Preparing for WIL: Online Career Development for IT Students

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This paper reports on an online unit that enhances IT students’ generic skills. Frequently IT students, even those with a strong technical background and a high academic record, can be unsuccessful at obtaining work placements as they stumble at the interview stage due to a lack of social or professional skills. A simulation was created that enables students to enhance their employability and to prepare for transition to work integrated learning (WIL) through realistic interview preparation. The simulation utilizes a synchronous communication tool to conduct behavioural group interviews with expert careers advisors. The impact of this new initiative is explored and feedback received from faculty, careers advisors and students during three trimesters is discussed. The findings suggest that incorporating WIL through the simulation has been a success by at least raising students’ awareness of the importance and significance of being well prepared for job interviews.

Keywords: Career development, generic skills, graduate attributes

Introduction

Traditionally a university provides students with curricula centred on the core body of knowledge of a discipline. More recently the expectation has been to ensure students are not only proficient in their chosen field but that they are also work-ready thus requiring generic employability skills (Litchfield, Frawley & Nettleton 2010). IT students will readily add to their portfolio of technical skills such as new programming languages or development methodologies, but there is much hesitancy and dissatisfaction when required to extend their communication skills, team work competencies or other generic skills. This paper focuses on an intervention developed to assist IT students improve their communications skills associated with interview preparation and participation.

Literature Review

Research studies suggest that the skills required of IT graduates by employers differ from the skills they actually possess (Sixsmith & Litchfield 2010). From their research Patrick et al (2008, p.vii) found that “… a large proportion of applicants for positions are considered unsuitable” and noted that many graduates had skill deficiencies in areas including business communication, problem solving, independent and critical thinking, and understanding of business practice.

Co-operative education programs, such as WIL, place students in relevant work experience for periods of up to one year to improve their generic skill development as well as their understanding of business practice. For a variety of reasons, not all students are able to undertake such placements. Consequently the provision of opportunities to develop their generic skills through the curriculum is needed. It is possible to simulate the work environment to enable students to experience aspects of the workplace within an educational framework (Sixsmith & Litchfield 2010). While the provision of professional and graduate attributes through the curriculum is not a replacement for those obtained through WIL, it should be seen as a necessary and valuable addition (Litchfield et al 2010). Curriculum content needs to cover these skills, make them more visible, and ensure that they are systematically taught.

Equally students need to be prepared for the transition from university to the workplace and to successfully navigate the recruitment process to secure employment. Students need to select appropriate job vacancies and demonstrate that they meet the selection criteria. Therefore students also need the skills to be able to self-manage lifelong career development (Bridgstock 2009).

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The Study

Background

IT Practice is a compulsory final-year unit in the Bachelor of Information Technology at Deakin University. It aims to provide students with opportunities to develop practical skills that can be applied in real-world situations. It is an online unit where communication and collaboration is facilitated through the university’s online learning environment (DSO). A problem-based learning approach is used where project briefs and associated tasks are the major part of assessment, driving the learning. The unit consists of four modules which focus on different aspects of employment and the day-to-day operations of an IT department. The first module is IT Employment where students reflect on what it means to be an IT professional. Students apply to a graduate employment program in United Enterprises (UE) by preparing their personal application letter and resume. UE is a simulated organization, in which they will work for the trimester. Once they are shortlisted for the position, students prepare for the next stage of the application process, the group interview. The live online interview is conducted by careers advisors from the University. Additionally students develop a Personal Reflection and Action Plan to identify skills they need to address, and describe what specific short-term and long-term actions they need to implement, to improve or acquire these skills.

Resources and links for IT Employment are available through DSO including: links to the UE website and the graduate program; resources and templates for resumes from student support services; links to external websites such as the Australian Computer Society’s careers website, and sites such as YouTube. Moderated discussion forums are also utilized in DSO to support the students’ learning activities.

The group interview using online real-time technologies was a new initiative in Trimester 2, 2010. Previous IT Practice cohorts were given a list of interview questions and discussed possible answers online. The new initiative of online interviews using genuine careers advisors as facilitators is the focus of this paper.

Elluminate Live!® (ELive)

ELive is a communication tool that allows participants to interact and collaborate in real time. With ELive users can:
- conduct synchronous voice (and video) discussions;
- engage in conversation using text based chat tools;
- share resources; and
- manage interactions using visual cues and communication spaces.

The video functionality was not used in IT Practice since many students could have bandwidth constraints which limits its viability. All other forms of communication in ELive were used though.

The Group Interviews

Students were given a description for a help desk position in UE. The position description focused on professional and generic skills including team work, communication and negotiation skills. Students were instructed to pay attention to the STAR (Situation or Task; Actions; Results) behavioral interviewing technique as this would be used to explore their suitability for the position. A number of resources on interviewing techniques, including STAR, and examples of the type of questions they could expect were provided. Students were also informed that the interview would focus on the essential selection criteria, including: written and verbal communication skills; working individually and collaboratively in teams; critical thinking and problem solving skills; time management and organizational skills; and lifelong learning skills. The position description indicated that the applicant would need to have an IT degree at the time of appointment.

A number of interview sessions were scheduled in which students could enrol. Sessions were capped at nine students. The one-hour sessions were held over a number of days starting as early as 8am and finishing as late as 7pm, to provide flexibility for students. Three to five days were set aside each trimester to hold the interviews. These were conducted by Deakin’s Careers Advisors. Faculty provided technical support, assisting both interviewers and students with any difficulties they encountered with the use of ELive.
The interviewers had a list of students enrolled in their session and could ascertain who was online through information in the ELive window. Each student was given the opportunity of answering two questions, the first was a practice question where prompts and feedback were provided on their answer; the second one was assessed. Marks were allocated for: timely arrival at the interview; adequate preparation using the technology; having a professional approach and engaging fully with the process; using the STAR technique; and finally the quality of the answer.

