Management students – expectations and perceptions on work readiness

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the expectations and reality perspectives accrued in a preliminary management course and understand if they impart and embed real-world skills and develop work readiness.

Design/methodology/approach – Primary data collected for the research were qualitative. A total of six focus groups were conducted with a total of 52 students enrolled at a large metropolitan university in Australia. NViVO was used to code and analyse the data.

Findings – The study found that at the commencement of university studies, the expectations were simple like, making new friends, getting around the campus and settling well into the university culture, which over time extended to getting a part-time job, securing internships, memberships of associations, desire to participate in exchange programs and get work-ready by the close of the first year. The research outcomes show that those who held a part-time job while studying demonstrated a better understanding of the preliminary management subject matter taught in class and obtained better grades. Primarily, the preliminary management course did not specifically impart work-ready skills and it would be fitting to embed employability skills in the management curriculum from the commencement of their programs in the first year.

Research limitations/implications – Qualitative research is used to comprehend a research problem from the outlook perspectives of the local population it involves. The limitations of this methodology includes no objectively verifiable result, adept interviewing skills for interviewers, slow and time consuming during interviewing process and intensive category process also as qualitative inquiry is normally open-ended, the participants have more control over the content of the data collected.

Practical implications – The lack of skill mismatch and graduates who are not work-ready incurs significant economic and social costs. A number of policy implications emerge due to university-labour market links and skills mismatches and the impact on students and the labour market. The rise in unemployment and the skills mismatch seen after the economic crisis requires immediate attention. Job creation is crucial but so is the need to develop graduate with appropriate matching skills and qualities to do the job. Mandatory internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training for university students would help. Governments can provide financial incentives and subsidies to organisations providing the above services and working cooperatively with the universities to get students work-ready. Universities must raise the educational requirements over time as jobs become more complex. Universities can build communities of practice with the assistance of this scheme to enable students to interact with the industry professionals. An additional year of vocational training could be recommended for the graduating students. This would help the young graduates to get work-related skills. Wheelahan *et al.* (2015) state that building better links between education and work can help provide a more rational approach to vocational development. They propose the use of vocational streams and productive capabilities in the education system and labour market to achieve this.

Social implications – This requires a combined effort from all stakeholders. A systematic approach needs to be adopted. First, the gap between the knowledge provided by the universities and the skills required by the employers need to be reduced. Second, the employers and the universities should keep a watch on the labour market and develop strategies to meet the dynamic requirements of the labour market collaboratively. Third, career guidance will help inform students make a career choice to match the labour market opportunities. This should be a part of the policy agenda for responding to the lack of work-ready graduates in the labour market.

Originality/value – Learning and teaching activities must include industry interface and engagement right from the first year at university. The main findings from this research indicated the need for better understanding of first-year students' expectations. The two significant student expectations that emerged were "need for collaborations" and "industry interface".

Keywords Employability, First-year undergraduate students, Industry engagement, Work readiness

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The first year at university can be a challenging one, and students come with many expectations and are looking for support and direction to understand the new environment, as well as understanding how they might fit in and keeping their heads above water when it comes to the new syllabus and discipline. This is a major change in their life. They have joined a new culture with its own set of rules, both spoken and unspoken (Ellis, 2006, p. 9). They have a total responsibility of their learning, time management, balancing work, university and social life, varied methods of learning and increased loads of study, larger classes, often with less interaction with the instructor.

While accentuating that a university education buys student future earnings and many opportunities, students also need to make new friends and develop social skills and network and have fun, it is not wise and very short-sighted for universities to present the academic goals as the most significant purpose of attending universities. On the other hand, students must be prepared to face more realistic expectations as students were found to have vague expectations, and limited prior experience of the service, from which to shape their expectations. Students were found to form their expectations as they consumed the service (Chavan *et al.*, 2014). Their expectations were influenced by parents, siblings and friends at other universities and change over time. To prepare students more effectively for success, they need to be assisted in setting realistic expectations for what is required of them (Miller, 1999). From the university perspective, the students, their parents and the society should be regarded as significant customers of education whose expectations should be understood by becoming customer oriented (Stukalina, 2016).

The first-year experience (FYE) is especially pertinent as it has a direct effect on attrition and thus on university funding, which is often coupled to the number of enrolled students. The Australian Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (Department of Education, 2008) reward universities for excellence in learning and teaching, which is tightly linked to attrition rates (Brinkworth *et al.*, 2009). Many universities design specialised studies and programs for first-year students to attract students during recruitment (James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017). Previous research has identified the varied student motivations for selecting institutions like academic programme, career opportunities, parental influences, or "access" in terms of financial capacity, location, internships and work-integrated learning programs, etc. ((Binney and Martin, 1997; Chavan *et al.*, 2014; Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Moogan *et al.*, 1999, 2001; Payne, 2003; Soutar and Turner, 2002) cited in James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017).

The outcome of this research suggests that understanding the expectations of the students is crucial for universities for revamping the teaching, in the first-year programmes, to meet their outlook and for the sake of retention. According to Jamelske (2008), many institutions have begun to assign major capital to the "FYE" in an attempt to improve student outcomes as many higher educational institutions outlook on students as the main decision-makers as competitiveness increases in the education industry (James-MacEachern and Yun, 2017).

Most first-year students of management have never studied a management unit at school. At their first year at university, they are therefore acquiring new knowledge and skills and navigating ways in which they might apply the material in a real-world scenario. Research outcomes of studies conducted by Nelson *et al.* (2008) support this by stating that the students' expectations were diverse and over all positive but they indicated that their expectations about developing new learning skills were not fulfilled. Whilst students acquired new knowledge, they were not able to make the transition of this knowledge in an applied sense to real-world situations and challenges.

The curriculum provides them with a general overview of business in society, introduces them to all of the basic business functions and managerial responsibilities and develops

awareness of social, human and economic issues through a general unit in "Introduction of business management" or "Introduction to business principles".

The objective of this research is to explore the expectations and reality perspectives accrued in a preliminary management course by first-year students in higher education (HE) in a developed western country context and understand if preliminary courses in management impart and embed real world and work readiness skills because it is vital to introduce work-integrated teaching from the very first year (Bates, 2010).

