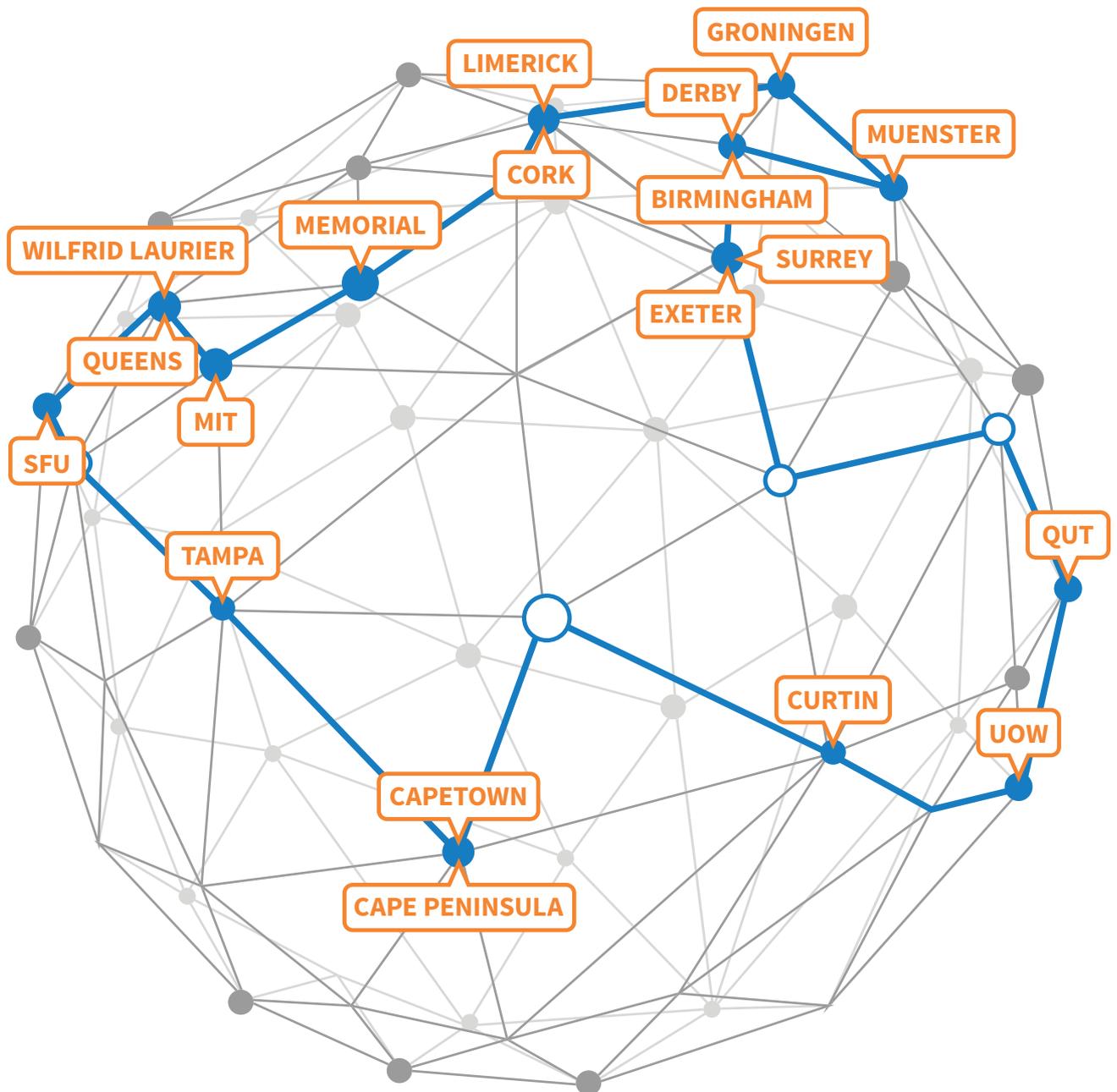


# Employability in a Global Context:

**Evolving Policy and Practice in Employability, Work  
Integrated Learning, and Career Development Learning**



Martin Smith, Kenton Bell, Dawn Bennett, and Alan McAlpine



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All are sincerely thanked for their contributions.

### **Martin Smith**

Chief Investigator  
University of Wollongong

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Queensland University of Technology



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# 1 Introduction

This research project was activated to explore trends emerging in the intersecting domains of employability, work-integrated learning, and career development learning. In late 2015, researchers, academics, and career practitioners from Australia, the United Kingdom and Canada gathered to attend an Employability Masterclass at the University of Wollongong. Attendees explored questions around employability in vocationally specific and non-vocationally specific degrees. The language and conversations highlighted the influence of global contexts on strategies and practices in transnational settings—specifically, how employability is defined and supported across the breadth of university activity.

[Graduate Careers Australia](#) funding in 2017 enabled the project team to progress the study with the aim of identifying critical learnings for Australian practice. The project team was [Martin Smith](#), Chief Investigator (University of Wollongong); Professor [Dawn Bennett](#), Project Investigator (Curtin University); Dr [Alan McAlpine](#), Project Investigator (Queensland University of Technology); and [Kenton Bell](#), Research Assistant (University of Wollongong).

## 1.1 Institutions Engaged in the Research:

- › Australia: [Curtin University](#), [Queensland University of Technology](#), [University of Wollongong](#)
- › Canada: [Memorial University](#), [Queen's University](#), [Simon Fraser University](#), [Wilfrid Laurier University](#)
- › Germany: [University of Münster](#)
- › Ireland: [University College Cork](#), [University of Limerick](#)
- › Netherlands: [University of Groningen](#)
- › South Africa: [University of Cape Town](#), [Cape Peninsula University of Technology](#)
- › United Kingdom: [Birmingham University](#), [University of Derby](#), [University of Exeter](#), [University of Surrey](#)
- › United States: [University of Tampa](#), [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#)



*“Employability reconceptualised as learning, as a concept, can create an environment for all stakeholders to hold a shared view.”*

## 2 Executive Summary

### 2.1 Overview

The research involved 19 institutions from eight countries and four continents. These institutional partners engaged in fact-finding and theory generation with the common aim of informing current and future employability policies and practices. This work aligned with the diverse aspirations of all higher education stakeholders and fostered communication between colleagues through open dialogue. The core research question was: *How is employability termed, driven, and communicated by universities internationally?*

### 2.2 Method

Data were gathered via semi-formal discussions between careers services leaders and academics responsible for learning and teaching practices at each of the nineteen participating institutions and moderated by a participant observer. Analysis revealed that the factors affecting employability definitions and effective strategic developments in employability could be categorised as follows:

#### 2.2.1 External Factors

- › Governments, in their policies around performance, transparency and outputs;
- › Industry-articulated needs regarding graduate talent, expressed through individual organisations, industry advisory boards, and professional associations; and
- › Students and their families expressing stronger views about returns on their investment.

