Bridging the GAP between study and the workplace

- more successful connections and effective transitions

Graduate Advantage Program, University of New South Wales

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Introduction

In this paper I propose to review the Graduate Advantage Program (GAP), a unique career development initiative developed by the University of New South Wales (UNSW), “one of Australia’s leading research and teaching universities” (UNSW 2011). Servicing a student population of close to 40,000 students UNSW’s chief priorities are education, research and community engagement (Hilmer 2011). Evolving from its more mature parent initiative, the UNSW Co-op Program (industry linked scholarships), the GAP sits in a broader scheme of work integrated learning and career development opportunities offered at UNSW specially designed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, connecting students with industry before graduation. I will discuss the development of the program, examine its content and features in the context of the university’s career education offerings, and consider evaluations to date regarding the future growth of the program. This program is one piece in the mosaic of the university’s bigger strategy for work integrated learning, career development learning designed to assist effective transitions to the workplace.

The Student Experience

Jenny Zhou is a typical student at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). She moved to Sydney, Australia from Hong Kong with her family when she was eleven and completed her high school education in Sydney’s inner western suburbs. Jenny excelled in her High School Exams and was able to secure a place in UNSW’s Bachelor of Commerce. Still living at home, Jenny works on a casual basis in a local bakery to gain some financial independence. Jenny is an avid soccer player and trains regularly with her team. While the majority of Jenny’s life, (working, studies and social interactions), is now primarily carried out in English, she has maintained her first language (Cantonese) as her parents’ English has remained limited since the family’s migration, but Jenny has not found much of a use for her Cantonese beyond her home.

Following her parents’ advice on pursuing a safe and prosperous career path, Jenny began a major in Accounting. However after her first year, influenced by her peers, she decided to add a second major in Finance because the idea of a job in investment banking sounded very exciting.
Jenny, like the majority of her peers, is enthusiastic about the prospects of starting her career, but has yet to gain any ‘real’ work experience or to have any contact with the real world of business. After a year of study, following her friends' lead, Jenny submitted an application for a summer internship at a major accounting firm. While her friends received invitations to activity centres and interviews, Jenny was sent a generic email saying that she was unsuccessful and would not progress to the next stage of selections. Disheartened by this experience, Jenny was confused as to where she went wrong and what to do next.

During the mid-semester break, Jenny received an email from one of her lecturers announcing that applications for the Graduate Advantage Program (GAP) were open and students interested in pursuing internships in business should apply.

**Background**

A survey of 350 of Australia’s leading graduate employers (Graduate Careers Australia 2011), not surprisingly, reveals the common top skills and attributes employers seek in graduates include leadership, teamwork, and critical reasoning/analytical skills, emotional intelligence, a business culture awareness and fit, initiative and commitment, work experience and a wide variety of interests and extracurricular activities. This employers’ wish list has remained consistent for decades now. What has changed is the competition between companies to secure the best graduates and the lengths high achieving students will need to go to in order to secure the desired graduate positions. The common theme is that preparation for graduate employment is starting earlier and earlier. For this reason it is increasingly important for students to gain ‘work-ready’ soft skills and establish meaningful contact with employers during their undergraduate studies in order to increase their chances of successfully securing the desired graduate work upon completion of studies.

Many students have all the right factors: good grades, work and/or volunteer experience, participation in extracurricular activities; but lack the acumen to pull it all together and present a strong case for employment. In the highly competitive employment market, only those students with business aptitude and confidence make it through the selection process.
The Graduate Advantage Program (GAP)

The GAP has been designed as a high value, intensive one week professional development program for UNSW students to develop generic employment skills and capabilities which improve their chances of securing highly competitive internships and ultimately, graduate employment. The program was designed as a work integrated learning experience that could be further enhanced if students were successful in gaining a vacation internship. Broadly, the GAP aims to equip students with the necessary professional soft skills, promote successful connections between students and employers and increase opportunity of gaining ‘real world’ experience for our students transition more effectively and successfully from study to employment. The program has been set up as a mutually beneficial tripartite partnership between the participating industry partners, the university and selected students. The GAP is fee free for all participants, although it should be noted that participation does involve a commitment of resources by the industry partners and the university.

For this initiative, UNSW has partnered with some of Australia’s leading companies, including; Citigroup, Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, IBM, KPMG, Macquarie Group, and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The long term goals of these industry partners include:

- Increasing the pool of potential recruits that have the soft skills employers look for;
- Increasing contact with potential recruits that they can encourage through the recruitment process;
- Increasing company exposure to the UNSW student population; and
- Strengthening the partnership with UNSW.