Theoretical background

According to research conducted by Sternberg (1986), "we need to look further than cognitive measurements of academic performance". He suggests that intelligence can be measured in three ways. The first, componential, or analytic intelligence which he states is the ability to understand information hierarchically and through classification. It is associated with traditional educational and social experiences. People who do well on consistent tests and have high GPAs are inclined to have this type of intelligence. The second, experiential intelligence, involves the ability to infer information in altering contexts; for instance, problem solving and decision making. Finally, contextual intelligence is the aptitude to adjust to a changing environment, i.e. the ability to handle one's environment and negotiate the system.

What kind of intelligence does the first-year management course impart? And the answer is mostly componential or analytic intelligence. What about the experiential; intelligence and the contextual intelligence? Is there a gap between the componential intelligence and the experiential and contextual intelligence in the imparting of management education in the first year? Not many researchers have looked into these issues and sought to understand the perspectives of first-year students on this matter. The notion of work-ready and employability relates to the propensity of students to obtain a job (Harvey, 2001). What are the ways to fill this gap between theory and practice to make students more work-ready?

Expectations and perspectives of first-year students from their education

It has been suggested that the youth of today in the western world have become self-centred and demanding, expecting immediate gratification and have a short term focus (Lasch, 1978; Twenge, 2006). In addition, Twenge (2006) describes students as "focusing on yourself was not just tolerated but actively encouraged". Bergman *et al.* (2010) suggest that students have become narcissistic. Hill (1995) demonstrates our need to view these students' expectations with serious attention as consumers of our service. This provides challenges for the HE sector as they try to meet student expectations in their first year at university in business schools.

Students have indicated that they expect to be employable at the end of their degrees (Tymon, 2013). For many graduates, there is an economic imperative that they can acquire employment. They recognise the value of employability skills as the degree may not be sufficient (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Fisher *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, there is an increase in students' expectations from their education right from their commencement in first year (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2006; Moreau and Leathwood, 2006). They are increasingly cognisant of the need for additional skills and attributes for career success (Tymon, 2013). In their qualitative study, Barbarà-i-Molinero *et al.* (2017) identified that the choice of degree and institution was influenced by their earlier education experiences and the choice of degree was also an important factor in their professional identify development. This was even further expected by international students undertaking business courses in Australia (Harris, 2008; Jiang and Carpenter, 2013).

Of course, students expect that the quality of the teaching, skills, knowledge and curriculum itself are of utmost importance and these expectations must be met – they are indeed assumed (Keaveney and Young, 1997; DeShields *et al.*, 2005). A number of other non-academic factors, however, have also been identified by several authors including the student's feeling of "belonging" and perceptions of the institution's responsiveness and concern (Delaney, 2001; Elliot, 2002/2003; Thomas and Galambos, 2004).

The nexus between theory and practice in management education

In line with student expectations, there have been concerns raised by many scholars that the knowledge of the discipline of management is not sufficient without it being accompanied by skills and competencies that enable students to apply it in a real-world setting (Berman and Ritchie, 2006; Evers *et al.*, 1998; Jorgensen-James and Nouwens, 2003). This is further supported by the Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills report by DETYA (2000), which found that industry valued the following areas most in business graduates: academic achievement in a suitable discipline, time management skills, written business communication skills, oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, team working skills, problem-solving skills and comprehension of business processes. These findings are confirmed by a metropolitan university in Australia, with employers commenting on the lack of key generic skills such as written and verbal communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills in students (Jorgensen-James and Nouwens, 2003).

Student centeredness and instructional effectiveness are significant requirements for student satisfaction, and the academic and social content in the programme is of great importance when it comes to student satisfaction (Garcia-Aracil, 2009; Stukalina, 2016).

The practice of participation of employers in educational activities of educational establishments such as universities and evaluation of education quality expands, as employers need guarantees that they will be able to find specialists of required qualifications in the labour market, who will be able to start working at once. More and more employers are engaging with universities as they need quality, work-ready graduates (Ictenbas and Eryilmaz, 2011; Bailly, 2008; Niţă and Goga, 2014; Fisher *et al.*, 2017; Zaytseva *et al.*, 2017). Industry opinion on the competencies of management graduates continually reveals dissatisfaction with students' soft skills (Calás and Smircich, 1990). Many practitioners seek the skills gap to be filled to complement the cognitive skills developed through the discipline-specific knowledge. This gap may be addressed partially through any opportunities for experiential learning, work-integrated learning and the like. These activities are important in skill acquisition and refinement of bridging the gap between theory and practice and will complement on-campus learning (Cranmer, 2006). Students can expect to build on the foundations of theory learned in the first year in a traditional classroom setting and start to apply later in their degrees (Coll *et al.*, 2002).

Many university programs do not conform to the requirements of employers. Previous research shows a gap between competencies and skills of students (Singh *et al.*, 2013) and the work-ready skills required by employers, resulting in a lack of satisfaction from the employers (Sirat, 2010; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2015; Zaytseva *et al.*, 2017). Reports have indicated insufficient attention to ethical behaviour and standards, internationalised business management, entrepreneurialism, communication and people management skills (Jackson, 2009). Barbarà-i-Molinero *et al.* (2017) explore the factors that influence professional identity development in HE and point out the time students spend at university is an important period for the formation of professional identity and become work-ready (Pratt *et al.*, 2006; Cohen-Scali, 2003). They identify that universities are changing to practice-based pedagogical curricula (Reid *et al.*, 2008; Trede *et al.*, 2012) to enable them to develop work-ready graduates who would assist in maintaining their countries to be more

competitive (Montero *et al.*, 2012). Management practices have been well established in HE as a much-needed discipline area as it educates and trains up and coming professionals. However, scholars have found that there is a greater emphasis on the discipline-specific knowledge of management rather than the softer skills that students require as they seek employment (Pant and Baroudi, 2008). The management discipline still appears to place greater emphasis on hard skills at the expense of the softer human skills. The criticisms of many approaches to teaching management focus on the overconcentration on the technical skills. More emphasis is needed in the employability skills as they are seen as complementary (Yen *et al.*, 2001; Adam and Groves, 2007). Consideration needs to be given to programs that develop skills that are important for students in their future careers. It has been found that management students are not developing these employability skills in their degrees as appears to be required by employers (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Wilton, 2008). These programs are often attended by large student cohorts who can make it more difficult to teach the soft skills. In addition, managerial jobs require a vast array of soft skills and the variability of jobs that are undertaken by management students upon graduation may be too demanding to cover at a university setting (Wilton, 2008; Keep, 2004; Skills Advisory Group (SAG), 2004).

