



Academic hindrances in the integration of employability skills development in teaching and assessment practice

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Published online: 8 June 2019

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Abstract

The development of employability skills is an important graduate outcome of most contemporary university degrees. Given the critical role of academics in teaching and assessing curriculum, they are held responsible for furthering the employability skills development of university graduates; yet little is known about the factors that hinder academics in integrating employability skills into the university curriculum. Based on the Theories of Action Framework, this research compared academics' espoused understanding of employability skills and reported practice against their actual practices to identify the hindrances. Their understandings of employability skills and of their espoused practice were collected through interviews with academics and content analysis of curriculum documents. The data, drawn from direct observation of teaching and assessment practices and follow-up interviews, were analysed to investigate actual teaching and assessment practices. The findings indicate a disjuncture between espoused practice and actual practice. The disjuncture can be explained by the individual nature of teaching and assessment practice that is influenced by academic experience, position, and disciplinary boundaries. As such, academics face a number of competing challenges, constraints, and demands within the scope of their practice that impede the consistent and systematic integration of employability skills in the university curriculum.

Keywords Employability skills · Generic skills · Academic development · Higher education · Curriculum · Teaching practice · Assessment practice · Curriculum design

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Introduction

Higher education in Australia has undergone dramatic change in the past two decades. Alongside government policy that fosters the widening participation of students in higher education (Gregory and Jones 2009; Bradley et al. 2008), one of the most noticeable changes is the drive for universities to produce work-ready graduates with a set of employability skills. While the question of whether it is the role of the university to develop graduates' employability skills is debated in the literature (Cranmer 2006; Holmes 2013), there is evidence to suggest that universities are taking account of the need for the development of graduate employability skills: employability skills are being incorporated into program and curriculum as learning outcomes (Oliver 2015; Oliver and Whelan 2011). Further evidence is the offering of employability opportunities, such as work-integrated learning programs (Ferns and Lilly 2015; Freudenberg et al. 2011; Harris-Reeves and Mahoney 2017; Leong and Kavanagh 2013), which are embedded in program and subject curriculum. Yet, while the responsibility for teaching and assessing students' learning outcomes ultimately lies with the academics¹ who deliver and assess curriculum, there is a dearth of research on academics' understanding of employability skills and on the extent to which they integrate employability skills development into their teaching and assessment practice. Much of the literature has focused on perceptions of employability skills and the methods used to research the acquisition and/or perception of relevant employability skills (Jackson 2009, 2012, 2013; Jackson and Chapman 2012a; Messum et al. 2016; Suleman 2018). Research that has focused on the academic perspective has tended to investigate how academics rate a prescribed list of employability skills that match industry and employer requirements (de la Harpe and David 2012; Jackson and Chapman 2012a, b; Suleman 2018, 2016). This paper presents the findings from a study that examined academics' understanding of employability skills, their self-reported practice, and the observation of their actual teaching and assessment practices in order to develop an understanding of the extent to which academics are able to include employability skills in their teaching and assessment practice. It adds to a growing body of literature on academics' perceptions and practice of employability skills development which suggests that researchers need to observe academics' actual teaching and assessment practices in order to develop an understanding of the factors that may hinder their integration of employability skills into their subject curriculum.

Employability skills

'Employability skills' is a contentious concept because of the array of terminology used to describe it. The term has often been used synonymously with 'competencies', 'generic skills', 'professional skills', 'graduate outcomes', 'graduate capabilities', or 'transferable skills' (Clanchy and Ballard 1995; de la Harpe et al. 2000; Jones 2010; Radloff et al. 2008). These different terms have been used in government and business reports over the past two decades (CSfW 2013; DEEWR 2012; Mayer 1992). In this paper, it is the position of the author that the

¹ In this study, 'academics' refers to subject coordinators/lecturers (who design and deliver the curriculum) and tutors (also known as teaching assistants, graduate student instructors, casual academics, sessional staff or teachers, hourly paid staff and graduate teaching assistants) who deliver and assess, but do not design, the curriculum.

term ‘employability skills’ refers to the skills—beyond discipline knowledge and technical skills—considered necessary and relevant for the workplace. This definition aligns with accounts of employers making hiring decisions more often on the basis of graduates’ employability skills than on discipline-specific knowledge and technical skills (Bennett et al. 1999; Curtis and McKenzie 2001; Finch et al. 2013; GCA 2016; McMurray et al. 2016).