#### 2.2.2 Internal Factors

- › University brand or profile (i.e., real world/work-integrated learning focused, or research oriented);
- › Policy, governance and the functional design of organisational and reporting structures; and
- › Learning and teaching strategy (e.g., recent or current curriculum transformation processes, emphasis on face-to-face versus online delivery focus, or variations thereof).



## 2.3 Key Concepts

### 2.3.1 Employability as Learning

Data analysis revealed that **employability reconceptualised as learning**, as a concept, can create an environment for all stakeholders to hold a shared view. Underpinning principles include:

- › Whether the purpose of higher education is at odds with employability;
- › Challenges such as definition and language, responsibility, expertise (careers services/ academics), the cost of higher education, and student expectations; and
- › Implications for careers professionals, the academic workforce, students, employers and industry regarding graduates' abilities to make economic and societal contributions.

### 2.3.2 Employability is a Process

**Employability is not an outcome, but a process**, with career development principles facilitating the individual to employ their abilities in lifelong and life-wide contexts for private and public good. Work-integrated learning (WIL) principles and practices, together with career development principles and practices, combine to enable transformative learning. Utilitarian or purely instrumental views on higher education can project a view that employability is critical in addressing productivity challenges, specifically skills shortages via first-destination employment rates. This view can result in a focus on the technical or discipline-based skills with little regard for meeting career development principles. The challenge is to ensure that intrinsically rewarded workers (graduate talent) are working in or with organisations where they are more productive and settled.

*When the 'employability as learning' frame is applied and underpinned by career development learning, national productivity challenges are more likely to be met.*

This frame has considerable benefits for individuals, organisations, economies and nations.

## 2.4 Key Findings

Seven hallmarks were identified as characteristics of a high-performing, employability-focused university:

- 1. Strategy and governance** – senior executives provide a compelling rationale and comprehensive strategy for informing and engaging all institutional stakeholders;
- 2. Internal partnerships** – senior executives lead and support respectful collaborations inside and outside the curriculum;
- 3. Learning and teaching practices and programs** are innovative and diverse in that they connect with all student cohorts, are scaffolded, are informed by industry, recognise excellence in employability development or career development learning, embrace transformative curriculum models, and both map and benchmark graduate competencies and attributes. These are explicitly communicated to academics, students and industry;
- 4. The messaging and language** between stakeholders is appropriately designed and consistent so that both internal and external stakeholders hear and understand the drivers of diverse views on employability development. As an example, the 'learning view' on employability can enable a more productive, collaborative and respectful relationship between academics, career professionals and industry, whilst the 'productivity and skills view' can result in less positive and compliance-driven relationships;
- 5. External partnerships** with industry and alumni are leveraged for mutual benefit;
- 6. Evidence**, harnessed through data collection, evaluation, and client feedback loops is based around appropriately designed metrics, which measure the process of employability learning and not merely first-destination statistics; and
- 7. Student partnerships** are leveraged to engage all cohorts and are harnessed to drive program innovations and ongoing refinements.



## 2.5 Stakeholders as Gatekeepers

Employability is a concept that has grown in currency with key stakeholders over the past 15 to 20 years.

The nomenclature around what business and industry, government policymakers, and universities and students want in relation to the term *employability* has ebbed and flowed over this period. The overlay of national, regional, and international contexts also plays a role in how employability is defined, driven, and practised under the purview of the key stakeholders and their specific perspectives, be it educational, economic, or social.

The 'learning view' on employability has the potential to enable a more productive, collaborative and respectful relationship between academics and career professionals. Conversely, this study has identified that the 'productivity and skills view' can result in less positive relationships between key players and, indeed, between higher education and industry. It is imperative that internal and external stakeholders consider the drivers for these diverse views on employability policies and practices.

Participants emphasised that employability development is a shared responsibility. As such, stakeholders are 'co-producers' of graduate talent as follows:

- › **The university:** Through learning and teaching activities and broader student experiences inside and outside the curriculum;
- › **The government:** Through policy and funding that value learning and teaching excellence;
- › **Business and industry:** Through policy and practice, including as mentors and placement hosts; and
- › **Students (and broader family support networks):** Through investments in support, time, money, and effort.



*“The need to explicitly articulate career development, career readiness, and career management skills has been a central tenet of employability practices.”*

### 3 Background

University graduates need to be quick-thinking, adaptable and innovative workers who possess the skills to navigate an increasingly competitive and constantly evolving workforce (Hagel et al. 2014). These factors require many graduates to construct their careers by putting together multiple, overlapping roles, acquiring new knowledge on demand, and positioning themselves within their own country and discipline as well as across national and disciplinary borders (Bauman 2012, Lehmann and Adams 2016).

In this context, it is unsurprising that the model of graduate employability has shifted over time from an emphasis on individual job-getting to one that emphasises having the requisite skills to obtain or create work. There is also increasing emphasis on work in which people “can be satisfied and successful” (Dacré-Pool and Sewell 2007, 287). This positions employability as a metacognitive capacity, defined by Bennett (2018, 6) as “the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan”.

Graduate employability is a focus of institutions of higher education (IHEs) in many advanced western economies, prompted in the main by new measurements and funding structures; increased regulatory scrutiny, massification of the sector; and increasing pressure for graduates to be globally aware and socially responsive

(Boden and Nedeva 2010, Siefert 2011). Alongside this is a shift in the labour market towards a more flexible, knowledge-driven economy with increased global competition for skilled labour and the prevalence of fragmented and intricate patterns of work. Labour market churning over the past decade also adds complexity to the supply and demand equilibrium that industry and governments aspire to achieve. On an individual level, the above factors increase the need for a return on investment when individual students and their families are investing so heavily in their higher education studies (Marginson 2014). These elements of change put traditional content-driven, delivery-focused models of higher education under increasing pressure (Ernst and Young 2012).

However, when the voices of governments and industry convey that the purpose of IHEs is to be focused on instrumental or utilitarian aspirations, the climate for curriculum integration and collaboration between academics and other key players (e.g., within university careers services) can be less favorable. IHEs have responded with a raft of employability initiatives ranging from work-integrated learning (WIL) and experiential learning programs (Freudenberg, Brimble, and Cameron 2011) through to co-curricular ‘awards’ and credit-bearing employability strands embedded within programs (Pegg et al. 2012). Some WIL or cooperative learning practitioners are recognising the benefits that career development can bring (Smith, Ferns, and Russell 2014) to their program design. Pegg et al. (2012), in



their review of careers service provision in the United Kingdom, concluded that interaction among career experts and those responsible for the design and delivery of academic content is critical to enhancing graduate employability. However, the utilitarian view of work-ready graduates, where career development is marginalised in favour of WIL, has skewed the Australian national agenda.