Many of the softer skills reported as being developed on management degree programs have been reported as extremely useful by students, particularly in reference to their employment. These skills include problem-solving, teamwork and communication skills. However, the main concern for graduates is that, students tend to perceive their programme as providing the basis for skills development, rather than the focus is on the skills development itself (Wilton, 2008).

The research context: new modes of teaching for real world application
The traditional lecture style of HE has been challenged in recent years as being out of date in terms of reflecting learning required for real-world experience as well as to accommodate changes in the learning styles of the student cohorts. Several innovations that are in place at present are discussed below.

Experiential learning theory relies on the works of scholars of human learning including John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Jung, Paulo Freire, Carl Rogers and others, and this has evolved into a holistic model of the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning activities can provide students with a direct encounter with business issues (Chavan, 2011). They integrate academic studies with work experiences in their chosen majors or careers, where the student is confronted with making decisions that are real and applied (Experiential Education Standards, 2004). Experiential learning includes cooperative education placements, internships, job shadowing and classroom projects and activities requiring business solutions (McCarthy and McCarthy, 2006). Problem-based learning is a type of experiential learning that involves students solving problems as they reflect on their own experiences (Boud and Feletti, 1997). Students are the active participant as they develop strategies and construct knowledge (Hmelo and Ferrari, 1997). This mode of teaching has been known to develop life-long learners as well as more intrinsically motivated students (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). These activities can be presented as case studies, simulation games and online industry projects (Chavan, 2009). The inverted classroom is another innovation of recent times to allow students to apply knowledge of the real world (Findlay-Thompson and Mombourquette, 2014). Often with the assistance of technology, students apply the knowledge in classroom activities. Instead of a lecture format, students come to class having understood the theory and are asked to apply it in the classroom setting under a series of activities. Strayer (2010) found that this method of teaching enhanced cooperation, innovation and task orientation of students. Whilst grades were not found to be changed, there was an increase in student engagement (Strayer, 2010). Online games and

simulations that integrate educational theory and game design can provide engaging learning experiences for students. It is an experiential learning model where students can apply theory in a gamified setting (Kiili, 2005). The ability to solve problems is one of the most significant facets of human competencies; therefore, a goal of business education can be to provide opportunities for students to encounter novel situations (Holyoak, 1991; Bruer, 1993). Games provide a meaningful framework for offering problems to students and have been found to be well received in business schools (Daruwalla *et al.*, 2006; Lean *et al.*, 2006). The research context for this study was a preliminary management course which included topics such as decision making, planning, organising, coordination and control, the manager's environment, forming and managing teams, organisational culture, human resource and ethics.

Embedding employability into the management curriculum
The accountability for student employability has made significant inroads into HE. As a core competitive matter and an on-going challenge for HE, employability is now a vital element within the teaching and learning agenda (Patrick *et al.*, 2015). Past research has indicated employers' discontent with the work readiness of graduates and lack of skills and competencies which are required on the job, including subject knowledge, specialist skills and generic personal attributes (Connor and Brown, 2009). Pine *et al.* (1995) stated that universities need to acquire greater awareness of employers' current requirements to enable the curriculum to include industry engagement and work readiness skills. Knowledge can then be transformed into authentic learning experiences. Consideration of the nature of formal education for management students in their first year at university has been given by many scholars, particularly in light of employability. Baker (2009) commented that formal education increases individuals' formal and/or actual competencies and plays a central role in defining and shaping one's employability. De la Harpe *et al.* (2000) in his research stated undergraduate programs, globally, are not producing graduates with professional skills for successful careers. There was a huge controversy amongst academics that the insistence by institutions of incorporating employability skills into their teaching is stealing their academic freedom (Coopers and Lybrand, 1998). The academic literature has widely debated the role of HE in the construction and development of the employability of graduates (Nilsson, 2010). But Knight and Yorke (2000) put forth the notion much earlier clearing all doubts that employability can be embedded in any academic subject in HE without compromising core academic freedoms. Since then efforts have been made to embed employability skills into HE and management education in particular. One of the functions of HE is to assist students to improve their higher level competencies and skills to augment their long-term employability (Hartley *et al.*, 2002; Robles, 2012; Howieson *et al.*, 2012; El Mansour and Dean, 2016).

The method adopted to teach a subject will affect the extent to which it facilitates learning of the discipline-specific skills as well as the employability skills (Yorke, 2001). Knight and Yorke (2000) suggest work experience. Holmes (2001) suggested that if work experience is not a formal part of the degree programme, tasks should be set that explicitly and intentionally relate to the workplace, part-time work while studying at university was suggested by Bibby *et al.* (2000), teamwork assignments has been advocated over the last decade internationally (Dunne and Rawlins, 2000). Some studies have found a need to make links between teaching and assessment approaches for graduate attributes whilst catering for student diversity calling for changes in academic practice particularly as the employability skills are developed in the changing contexts of HE (Owen and Davis, 2011) Above all, there is a lack of collaboration between HE and industry employers to understand each other's needs (Dunne *et al.*, 2000). Given this combination of student experiences at first year and their expectations of application of theory to practice, the HE sector must pay attention to teaching and learning activities that may enable this transfer of knowledge.

Consideration must be given to the modes of teaching and ways in which employability skills can be embedded in the curriculum. In this way, HE is better serving the students as well as the industry. Research is required to better understand the gaps that currently exist from the undergraduate student perspective. This paper explores the following research questions that emanate from the gaps in the literature:

RQ1. What are the students' expectations and perspectives accrued in a preliminary management course and do they impart and embed real-world skills and develop work readiness?

RQ2. Is there a necessity to revisit the first-year management content and embed the first-year syllabus with employability skills or work-integrated learning?

RQ3. How do we embed employability into the preliminary management curriculum?