Industry’s understanding of the range of skills that are deemed to be ‘employability skills’, beyond discipline knowledge and technical skills, have been documented in industry reports (Bennett et al. 2016; Kinash et al. 2016; KPMG 2014) and in industry and government frameworks (Mayer 1992; DEST 2002; CSfW 2013). While there is a wide range of employability skills identified, it is the author’s contention that communication (verbal and written), problem solving, analysis, critical thinking, and teamwork skills are the core employability skills regularly posited as a requirement for a work-ready graduate. Despite this, an analysis of academics’ understanding of employability skills has not been investigated from their particular perspective and experience. To conduct this study, the following key research question was asked: To what extent are employability skills included in the university subject curriculum? In order to investigate academics’ teaching and assessment of employability skills, this study begins by identifying academics’ understanding of them and their self-reported practices. It is followed by an investigation of actual teaching and assessment practice in order to examine whether there is a disjuncture between understanding, beliefs and practice.

Theoretical framework

To investigate academics’ understanding of employability skills and self-reported practice in the context of their actual teaching and assessment practice, this research was guided by Argyris and Schön’s (1974) theoretical framework which compares two types of action theory: espoused theories of action and theories-in-use. Espoused theories of action are those used by individuals to explain and justify their proposed behaviour or actions in a given situation (Argyris and Schön 1974), while theories-in-use reflect what is actually enacted in practice, thereby exposing tacit theories that inform practice (Argyris and Schön 1974). Previous research has indicated that this theoretical framework enables the exploration of the extent to which individuals’ theories-in-use are consistent with their espoused theories (McAlpine et al. 2009; Kerr 2009, 2010). The identification of incongruence between espoused theories and theories-in-use has the potential to provide information about practice, which in turn enables the evaluation of actual practice and suggests ideas to improve practice (McAlpine et al. 2009; Kerr 2009, 2010). The theories-of-action framework is appropriate for the investigation of academics’ practice because it enables an investigation of factors that inform practice beyond academics’ perceptions of the role of the university and the academic in equipping graduates with employability skills. The use of these contrasting theories offers a strategy for exploring practice that will assist in identifying the factors that underpin the integration, or lack of integration, of employability skills into current academic teaching and assessment practice.

Method

The data presented was derived from interviews with eight academics involved in the teaching and assessment of four subjects in a Bachelor of Commerce Degree Program, two from the

accounting discipline and two from the economics discipline in a large, well-established, research-intensive Australian university. The study used an adapted qualitative research framework that combined a mix of research strategies, including semi-structured interviews (pre- and post-observation), content analysis of curriculum documents, and observation of teaching and assessment practice. The sample size is small, but this was necessary in acquiring the in-depth qualitative data reported in this paper.

The semi-structured face-to-face interviews took place during phase 1, prior to content analysis of curriculum documents and direct observations of practice (phases 2 and 3). This allowed the author to identify academics' understanding of employability skills prior to gathering the data on how employability skills development is visible in the curriculum documents and prior to direct observations of practice. An interview schedule (see Appendix 1) was used to guide the discussion; however, the questions were open-ended to allow for an understanding from the point of view of the individual participants to emerge (Patton 2002).

Phase 2 of the research involved the collection and content analysis of all subject curriculum materials available to students. This included the subject handbook, subject guidelines, assessment tasks and instructions, assessment criteria, assessment feedback, tutorial and lecture notes, tutorial and lecture instructions, and online/eLearning resources. The curriculum documents were analysed to examine the extent to which the integration of employability skills was espoused as part of the design of subject curriculum. Curriculum documents are useful because they have been developed for the purposes of their subject, without knowledge of the current study (Yin 2009); they have been developed for the sole purpose of designing, delivery, and assessment of curriculum.

During phase 3, the direct observation of teaching and assessment practice was undertaken throughout the entire semester. Christie's (2002) curriculum macrogenre model was adapted for this study to guide the collection of teaching and learning activities during the direct observation process. A macrogenre, a 'sequence of lessons' that can last over several weeks, is useful as a tool to trace activities over a period of time. Since qualitative studies are naturalistic because they take place in the 'real' setting (Patton 2002), the observations of practice took place in the actual teaching setting of each academic, so the location of teaching practice observed depended upon the teaching academic. The observation, over the entire semester period (12 weeks) of lectures, tutorials, and workshops of the selected subjects, occurred in a first year economics subject and a third year accounting subject during Semester 1, 2014, and in a first year accounting subject and third year economics subject during Semester 2, 2014 (see Appendix 2). The observation of assessment practice was managed by collecting and analysing verbal feedback provided to students on formal assessment tasks during class time, and via written feedback on assessment tasks and assessment rubrics and/or criteria.

