan and coded for performativity.

Text related to employability and coded for performativity	Rationale for coding
This will prepare graduates who are fit not just for finding employment but also creating it.	(See Ball. Appendix A1) Expectations that make us accountable. Measures of productivity and displays of quality that represent value.
We will monitor success through the leading national measures of teaching and learning quality, student satisfaction, graduate employment and the success of our alumni.	(See Macfarlane. Appendix A1) . . . transforming learning from a private space into a public performance (See Ball) . . . excellence and value must be visible and measurable.

Table 2. Activities embedded into the curriculum for developing employable graduates.

Employability activities	
Activity types	Number of Universities (percent in brackets)
Embed employability skills/capabilities into the curriculum	33 (78)
Align the curriculum to market needs	21 (50)
Encourage entrepreneurial activities	20 (48)
Offer Work Integrated Learning	17 (40)
Develop life-long learners	5 (12)
Staff to support learners to develop employability skills	3 (7)

For each university we copied/pasted (using a word processor) the texts related to employability under the most relevant fitting code-category or created new code-categories or sub-code categories to gain a better fit. Conceptually similar texts were ascribed to the same unique code-category. In some cases, the same segment of text, depending on its richness of content, aligned with several categories and was coded accordingly. All coded texts were tagged with its university identification for verification of its source and context allowing for collaborative review and sense-checking. We reviewed the coded texts and code attributes at our weekly meetings to reduce overlap and redundancy of codes. When code boundaries became blurred, we narrowed the code attributes and moved any misaligned texts under a new/better fitting category.

On completion of coding, we identified code-categories with links or relationships that connected in a patterned way and grouped these together under key themes. The themes provided central organising threads related to the study aims (Bengtsson, 2016; Cohen et al., 2011). For example, see Table 2 in the Findings, six codes with similar characteristics were grouped together under the theme that *Universities identify a range of activities to support students in gaining a 'competitive edge' to become employable.*

We reviewed and revised the themes until satisfied that they provided the most meaningful interpretation of the data that informed the aims of our study.

Coding process for performativity

To code the material in the plans based on the interpretations of performativity, we drew on the descriptions of performativity as outlined by frequently cited scholars in education on this topic (see Table A1, Appendix). We coded the text against these descriptions. Table 1 is an illustrative example of how coding proceeded. On completion of coding, we identified categories with links or relationships that connected in a patterned way and grouped these together under key performativity themes.

Our study: findings

Aim 1: The extent to which GE is embedded in each university's strategic priorities

We found GE to be a strategic objective across all 42 universities. The plans aimed to educate future workers who contribute to society through the job market (31 universities-74%); enhance Australia's economic productivity (19 universities-45%); and provide good employment prospects for students (14 universities-26%). Twenty-two universities-52% stipulated one of these three aims in their strategic objectives; 16 universities-38% stipulated two of the three aims; while 4 universities-9% stipulated all three aims. Twenty-three universities-55% referred to the publicly available university ranking figures such as the *Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning* (QILT) (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022), *The Good University Guide* (n.d.), world university rankings or rankings in general to verify that their graduates are satisfied with their employment outcomes. The 2022 QILT data reveals that the proportion of undergraduates in overall employment, four to six months after completing their course, was 88.1%, and postgraduates 86.6% (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).

Thirty-three universities-78% promised prospective students that their university provides a competitive advantage related to employment. For example:

> ... start now at the university with Australia's highest graduate employment rate (as reported in the Graduate Outcomes Survey via QILT (Charles Sturt University).

Universities purported to enhance their students' employability capacities and to provide them with a competitive edge by embedding a range of activities into the curriculum as shown in Table 2.

We also note, in Tables 2 and 3, the emphasis on the development of work-related skills and absence of discipline-related skills. One key explanation for this focus is that graduate employment data is a key performance indicator applied by the Government. In addition, *The Good Universities Guide (n.d.)* applies graduate employment data to rate

Table 3. List of key attributes purported by universities that are valued by employers.

Attributes	Number of Universities (percent in brackets)
Leadership	24 (57)
Creativity	16 (38)
Global citizens with cross-cultural skills	16 (38)
Entrepreneurial (9) or enterprising (6)	15 (36)
Critical thinkers with problem solving skills	14 (33)

and rank universities and courses to assist students in selecting their university and courses. These performance measures contribute to universities seeking to strengthen GE skills.