Methodology
Qualitative research was used for this study as it is especially helpful in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviours and social contexts of particular populations. The respondents included local and international students as such it is particularly suitable for using exploratory research as open-ended questions can be used and we can get realistic answers from the respondents in their own words which are meaningful, rich and exploratory in nature. Qualitative research is used to comprehend a research problem from the perspectives of the local population it involves. The limitations of this methodology include no objectively verifiable result, adept interviewing skills for interviewers, slow and time consuming during interviewing process and intensive category process also as qualitative inquiry is normally open-ended, the participants have more control over the content of the data collected (Yauch and Steudel, 2003, pp. 472-473). The study is a part of a wider study on student perceptions on quality education which adopted a qualitative exploratory approach. In this context, a qualitative approach allowed the researchers to explore students' lived experiences with their tertiary provider through a rich and informed phenomenological approach. In doing so, it also assisted the researchers to establish the validity of the different types of expectations identified. Structured focus groups were selected as the primary method for this study as they allow for an analysis of the meanings, processes and normative understandings of the participants (Creswell, 1998). The following focus groups were conducted with numbers as follows: domestic students' Focus Group 1 included three participants; Focus Group 2 included eight participants; Focus Group 3 included seven participants, and international students' Focus Group 4 included eight participants; Focus Group 5 included six participants; and Focus Group 6 included four participants.

Focus groups ran for approximately one hour, audio-recorded and transcribed. Informants were selected on a convenience basis from students undertaking undergraduate business degrees at a large metropolitan Australian university. Students ranged from those in their first semester and first year of study to those completing their final semester in their third year of study. The international respondents originated from China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Vietnam. Interaction was encouraged in the focus groups to allow the participants to discover experiences which were perceived to be most important to the group as a whole. This ensured that the process permitted the participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences to be explored openly (Thompson *et al.*, 1989). It also ensured that a rigid research agenda was not imposed on the participants at this early stage of the study (Lähteenoja and Pirttilä-Backman, 2005). The focus groups were moderated by the authors and a series of moderator-generated reflective annotations from each group were produced at the end of each focus group. A key objective of this stage was to elucidate

universal structures and themes concerning the nature and the fabric of the domestic and international student experience. Focus group interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. All the focus group discussions were externally transcribed and de-identified. The transcription resulted in 341 single-spaced pages and 130,704 words. The accuracy of the transcription was double-checked by the authors. All identifiers (such as names of the organisation, interviewers and participants) were substituted by appropriate codes to preserve confidentiality and privacy of the participating organisations and interviewees.

This paper presents the responses from the first-year student participants in the focus groups. The data were analysed using qualitative analytic techniques including coding and thematic development through NVIVO (Version 9.2), applying a general inductive approach and thematic analysis. This assisted in the identification of patterns, ideas, hypotheses, categories of information, theoretical elements and new concepts, as evidenced by the data. In the early stage of the open coding process, reading the data involved noting any interesting material about ways that the respondents perceived their expectations and experiences impacted upon their satisfaction. The coding of interesting observations is central to qualitative analysis. While the interesting data were coded, thoughts about why the data were interesting, and how they related to the research questions, were noted in memos. At this stage, interesting materials that were not perceptions but observations and assumptions were also coded, as these could later turn out to be related to some other new factors and dimensions.

Key to coding the data was the questioning of the data items around the research questions. Coding of focus group interviews took eight hours over four sessions.

The focus of this study was understanding the how students perceived and evaluated their FYE in a management course and what were student's expectations in terms of the employability skills that resulted from the curriculum. Coding of the qualitative data was undertaken to facilitate a more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation of the data. The coding process therefore assisted in filtering, highlighting and focussing on the salient features of the qualitative data to assist in categorisation and, more broadly, the meaning-making process. From this analytic technique, descriptive and interpretive frameworks were then formed concerning the broad and overarching themes identified within the qualitative data as per the recommendations of Creswell (1998). Expectations and perceptions were set up as codes prior to commencement of open coding of the data item. Initial open coding on analyses of the data items resulted in 116 codes. The factors were divided into categories or themes which reflected upon factors from the literature. These themes were merged into the following major themes. These included:

(1) expectations and reality perspectives;

(2) cognitive and Affective learning;

(3) engagement with peers, society and industry; and

(4) employability skills.

This final process involved identifying recurring terms and themes, noting absences and elisions, and observing relationships between themes. The next section presents snapshots from the focus groups that explore the major themes that were identified in light of the expectations and perceptions of undergraduate students in a preliminary management course.

Findings and discussions

Developing employability skills in business undergraduate programs will enhance graduate work readiness. Business school undergraduates place significant value on employability skill development in degree programs the importance of employability skill provision are consistent with some studies (Nilsson, 2010; Tymon, 2013) yet contradict others (Rae, 2007).

There appears to be little empirical evidence of student perception of skill development in HE, surprising given its prominence in graduate employability models and the importance of achieving student buy-in to the concept of work readiness. This study provides clear evidence of students' commitment to the skills agenda in HE. Despite widespread initiatives in employability skill provision in HE, gaps between graduate workplace performance and employer and student expectations continue to persist (Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007; Helyer, 2011).

Expectations and reality perceptions

In total, 60 per cent of the students stated that they did not have many expectations about university as they did not have prior experience, nor did they have a sibling or a friend who attended university:

> I didn't have many expectations of University because I didn't really know anybody that Had been through it before. Definitely I thought it would be more independent work compared to school and I thought it would be a lot more challenging (Focus Group 1 local student).

Whilst no expectations about the routines and content of their university experience, over 90 per cent of commencing students expected university to be different to high school:

> For me my expectations – actually I didn't think it would be that hard, but it was, for me! And there was a lot of freedom; you could go to lectures, you could not go to the lectures. It wasn't anything like high school which felt really controlled, uniforms and […] It was just really different. I'm not even sure how to explain it. Just too much of freedom (Focus Group 2 local student).

But their expectations of university life compared with high school were unrealistic when asked more on workload, feedback on work and access to teachers (Crisp *et al*, in press). Ready access to teachers was a common expectation:

> Expected some senior academic to give me advice on open day but had students, who said you cannot do this and that but they wouldn't say that you couldn't already do them. I don't know; I just remember it was really confusing (Focus Group 3 local student).