The need to explicitly articulate career development, career readiness, and career management skills has been a central tenet of employability practices. This need is evidenced in the writings emanating from the United Kingdom, ostensibly commissioned by the [Higher Education Academy](#) (e.g., Artess, Hooley, and Mellors-Bourne 2017, Cole and Tibby 2013, Pegg et al. 2012).

In Australia, the Federal Government commissioned [Employability Skills for the Future](#) (BCA and ACCI 2002) and the [Core Skills for Work](#) (DIICCS RTE and DEEWR 2013) development framework where employability is defined as career management skills, and other self-management and self-awareness skills. However, neither publication resulted in policy (or related funding) to foster these practices. This lack of change is evidenced by the low engagement of career practitioners and careers services in scholarship and curriculum-based practices.

The initiatives highlighted above, mirror similar moves in several countries, which signals a critical change in the relationships between academic programs and careers services. The rationale for these initiatives is recognition that careers services within universities offer a unique perspective on curricular development, and as such, their daily external purview can inform and enhance internal learning and teaching practices. Highlighting the changing relationship between academic programs and careers services, Farenga and Quinlan (2016) categorised existing employability initiatives in one of three ways:

- › Possessional, with a focus on possessing employability attributes;
- › Positional, with a focus on institutional and social capital (see Sin and Neave 2016); or
- › Processual, with a focus on the process of developing employability development (Holmes 2013).

A positional approach is often a ‘hands-off’ strategy in which students independently approach their careers service to fill specific gaps. This approach is perhaps the more traditional relationship, whereas a processual approach demands an integrative and interactive process of employability development that involves career advisors in core program delivery (Watts and Butcher 2008). Bennett et al.’s (2017) analysis of the employability messages on university websites indicates that research-focused universities tend to emphasise either possessional or positional approaches to employability, with the latter leveraging institutional and reputational capital to reinforce employability claims.

Whilst more sophisticated processual practices associated with employability have evolved over time and across national borders, concurrent commercialisation and massification of the higher education sector have often conflated the development of employability in favour of employment outcomes. When graduate outcomes are used as a proxy for employability, employment begins to override the employability agenda. Analysis of developments across national and institutional boundaries has contributed to a more in-depth exploration of the tensions between diverse higher education stakeholders. A specific focus of this enquiry has been the practices occurring inside and outside of the curriculum, together with their interface with business and industry. Bennett et al. (2017, 59) advocate for “a pedagogical shift towards processual approaches in which responsibility for employability development is shared” by academic and professional staff, students, and leadership. Making the distinction between functional and cognitive aspects of employability, the authors continue by reinforcing the view that embedding effective employability development requires a co-delivery partnership with careers services staff working alongside discipline educators.

How might such an approach be facilitated, and are the language, drivers, and communication of employability sufficiently aligned to enable international partnerships? This report and the research that underpinned it seek to create the foundation for such an approach.



*“How is employability termed, driven, and communicated by universities internationally?”*

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Background and Research Question

The study reported here resulted from an international conference convened in Australia by the [National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services \(NAGCAS\)](#) in November 2014. At this event, university careers practitioners and academics recognised the shared challenges, various perspectives, and vastly different languages of employability. The collaborators agreed that the concept of employability development is not, as is often expressed, limited to the functional aspects of *curriculum vitae* writing and interview skills. Instead, it involves the development of students' cognition and metacognition such that they become agentic learners able to apply their skilful practices and awareness in multiple settings and across the career lifespan (Knight and Yorke 2004; Bennett 2018).

The 2014 conversation led to a mostly qualitative study that sought to create a deeper understanding of employability initiatives and their contexts across regions. The research question was as follows: *How is employability termed, driven, and communicated by universities internationally?*

Potential research locations were defined in terms of countries in which graduate employability is a concern for the higher education sector, and in which both academics and careers services practitioners play a role in supporting employability development strategies.

### 4.2 Instruments and Procedure

The study was organised into two distinct but overlapping phases. Phase 1 commenced with a detailed literature review, which was updated throughout the study. The literature review led to an initial interview instrument, which after discussion and revision was confirmed for use in Phase 1 (see [Appendix p23](#)). Within the identified research locations, professional networks were used to identify participants in careers services and learning and teaching roles. In each case, the team selected potential participants who could give a representative view through their broad expertise or their involvement in national and international associations. Invitations were issued by phone, email, or in person. Participants were provided information about the study, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were also assured that their names would not be included in any publications arising from the research and that the findings would be generalised to protect confidentiality.

Once ethical approvals were obtained, nine Phase 1 interviews were conducted. Each university representative(s) was interviewed by a participant(s) from a different university in another country and also interviewed another university from a different country. For example, a United States university interviewed an Australian university, and then the United States university was interviewed by a United Kingdom university. Thus, **each university led an interview and was led through an interview**, and a **three-country exchange of theory and practice** took place. Whilst



this was logistically difficult, the resulting rich data and engagement of the participants with each other proved worth the effort. In each semi-structured interview (conducted via a conference call using a consistent set of interview questions), both participating institutions engaged, where possible, a senior learning and teaching academic and a careers services leader. Each interview was moderated by the project research assistant.

Analysis of Phase 1 data informed revisions to the interview schedule, enabling more attention to be paid to the most pertinent topics and issues in Phase 2 (see [Appendix p23](#)). This process ensured a rich and fluid flow of data. This second phase involved interviews with representatives from a further ten institutions, conducted in the same way and with the amended interview schedule. In total, 31 people were involved in the interview process: 20 careers services practitioners and 11 academic leaders. Of these, 12 were women. The separation between practitioners and academics is not clear-cut, as several practitioners had published academically and several academics had previously worked in careers services roles or in concert with practitioners at their universities.

### 4.3 Analysis

Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed before being checked and cleaned. Two researchers independently conducted initial coding, after which coding was compared, and refinements applied. Content analysis and dual coding enabled the systematic, replicable compression of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding (Weber 1990) and inspection of the data for recurrent instances (Wilkinson 2011). Two coders independently read the Phase 2 transcripts to identify any new themes. After this, all interview data were coded and analysed for emergent themes with the assistance of NVivo analysis software.

### 4.4 Limitations

The critical limitation of the study is convenience sampling through an established cohort. The authors do not seek to generalise the findings across all institutions or geographic regions.



*“Until the core business of universities—teaching and learning—is equally respected in policy and ranking exercises . . . tensions will remain.”*

## 5 Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Governance and Embedding a Cultural Shift

The drivers for an employability agenda appear to be ubiquitous; however, the uptake of a common strategic agenda and definition, from an institutional perspective, varies across the globe. The broader implications of industry and labour market disruption are having an impact. Institutional responses to this impact are influenced by institutional reputation, national policy perspectives, and university approaches to creating employable graduates.