The questions were devised such that students could provide an adequate response even if they had no work experience. For example, “Tell me about a team situation you have experienced ...” and “Describe a time when you had to resolve a conflict ...” All questions could be answered from the perspective of previous work experience, social or sports club participation, or school and university activities.

At the conclusion of the interview session students were thanked for their participation and were told that they would hear the outcome of their interview by the end of the week, the timing coinciding with the conclusion of IT Employment and the commencement of the next module which required students to take on the role of a new employee at UE.

In trimester 2, 2011, the careers advisors were able to access the online resume students provided to UE, rather than a summary form which had been used with the previous interviews. This allowed the careers advisors to tailor the interview questions to students' specific skills. Whereas 2010 students had to provide the context of their response to a question (“When I worked at McDonalds ...”), in 2011 the interviewer could provide the context that students should reference in their response (“When you were working at McDonalds ...”) or formulate the question in a way that captured the student’s experience or area of specialization within their degree.

Results

Teaching staff and careers advisors participating in the initiative were interviewed and feedback from three cohorts of students was gathered providing a picture of student and staff perceptions of the initiative. It was found that benefits were perceived at a number of levels: students appreciated the opportunity to practice their interview technique and receive critical feedback; some students were amazed to discover that careers advice was available on campus; careers advisors were appreciative of the opportunity to have critical input into students’ career development skills.

Feedback from Careers Advisors

The feedback from interviews conducted with the careers advisors was very positive. “The e-live session is close practice to what a telephone interview would be like” and “the tool provides students with experience of using an online audio visual communication tool – something they’ll use more of in their future workplace”.

The careers advisors were pleased with the overall management of the sessions, the attendance rate of the students and “the enthusiasm and engagement of the students who valued the feedback, some asking for another go!”. “I think the students get a lot out of these sessions ... they get involved and have a good attempt at answering the questions. They respond positively to the feedback we give and are usually appreciative of the session”.

According to one careers advisor, students are often hesitant about seeking careers advice but this initiative allowed them to interact with students in a very realistic way. It was also an opportunity to direct students who had difficulty with structuring or articulating responses in the interview to the career services and other workshops provided by the University's support services.

One observation was that there was quite a variance in the quality of the answers. It was clear who had prepared for the interview and who hadn’t. What also became apparent was that students had the opportunity to learn from each other and from the feedback during the session. The responses for the second round of questions were more detailed and expansive. “Students who give well-structured quality responses provide a good example for students who find the exercise more challenging. It is noticeable that having good strong students in the group raises the level of the session”.

Feedback from those conducting interviews in 2011 reinforced the positive feedback received previously. “The activity provides students with an excellent opportunity to experience the interview process and is just as
authentic as the traditional face-to-face scenario. They also suggested that ELive is less intimidating than face-to-face role play where presentation issues can be overwhelming and detract from the potential learning opportunities. It was also evident that submitting a formal application encouraged students to “reflect on and articulate the transferable skills they had acquired throughout their course”. One interviewer highlighted the benefit for off campus students in particular “who often lack contact with the university and fellow students”.

Feedback from Faculty

The technology utilized for the interviews was regarded as “available, easy to set up and run. Students are expected to use the technology later in the unit making it a worthwhile addition”. Another faculty member indicated that "ELive was the ideal tool to facilitate a conversation between careers advisors and students in this context”.

Although organizing and running the interviews was resource intensive, the value added to student learning was worthwhile. In follow-up tasks students had to reflect on the outcomes of the interview activities and develop an action plan to improve their skills and knowledge. Students produced more insightful submissions than in previous years suggesting that the interview process had provided valuable feedback into their personal skills limitations.

The number of students in a group was capped at nine to allow sufficient time to conduct the interviews in one hour. Most groups had eight or nine participants. The size of the group proved to have advantages and disadvantages. Smaller groups were able to discuss their performance with the interviewer after the assessment was completed but had a limited number of examples to discuss. The larger groups generally did not have time to review their performance but were able to listen to a wider range of responses and feedback during the interview.

Feedback from Students

Students were not surveyed formally but it is clear from anecdotal evidence that they found it to be relevant and worthwhile. Students appreciated the opportunity to interact with careers advisors and acknowledged that it had enhanced their learning. One student was particularly appreciative of this opportunity as he participated in his group interview session while waiting for a train that would take him to a real job interview!

Off-campus students are often isolated while studying and appreciated the opportunity to engage directly with careers advisors and to learn from other students.

A number of students commented on the wider career preparation opportunities. "I feel much more prepared to begin my career"; "it made me think about my future"; and "I gained a lot of experience from this that I can take and use my whole life!"

It is common in the recruitment process to conduct initial telephone screening or conference calls where the focus is on the applicant’s overall manner and the content of their answers and not on body language and presentation. A careers advisor suggested:

This activity emphasises the importance of auditory tone cues to build rapport with the interviewer and the focus is on the content of the response. In the face to face situation presentation issues need to be addressed and some students are quite awkward role playing in front of their peers. ELive is comparatively less intimidating but still allows the group to listen and learn from each other’s responses while minimising potential distractions.

Conclusion

One of the aims of a university is to develop in its graduates the knowledge and skills to allow them to transition seamlessly into the working environment (Litchfield et al 2010). Providing opportunities for students to develop these skills is difficult to do, particularly in online environments. IT Practice attempts to expose students to real world practices, including applying for employment on graduation. As part of this process students have participated in group behavioural interviews facilitated by careers experts through the use of a synchronous communication tool. While it would be advantageous to provide the experience of face-to-face interviews, simulating this real-world situation in an online context appears to have been successful. Essentially students have interacted with the real world in real time with real people.
References


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