First-year groups thought it was important to attend most lectures and have enthusiastic lecturers and get quality education:

> It's just the way things have just panned out in the education sphere now, it's the information age, everyone just wants – education is the pinnacle, it's your competitive advantage as opposed to anyone else. It's something that we're lucky to have in our western liberal democracy here. I expect to get world class education, taught by enthusiastic good teachers as I am paying for it (Focus Group 1 Local student).

> There is a lot of power point teaching in all units and it is boring, I wish we had more guest lectures and industry visits and more interaction with business student (Focus Group 1 local student).

Expectations were not met as large classes, disengaged teachers and lack of real-world exposure appeared to detract from the FYE. The need for small classes, making friends and social interaction and working in groups was reiterated:

> Mostly I spent my time studying by myself, so I'm sitting in a large lecture theatre with 300 people and just freaking out. It was very difficult to adjust and make friends (Focus Group 2 international student).

An additional point of view related to the unmet expectations related to issues around group work. Students did not believe they had the preparation or skills to effectively contribute to group work:

> Because it was a higher level of education that you would find more motivated and more engaged people studying with you than potentially you would necessarily find at school I've encountered a

lot of very poor motivated, poor enthusiastic, poor kind of engaged people in my groups, which has actually made it a bit of a down kind of semester (Focus Group 3 local student).

It appears that there are several issues that have been identified. First, there appears to be a high level of disengagement amongst the students in first year as they undertake this group work. This is a surprising outcome as the first year would be when students should be the most motivated and engaged in this work at university. Second, students did not seem to feel prepared to undertake these assessment tasks, which may be attributed to the lack of attendance required as well as the disengaged academic staff:

During the process of group working [...] Group work is not really group work here where we learn to interact and confront other people. The groups just divide the work and off they go (Focus Group 6 local student).

In total, 20 per cent of the first-year students who discontinue their education stated two reasons. The quality of the teaching was an issue for these students in this situation:

There are some tutors who have such strong accents it is difficult to understand them and they don't understand us either, this does have an impact on student learning [...] it's not helping (Focus Group 1 local students).

Inadequate or poor interaction with teaching staff was also mentioned by 30 per cent of the students as a reason to discontinue with studies (Long *et al.*, 2006):

I mean, you're given your lectures which are meant to be options that you don't really have to attend all of them, which I found surprising. I thought there'd be more compulsory. There was minimal contact with the lectures and the tutors which was very different from school (Focus Group 2 international student).

There is an opportunity for universities to consider a change in the freedoms afforded to university students as boundaries and attendance requirements may indeed increase engagement as well as make the transition from high school to university more streamlined. In this way, HE may lead to better outcomes in terms of both discipline-specific skills as well as employability skills.

The gap between the expectations and the reality perceptions were most obviously witnessed from international students:

You know, huge campus and I wanted to meet new people from different countries. Also I wanted to experience this new way of teaching. There are so many other extracurricular activities that you can involve yourself in. At first I think it would be really great, like, have a lot of friends and you enjoy university. But when I actually come into university I think it is really hard because this my second language and it's really hard for me to adapt with the life. I think the expense here is just huge and I have to worry about it and I have to go to work, cook and wash and everything just disaster at first year (Focus Group 4 international student).

There appears to be many obstacles initiated by the university that may inhibit students, in their first year, for local and international students, to be successful and develop a sense of ability to be able to show the relevance and application of theory to the real world.

Cognitive learning
The cognitive aspect of learning is referring to the applied problem solving. It is going beyond the memorisation of a procedure to solve a problem towards making decisions about the selection of the right procedure to adopt to solve problems. The secondary school curriculum focusses too much on teaching problem solving through rational applications of formulae and not applied problem solving. This poses a challenge for first-year students

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making the transition from high school to college. Some will say things like, "That test question wasn't taught in class or it is outside the text book" as a complaint because students do not understand the difference between memorisation of facts and applied problem solving, deep and surface learning:

> I learned a lot yet did not get good marks, I don't know what to expect as the questions in the exam were different to what was taught in class (Focus Group 2 local student).

The expectations about lecturer are teaching skills, language skills, accent and quality teaching was something they indicated affected their cognitive skills development:

> Sometimes I can't understand my tutors because – I cannot understand their English accent. It's not that they're being racist, it's just sometimes there's a language barrier (Focus Group 1 local student).

Communication and feedback has always been a common problem at the first-year level (Crisp *et al.*, in press):

> I was not happy with my marks and the feedback I received on my first assignment so I send them (my lecturer) an email and they never replied and I get an automated sort of reply stating (to) please contact the tutor at consulting hours and then I never got the answer back. So that can be a bit annoying (Focus Group 2 international student).

This is not an acceptable level of engagement when students are in their first experience at university and requiring assistance in the transition from high school to the new routines and processes.

Students found that that they had obtained no education in the application of the knowledge that learned within the theoretical lectures and tutorials:

> I don't know what I learned was beneficial to me till the time when I was asked to implement the OH&S policy at my part time job. That is when it dawned on me that I had heard about the importance of the OH&S policy in firms but had no idea how to implement it (Focus group 3 local student).

Affective learning

The affective domain describes learning goals that highlight an emotional tone (Bloom *et al.*, 1956). A large number of such objectives in the literature are expressed as interests, attitudes, behaviours, appreciations, values and emotional sets or biases (Krathwohl *et al.*, 1964; Shephard, 2008). As part of the affective learning, there are social benefits that are outcomes of university learning. These social benefits include the emotional parts of the relationship between people, and in this context, are between academic staff and students as well as between students. It also includes the recognition of achievements, friendships, and the experience of shared purposes (LeBlanc and Nguyen, 1999; Gwinner *et al.*, 1998). The social aspect of HE is important, as social networks facilitate the educational process, and also offer a personal support networks which allow students to cope with, and navigate, the challenges of tertiary life:

> I felt sad that my friends were at another University and it was week five and I had no new friends (Focus Group 1 international student).