In all cases, institutional representatives emphasised that the responsibility for employability is shared or diffused. This situation is both useful and problematic. It is useful in the sense that everyone sees employability as part of their business and should work towards that end; however, the absence of a consistent and institutionally agreed definition of employability can lead different groups to pull in different directions. This definitional disagreement can put all initiatives at risk. Despite this, some participants asserted that the connection with employability could be inferred from overarching university-wide missions, as opposed to institutions having a specific and shared definition of employability.

The design and delivery of employability strategies are ultimately driven by key performance indicators. These are, by definition, summative, and in the case of graduate feedback, subjective: they serve to focus the attention of institutions on the result of higher education rather than on the process of development. As one university careers director commented,

*“Ultimately, we can come up with any interpretation or definition of employability we like or prefer as colleges and individuals, or as an institution, or as professional services, but the graduate destinations key performance indicator<sup>1</sup> is the key driver in terms of establishing the foundation of the culture.”*

The critical point, as suggested by several participants, is that employability development should be embedded within the curriculum and be part of the culture of a university. As a careers director said, whilst reinforcing the importance of institutional support, a “strong belief in delivering within the curriculum around all things employability” is necessary.

At one Canadian university, one of the three strategic ‘pillars’ was employability. This emphasis led to the recruitment of a Vice President of Experiential Learning and Career Development. Alongside this, the institution had begun to link student activities such as community

<sup>1</sup> Graduate destinations survey data is collected in multiple countries between four and six months after graduation and focusses on measures of success such as full-time employment.



service and fieldwork, and both academic and support roles, to the employability agenda. Students were encouraged to link and reflect on their learning in relation to 12 institution-wide competencies. As such, employability was conceptualised across all learning and engagement activities to encompass ideas such as social engagement and entrepreneurship. The rationale for this approach was that “we can put all those pieces together and help the students get to a point ... where they’re very articulate about what they’ve developed outside of the classroom”. This insight gets to the core of students’ abilities to articulate what they have learned in a way that reaches multiple audiences, including potential employers.

At the same university, an accompanying experience guide helped students align what they were learning with opportunities within and beyond the core curriculum. The innovative aspect of this approach was that it avoided the tendency to have students ‘tick the competency boxes’ (the processional approach) and instead challenged students to plan and reflect on the process and outcomes of their experiences “in a more meaningful way ... talk about the skills you developed, how they related to what you were learning inside the classroom, how it would enrich what you were learning ... put the pieces together”.

To manage logistical issues, this institution worked with a software company to develop a system that would help with the administration, record keeping, and creation of institutional reporting data. This system has the potential to link employability with employment outcomes, creating more nuanced and compelling data for policy makers and funding bodies as well as for marketing purposes. Moreover, data gathered through an integrated processional approach have the potential to inform career and learning support for students.

A clear theme throughout the discussions was that successful employability development involves collaboration between careers professionals and academic staff. Participants also emphasised the importance of “shareable resources, tools and strategies”. As one participant commented, “I am 100% committed to sharing anything we are doing with other schools or colleagues ... I’m not in competition!” The shape of a shared resource portal merits further attention.

## 5.2 The Role of the Academic

Regardless of whether an institution had an agreed definition for employability, the positive impact of employability development on teaching and learning within participating universities was reported as significant by participants.

While many universities are placing a stronger emphasis than ever before on the skill sets of academics in teaching and learning roles, the area reported as lacking throughout this broad sample was institutional and educator understanding of career development learning and how it relates to the overall employability and academic success of learners. This highlights an interesting gap considering the strong consensus that the responsibility for employability is shared, and that teachers are the primary point of contact for students wanting advice on career directions (see also Bennett, Richardson, and MacKinnon 2016). Some traditional, research-led universities have relied upon their reputations to connect with the labour market. However, these institutions realise that it is increasingly important to work with students and faculty on non-technical aspects of employability in addition to the content knowledge of specific disciplines (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014).

The importance of ensuring that students, and ultimately graduates, are fully prepared for work, has led many universities across the globe to centre their efforts on WIL approaches. WIL is a valuable and effective career-development intervention; however, study participants warned that WIL is often viewed as a ‘magic bullet’. While from a career development perspective, WIL is only one strand of the possible strategies for the holistic development of students, it is an easy win for institutions and makes direct links with industry and employers. The caveat, of course, is that WIL experiences also need to be effective learning environments. They also need to be scaffolded before, during and after they occur, utilising appropriate career development frameworks (Smith et al. 2009) so that students can create meaning of their experiences and relate these to their broader development (see also Jackson and Chapman 2012).

The sustainability of employability initiatives was emphasised as critically important, and many participants reported that this is being addressed in their institutions. At a minimum, sustainability appears



to occur through conversation and through internal and external partnerships. The more embedded approach occurs at a policy level across the institution (shared responsibility); key performance indicators (KPI's) drive the agenda across all facets of a university's performance. While these KPI's can be broad in nature, often it is the employment agenda and rankings in international benchmarking (league tables) that are the focus.

Several institutional representatives spoke of adding questions to their national graduate surveys. These included perceived 'career confidence', which led one institution to review its development of career decision-making and self- and career-efficacy among students. Another survey found that peers were the most significant influence on career decision-making and employment opportunities. This insight led to an institution-wide initiative to engage students with multiple points of career contact and advice and to engage student organisations as partners. The same institution asked students how they preferred to receive information, how they made decisions, and what opportunities would most enable them to engage in career thinking.

### **5.3 Partnerships with Employers, Students and Other Stakeholders**

Partnership with students was reported as tokenistic in most cases; however, participants reported that this is beginning to change. At some institutions, learners were pushing the employability agenda by voicing their concerns about being prepared for the changing and fluctuating employment market. The ability of students to advocate for change was reported in multiple institutions and was related to several factors. In many cases, the student voice was being incorporated into the workings of institutions through various feedback mechanisms. In some cases, students were involved in the decision-making processes of degree design and structure, making their voices far more influential. In other cases, the delivery of employability initiatives was being designed and delivered by students, for example through a student-organised career fair or the activities of clubs and guilds. Overall, the student voice as both advocate and 'client' is likely to be a dominant force in future employability advocacy.

One participant, from an established and research-focused university, noted the adoption of "a driven

culture towards employability" in which "students participate at a very high rate". At this university, students' employability engagement extended to research, with over 90% of that institution's undergraduate students participating in research opportunities such as collaborative research into the efficacy of employability initiatives. These comments emphasise the importance of engaging with employability research and scholarship across and beyond the institution.