By employing direct observation of academics' practices in a sequence of lessons over an entire semester, the author was able to observe in detail aspects of practice that were not explicitly mentioned or described by the academics in the first interview and that could be explored in more detail in the follow-up interview. In this way, direct observations have the advantage of noting practices that study participants may not have paid attention to, or been unwilling or unable to talk about (Patton 2002). The role of the author was that of unobtrusive observer with no involvement in the teaching and assessment practice of the subjects observed. As Patton (2002) contends, the observational data must be in-depth and detailed; therefore, as in the observational data were structured by developing an observational protocol (Creswell 2007, 135–138). This protocol provided open-ended space for recording descriptive notes of

the practices observed, including the time, topic, and different stages of the teaching period (see Appendix 3). This enabled the author to take notes during observation, rather than writing descriptions after the observations, enabling the author to accurately describe and to reflect on the observations at the moment they occurred. Running notes during the observation process were valuable as a tool for focusing questioning during the follow-up interviews. The physical setting of the classroom, as well as behaviours, interactions, and activities, were also noted. Reflective notes about the experiences of observing the classes, about research hunches triggered, and about any learning generated were also documented (Creswell 2007).

Semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted with the academics during phase 4. During the follow-up interviews, academics were asked to recall examples of actual teaching and assessment practices. The aim of this phase was to gain an understanding, directly from the academics' perspective, of the reasons for their decisions in relation to specific teaching and learning activities. A number of questions, prepared in advance, formed the interview schedule for follow-up interviews (see Appendix 4). The questions were used as a tool to allow the academics to reflect on particular teaching and assessment practices observed.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed then analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Miles et al. 2014). The author carried out the analysis of all data with the support of two colleagues who confirmed the themes that emerged. The process of 'open coding' as advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2015) was employed over several stages to develop the final codes. In this way, codes and categories emerged from the remarks of the academics during the interview (Miles et al. 2014). A thematic analysis was appropriate for this study as the aim was to privilege the academics' definitions of employability skills and their espoused views regarding the integration of employability skills in their subject curriculum; for example, the codes assigned to academics' definitions of employability skills began with the term 'two-part definition' because each of the academics mentioned that the term employability skills consists of two parts, or a combination of two parts.

A thematic analysis of the curriculum documents was conducted in a similar manner to that of the semi-structured interview responses: 'open coding' was utilized. An inductive process was adopted by drawing out academics' understandings of their practice and their espoused practices that were apparent in the documents. The analysis of documents enabled the author to corroborate and augment evidence gained from other sources (Yin 2009), that is, from the semi-structured interviews and direct observations.

In conducting the analysis of teaching practice observations, Christie's (2002, 98) notion of using macrogenres for an analysis of classroom talk was adapted. The teaching and assessment practices identified were analysed using thematic analysis in the same way as the analysis of the interview data and curriculum documents.

Findings

The findings are presented in accordance with the Theories of Action Framework. Academics' espoused theories (understandings and self-reported practice) are presented first, followed by academics' theories-in-use as observed in their actual practice and in their commentary on this practice during follow-up interviews.

Espoused theories

Understanding of employability skills

Drawing on the initial interview data and content analysis of curriculum documents, the findings indicate that the academics share a common understanding of employability skills and acknowledge that these skills are an important part of teaching and assessment practice. The following quote reflects the common responses articulated by the academics.

Well I think most of us take employability skills to mean... a combination of the technical skills associated with the discipline, plus the more generic skills and attributes (Third Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

Consistent with industry's understanding, the academics defined employability skills as consisting of two main skill types: discipline-specific skills and those skills which foster better employment outcomes because they are significant for work readiness, as indicated by the following quote.