A lack of social benefits can lead to reduced satisfaction and performance at university. Students may be more engaged with their learning if they have a support network at university that may build confidence in their learning. Evidence suggests that they expect to make local friends, and are open to, and desire, greater contact (Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Ward, 2001a). There are direct comparisons made by students between their secondary school experience and university experience. The individualised attention they received in

high school was compared to the impersonal nature of classes in university subjects, especially those with large numbers:

> The close rapport between staff and student is definitely non-existent due to the large classes (Focus Group 2 local student).

Students outlined common tangible aspects of university life which shaped their perceptions of a high quality tertiary experience:

> I liked the campus on my first visit and the administrative arrangements they were much organised […] but I later found out that I had not seen much, it is vast and beautiful with modern buildings and state of the art library (Focus Group 1 local student).

> I love the campus here. They've got a huge big grass. I love that. Yeah, I usually sit on that grass when I get a break. Yeah, I love that because in Hong Kong our campus is really, really small (Focus Group 2 international student).

> There are some days when you can go (this large campus) and you miss home so you need your friends from back home where you can talk and stuff (Focus Group 5 International student).

It appears that the aesthetic nature of the university was appreciated by the students; this unfortunately did not translate to improve the affective domain of learning. In the educational literature, several authors agree that the affective domain is essential for learning, but it is the least investigated. The affective domain of learning is also the hardest to evaluate (Bloom *et al.*, 1956). The majority of the efforts in teaching typically go into the cognitive aspects of the teaching and learning and most of the classroom time is designed for cognitive outcomes. Evaluating cognitive learning is simple but appraising affective results is difficult. Thus, there is significant value in appreciating the probability to increase student learning by exploring the affective domain.

Engagement with peers, society or industry
Student engagement focusses on the extent to which students are engaging in activities which HE research has shown to be linked with high quality learning outcomes (Krause and Coates, 2008). Engagement as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" ((Kuh, 2001, p. 3) in Krause and Coates, 2008). The first-year students were struggling with financial issues, language barriers, loneliness and the adjustment to self-paced studying:

> Like, when I came I just under 18 so I live with my guardian but I also to pay them and I have to work besides study. It is difficult to engage in other […] extracurricular activities. I don't have time to study (Focus Group 4 international student).

These difficulties of students who arrive in a new unknown university, in potentially a new country and at young ages, add to a sense of emotional distance when the students had come motivated and expecting to become socially integrated into the university life. Language barriers also international students spend more time on their study, reducing their opportunities for other forms of engagement in university life:

> I expected us to be close to our lecturers because that's how we are in our home country. We're very close to our teachers. But here we have that gap. I don't know, personally, I make an effort to talk to my lecturers and stuff. With tutors it depends because, you know, but you want to get close to your lecturers. But there are just so many of us. You put, like, 200 in a room, you don't have the time (Focus Group 4 international student).

The notion of engagement encompasses an understanding of the affiliation between students and institutions. Institutions are accountable for creating an atmosphere that make learning enjoyable and affordable to learn. The ultimate responsibility for learning falls on

the students. The nature and of learning is reliant on how the student makes use of their resources Astin (1985) and Pace (1979) agree that an individual's involvement or quality of effort plays a central role in shaping the extent of development and learning at university. Student engagement is a result of the active interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions:

> I guess probably you can try to provide more opportunity for locals then to kind of get to know the international students and vice versa because well sometimes people want to be friends with them but it is always hard to make the first move. But if the uni has this kind of networking session that helps people to get along with each other than probably is better (Focus Group 6 international student).

> Like I constantly in the first semester I had this fear that I'd just missed something because I hadn't seen it online or something. It would have been good to engage with students from the unit but I only got to see them during lectures and tutes where we did not get an opportunity to talk much (Focus Group 1 local student).

> That was something I had to get used to and then I thought there would be – like clubs and committees but it's really just like, if you want it, you'll have to search for it yourself kind of. I was used to teachers always reinforcing everything and that wasn't there anymore (Focus Group 2 international student).

> And I've joined a few committees so I've made a lot of new friends, and yes, got pretty good by the end of the year as we were invited to social meetings and outings (Focus Group 2 international student).

> Yes, large classes and there's not that student/teacher relationship. Better communication between staff and the students so with emailing your tutor – I know that the University has a tight budget but because tutors are casuals they don't usually have email addresses (Focus Group 1 local student).

This lack of engagement has led to anxiety and lack of clarity in terms of expectations lead to decreased motivation and confidence in learning at university. The literature acknowledges that the more frequently students interact with peers in the learning community in educationally purposeful ways; the more likely they are to engage with their learning (Gellin, 2003; Terenzini *et al.*, 1999):

> I actually – my first semester I didn't really want to come to Uni but now that I've found friends and I found there's a spot that's really chilled and you can just stay there (Focus Group 1 local student).

> Yes, it's like friends basically. It's like lunch breaks and things, you can just chill and get away from the studying so it's good just being here, like friends, and just hang out without even needing to do much or anything (Focus Group 2 Local student).

> I think it would just be good to have like, not even like a close relationship with your tutor, just like be on communication terms, just being able to really ask them a question. Because sometimes I go to a tute and there's no time to ask him any questions and he has to rush to another class and people are coming in already. So there's no time and then after that it just takes another week for you to see them again and it's just too late for the question (Focus Group 5 local student).

Collaboration between academic staff and students is required for improved learning, both in direct and an indirect sense (Coll *et al.*, 2014; Kohli *et al.*, 2016). It can contextualise knowledge in a conversational context, extend material outside "formal classroom" settings, build learning centred networks, allow individuals to demonstrate their knowledge, expose the negotiated and generative nature of knowledge and enhance interpersonal skills:

> The Uni does kind of facilitate social though, like U-Bar. Isn't that – that's all run by the Uni isn't it? Yes, so they already do, I think, go their distance because U-Bar is so interactive and they're doing those Thursday night things and Conception Day; that's a huge social event. So I feel like socially they're meeting their target for sure. Because I see – I don't really see it as their need to facilitate friendships. I see it more education-wise. But I do think they are doing a good job of that too (Focus Group 4, local student).

> We can have more, like; international student can have more connection with the local student. Because actually I find really easy to make the international student friend, like, in here pretty much easy. But for the local, because my major got so many local students, like, in our class. But actually found we can talk really friendly but from deeper I found the cultures are different. For the age people is okay. They more like to talk to you, but for the young age they just want to make their own friend. Maybe all their friend get together. So I find that's the hard part. But ideal more understanding on that. It doesn't make me feel not really good (Focus Group 5 international student).

