

Graduates Building Bridges to Employment: Planned and Unplanned Career Destinations after a Recreation Management Internship.

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Abstract

Many university students are anxious about finding a career in an unpredictable, complex and rapidly changing world. The expectation for careers to be predictable, with clearly defined paths, is no longer relevant in the 21st century. Through career guidance within a degree incorporating embedded Career and Professional Development students can replace predictability thinking with open-minded and opportunistic thinking and learn to generate work opportunities that will improve their employability.

This study used contemporary career theories and frameworks to construct a questionnaire that was administered to 18 graduates of a Victoria University Recreation Management degree, who completed an internship, between the years 2004 to 2010. The survey questionnaire was informed by Happenstance Learning Theory, and four frameworks: Employability Skills Framework (2002); Australian Blueprint for Career Development (2009); DOTS Framework of Career Development (Watts, 2006) and Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999). The questionnaire elicited responses describing the unfolding career journeys of graduates. Where are they now? Were their job, or career changes, planned or unplanned? Is this the career they were expecting? How useful was a Recreation Management internship as a career strategy? What employability skills developed through the internship experience? What career management competencies were used?

Data gathered from administration of the survey questionnaire was then used to construct a series of case studies outlining the unfolding career journeys of graduates. The case studies inform good practice in the delivery of career development learning for university students. Importantly, they contribute to student understanding of the unpredictable nature of careers and how to proactively manage career uncertainty.

Introduction

In Australia students make substantial financial investment in their education with the view of advancing their employability for the world of work by gaining knowledge, skills and experiences. Employability skills help graduates gain employment, advance to achieve their potential, and successfully contribute to workplaces (ACCI / BCA, 2002).

For a university graduate initial career success includes gaining university level employment, appropriate to the degree undertaken, within a short time after graduating. As employability for their first job after university may be affected by work experiences gained during studies, most students aspire to fully capitalise on university placements, which are a substantial investment of time, effort and finances. The real world problem motivating this research was that many university students are anxious to decide on a career direction, early in their university degree, in order to seek the best possible and most relevant work experiences. Ironically it is difficult for students to decide on a career direction when they have limited work experiences to inform assessment of particular jobs. As well many university students in the 21st Century are overwhelmed by the number of career choices available to them in a rapidly changing world.

Career is now viewed as a complex, lifelong experience with varied unpredictable trajectories (Smith, M. *et al.* 2009; Bright & Pryor, 2008). Everyone's career is affected by events that could not have been predicted (Bright Pryor, Chan, Rijanto, 2009; Chein, Fischer, & Biller, 2006; Guindon & Hanna, 2002). This paper will describe the career stories of 18 graduates who completed a Recreation Management Internship during their final semester of study between the years 2004 and 2010. Data to generate the career stories was gathered by a survey questionnaire. The intention was to explore the implications of the career stories to generate knowledge that would provide insights and a paradigm shift for current students, helping them to become proactive, flexible and adaptable in their career thinking and actions.

Context

Australians love their sport and recreation and related careers and courses are popular with many young people. The survey questionnaire was designed to use with graduates of what is now known as the Sport and Recreation Management degree (previously Recreation Management) - a single three year degree program

or a four year double degree program when combined with marketing, business, event management or sport science.

Possible career paths following this degree are wide-ranging and multifaceted. Graduates gain positions such as: sporting club administrators; event managers for sport or cultural events; sport development officers; recreation facility managers; recreation planners; and sport and recreation program leaders for varied populations including people with a disability, older adults, children, youth at risk, and university students. They may work in a range of organisations including: all three levels of government; sport and recreation governing bodies; sporting clubs; not-for-profit organisations; private sport management, marketing or sponsorship companies; or outdoor recreation and adventure tourism companies.

Considerable career preparation is provided to the Sport and Recreation Management students. Career and Professional Development (CPD) units are embedded in the degree and provide career development learning linked to placements. CPD is designed to overcome the personal career and employability issues many university students face, these being: lack of clarity regarding career direction; no substantial course related work experience; and inadequate skills to effectively market themselves (Dressler, 2010).