There are two types. One is we're training people to be commerce graduates and so I guess one of the skills is knowledge of economics in a way that they'll actually be able to apply that in the workplace... the discipline specific skills. Then there are the generic skills, which are the things like being able to communicate, that involve being able to explain clearly, being able to know what audience it is you're writing for or talking to. (First Year Economics Subject Coordinator)

The most discussed employability skills in order of frequency were analysis, evaluation, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills. The academics claimed that employability skills occupy an important place in the university curriculum and in an academic's role. The following statement captures the academics' views.

Employers are looking for these skills. Employers have a big say in setting... the theory or the practical work that we run through each week. But if they're looking for employability skills, the onus is on the university to try and develop those (First Year Accounting Tutor).

Consistent with their understanding of employability skills, the academics stated that they accepted responsibility for ensuring that employability skills are integrated into the university curriculum because employers are looking for such skills.

Self-reported practice: what academics say they do in practice

In order to understand whether their understanding of employability skills influences self-reported practice, the academics were asked to talk specifically about their practice. The purpose of this stage of the study was to understand the extent to which academics' self-reported practices align with that understanding.

The teaching practices reported indicate that academics seek to ensure that the teaching of employability skills is direct and explicit through demonstrations, facilitation, and assessment of these skills. The academics aim to play a pivotal role in providing students with an opportunity to connect what they are learning in the classroom to the workplace by demonstrating the importance of employability skills. In this way, their statements indicate, they

believe they give students the opportunity to learn the skills they need to be work-ready, as one interviewee suggested.

One of the ways of engaging them is by demonstrating - you've got to put yourself in their mind and think okay, why are they doing this? So, the best way you can actually get them to learn the material is by engaging them and making it relevant to them which, again, means that you've got to make them think that it's adding to their employability. (First Year Economics Subject Coordinator)

Consistent with their beliefs about their teaching role, academics claim that they also facilitate student activities that provide opportunities for the acquisition of employability skills.

... as a tutor, you're there pretty much to just facilitate learning. So, the way I approach the tutorials is as much as possible I want to do minimal talking. As much as possible, I want to ask probing questions and get them to do the thinking and answer the questions, get them really problem-solving and thinking. (First Year Accounting Tutor)

In addition to drawing on the interview data, a content analysis of available assessment task instructions and assessment criteria was conducted. The findings indicate that, through their curriculum documents, academics show that the assessment of analysis and evaluation skills is central to all of the assessment tasks they set, and that written skills and teamwork/collaboration skills are sometimes measured through these tasks. The assessment of analysis, evaluation, and written skills is explicit in the instructions. The outline of the first year group assignment in the excerpt below (Fig. 1) is an example of such instructions. Part A of the assignment consists of technical skills application, while the primary component of part B requires students to analyse the calculations component of part A and present a written report.

During the interviews, the academics who design assessment in both accounting and economics subjects stressed the priority given to the assessment of analysis, evaluation, and written skills, as indicated in the following statements.

Part B [of the group assignment] is the analysis. It's the – 'you've done the numbers, I give you the correct solutions, go away, tell me what that means'. (First Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

... In my assignments, I have short essay questions, so basically, I expect them to analyse it, to give a short paragraph, to be able to just very concisely answer the question, but to be able to identify the most important... I also have an assignment that asks them to process data. I have some data facts and then do some intuitive explanations. (Third year Economics subject coordinator)

Overall, drawing on initial interview data and the content analysis of curriculum documents, the findings indicate that the academics in this study support the concept of and importance of

Assignment

This is a group assignment in which groups will need to do Financial Statement Analysis on two hypothetical companies to decide which company is the best to invest in. Part A is the calculations, Part B is the writing of a report analysing the information and making recommendations, and Part C is a self/peer review.

Fig. 1 First year accounting subject guideline

employability skills as articulated by industry. To this end, the academics in this study seek to integrate employability skills through teaching and assessment practices that demonstrate, facilitate, and assess employability skills.

Theories in use: what academics actually do in practice

This section reports on the data collected from the observation of academics' teaching practice and follow-up interviews. Drawing on the coded observations, a typology of accounting and economic academics' teaching and assessment practice has been developed (Tables 1 and 2—Appendix 5). The typology illustrates that academics were observed using four different types of practice that integrated employability skills: (1) discussion of employability skills; (2) demonstration of employability skills; (3) facilitating employability skills in practice; and (4) the assessment of employability skills. The typology, read from bottom up, conceptualizes four different levels of teaching practice. The levels represent the extent to which employability skills are integrated into the curriculum. The different levels of teaching practice are listed in ascending order from indirect to direct as indicated in Appendix 5. Although the four types of teaching practice were observed, there was a lack of systematic and consistent use of the practices to integrate employability skills within the curriculum across different teaching spaces and within and across disciplines and subjects. Each type of practice is discussed below.