The involvement of the careers services across institutions varied. Participants reported becoming increasingly more involved in the committees that drive curriculum, and more embedded approaches to the work of careers services emerged as a significant development in recent years. This shift recognises the expertise of those within careers services and acknowledges that the employability agenda is a central tenet of students' higher education learning experiences. The authors note here that employability should be defined as a cognitive and meta-cognitive capacity developed through learner engagement with critical thinking and both self- and career-awareness. The irony expressed by many participants is that at a time of increased emphasis on employability development and graduate employment outcomes, the services with this expertise are under extreme budget pressures.

Ireland emerged as the one region where a strong national agenda, expressed as a national white paper (Department of Education and Skills 2016), is driving industry behaviour by recognising and rewarding industry-institutional partnerships as a return on national investment in education. There is also an active agenda in Ireland to focus on job and industry creation through educational initiatives and entrepreneurial hubs. This agenda has significant potential elsewhere, for example linking engagement with professional bodies and employers to national and international benchmarking surveys. Whilst Ireland strives to establish strategic partnerships across the country, minimal innovation was evident elsewhere in the transcripts of engagement, that is, beyond the usual with employers, on-campus events, symposia, and a focus on WIL. The challenge for society and institutions (universities and industry specifically) has been a change in mindset in this regard—where longer-term investments in partnerships and engagement can realise positive gains in talent participation and productivity in years to come.

## 5.4 External Stakeholders and Learning and Teaching Developments

Analysis of the interview data identified that a variety of key factors would, directly and indirectly, affect the design and delivery of employability strategies and initiatives. These factors may be externally or internally driven and are explored in this section.

Government policies (associated with various jurisdictions: state, provincial, national) are influencing employability strategy and practice, most noticeably in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom. Study participants in these countries identified a strong emphasis on employment outcomes as an indicator of the quality of university experience and the related return on investment for key stakeholders—students, industry, and government.

Rhetoric from industry has a strong influence on policy and practice in relation to job-ready or work-ready graduates. One academic said,

*“We have a tradition of having extensive networks of the industry advisory councils involved in some of our professional schools. [Several of our faculties] are heavily involved with industry councils today. They sit on the councils, nationally, internationally and locally, and they have membership on those councils as well. They have the people coming and getting advice to them about programming and experiential learning.”*

The combination of government and industry voices is manifesting in a perception from careers and academic practitioners that there has been a shift to a more utilitarian view of the purposes of higher education. As one practitioner said, “My sense is that just the concept of employability *per se* feels to many people at this university as too instrumental”. This view was stronger in Australia and the United Kingdom due to funding structures where the government was able to lead the debate around return on investment, whereas in North America it was pressure from industry, which was a factor in this development (also present in Australia and the United Kingdom). Industry voices are being heard from individual graduate employers, but also in a more functional manner via professional associations due to their role in the professional accreditation process.

The potential negative impact on institutions, where this view of IHE is held by external stakeholders, is the identified backlash or negative perspectives within the academic community. As academics engage with the employability debate, this potential for negativity may indeed erode the positive gains that are being made in many institutions. However, these positive gains are underpinned by specific characteristics being in place before and during the early and more mature stages of dialogue between the internal players: career practitioners, academics and academic leaders, and senior executives who have positional power to effect change.

## 5.5 Ranking and Reputation

Throughout the discussions, it was clear, as one participant stated that, “there’s no place that doesn’t think about ranking”. However, are rankings and institutional reputation at odds with employability? This study confirms that they are not. At one university, the quality of graduates was a key consideration when “leveraging other universities and institutional bodies” and “reputation really draws employers ... there’s no question about that”. That said, universities in multiple countries struggle to align rankings, which privilege research outcomes, with base funding which increasingly privileges employment outcomes. Until the core business of universities—teaching and learning—is equally respected in policy and ranking exercises, these tensions will remain.

## 5.6 Language: Strategic and Explicit

Employability must be explicit, or as one participant said, “make them aware of what they have learned ... and able to express this to other people, to employers specifically”. This sentiment was further elucidated by a careers director:

*“If our students do a community service project, for example, there are student outcomes that are written, that are mapped to our [employability] competencies ... then there are assessments of the learning that’s taking place ... and we are working on a common language for rubrics ... so that we are all at the same level—standardised. The involvement of students as partners in their development led them to be pretty active in the development of their employability.”*



For this institution, the next challenge was to capture the information so that educators, coordinators, students, and careers counsellors could map out students' development across their programs.

Many leading institutions were rethinking graduate attributes or capacities regarding employability, with some adopting existing employability frameworks and others taking a more innovative or personal approach. A characteristic feature of the successful employability strategies was agreement on an institution-wide framework. Discussions with employers heightened employers' understanding of employability development within higher education and, arguably, their expectations of interns and graduates.

Barriers to engagement in employability were often overcome using alternative language, such as 'student success' and 'critical thinking'. A particularly successful approach when working within curriculum was to

map existing curriculum in such a way that academics could identify where they were already addressing multiple employability dimensions. Thus, one institution explained their approach as "asking the faculty to explore the development of competencies instead of approaching them with the ones that we have". By using this approach, these outcomes could be made more explicit and could be mapped to assessment. Another strategy employed successfully with academics was to think about the benefit each employability dimension might have on student learning: "... Well, if I want my students to think critically and that happens to be something employers want as well, if I could show that to my students ... then it becomes easier to motivate [them]". In the same way, institutional cultures were seen to shift when aspects such as engaged citizenship were recognised as essential dimensions of employability which are highly regarded by employers.



*“Multi-national research, which can meet the needs of the sector, should be a funding priority for institutions, organisations and governments.”*

## 6 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed as a guide for key stakeholders. Some of the recommendations require specific direct action and are more easily deliverable, whilst others will require a staged approach across the sector and jurisdictions.

### 6.1 University Leadership

#### Institution-based recommendations

University leadership should develop a whole-of-institution employability strategy, which engages all stakeholders and encompasses the curricular and co-curricular space.

It is recommended that these approaches be adopted from the first year of study and that program or accreditation reviews form the trigger to embed employability. Senior executive teams at individual universities are advised to consider contemporary institution-wide strategies in relation to:

- › learning and teaching;
- › governance;
- › funding;
- › external relations and industry development;

- › internal and external messaging and communications;
- › data analytics; and
- › student engagement—with the view to assuring that all student cohorts have balanced participation rates in current and ongoing program innovations.

The senior executive has a critical role in providing a coherent and compelling rationale for a strategic platform across the institution, which sets a roadmap to inform and engage all stakeholders. One European university shared its strategy for embedding employability thusly:

- › it needs to be university-wide;
- › it needs to be both curricular and co-curricular;
- › all stakeholders need to agree on a common language;
- › there needs to be a commitment to both financial and human resources; and
- › policy change needs to include a commitment to engaging with national and international expertise and practice.