Recreation Management Internships

The Recreation Industry Course Advisory Committee identified that graduates were leaving the recreation industry, attributing this to difficulty obtaining employment beyond entry-level roles. Graduates required significant work achievements to improve their employability for sport and recreation jobs commensurate with their level of education. The committee endorsed the introduction of the paid internship program for final year Recreation Management students, believing graduates could use internships to build a bridge between university and full-time jobs in recreation. The Recreation Management Internship is a culminating placement experience:

- 340 hours - equivalent to 9 weeks or 45 working days.
- Salaried position - Local Government Band 3, salary approximately \$(AUS) 22 p/h for a 340 hour internship.
- Nearly all internships were within recreation/leisure departments of local government.

- Sourced by the university and financed by the host organisation.
- Selection is competitive. Students apply directly to host organisations using normal job application process (cover letter, resume and job interview).
- Interns generally work two days per week during their final semester of university and complete internships full-time, once exams finish.

The timing of the internship, in final semester, is imperative. Students are hopefully knowledgeable workers at the end of the degree and host organisations are asked to provide interns with ownership of significant projects that will generate work achievements. Acquiring achievements is a well-supported career management strategy in the literature (Yorke, 2004).

Methodology

Between 2004 and 2010, 31 Recreation Management degree students completed a paid internship. A survey questionnaire was constructed to gather their career stories using contemporary career theories and frameworks. The paper-based survey questionnaire design incorporated over 200 statements for participants to select facilitating in-depth, well-informed and efficient responses. Statements were based on the synthesis of numerous previous research studies. The survey took about 45 minutes to complete.

Underpinning the survey questionnaire design were the following modern concepts of career management:

1. Most graduate careers will be constructed, not predicted in a once in a lifetime choice
2. Learning in the workplace experience makes a useful contribution to development and management of careers
3. Graduate careers progress in planned and unplanned career directions after work experiences
4. Chance events can be very influential in determining career outcomes

University ethics approval was obtained for this study (Victoria University ethics committee code HRETH 12/164). The Recreation Management Internship study was advertised in various newsletters in the hope that as many of the possible 31 eligible people who completed an internship between the years 2004 and 2010

would see the advertisements and volunteer to complete the survey. At the time of publication 18 people, 8 females and 10 males, had completed the 15 page survey.

Results and Discussion

The survey response rate was 58%. A large amount of data was collected and only some results are discussed in this paper. The kinds of findings included are: graduate career histories; career success; predictability of careers; retention of graduates in the industry where they qualified; incidence of chance career events; how proactive graduates were when managing their career; current salaries; and the value of an internship as a career strategy to kick start the career.

Career Success

Table 1 below clearly shows the internship experience was linked to initial career success for 100% of survey respondents. Career success is defined as gaining university level employment appropriate to the degree undertaken within 12 weeks of completing university degree.

Table 1. Time taken after graduation to gain full-time employment in a university level, recreation job

Year Intern Graduated and Sex.	Time to gain full-time employment after graduation and any extensions of internship.	First Job After Graduation Job Title
2004 (M)	4 weeks (Travelled for 5 months immediately after internship)	Conference Management Assistant – event management
2004 (M)	4 weeks	Recreation Manager - acquired brain injuries.
2004 (F)	0 weeks – fulltime work with internship organisation	Recreation Planner – Local Government (LG)
2005 (F)	0 weeks – fulltime work with internship organisation	Leisure Services and Public Space Officer (LG)
2005 (F)	12 weeks - fulltime work with internship organisation	Recreation Development Officer (LG)
2005(M)	1 week	Recreation Centre Program Co-ordinator (LG)
2005 (M)	10 weeks	Graduate Recreation Planner (LG)
2005 (F)	0 weeks	Graduate Recreation Planner (LG)
2007 (F)	2 weeks	Membership Manager Camps Association
2007 (F)	Travel (1 yr.) – returned to fulltime work with internship organisation	Leisure Project Officer - (LG)

