Leveraging work integrated learning through on-campus employment – A university-wide approach

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Student life at Victoria University is characterised by two features: the majority of students engage in paid employment alongside their studies; and, every student engages in work-integrated learning or Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC) as a key component of their academic course. This paper explores an innovative structured approach Victoria University has initiated which is emerging as a strategy to better align these two activities, the Students as Staff program. The program was designed to respond to VU’s diverse student cohort and the pivotal role the university plays in the western region of Melbourne, Australia. Students as Staff is a term used to describe any current Victoria University student who is also working for pay on-campus. In 2011, one thousand students held positions at VU ranging from administration and peer-to-peer mentoring, through to research assistants and tutors.

The 2011 Students as Staff evaluation found that 20 per cent of students received academic credit for their on-campus employment, and many more indicated their roles were related to their study discipline. In addition respondents reported feeling significantly engaged with the institution and that work on-campus had contributed to developing their graduate capabilities. These evaluation results therefore indicate that on-campus employment through a structured program such as Students as Staff provides Victoria University with a mechanism to enhance student learning outcomes. This paper discusses key ways in which tertiary institutions can expand their capacity to support and enhance student learning and develop graduate capabilities through paid work opportunities; an increasingly necessary component of university life.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning; graduate capabilities; part-time work; on-campus employment

Introduction

The employment of students on-campus at Australian Universities is not a new phenomenon, and indeed has been occurring for as long as Universities have existed. Few however have taken a systematic approach to linking on-campus work with students disciplines of study, therefore resulting in a unique relationship between the student and the institution in a climate when student’s on-campus engagement with their universities is increasingly diminishing.

Victoria University (VU) is a multi-sectoral institution with 10 campuses across the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. In the heart of one of the fastest growing population corridors in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), it has a student cohort of 50,000 predicted to double in the next 20 years, and a staffing profile of close to 2000 academic, and 1500 professional staff. It is a richly diverse community with many members coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, being first in family to attend post compulsory education, and living in an environment where English is a second language.

In 2009 VU implemented a pilot known as the Students as Staff program. This pilot aimed to facilitate the employment of current VU students on-campus with Black et al (2010) noting “the impetus for the program relate[d] to:

- Boosting engagement with the University to impact on the attrition rates;
- Providing avenues to gain financial support on campus, not off campus; and
- Linking work and learning to enhance employability skills.

The results of the pilot were overwhelmingly positive with students self-reporting improvements to their employability skills, and graduate and professional capabilities. In addition they reported a greater connection to VU as an institution and an improvement in their studies.

Following the successful pilot, VU committed to a full scale implementation of the Students as Staff program in 2011 with a key focus on enhancing the link between on-campus employment and students study discipline. Across 2011 VU recruited and employed 1000 Students as Staff, which allowed the program team to explore factors that linked that work through to VU’s highly successful Learning in the Workplace & Community (LiWC) initiative, VU’s work integrated learning (WIL) program.
A survey of all Students as Staff in 2011 found that a higher than expected percentage (20%) of students were receiving some form of credit for their on-campus employment. The results also confirmed the pilot findings with students reiterating the role the financial support played in retaining them in post-compulsory education, and the enhancement of their employability skills, and graduate and professional capabilities.

The remainder of this paper discusses implementation of the program, explores factors which have contributed to the success identified by the evaluation findings, and suggests mechanisms which tertiary institutions can utilise to support student learning and develop graduate capabilities through paid work opportunities, particularly through expanding the link between on-campus employment and work integrated learning.

**Study and Work**

Despite the supposed adverse effects of working whilst studying, it is becoming a standard component of student life. The most recent Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) data indicates that 69% of Australasian University students work for pay on or off campus (ACER, 2010). Some studies (Devlin, James, & Grigg, 2008; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) have linked high rates of off-campus employment with issues such as students not attending class in lieu of working. On-campus employment, however has been positively related to enhanced student progress and completion (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Although it is acknowledged that on-campus employment is far less prevalent than off campus employment (Coates, 2011) and limited research has been conducted in Australia in relation to on-campus employment. Given universities’ play a critical role in producing work ready graduates, there is now a strong impetus for universities to play a greater role in linking part-time work to students learning and development activities to ensure students can articulate and leverage these co-curricular activities for their future career outcomes. As noted by Hamish Coates, Executive Director Research, Australian Council of Educational Research, “this is a significant facet of Australia’s higher education life that is slipping between the cracks” (2011, p.2).