> I think like before I went to university and I imagined that there would be like not only just focus on studies because I'm really down with studies since like, just study or writing something and I hate it. But I think that university provide like lots of chance, like you could go in and you can have a different style life, like the volunteer program at this university that I'm going to apply for the next semester, the volunteer for the refugee monitoring, and some other, I think in Bankstown or some other place. And I think it's a really good experience for me to have like volunteer program and also like some other activities like she mentioned (Focus Group 2 international student).

To improve engagement for our students, universities might need to consider opportunities in the classroom and their assessment tasks that enable more collaboration with academics and students that go beyond the extra-curricular activities that are available on campus. In this way more, students may be engaged with the content, be better prepared to apply the knowledge to the real-world application, build networks for future careers and have reduced anxiety as they approach their learning.

Employability skills embedded into the curriculum

Students need to get work-ready and the university curriculum needs to embrace work-integrated learning to achieve this. But is this happening in reality? Students want to know what job they will get after completing this degree right from the first day at university, but does their education really get them work-ready. Evidence below clearly shows that there exist gaps between graduate workplace performance and employer needs and student expectations:

> I think quality education is like (to be) more practical for […] university has to provide […] the student has to know if you study this one (subject), what, how to apply it in your world. I mean if you were studying accounting and you were doing for example like an introductory unit in accounting and then how to apply this one in the real world should be taught from the first year The university has to lead the student, the reason he(she) is studying this subject (Focus Group 6, international student).

> You have a lot of volunteer groups at this university and you get free breakfast sometimes with the iClub Social Groups and BBQ's and, it's fun once in a while. When you don't want to cook you can just for the free food […] but you also meet new people and make new friends it is a way of networking (Focus Group 5 international student).

As the university fees keep rising ever year, employability and getting value for money and a good return on investment is high on every mind of first-year student's right from day one. Also, considering the competitive nature of the graduate positions and the job market, students are trying their level best to acquire as many skills as possible whilst at university. Their commitments outside of university such as paid work equip students with job interview experience, development of teamwork and interpersonal skills as well as the opportunity to apply theory to practice. In addition, employers now expect graduates to offer more than a good academic record and degree; they also look for work experience (relevant if possible) and evidence of "employability skills" such as communication skills, team work and planning/organisational skills. They are seeking "rounded individuals:"

> I found it's very hard for international student to get internship from real company. Many of my friends went to career services to get internship, like at the end of the day the company asks do you have PR or are you a citizen no, so sorry I can't do anything. That's really, frustrating for us (Focus Group 6 local student).

Conclusion and further research
It is never too early to start boosting employability or work-ready skills for first-year students.

Employment and employability are a multifaceted phenomenon that involve more than the acquisition of cognitive skills (Yorke, 2006). Employability is most often linked with more than qualifications (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), it means being work-ready (Nilsson, 2010), being able to work in collaboration (Bradshaw, 1989; Riebe *et al.*, 2010) and enhancing critical, reflective abilities (Harvey, 2001) and more.

By understanding the perceptions of first-year students in a preliminary management class, we have gained some insights into the expectations and realities of these students as they attend lectures and tutorials with a view to understanding and applying management theories and skills to develop employable skills for future work opportunities.

Responding to the research question *RQ1* exploring students' expectations and perspectives accrued in a preliminary management course and whether they impart and embed real-world skills and develop work readiness, the primary data that have been presented has found that students' expectations have not been met in terms of the development of the softer skills such as social benefits, affective skills, lecturer/student interaction levels and student engagement during their learning. This has been supported by the research conducted by (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2009), which was based on a corroborate employability framework (XXXX, 2013), which assessed core employability competencies and performance levels of students and concluded that there was a limited understanding of the affective skills among students. The research identifies that to unlock the potential of the cognitive skills and for a deeper understanding of emotional skills by students, the concept of "emotional work readiness" was introduced in this study. There seemed to be similar lacunae in these areas of affective skills and the social benefits derived in this study. Whilst students indicated that the classes have aided employability to some degree due to the network and information from other students during group work, such as seeking part-time work, vacation work experience/internships, undertaking volunteer work and the like, but they have not been able to demonstrate a direct link between their leanings at the university classes and these outcomes. Opinions of employment and employability must be amended to link the cognitive and affective domains for greater work readiness. The developing of social benefits and emotional work readiness will enhance the potential to make students understand the social skills, and bridge the gap between the cognitive and affective domains (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2009).

During the course of this research it was identified that those students who had been working in a part-time job, quoted that they had a better understanding of the preliminary management matter taught in class as compared to the ones who did not have a part-time job, indicating that having some work experience helped the students understand the matter taught in class much better. Research conducted by Wang *et al.* (2010) found that doing part-time jobs enriches students' school life and increases their social support network. Further support comes from the previous research by Mussie *et al.* (2014) that identified that work has a positive effect on both satisfaction and GPA, when students did work fewer than ten hours. Thus, part-time jobs may not always be disadvantageous to students' satisfaction. This is because part-time job can help college students cover living costs, reduce financial stress, improve work experience and thereby employability after graduation, makes them more confident and enables them to gain competence and skills and enhance their, improve network and improves their social lives (Callender, 2008; Pinto *et al.*, 2001; Wang *et al.*, 2010). However, it was found that when students work for more than 11 hours a week, students' satisfaction and GPA were found to decline, although the change was very small. So, the above-mentioned benefits of working while attending college can improve students 'college satisfaction and happiness, which in turn boost their academic performance (GPA) (Wang *et al.*, 2010). For instance, some studies show positive

effects of student employment on GPA in that, students who worked (part-time) were found to have (slightly) higher GPA's than those who did not (Astin, 1982; Kalenkoski and Pabilonia, 2010; Manthei and Gilmore, 2005).