2007 (F)	0 weeks - fulltime work with internship organisation	Leisure and Culture Officer – (LG)
2007 (F)	0 weeks	Access for All Abilities Officer – (LG)
2007 (M)	0 weeks - fulltime work with internship organisation	Sport and Recreation Officer – (LG)
2008 (M)	1 week	Tribunal and Disciplinary Co-ordinator – Sport (Soccer)
2009 (M)	4 weeks	Events Coordinator Exhibitions
2009 (M)	6 weeks	Marketing Coordinator - Sport (Horse racing)
2009 (M)	2 weeks	Development Officer – Sport (Motor racing)
2010 (M)	4 weeks	Account Manager Events and Exhibitions
Yellow = no time gap between finishing the internship and being offered full-time work with the internship host organisation		
Green = students who were employed in local government for their first job after completing the internship and graduating from their degree.		

Table 1 shows in green that 56% of survey respondents gained their first full-time job after graduation in local government recreation. As well 33%, shown in yellow, gained their first full-time job with their internship host organisation. The mean time for gaining degree related fulltime employment after finishing the degree was two weeks.

Is this the career they would have predicted for themselves?

At the end of the degree: 39% of the survey respondents were undecided about a career direction; 39% were decided about a career working in local government recreation; 5% of the survey respondents were considering a career in local government recreation; and 17% were considering or decided on other sport and recreation careers. However immediately after completing the internship 83% of survey respondents wanted to stay working in local government recreation. The internship experience helped 44% of people completing the survey to change their mind about a career. For example, quotes from survey participants include, “I love working in local government and the internship allowed me to realise this.”

Retaining graduates in the industry for which they have qualified.

Toward the end of their degree only 39% of survey respondents were decided about a career working in local government recreation. Interestingly, immediately after they completed their internship 83% of graduates wanted to stay working in local government recreation. For example one person wrote, “I had no

interest or knowledge regarding local government recreation before my internship.” This person is still working in local government recreation and is very satisfied with her job 8 years later - local government recreation ticked all the boxes for a long term career.

The career histories shown in Table 2 below reveal:

- 33% of the interns were offered fulltime positions with their internship host organisation as soon as the internship finished
- Another 11% were asked to return to work full-time at their internship host organisation after travelling or further study.
- 56% of the graduates have continued to work within the local government recreation sector for all or most of their career since finishing university.
- 39% of the graduates spent some or their entire career working in the event industry.
- 17% of graduates have worked some or their entire career in recreation for special populations including people with a disability or older adults.
- The graduate who completed their internship within outdoor recreation has also remained in the same area of employment for 6 years currently.
- Only one graduate has left the recreation industry after working in sport for 4 years. He retrained in accounting.

Career histories of graduates who completed an internship

Table 2: Where are they now? Career Histories of Recreation Management Interns.

	Graduate working in original internship host organisation		Significant employment in local government during career
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Graduation year	First job after internship	Second job	Third Job	Fourth Job	Fifth Job
1. 2004 (Female) 	Offered employment as a Recreation Planner with internship host.  Local government 4 years	Took gap year and worked in a ski resort in Canada in event management 12 months	Returned to internship host. Employed in Community Development  Local Government 2.5 years	Parks Planning and Recreation Project Officer - Local Government 1 year - current	
2. 2004 (Male)	Manager in recreation services for people with acquired brain injuries.	Access for all abilities leisure service. Disability and Sport and	Assistant Cruise Recreation Director. Luxury cruise ship	Client Services Officer with a different acquired	