Aim 2: The characterisation of employability as performative

We found all plans conformed to the standard concept of GE. They are heavily skills based, responsibilise the student and are heavily performative in character. Three key themes relating to student performativity were evident. Although we discuss each individually, the themes are closely interconnected.

Theme 1: To be successful in the labour market, a student needs more than a degree

The plans show that discipline knowledge alone is considered insufficient for GE. The development of a skilled workforce that meets business needs requires the participation of industry and community partners in shaping, developing and delivering the curriculum. We found this theme in 24 (57%) of the plans. For example:

> [Student] learning will be responsive to the needs and context of industry and community partners. In order to facilitate real-world experiences, we will also build a deeper set of external relationships to create a model of engagement that is responsive to the needs and context of industry and community partners and ensures broad educational value. (University of Sydney)

The plans promised students that by successfully undertaking the curriculum activities and assessment, co-developed between university and industry, their learning would be relevant, prepare them for the workforce and future-proof their employment opportunities. For example:

> New courses will resonate with career opportunities (Murdoch University).
>
> Students will be workplace ready and future-proofed in a rapidly changing world. (University of Southern Queensland)

Theme 2: students need to become enterprising, competitive, develop entrepreneurial skills and the ability to successfully market their skill set

Universities characterised the future work environment as ‘rapidly changing’ (9 universities-21%), ‘complex’ (6 universities-14%), and ‘competitive’ (5 universities-12%). Ten universities-24% stated that, to succeed in this environment, students need to be open to new ideas; actively seek out new ways of learning or understanding the world; be enterprising and seek advantages and opportunities that will make a difference in their future; and address challenges. These behaviours were promoted as leading to employment or entrepreneurial, high-performing and competitive outcomes (18 universities-43%). For instance:

> The University will assist students to develop their leadership and entrepreneurial skills and business models for commercial and not-for-profit ventures. (Monash University)

The strategic plans refer to an employment market that is increasingly globalised and 16 universities-39% asserted that students should develop a 'global perspective'. For example,

> [The University will] Transform students into game-changing graduates who make outstanding contributions and address complex issues with a global perspective. (University of Queensland)

The plans anticipated that students will face multiple careers in their working life, and should be prepared to upskill and adopt a life-long learning approach, adapting to changing job markets. Agility, adaptability and creativity will be essential for success. These attributes were mentioned by 13 universities-31%. For example,

> [Students are told to] . . . develop skills to be life-long learners who are agile in adjusting to futures and technologies they never imagined. (Southern Cross University)

Theme 3: students will be valued by employers if they have achieved a successful individual worker identity

To further cement their individual worker identity, students were encouraged to undertake Work Integrated Learning opportunities (17 universities-41%), internships (10 universities-24%) and volunteering opportunities and/or exchange programs (5 universities-12%). Graduates were told that these activities will provide them with an advanced ability to acquire work. For example:

> [Graduates will have] an advanced and competitive ability to acquire and create work and new opportunities over a lifetime for themselves and for others. (University of Queensland)

The plans recommended that academics collaborate with industry partners and alumni to facilitate networks between students and employers:

> [Academics should] bring in guest speakers to lectures, workshops, panel events: these could include previous students who have moved into particular industries, industry experts sharing their expertise. (Australian Catholic University)

There is a focus on skills development and attributes purported by universities to be valued by employers as shown in Table 3.

However, there was no consensus among universities as to which of these skills are key to achieving employment. In addition, these five attributes are misaligned with the five top attributes employers most applied when recruiting graduates. In 2016 the employer attributes were, in order of importance: interpersonal and communication skills; cultural alignment/values fit; emotional intelligence including self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation; reasoning and problem-solving skills; and academic results (Graduate Careers Australia, 2016; Norton, 2017).

Students were tasked with accountability for their own skill set and GE success by keeping a record of the skills they need to demonstrate:

> Record the skills you gain and activities you undertake. Research the skills and qualities sought by employers within your industry of choice to keep informed of what employers are looking for. (Australian National University)

One university mentioned systems of surveillance and measurement to track graduates and their longer-term career outcomes, undertaking to:

> . . . monitor student retention and progression, students' success in accessing further study pathways and employment outcomes, and make a significant effort to track graduates and their longer-term career outcomes. (University of Sydney)