Responding to the research question *RQ2* that there is without doubt a need to revisit the first-year management content and embed the first-year syllabus with employability skills or work-integrated learning, because previous researchers have identified that employers value innovative, adaptable, resilient graduates with flexible enterprise skills, an enterprising mindset and business awareness, which are the results of enterprise learning (Owens and Tibby, 2014; Weligamage, 2009). Thus adopting employability goals in the curriculum needs input, feedback and collaboration from the industry (Tran, 2016). The challenges confronting society in the coming decades will require a skilled, innovative workforce to identify sustainable solutions (EY Megatrends, 2015). Universities have a responsibility to guarantee that students get opportunities to network with industry and gain skills which equip them with the skills necessary for a satisfying and challenging career (Edwards *et al.*, 2015). It is vital that universities identify new ways of delivering the course content to allow for more opportunities to link theory to practice and to encourage students to be proactive in securing part-time work, which will allow for deeper learning within the classroom experience. Academic staff also need to embrace change to ensure more engagement with students and increase levels of industry engagement from the first year.

Responding to the research question *RQ3* on the ways we can embed employability into the preliminary management curriculum, it has been evident that with an energetic enthusiastic young pool of skilled workers employers have become more selective in their choice, and prefer those with work experience which can be a disadvantage for students with no industry experience (Tran, 2016). Having taught reflection and application skills through experiential activities or industry placements from the very start of their university education can help students meet some of the requirement of employers. However, these practices all require input from and cooperation with enterprises and industry and we can see different forms of cooperation between universities and enterprises and highlight that employers, students, graduates and HE institutions value work-based learning and work-integrated learning as particularly effective approaches to promote the employability of graduates ((Etzkowitz, 2004; Lowden *et al.*, 2011, p. 6.; World Bank, 2012) cited in Tran, 2016).

It is thus evident that academics must reconsider the current formats for their learning activities and identify alternative methods to reach students in terms of content, particularly in light of the softer employability skills and the appropriate application of understanding affective learning for deeper learning within the curriculum and teaching and learning activities. At present, many of these skills are developed through opportunities outside the classroom either in part-time work or student groups/societies. Change is required in the classroom to ensure a nexus between theory and practice is made from first-year courses through group industry projects, industry visits, guest lectures, internships and work experience attached to courses.

Some forms of collaborations have seen university students, staff engaging in a "go out" to the employers domain, for internships or work experience programs and also where staff can consult on curriculum development and experiential, application and reflective course content in collaboration with employers (Blackmore *et al.*, 2016).

Future research might consider longitudinal studies that follow students through university and into their early careers to obtain feedback on the value of theories learnt in class and how this has assisted their careers. In addition, a quantitative study to understand the main factors that lead to employability skills being developed through classroom teaching vs extra-curricular activities. Student success must be measured to identify

changes in student competencies before and after the experiences in the classroom for opportunities for application of theory. Student GPAs may also be considered against career success: is there a correlation? In addition, flipped classrooms and industry guest speakers need to be evaluated in terms of the value-add to employability skills that are developed whilst students are at university. Perhaps consideration can be given to identifying the importance of compulsory careers modules that are undertaken by students at first year with a view to enhance soft skills as well as students' abilities to write CVs, practice interview techniques and develop some business etiquette. More research is required to more clearly understand the links between employability skills and the first-year curriculum so that learning and teaching activities can be more closely aligned to employer and student expectations.

Policy implications
The lack of skill mismatch and graduates who are not work-ready incurs significant economic and social costs. A number of policy implications emerge due to university-labour market links and skills mismatches and the impact on students and the labour market. The rise in unemployment and the skills mismatch seen after the economic crisis requires immediate attention. Job creation is crucial but so is the need to develop graduates with appropriate matching skills and qualities to do the job. The borders between university and community should be blurred to offer a more all-encompassing and inclusive education (Ferns *et al.*, 2014). Australia values education as a mechanism for building a skilled and productive workforce that contributes effectively to a sustainable and globally competitive economy.

Education is perceived to impact on three levels:

(1) economic and intellectual value for individuals;

(2) economic and productivity value for society; and

(3) civic benefits for society in positive ways (Hagel *et al.*, 2014).

Mandatory internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training for university students would help. Governments can provide financial incentives and subsidies to organisations providing the above services and working cooperatively with the universities to get students work-ready. Universities must raise the educational requirements over time as jobs become more complex. Universities can build communities of practice with the assistance of this scheme to enable students to interact with the industry professionals.

An additional year of vocational training could be recommended for the graduating students. This would help the young graduates to get work-related skills. Wheelahan *et al.* (2015) state that building better links between education and work can help provide a more rational approach to vocational development. They propose the use of vocational streams and productive capabilities in the education system and labour market to achieve this.

The current content-focussed university education is no longer sustainable and does not provide students with work-ready transferrable skill set and a pathway to a challenging career (Thomas, 2012). Students need to be exposed to real-world learning opportunities where they engage in authentic problem-solving and build intellectual capacity through applying theoretical concepts in practice-based settings (Ferns *et al.*, 2014).

This requires a combined effort from all stakeholders. A systematic approach needs to be adopted. First, the gap between the knowledge provided by the universities and the skills required by the employers need to be reduced. Second, the employers and the universities should keep a watch on the labour market and develop strategies to meet the dynamic requirements of the labour market collaboratively. Third, career guidance will help inform

students make a career choice to match the labour market opportunities. This should be part of the policy agenda for responding to the lack of work-ready graduates in the labour market. There is an overt expectation from the government that HE institutions assist students to obtain skills to readily adapt to the working environment and are adaptable within it (Cable, 2010). Australia has made huge efforts at promoting innovative work-integrated learning approaches for enhancing the employability skills of students during their university education. The Statement of Intent (Universities Australia, 2014), released in February 2014, was a collaborative initiative between the Australian Collaborative Education Network, Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Business Council of Australian and Australian Industry Group. It outlines key areas for action that supports educators to work with industry and community based employers, ensuring a sustainable increase and broadening of work-integrated learning opportunities to develop our human capital and competitiveness of the economy. The National WIL Strategy highlights the need to develop innovative, problem-solving and entrepreneurial skills through collaboration with external industry partnerships to enhance students skills required for employability in a volatile future (Foundation for Young Australians, 2015). Universities need to make efforts to enhance institutional capacity by implementing a WIL framework for enhancing the student experience through the provision of curriculum opportunities to complement employability capabilities in graduates.

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