Messaging and language used between stakeholders, when appropriately designed (e.g., the ‘learning view’



on employability), can enable a more productive, collaborative and respectful relationship between academics, career practitioners, industry, and alumni. The 'productivity and skills view' has been seen to lead to less positive relationships between these key players. It is imperative that stakeholders inside and outside universities hear and understand the drivers for the diverse views on employability development.

A culture that contributes to the occurrence of internal partnerships, where faculties, academics and career practitioners (and other key portfolios) can engage in mutually respectful collaborations inside and outside the curriculum, will contribute to innovative program design. This employability culture can also be fostered through strategy and practice, where the scholarship of teaching and learning enables academics and career practitioners to collaborate on employability research and practice.

It is recommended that these approaches be adopted from the first year of study and that program or accreditation reviews form the trigger to embed employability. Employability language needs to be supported with examples. It also needs to be appropriately assessed to avoid 'tick box' approaches in both the curricular and co-curricular space. Students must become partners in their employability development, building agency through reflexive experiences that they co-construct. Additionally, an essential aspect of employability development concerns recognition and reward for educators.

*Exceptional work in employability development should be recognised in academic recruitment and promotion processes.*

### **Professional Associations**

Professional higher education and careers organisations should work collaboratively to provide leadership and advocacy across the sector.

Professional bodies (such as [Universities Australia](#) and university coalitions such as the [Group of Eight](#)) are encouraged to provide leadership between their educational institutions and other key stakeholders. Advocating for meaningful dialogue between internal and external stakeholders. This can lead to more

productive and mutually respectful discussions and outputs, which leads to acceptance across the sector regarding the characteristics/hallmarks that signal a high-performing, employability-focused university.

Alliances such as these may also lead to agreed definitions and the leveraging of policy and funding which might contribute to further scholarship and the achievement of good practices in these domains. This work would also include focused communications and collaborations with industry, including leveraging alumni effectively.

## **6.2 Learning & Teaching Leaders**

### **Professional Networks**

Regional professional networks should adopt a collective approach to synthesise employability policy and practice from around the globe.

Practitioner networks such as the [Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia](#) (HERDSA) and [Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited](#) (ACEN) are encouraged to examine policy and practice from around the globe, which has led to high-quality employability initiatives associated with scholarship, policy and practice.

In the United Kingdom, university careers services have been central to learning and teaching developments in relation to employability since 2003, when the [Higher Education Funding Council of England](#) established the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team, which went on to fund multiple Centres of Excellence in Teaching & Learning (CETL). At the time, the requirement that any university proposing a CETL must include active participation by their university careers service was a public policy which activated a multitude of active collaborations and partnerships across the perceived divide between staff in professional services and those in teaching and learning settings.

The United Kingdom's [Higher Education Academy](#) (now part of Advanced HE) also produced a series of scholarly publications around learning and employability between 2003 and 2015. Many of these publications illustrated the converging theories, policies and practices inherent to employability, for example career development (Watts 2006); work-related learning (Moreland 2005); and pedagogy for employability (Pegg et al. 2012).



In Australia, the academic-led movement of WIL has shown little concern to date regarding career development learning principles. The language and actions of the National WIL Strategy and the funding associated with this critical policy do not feature any career development strategies and actions.

Career development learning principles and practices are underrepresented in employability grants. One of the authors undertook a review (unpublished) of employability proposals submitted to the previous [Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching](#) during 2014 and 2015 and identified that of approximately 50 funding proposals, only two included a careers service member on the project team. Additionally, only five proposals referred to exploring the role that career development theory and practice might bring to the scholarship associated with employability practices and innovations. This review suggests the need for further integration of academics and practitioners to collaboratively drive innovative thinking and practical outcomes.

One powerful cornerstone of effective employability practice is the metrics used to measure quality processes and practices. Professional networks must facilitate mature and open discussions about what, who, how, and when we measure to assure and enhance quality. Simplistic measures which focus wholly on graduate destinations four months after completion of studies is not good practice. Professional networks must facilitate and lead in the development of appropriate measures and then advocate for their adoption across stakeholder groups inside and outside the university context.

### **Practitioners**

Careers professionals should add value to employability pedagogies by exploring deeper connections within academic disciplines.

Employability initiatives should leverage collective expertise of academic staff and careers professionals to engage the diverse student body effectively.

Key staff associated with learning and teaching are encouraged to design practices and programs which are innovative and sufficiently diverse to connect with all student cohorts. System- or program-wide approaches should be scaffolded and should map the competency/attribute outcomes throughout the learning journey of the students. They should be designed in a manner,

which leverages the expertise of both academics and career development practitioners, thus enabling more explicit understanding of learning outcomes by academics, students and industry audiences.

Underrepresented cohorts in employability and WIL-related initiatives (e.g., indigenous, low socioeconomic status, rural and regional students, and students with a disability) must be factored into program innovations.

The above assertions for the value that career development brings to a modern university and its stakeholders is supported by Hooley and Dodd (2015) in their [Careers England](#) paper titled *The Economic Benefits of Career Guidance*: “The evidence base provides insights into the effective delivery of career guidance and highlights the three main policy areas it can support: (1) the effective functioning of the labour market and through this the economy, (2) the effective functioning of the education system, (3) social equity”.

Further to this, recent exemplars in the United Kingdom at [Oxford Brookes](#) and [Reading](#), illustrate that career literacies are the cornerstone of employability and ‘graduateness’ (i.e., graduate attributes institutions aspire to develop) (Rust and Froud 2016). Self-awareness, criticality and self-actualisation align nicely with the deeper purposes of higher education, with career development putting students at the heart of the learning process (Watts 2008), thereby contributing to social inclusion strategies, and the first year experience (Lizzio 2006), and maximising completion rates and employment outcomes.

*Career-development learning, WIL and entrepreneurship all play a role in curriculum reform, not at the expense of discipline-based content and knowledge, but as converging pedagogies where critical reflective processes contribute to transformative learning.*



## 6.3 Careers Service Leaders

### Professional Networks

Professional associations need to foster the scholarship of teaching and learning practices related to employability. Further, associations should leverage their unique position to include industry voices and perspectives in discussion and program design.

Associations, such as the [National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services](#) (NAGCAS) in Australia, the [Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services](#) (AGCAS) in the United Kingdom and [Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers](#) (CACEE) in Canada, and the [National Association of Colleges and Employers](#) (NACE) in the United States, have a distinct and influential role to play. These groups serve (or should serve) as leading contributors to research and discussion around employability practices and quality assurance processes which underpin quality enhancement, along with the pedagogies which lead to transformational learning.