The plans of 37 universities-88% promised to provide students with career advice, career development, career preparedness, industry experience and start-up opportunities. University career centres, featured prominently in 15 universities-36%. The plans urged students to engage in extra-curricular activities so that they can 'stand out from other graduates' when competing for jobs; and to market themselves by presenting a public account of their qualities. These universities claimed that they would nurture the students towards their career: The career centres offered to provide students with performance and perception management tools when competing for jobs in the labour market:

> Our Career Accelerator initiative is a powerful three-stage process that ensures potential employees will like what they see and get you started on the path to a satisfying career sooner Together, we'll look at what type of career is the best fit for you and help expand your skillset so you can succeed. . . . We'll work together to secure you a placement in a real-world work or community setting. After your placement we'll examine how you did and help you improve your job-seeking skills – all in preparation for you to start your career. (Macquarie University)

> Get involved in university life and extra-curricular activities to expand your interests and develop employability skills. . . ..Connect with Careers to keep informed of what employers are looking for, get new ideas for enhancing your skills and experience and to ensure you are highlighting these effectively in your applications. (Australian National University)

Discussion

Our study offers empirical evidence of the model of GE operating in Australia. Our findings show that the standard concept of GE was ubiquitous and largely uniform across Australian public universities in 2018, despite the considerable body of literature critical of this model (Bennett, 2019; Cole & Hallett, 2019; Hora et al., 2020); and despite each university claiming distinctiveness in this area. The concept of employability was heavily skills-based, responsibilised the individual student, and emphasised competition and the 'winning edge'. We have discussed the critiques of this view, but there are at least three problems with this characterisation of GE worth considering in more detail.

The first is the impact on the mental health of students. The plans show, quite starkly, the construction of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject, and the attendant expectations of student performativity as a necessary corollary of university performativity. If the university's 'product' is the 'work-ready graduate', then in turn, students must demonstrate that they are responsible and entrepreneurial neoliberal subjects, and their success in the job market has become the external measure of their value. It has long been acknowledged that neoliberalism functions at this level of the subject, producing docile individuals who are tightly governed yet define themselves as free (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Neoliberalism shapes the individual's hopes, ideals and fears in such a way that

they seek to be 'morally worthy, responsibilized individuals, who, as successful entrepreneurs, can produce the best for themselves and their families' (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 251). Macfarlane (2015) refers to this as 'soulcraft', that is, the university's surveillance of students' emotional development and values. Empirical studies (see, for example, Bal et al., 2014; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006) show the ways in which students internalise these ideas, accepting responsibility for success or failure in the market, which can have negative impacts on their mental health.

The second is the potentially misleading nature of this conception of GE. As discussed, the standard conception does not take into account the many variables that impact on employment (Marginson, 2019; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006). It is, perhaps, unsurprising that the prestigious Group of Eight (Go8) research intensive universities, which also include most of the elite sandstone universities, increase a student's chance in gaining full time employment by 38% (Jackson, 2014) because they confer status and provide access to privileged networks. This reinforces the view that employability outcomes and opportunities are not based on merit, employability frameworks and strategies alone.

In addition, all the plans purported to provide students with that 'winning edge'. Yet our analysis suggests that the model, framework and strategies for promoting employability were, remarkably similar across all universities. Although having a degree is advantageous in competing against those without a degree, having an undergraduate degree is increasingly the norm in Australia and of itself is unlikely to confer a significant advantage vis-a-vis other graduates in the job market. The 2017 Australian Bureau of Statistics gender indicators (Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS, 2017) show that 45% of women and 32% of men aged between 25 to 29 years have a bachelor degree or higher qualification. Most women in this age bracket will soon have a degree. Of course, this provides a basis for universities to promote post-graduate degrees as providing that elusive 'competitive edge'. Pennington and Stanford (2019) describe a longitudinal study on young Australians aged 25 who finished secondary school in 2006. It was found that by 2015, 52% had at least a bachelor's degree and 26% were studying for their second tertiary degree in different fields to the first because the first qualification did not translate into adequate employment outcomes.

Thirdly, as we have discussed, the standard conception of GE tends to narrow the educational focus (Bennett, 2018; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2017c). As Bennett observes, the result of the emphasis of the higher education policy agenda on GE is that 'employability is now firmly entrenched with a reductionist graduate outcomes discourse, rather than in the development domain that defines higher education' (Bennett, 2018, p. 45).