	Disability sector 1 year 9 months	recreation industry 7 months	industry 2 years 2 months	brain injury organisation. Disability sector. 2 years 4 months - current	
3. 2004 (Male) ✓	Conference Management Assistant Event management 7 months	Leisure Services Assistant. Local Government. 3 months	Recreation Facilities Officer Local Government. 2 years 3 months	Community Development Officer - Facilities and Partnerships. Community Renewal Project Manager. Local Government 5 years 6 months	
4. 2005 (Female) ✓	Community events coordinator. Local government 1 year 5 month	Project officer Music festival. Event and local government 5 years 11 months	Professional triathlete. Sport industry. 10 months		
5. 2005 (Female) ✓	Retail (canoes) 3 months	Recreation Development Officer with original internship host organisation. ★ Local government recreation. 2 years	Travelling O/S for 5 months	Recreation and leisure planner Local government recreation 5 years.	
6. 2005 (Male) ✓	Offered ongoing employment with internship host ★ organisation. Holiday programmer and Facility Management. Local government recreation 3 years	Facility Coordinator for local government recreation facility. Local Government recreation. 5 years ongoing			
7. 2005 (Male) ✓	Graduate Recreation Planner. Local Government. 4 months	Recreation Planner and then promoted to Senior Recreation Planner. Local Government. 2 years 8 months	Recreation Planner/ Recreation Development Coordinator. Local Government. 3 years 5 months ongoing.		
8. 2005 (Female) ✓	Recreation Officer. Local Government. ★ 3 months	Graduate Recreation Planner. Local Government. 6 months	Recreation Manager. Aged Care. 1 year 7 months.	Leisure Coordinator – Aged Care. Local Government. 1 year 9 months	Coordinator Community Sport. Local Government. 5 years 11 months ongoing.
9. 2007 (Female) ✓	Travel O/S 1 year	Employed by internship host ★ organisation project Officer and if required Venue Operations and Logistics coordinator for the emergency relief centre. Local Government recreation 5 years 1 month ongoing.			
10. 2007 (Male) ✓	Offered employment with internship host ★ organisation. Sport and Recreation Administration Officer. Local government recreation. 5 years	Seconded to Sustainable Travel Officer with Internship host organisation. ★ 2 years ongoing			
11. 2007 (Female) ✓	Offered employment at the internship host ★ organisation. Project officer. Local government recreation.	Travelled for 1 year.	Access for All Abilities Officer with original internship host ★ organisation. Local government –	Arts and Recreation Officer Local government recreation. 18 months	Project Manager. Event management industry. 19 months continuing.

	12 months		disability. 15 months		
12. 2007 (Female) ✓	Leisure and Recreation Officer with internship host organisation. Local government recreation. 12 months	Recreation Facilities Officer. Local government recreation. 10 months.	Customer Services Officer and Cycle Instructor. Local government recreation facilities. 4 years - ongoing	Teacher, Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. Tertiary Education. 12 months – ongoing.	
13. 2007 (Female)	Membership Manager Outdoor Recreation Association. Promoted to Events and Communications Manager 6 years - ongoing				
14. 2008 (Male)	Tribunal and Disciplinary Co-ordinator Sport industry 2 years	Assistant Accountant with same sport organisation as first job. 2 years	Financial Operations Manager. Security business. 3 years - ongoing		
15. 2009 (Male)	Account Manager Event Industry 4 years 7 months and ongoing				
16. 2009 (Male) ✓	Customer Service / Development Officer Sport industry 1 year 6 months	Sport and Recreation Liaison Officer. Local government recreation 2 years 1 month – ongoing.			
17. 2009 (Male)	Events coordinator Exhibition industry 6 months	London Olympics Regional Coordinator Europe. 1 year 9 months	Business Development Manager. Training and education industry. 11 months - ongoing.		
18. 2010 (Male)	Marketing Coordinator. Event and racing industry. 2 years 6 months ongoing.				

Should you leave your career to chance or be proactive, self-directed and planful when it comes to career development?

A total of 85 unplanned, chance events were identified by the 18 respondents as having had a significant effect on the career directions of the survey cohort. The mean number of chance events affecting career was 4.7. Regarding the influence of chance events on career 100% of the respondents agreed that chance events had played a role in their career choices and outcomes with 45% of respondents reporting chance was very influential for their career and 55% of respondents reporting chance events were somewhat influential for their career.