NAGCAS, AGCAS, CACEE, NACE, and like-minded associations across the globe are advised to foster the scholarship of teaching and learning practices related to employability. They must leverage their unique position to bring industry voices and perspectives to the tables for discussion and program design, and they are advised to act as brokers to highlight mutual benefits when the return on investment is paramount for external stakeholders, even when this may seem at odds with academic communities and networks.

*Critically, to change behaviours, the sector needs new metrics and vastly different models of funding, ranking, and faculty career progression.*

Mirroring the key role of academic networks, individual practitioners should lead the discourse on quality assurance measures to engage with quality assessments and enhancement processes. This should have a starting point where contributors feel engaged and valued, rather than quality being enforced by external stakeholders who are purely driven by data and other easy-to-collect and report metrics.

### Careers Practitioners

When careers practitioners are engaged and valued in the design of quality assurance processes, they will support and commit to this vital part of the employability strategy. Staff operating within individual university careers services also have unique insights into the needs and aspirations of key stakeholders connected to that institution, whether they are students, academics or from industry. This insight is at the heart of appropriately designed innovative practices, which can occur inside and outside the curriculum and which responds directly to the identifiable needs and contexts.

Proactively exploring deeper connections within academic disciplines can place the career practitioner in a stronger position to add value to employability pedagogies and practices through partnerships, which create stronger student outcomes. In addition, proactively exploring partnerships with other parties will lead to better practices and outcomes. Student clubs and societies can be leveraged for program design, student and industry engagement, and ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement strategies. External service providers may also deliver complementary strengths in services, products, tools and practices. Active exploration of these potentials—whilst resource intensive to establish desirable partners—can lead to improved program design and delivery.

## 6.4 Students

Students need to be active agents and partners in the development of their employability.

Students as partners in the design of learning programs and practices, student engagement and student experience, are becoming more widespread across the globe and are present in the United States, United Kingdom, South Africa, and Europe. In line with assuring the learning through feedback loops—together with achieving buy-in to deliver on the return on investment aspirations—a variety of innovative systems and practices are developing.

This finding is evidenced by one participating university, where all students engaged in “career registration” are given core employability teaching, followed with regular, two-way feedback.



*There is a need for unequivocal advocating for thinking that moves beyond career to the whole person; nonetheless, the engagement of students from the outset, coupled with multiple opportunities for development within the curricular and co-curricular space, shows the way forward.*

### **Learner Feedback**

Students need to be engaged in the governance, design and implementation of employability related programs and activities.

Individual students share the responsibility—along with other key stakeholders—to contribute to their own employability development action plans. Universities offer a host of opportunities to engage students in the core curriculum and co-curricular contexts (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Besides formally participating, students should provide feedback on program design, along with input into new program development. Universities in the sample are actively seeking input and comment from students in governance, design, and the implementation of actual programs and activities.

### **Professional Networks**

Student organisations should seek opportunities to contribute to the discourse on university education, its purposes and the return on investment.

Undergraduate and postgraduate student associations have a key role to play in advocacy and student engagement. Individual clubs and societies on campuses across the globe are finding ways to effect positive change in the learning journeys and workplace experiences of their constituencies. Moreover, the collective student voice is a powerful tool for advocacy and change.

Opportunities to provide comment and input into the discourse around university education, its purposes and the return on investment are many and varied for student associations.

## **6.5 Industry Leaders**

- › Individual organisations
- › Professional associations (e.g., [Certified Practising Accountants](#)), professional bodies (e.g., [Australian Industry Group](#), [Australian Association of Graduate Employers](#))

Industry leaders must develop sustainable ways to collaborate at the interface of education and employment.

On a global level it is instructive to note that graduate employer associations and university career development associations are either together in one common association (Canada and the United States) or separate (United Kingdom, Australia, South Africa).

At the education and employment interface, a nation's shared goals will focus on achieving higher levels of student satisfaction and engagement, better completion rates and employment outcomes, and then improved employee engagement and workplace participation and productivity. With this in mind, Australian stakeholders should activate a more extensive, strategic discussion to assess the benefits associated with North American models. Indeed, in Canada, developments in 2017 saw the academic-led WIL fraternity ([CAFCE](#)) partnering in major professional development activities with the career development and graduate employer association ([CACEE](#)), underscoring the connectedness of professional networks in the nation's talent pipeline. This recommendation has relevance for all stakeholders.

## **6.6 Government Policy Leaders: Local, State and Federal**

Governments must ensure that policy and associated funding are grounded in scholarship and evidence from within the sector. Policy must strive to achieve the bi-partisan support required to avoid unnecessary turmoil.

There needs to be a far stronger focus on the link between supply and demand, and a far stronger understanding about 'who does what' in the development of students' employability. This recommendation is as relevant to programs as it is to institutions and policymakers.

The framing and design of government policy, and the output and associated funding for these policies, should connect with the emerging scholarship and evidence regarding the value that career development practices and activities can bring to social mobility, workplace participation and productivity challenges around the globe.

Career development systems, appropriately resourced and underpinned by sensibly designed quality assurance hallmarks for strategy and practice, staffing, program design and delivery, and evaluation based around



well-designed metrics, will lead to an increase in the participation, completion and outcomes associated with higher education from a diverse range of student demographics.

*If nation-building is the cornerstone of government policy, then career building provides the foundation for all citizens.*

A short-term focus on actions to fill skills shortage wish lists from industry voices will not lead to workplace productivity improvements. Various levels of governments and various government agencies, which sit across the education/employment/workplace interface, need to engage in open discussions about employability practices: what employability is, what it is not, and what good practice looks like in an employability strategy.

Given the multiple career transitions individuals will navigate over their lifespan, governments must encourage career-ready graduates through policy and funding which leverage career development theories and frameworks and draw on lifelong and life-wide experiences to foster workplace productivity, so that workers are satisfied, rewarded, and motivated.

## 6.7 Future Research

Multi-national research, which can meet the needs of the sector, should be a funding priority for institutions, organisations and governments.

There remains much work to be done if employability development is to be adequately addressed across the sector. Future research might, for example, investigate the extent to which research-focussed metrics drive academic behaviour and how this might be ameliorated at the policy level. At the institutional level, research might synthesise case studies of academic career progression or reward and recognition strategies, which can energise institutional change despite the research-focussed environment. The growing number of institutions seeking to embed the expertise of careers professionals within the curriculum and in academic units merits significant attention and has the potential to avoid repetition. Similarly, there would be international interest in a review of graduate metrics and the simplistic reporting of these, particularly given the recent taxation data links discussed in the United Kingdom.