In the development of the broader strategy for career development learning and opportunities and assisting transitions to the workplace, the GAP is one new and innovative way to deliver UNSW’s long term objectives, which include:

- Developing more flexible and resilient graduates that hit the ground running when they enter the workforce;
• Increasing employability (and evidence of employability) for UNSW graduates and demonstrating this through statistics of program success year to year;

• Demonstrating UNSW’s absolute commitment to the development of graduate attributes;

• Taking a leadership position in the development of graduate attributes and career development learning for UNSW students in relation to competitor institutions; and

• Strengthening partnerships with leading employers.

For students, the GAP offers highly valuable short term gains, including:

• The opportunity to meet and learn from graduate recruiters, the guardians of the gateway to highly sought after graduate programs at some of Australia’s leading employers;

• Increased awareness of business culture including appropriate etiquette for the professional world and an ability to practise this behaviour in practical activities throughout the program, e.g. networking functions, teamwork activities, presentations, written exercises, etc;

• Increased understanding and familiarity with the recruitment process;

• Greater understanding of their own development, increased confidence and an enhanced positive self concept;

• Increased awareness of and familiarity with the ongoing career development support services available to all UNSW students; and

• Official recognition on their supplementary transcript of the completion of a university endorsed extracurricular program. This appears as: “Program Participant, Graduate Advantage Program - Completed a program of lectures, workshops and assessments designed to build skills and capabilities for effectiveness in the workplace”.

Employers are looking to recruit certain types of students to undertake summer internships and so the eligibility criteria of the GAP reflects these needs. Students must be undertaking undergraduate studies in Business, Engineering, Law and/or Science; be in their penultimate year of study; have a credit average or above; have a strong interest in pursuing a career in business; and be an Australian citizen or permanent resident. Beyond these basic requirements, students are then selected for the program based on responses to short answer questions in which they elaborate the value they seek to gain from the program, their career aspirations, previous work experience and personal interests.
ACCESS\(^1\) students are strongly encouraged to apply with a goal to offer them at least 10% of available places. To ensure that the GAP was made available to students who had very little or no industry contact, students who were on a cadetship or industry linked scholarship were ineligible for this program. Sixty places are available annually.

Selected students must complete and submit an online “pre-program self evaluation”. This evaluation is designed to gauge each student’s perception of their own professional capabilities and skill level before commencement, offering the GAP organisers an insight into the makeup of their audience. More importantly, the evaluation raises the student’s awareness of their own strengths and areas for improvement and encourages them to focus on the soft skill topic areas they are about to work through during the program.

**Program Content**

The GAP Industry Partners view this program as an opportunity to promote the graduate attributes they seek, not only to improve the application process for graduate recruitment, but also to set the foundation for a smooth and more effective transition to the workplace, so that potential new employees can hit the ground running. The program is comprised of several modules which directly target the key soft skills identified by industry as being most important in the selection of graduates for employment. Opening with a graduate employment and internship showcase, the program goes on to cover: application and interview processes (including mock behavioural interviews, cover letter and resumé reviews, etc); basic business etiquette, communication, leadership and teamwork skills; personal branding and personality profiling; innovative thinking and problem solving; process excellence; networking opportunities; advice on optimising recruitment; and is finally wrapped up with career stories from senior managers and younger managers/graduates of the firms.

Sessions are made as practical as possible with students being presented with opportunities to ask questions, discuss their ideas and practise the skills being covered. The topics presented are chosen by the industry partners as relevant soft skill areas for all students approaching graduate recruitment. In each session the topic is outlined, discussed and then related to the work environment. For

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\(^1\) ACCESS is a scheme whereby long term significant social and economic disadvantage is taken into consideration in the admission process.
example in the module on ‘communication’, students are encouraged to review professional
communication expectations and then practise written and presentation skills expected in a client
facing role. In the module on ‘leadership and teamwork’, students are divided into randomly assigned
teams to work on a group task and then asked to reflect and give feedback on the role each person
played in task delivery.

Beyond the obvious lessons on the valuable skills and capabilities outlined above, the real drawcard
for students and a point of differentiation for this program is that the bulk of the content is developed
and delivered by industry representatives in their corporate environments. This delivers on the
promise of direct contact between students and industry and encourages the development of genuine
connections. Throughout the program, students learn from and interact with various people within
these businesses. Students are given rare access to gain insights into these companies from all
angles. The opportunity to quiz recruiters about the application process, to ask new graduates for tips
on how they handled their interviews, to test out their handshakes and elevator pitches with learning
and development trainers and to participate in a dialogue with senior managers about their career
stories, is invaluable.

Another major highlight of the program for most students is simply stepping inside the doors of these
large organisations to see the office environments and get a feel for the type of business culture that
exists. From signing in with security at the front desk to shaking hands with a partner of the business,
the entire sensory experience is like exploring a new world for many students and while they are shy
at the beginning, by the end of the program many start to display a new level of confidence in
approaching new people and engaging in the business setting.