Concerning being proactive and planful when it comes to managing their career development again 100% of respondents described themselves as being proactive to some degree with 17% of respondents describing

themselves as proactive all the time, 55% as reasonably proactive intermittently and 28% were slightly proactive a little of the time.

The current salary range for people working in recreation was between \$(AUS) 41K and \$(AUS) 120K. The number of chance events affecting career did not seem to have a relationship on either salary or how proactive the respondents had identified themselves. For example respondents who identified the highest number of chance events, between 7 and 9 events, had salaries in the range between \$(AUS) 41K to \$(AUS) 80K and of these 60% of the respondents were reasonably proactive, 20% was slightly proactive and another 20% proactive all the time. For 22% of respondents who only identified between 1 and 3 chance events the salary range was between \$(AUS) 41K and \$(AUS) 120K. 75% of these respondents were reasonably proactive intermittently and 25% was slightly proactive a little of the time.

The salary range for people who identified as reasonably proactive intermittently or proactive all the time was between \$(AUS) 41K and \$(AUS) 120K and the salary range for respondents who identified as only slightly proactive a little of the time was \$(AUS) 41K to \$(AUS) 80K. For the 61% of respondents who are earning salaries above \$(AUS) 60K, 73% identified as reasonably proactive or proactive all the time and 27% were slightly proactive a little of the time.

How valuable was a Recreation Management Internship as a career strategy to kick start the career?

- 56% of respondents felt the internship was absolutely essential to kick starting their career
- 39% said the internship was quite important for kick starting their career

It is very clear that the graduates valued the contribution of the internship to their career success with 95% of the participants stating the internship was either quite important or absolutely essential to kick start their career (5% said the internship was reasonably important to kick start their career).

Respondents also made comments such as, “Working in local government has also opened up my chances for movement to other government sectors and the private sector. It has enabled me to build my networks and skill base for those potential moves in the future” (Female, 7 years after graduating). “The internship was absolutely essential to kick starting my career. By undertaking the internship I completed my university degree, gained experience in local government, gained my first real job, was able to travel

the world (with leave without pay) and gain a second job in community development” (Female, 8 years after graduation).

In terms of the main reasons the graduates chose to complete the internship.

- 72% of the respondents identified career exploration
- 61% identified they were hoping if things went well during the internship they would be offered a job
- 56% hoped to improve the quality of their resume by adding a significant work experience
- 33% wanted to learn or improve employability skills to develop as a professional
- 33% wanted to build their networks
- 16% chose an internship as it was a convenient way to pass the final placement for university credit
- 11% were attracted to an internship because it paid a salary
- 11% were undecided and vague about their career direction and as they did not have a career plan just did the internship.

As soon as the 340 internship hours were completed 33% of internships were converted into full-time jobs for the intern. Results also revealed that once interns gained some experience and demonstrated employability skills 83% of the internship host organisations decided to extend the internship salaried position beyond the official 340 hours. The mean time for internship extensions was 9 weeks.

Conclusions

Firstly the internship programme has provided university graduates an opportunity to bridge the gap between university and significant jobs in the recreation sector, clearly ratifying the Recreation Industry Course Advisory Committee’s recommendation to introduce a paid internship program for final year Recreation Management students. After finishing the internship all interns were able to secure substantial jobs within the area for which they studied at university. Internships directly and indirectly assisted career building by advancing employability and increasing the likelihood of positively influential chance events. As well the internship proved a very effective way for local government recreation, to recruit and retain trained graduates.

University students can be less anxious about knowing an exact career direction as this is not essential for career development. Unplanned and unpredictable chance events are influential in most people's careers. It is important for students to gain any experience where they can develop employability skills, attributes and workplace achievements. Gaining significant work experiences and thereby positioning themselves for chance events is an effective proactive career management strategy.

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