Definitional issues pervade this report and require urgent attention. A particular focus of this work should be to challenge the skills-based rhetoric to bring employability development into line with the purpose of higher education studies. Work integrated learning, positioned as the 'magic bullet' and adopted by many institutions as a core aspect of university studies, creates a considerable challenge for everyone involved in realising its true potential within the nexus of employability and career development learning and work integrated learning. Future research might bring together the excellent guidelines and frameworks generated in Australia and Canada to create an international repository of resources for the non-expert. Given that every one of these issues is common across geographic and political borders, there is significant potential for stakeholders to bring together and fund an international team, which can advance this work in a collaborative and timely manner.



# 7 Appendix: Research Instruments

## 7.1 Round One Discussion Questions

- › What is your institution's working definition of employability?
- › How does your institution promote an 'employability culture'?
- › What employability message do you give on the institution's website?
- › Whose responsibility is employability – does it come under career services, or the faculties, or a dedicated office etc.?
- › How does the institution contribute to the ongoing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) - including communities of practice or special interest groups - in connection to employability and career development?
- › What systems or structures are provided to support staff endeavours in the development of employability?
- › What role do students play in developing employability?
- › To what extent do you leverage other institutions and professional bodies and networks at the national and/or international level to drive and deliver an employability strategy at your institution?
- › What role does institutional reputation play in the employability of an institution's graduates? How do you and your organisation leverage with other institutions and professional bodies and networks both nationally and internationally?

## 7.2 Round One Reflection Questions

- › What are the key themes that you felt developed during your conversations?
- › What questions would you like to add, remove, or modify to the discussion?
- › How has your participation in this project assisted in understanding employability at your institution and your role in facilitating employability?

- › Do you think you will change any practices either personally or institutionally based on the discussion?
- › Is there anything else you would like to add to the research project or the topic?

## 7.3 Round Two Discussion Questions

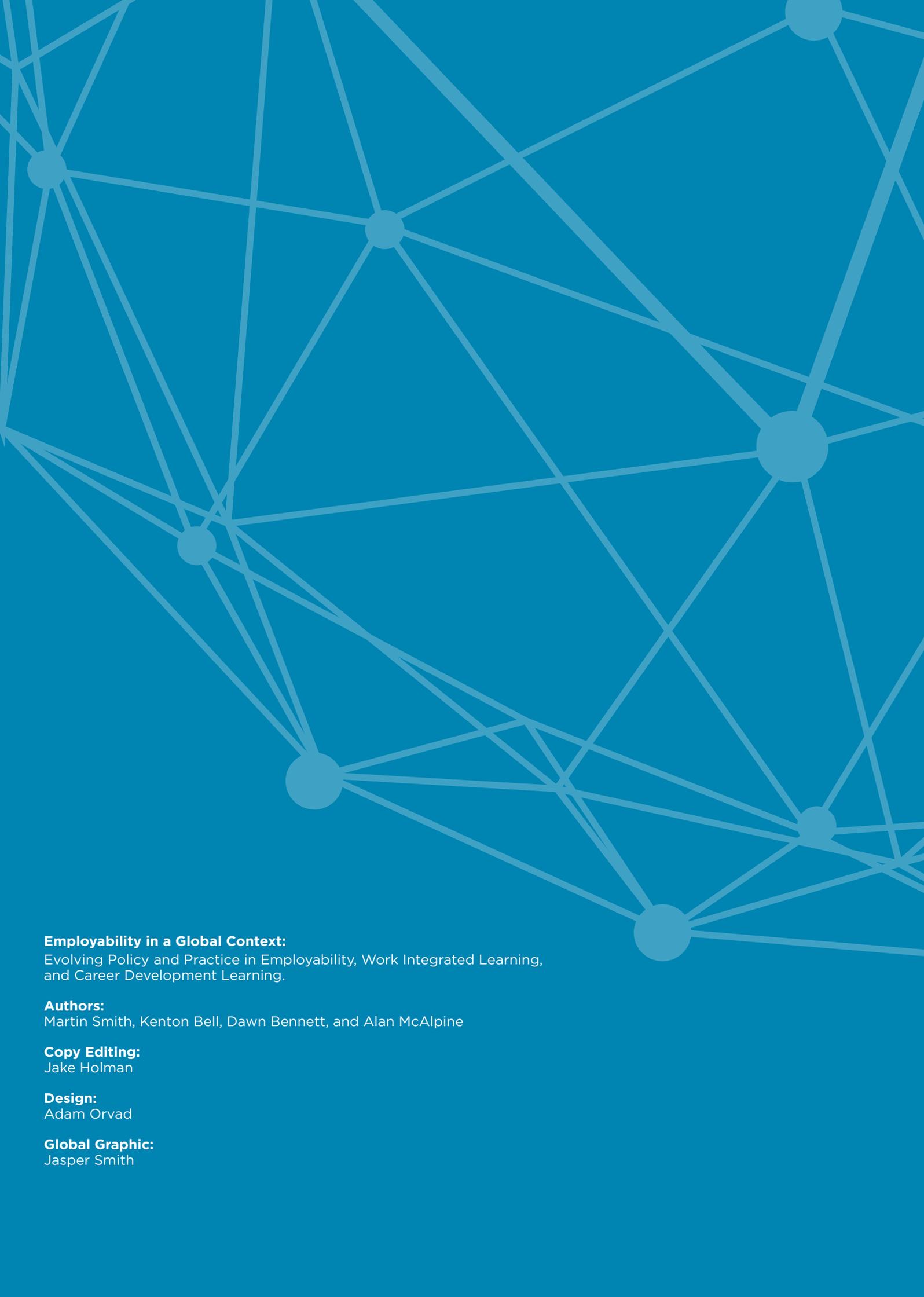
- › What is your institution's working definition of employability?
- › How does your institution promote an 'employability culture'?
- › Whose responsibility is employability – does it come under career services, or the faculties, or a dedicated office etc.?
- › How does the institution contribute to the ongoing Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) - including communities of practice or special interest groups - in connection to employability and career development?
- › What role do students play in developing employability?
- › To what extent do you leverage other institutions and professional bodies and networks at the national and/or international level to drive and deliver an employability strategy at your institution?
- › What role does institutional reputation play in the employability of an institution's graduates?
- › How can employability be embedded across programs, and how can this be sustained?
  - What policy changes are needed for this to happen?
  - What strategy might we use to understand what is and is not happening within programs?
  - What is the potential for shareable resources, tools and strategies – are they open to this idea?



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**Employability in a Global Context:**

Evolving Policy and Practice in Employability, Work Integrated Learning,  
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**Authors:**

Martin Smith, Kenton Bell, Dawn Bennett, and Alan McAlpine

**Copy Editing:**

Jake Holman

**Design:**

Adam Orvad

**Global Graphic:**

Jasper Smith