Many Australian institutions have moved towards systematic work-related, experiential learning activities that take many guises – work-integrated learning, learning-integrated work, and service learning to name but a few. At the core of this is any form of intentional, organised and accredited educational activity that integrates theoretical learning and application in the workplace (Flinders University, 2012), or as defined by the 2008 WIL Report “An umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum” (Patrick et al, 2008, p.8).

At Victoria University this has been termed Learning in the Workplace and Community (LiWC), and is a key strategic initiative for the institution. All students must complete 25% of the assessment of their studies through some form of LiWC activity and these traditionally take the form of practical placements, industry and/or community projects, cooperative education, or internships. Now, under the banner of Students as Staff, linking on-campus employment with LiWC has become a new focus that will start to go part-way towards closing the gap between part-time work and studies.

**Students as Staff at VU**

Students as Staff was formally launched in August 2010 by the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Elizabeth Harmen who set a stretch target of 1000 positions on campus by the end of 2011. At the time she noted the need for VU to “walk the talk” in terms of becoming an exemplary host organisation, and that Students as Staff was one of a range of strategic initiatives aimed at achieving that outcome. If VU was out in our community asking partner organisations to take on VU students for all forms of Learning in the Workplace and Community, VU needed to be leading the way in providing these opportunities to its own students.

Among the initial challenges was defining, and then implementing systems to measure and evaluate Students as Staff at VU. Through the ratification of a positioning paper in late 2010 Students as Staff at VU were defined as:

> Any student who is also a paid member of Victoria University’s staff profile, will be defined as a Student as Staff. Inherent in this is that the primary reason the student interacts with VU is as a student, rather than a staff member.

Early data analysis through Human Resources identified approximately 5 out of every 10 casual staff members, undertaking significant study loads. This lead to the estimation that VU probably had close to 500 Students as Staff already on the payroll, however this needed to be further quantified. Working closely with Human Resources a Student as Staff tick box was added to every employment contract across both the higher education and vocational education sectors. This allowed the project team to track student employment on campus across 2011.
A key focus in the initial stages was to create a permeating cultural shift towards the employment of students whenever possible. A range of mechanisms were used to achieve this cultural shift, one example being 12 months of funding provided by the Vice-Chancellor to subsidise student salaries and establish the program.

**Evaluation and Key Findings**

In July 2011 the first full-scale evaluation of all identified Students as Staff was conducted – a total of 650 students at that point in the year. An electronic survey was utilised with a 40% response rate which gave significant weight to the results.

Key findings from the Students as Staff evaluation included:

- Students employed on-campus self-reported that they felt significantly engaged with Victoria University as an institution. 89% of students indicated that working at VU had made them more connected to University life;
- The remuneration for Students as Staff positions had a major impact on student’s abilities to continue with study commitments at VU; and
- There was a marked disconnect between how related (somewhat or very) work activities were to studies (80%), and those that actually received any credit (20%).

In addition students self-reported that their work on campus had contributed to the development of VU’s Graduate Capabilities as per **Figure 1** (Mitchell, G., 2012)

One limitation of the evaluation findings is that many Students as Staff are also actively involved in separate LiWC activities as part of their study programs, and/or other extracurricular activities, and this may have impacted the evaluation results.

**Figure 1 : Graduate Capability Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to problem solve in a range of settings</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Some contribution</th>
<th>Significant contribution</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.6% (4)</td>
<td>56.5% (143)</td>
<td>41.9% (106)</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>253</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Ability to locate, critically evaluate, manage and use written, numerical and electronic information | 7.9% (20) | 55.3% (140) | 36.8% (93) | 2.29 | 253 |

| Ability to communicate in a variety of context and modes | 2.0% (5) | 42.9% (108) | 55.2% (139) | 2.53 | 252 |

| Ability to work both autonomously and collaboratively | 3.2% (8) | 47.8% (121) | 49.0% (124) | 2.46 | 253 |

| Ability to work in an environmentally, socially and culturally responsible manner | 4.4% (11) | 44.4% (111) | 51.2% (128) | 2.47 | 250 |
To what extent has your paid work at Victoria University contributed to your knowledge, skills and personal development in the following areas?

| Ability to manage learning and career development opportunities | 8.4% (21) | 49.8% (125) | 41.8% (105) | 2.33 | 251 |

The evaluation question in relation to LiWC resulted in 20% of students indicating that they received academic credit for their employment on campus. Examples included students working in the gymnasiums who were often undertaking Sports and Exercise Science qualifications and credit was granted for some of their work. Student Connections also offered all Students as Staff the opportunity to undertake a Certificate IV in Frontline Management, with all study components replaced with Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for on-the-job training, and a significant reflective writing process in place alongside the work.