**Evaluation of Program Outcomes and Future Growth**

Now in its fourth year, the feedback gathered from participating students and industry partners has
been crucial to the program’s development and growth. Students’ feedback is gathered formally in
written surveys at the end of each module, summarised and circulated to industry partners in the
interests of refining and improving the content for future sessions. Pre and post program self
evaluations are also completed by each student to gauge perceived improvement in each soft skill
area and to assist in the development of their self awareness. These evaluations also allow the students to provide greater feedback on what they appreciated and learnt from the modules; if the program met their expectations and what they thought could be improved or added to enhance the program next time. Post program evaluations from the most recent 2010 cohort indicated that all students’ awareness of industry and how to behave in a professional environment had improved, with many showing a marked increase in confidence in their abilities (see Appendix 1 for more details). All students reported that they gained new skills or refined their skills. The vast majority of students (97%) indicated the program met and/or exceeded all expectations and they felt it would be greatly beneficial to their future careers, (the remaining 3% of students indicated the program met expectations in some ways). Forty-five percent of participants reported they were successful in gaining summer vacation (2010/2011) internships.

Industry partners are consulted regularly to gather informal feedback throughout the planning and implementation stages of each program and a formal review meeting is held at the conclusion of each program to evaluate their experience as presenters and to discuss the way forward. Feedback from industry partners has been on the whole very positive. They are continually impressed by the students’ enthusiasm and curiosity and find the delivery of workshops an overall enjoyable experience. This aside, it is clear that the key factor in continued participation is the number of successful conversions the companies can see from the GAP students to vacation placements within their organisations. For this reason, while the university GAP team has reasonable freedom in developing the GAP content and structure, the eligibility criteria for candidates to the program must be kept within industry partners’ parameters, to ensure that they can continue to justify their involvement.

Having piloted and refined the program, we now have a successful, replicable model. The program has grown incrementally, offering more student places, to a broader range of disciplines and involved an increasing number of companies which has allowed a greater number of topics to be covered. It is currently confined to industry partners in the corporate sector, but the university believes there is scope to develop other complementary programs specialising in other areas of industry.
One solution will not fit all

The GAP is a resource intensive initiative, so while maintaining the value to its participants and quality of its outcomes, it can only be offered to a limited number of students. For this reason the GAP can only be one piece of the broader transition to work strategy put in place at the university. The development of broader suite of professional development opportunities is required in order to have any significant impact on the university’s student population and to take account of the diverse range of student needs being expressed by both students and employers. UNSW has the opportunity to leverage its considerable experience with programs like the GAP, the more mature Co-op Scholarship Program, together with its longstanding relationships with industry, to take a leadership position in packaging and promoting work integrated and career development learning for many more of its students.

Gaining the Graduate Advantage

Jenny applied for and was successful in gaining a position in the GAP and just six months on, she can hardly believe how much of a difference it has made to her career path.

Post program, Jenny felt much more confident about her own abilities. She was now able to clearly link and articulate how the experiences she had gained through team sports, casual work and home life, related to the employment context. The integration of these skills proved valuable not only in the application and interview process but also in making an effective transition to the workplace.

Through the program, Jenny had established contact with a range of recruiters at the GAP companies and decided to apply for three internship programs for the coming summer. Being able to recall the relevant people’s names, faces and advice, she was able to tailor her cover letter and resumé for each company and was successful at progressing to the interview rounds for all three programs. Jenny received two offers for summer vacation internships and found herself in the new position of being able to choose which company she would like to join.

Jenny’s twelve week internship flew past quickly and her managers were so impressed with her performance and how easily she fitted into the team that at the end of that summer she was fast
tracked to the final interview round for graduate roles. Jenny’s interview was successful and she can now complete her final year with the knowledge that a graduate role was secured for the following year.

Concluding Remarks
The GAP is a significant development in UNSW’s career development learning and transitions strategy. The program aims to create successful connections between students and industry and assist with effective transitions from tertiary study to industry. With development over four years, the GAP now offers a successful replicable model in the delivery of high quality work integrated learning. With built in reflective and evaluative mechanisms, the GAP continues to strive to be a leading edge professional development program and continues to adapt to reflect evolving participant needs. The GAP constitutes a key project in support of the university's objectives to deliver the highest quality education and to promote relevant and innovative engagement with industry. The learning and expanded understanding gained from the GAP will now be directed into the next generation of even more broadly based career education and transition opportunities.
Bibliography

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Appendix 1

Pre and Post Program Self Evaluation Comparisons

Communication

- Pre Program Communication
- Post Program Communication

Presentation

- Pre Program Presentation
- Post Program Presentation