At the same time, reimagining the concept of GE in Australia is no easy task. The prevailing policy environment ignores the societal aspects of higher education (that is, preparing graduates for social citizenship) in order to focus upon economic outcomes (Bennett, 2018). Prevailing ideology is so internalised and normalised, it is difficult to consider alternative models: ' … neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others' (Ball, 2012, p. 18). Similarly, W. Brown (2016, p. 12) asks 'How to name and challenge something as ubiquitous, diffuse and superficially benign as neoliberal governance and rationality?' and 'How to articulate and challenge such things as the destruction of non-economic value or

the remaking of subjects, social relations and associations according to market metrics?' At the same time, Brown reminds us that, while we need to understand how we internalise such pressures, 'we also need to hold firmly onto a sense that we are none of the things we now do, think or desire' (W. Brown, 2016, p. 26).

There is, however, promising work in this space: for instance, Tomlinson (2017b) proposes a more holistic model of graduate employment, based on a graduate capital model which emphasises the significant role that various forms of capital can play in the development of GE and which acknowledges the impacts and structures of mass higher education. Such an approach would 'see employability as not simply a measure of an individuals' potential for employment, but also the social and economic context which enables this potential to be realised or otherwise' (Tomlinson, 2017c, p. 6). Bennett argues for 'employABILITY', a more holistic approach, grounded in social-cognitive theory, and within which students learn how to create and sustain meaningful work across their career (Bennett, 2018, p. 39). We agree with her position that 'GE must embrace diversity and must integrate the metacognitive capacities with which higher education graduates are not only ready for work, but ready to learn' (Bennett, 2018, p. 52). Biesta (2005) urges us to reconsider our very model of education, proposing a model that revolves around three key concepts: trust without ground (that is, the acceptance of risk and the uncertainty of outcomes); transcendental violence (learning as a reaction to disturbance and the opportunity for individuals to come into presence); and responsibility without knowledge (the responsibility of the teacher to promote the student's unique subjectivity).

Conclusion

In this paper we have reported on our study which analysed the strategic plans of Australia's 42 operating universities current in 2018 to better understand the extent to which employability is embedded in each university's strategic priorities and the ways in which employability is characterised. Our paper contributes to knowledge on this subject by providing empirical evidence of the way in which the conception of GE in Australian universities universally and uniformly adopted the standard conception: that is, GE as highly performative, heavily skills based, which places responsibility for graduate outcomes on the individual student; and largely ignores or conceals the myriad factors that impact on the individual's ability to gain and retain employment. Yet, the model is misleading and potentially harmful to both students and to tertiary education itself. Our call to action is for universities and government to be open to a more creative approach to the concept of GE. We acknowledge that it is difficult to think outside the prevailing neoliberal mindset but note that there are emerging models that offer new possibilities and which emphasise the importance of contemplating a wider and more holistic vision of the relationship between universities and GE.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Declaration of conflicting interests and financial support

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest nor financial support with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article.

Manuscript status

Each of the authors confirms that this manuscript has not been previously published and is not currently under consideration by any other journal. Additionally, both the authors have approved the contents of this paper and have agreed to the JHEPM submission policies.

Authorship

Each named author has substantially contributed to conducting the underlying research and drafting this manuscript. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, the named authors have no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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Appendix 1 Appendix

Table A1. Author interpretation of performativity applied in the coding process.

Author interpretation of performativity
Ball (2003)
(1) . . . employing judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change-based on rewards and sanctions'. The performances of both individuals and organisations provide measures of productivity and displays of 'quality' that represent value within a field of judgement.
(2) . . . a flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that make us continually accountable and constantly recorded. Excellence and value must be visible and measurable.
Boden and Nedeva (2010)
(1) . . . the pursuit of practical efficiencies and the need to be seen to perform. Universities can effectively produce the worker/consumer citizen on which economic growth depends.
Kalfa and Taksa (2017)
(1) Managerialism creates a performative culture by its focus on performance indicators and efficiencies and the need to be seen to perform and therefore engage in image management, fulfilment of indicators to meet targets of performance. Value is no longer placed on traditional knowledge but on operational competence through performative learning. Efficiency and effectiveness are the exclusive criteria for judging knowledge. One of the ways universities can prove their value is by equipping students with transferable employable skills that are valued in paid employment.
Macfarlane (2015)
(1) . . . the ways in which students are evaluated on the basis of their university performance in 'bodily, dispositional and emotional' terms. It 'is symbolic of the 'performing self' in wider society and is transforming learning at university from a private space into a public performance.