In addition Students as Staff were asked whether they felt their work was very, somewhat, or not related to their discipline of study. 82% indicated work was somewhat or very related to their discipline of study which was a stark contrast to the 20% of students receiving credit for their study. This finding has initiated discussion within the University community and a key focus moving forward will be on finding mechanisms to support, enhance and grow the formal link between on-campus employment and study. See Figure 2 (Mitchell, G. 2012).

Figure 2 LiWC - Relationship between part-time work and studies
Discussion

The results of the Students as Staff evaluation at VU are consistent with previous research findings and highlights the role on-campus employment can play across dimensions of retention, engagement, and learning outcomes.

When examining VU departments where a direct link between a Student as Staff position and gaining credit under LiWC has been achieved, they can be clustered by the various drivers at play:

1. Historical Discipline Focused Programs: A range of long standing programs already in place at VU, particularly in areas of distinctive specialisations such as the link between the sports and fitness centre and sports and exercise science students which have grown and been aligned over time.

2. Innovative General Programs: Led by champions of Students as Staff who have built on both LiWC and Students as Staff as key strategic mechanisms for developing students employability outcomes at VU. In these instances the strong advocates of the program have been encouraged by the current university wide support for the program, seen the benefits of student employment in their own work areas, and then creatively linked the work to study programs and WIL. An example of this is the Student Connection area and their offering of the Cert IV in Frontline Management which extends a student’s experience at University and adds to their employability upon graduation.

3. Individual Student Led roles: Students opting for positions within the university that have a strong link to their particular discipline of study and thereby creating the link themselves to enhance employability outcomes. In some instances the student has then needed to advocate within their discipline area to gain the credit for this work.

The evaluation of the program in 2011 and its successful outcomes has invariably identified a number of challenges in the employment of Students as Staff which are guiding program initiatives moving forward:

- Evidence of a highly casualised workforce;
- Variations in the provision and quality of supervision of students with in work areas;
- Variations in the work readiness of Students as Staff;
- Ensuring broad access to opportunities and avoiding an “elite” cohort of Students as Staff who get every role;
- Ensuring the student can understand and articulate their own learning;
- Increasing the opportunity to link on-campus employment and studies and their LiWC.
Looking forward

US literature (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005) draws some favourable links between on-campus work and a range of engagement indicators, which unlike off-campus work, provides a growing argument for institutions to move in the direction of systematic on-campus employment opportunities for students. Not only does this initiative provide an income stream (in a safe environment) for students, but it also enables universities to develop good practices in the provision of work integrated learning on campus which can be transferred to partner organisations in the broader community. Examples include enhanced guidelines and training for supervisors of Students as Staff, and sharing of best practice through face-to-face and online Communities of Practice.

In support of work by Benckendorff & Blackman (2010), if further research can support the link between part-time work and useful integrative learning outcomes, then Universities exploring options for WIL may find a deliberate link between part-time work and study a useful alternative to more costly WIL programs. All of these insights can be utilised to develop further strategies to enhance the links and take the VU Students as Staff program to the next level. Strategies can include:

- Showcase existing programs to department managers highlighting how the links with study and LiWC have been achieved;
- Developing strategies to inform and encourage students to forge the link with their study programs as part of their on-campus employment briefing;
- Provide institution wide incentives for university departments developing employment programs with the link to study incorporated;
- Broker conversations between academic areas and university departments to collaborate when developing on-campus employment and curriculum innovations.

Conclusion

The Students as Staff program has been a major institutional wide initiative that has resulted in 1000 students employed on campus at Victoria University during 2011. A recent evaluation has confirmed the success of the program for students and the institution.

The linking of the program to study and LiWC had not been a major focus in the initial stages but despite this has grown organically in a number of university department and areas. The evaluation of the 2011 program identified a higher than expected level of linkage between students on-campus employment and credit towards their studies. However the data also indicates an untapped potential for strengthening the link between on-campus employment and study. Understanding the different drivers which have shaped the various models for Students as Staff can inform future measures to enhance this link.

The evaluation has also highlighted the increased role on-campus employment can play in retaining students in post-compulsory education, increasing student engagement with the institution, and further developing employability outcomes through the link between part-time employment and study.

Further exploration would be interesting to identify if particular cohorts of students reported higher levels of work/study congruence than students from other disciplines, and whether part-time employment can become a viable alternative to other WIL approaches such as internships and simulations.

References


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