Discussion of employability skills

'Discussion of employability skills' was observed as being the most common form of practice that integrated employability skills into the curriculum (see Appendix 6 that provides an overview of observed practice), but there were marked differences between the types of classes in which this occurred; that is, discussion of employability skills was more often observed in the first year lecture rather than the third year lecture, and in tutorials more often than in lectures. There were also differences observed between the disciplines in the extent of discussion of employability skills; for example, accounting academics were more likely to discuss employability skills than were economics academics.

While academics in this study claimed to recognize a range of employability skills involved in work readiness, with core employability skills being identified as being communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork skills, they were mostly observed discussing the importance and relevance of a select number of skills they deemed relevant to their specific discipline. The accounting academics, for instance, focused on analysis, evaluation, and sometimes written skills, while the economics academics mentioned skills of analysis, only occasionally mentioning decision-making skills.

The inconsistent integration of employability skills in practice is most evident in the infrequent discussion of communication and teamwork skills. Despite academics' belief that communication and teamwork skills are considered key employability skills, in practice, the academics paid inconsistent and minimal attention to these skills in their teaching practice; that is, only one academic was observed making an announcement during two lectures that a report-writing session would be offered to assist in developing report-writing skills needed in the workplace. To investigate the purpose of the report-writing workshop, the author asked the academic to outline the reasons for offering the 'Report Writing Skills Session'. The academic

explained that the report-writing session was required because his previous experience indicated that students encounter ‘language skills’ problems that could affect their gaining and maintaining employment.

We do have a problem with the international students and their language skills. So, in some ways I’m trying to plug holes. (First Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

The academic further stated that the report-writing workshops were an important way of showing students how to present their work in the business report structure expected in the workplace and expected in their assessment tasks, especially as reports had been incorrectly formatted in previous semesters.

Writing Workshops are to make sure they present their work in the correct format and write well. It’s for those who need the support. We recognise that they are first year and may have not written a business report before – so we provide support to do so. I believe it’s important to learn about presenting a written report; it’s relevant to the workplace. (First Year Accounting Tutor)

It seems, in this instance, that the academic’s experience has enabled him to identify and respond to student shortcomings needing direct attention, both to enable successful completion of assessments in their subject and to enhance employment outcomes for students. The direct link to the workplace was not clearly articulated to students, however. It could be argued therefore that offering the report-writing session indicated an implicit rather than an explicit, direct message to students that report-writing is an employability skill required in the workplace. It suggests that students are not explicitly informed during lectures and tutorials that written skills development is a core component of the subject’s learning outcomes. This was confirmed in follow-up interviews when the academic explained that the teaching of written skills is seen as different to the teaching of discipline content, as exemplified in the following quote.

I much prefer a more systematic universal approach to supporting students whose language skills may not be to the level expected. So, one of the reasons we introduced the report-writing skill workshop was based on that we know students do actually struggle with written skills how to write a report... A lot of the generic skills aren’t content skills. I can’t teach written skills. My background is not in that. I know what a good business report is... I know how to teach it, but I’m not qualified. (First Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

The observation of practice has shed light on the influence of academic position and expertise on the decisions academics make about the extent to which they discuss employability skills during their teaching practice.

Demonstration of employability skills

‘Demonstration of the application of employability skills’ was observed when there was explicit showcasing, directly from academic to student, of the application of employability skills, especially as applied in the workplace. While the ‘demonstration of application of employability skills’ was espoused by academics as a form of teaching practice they employed, in actual practice, inconsistent demonstration of this was observed in each subject over a 12-week period (see Appendix 6).

The demonstration of employability skills was observed more often in lectures than tutorials. Disciplinary differences in relation to the extent of integrated demonstration of employability skills in academics' practice was also observed. Accounting academics tended to routinely integrate the demonstration of employability skills in their teaching practice, but it was an inconsistent component of teaching practice across all economics subjects and teaching spaces; that is, it was mostly observed in first year economics lectures (10 out of 12 lectures), while infrequently observed in first year economics tutorials (2 out of 11 tutorials), rarely in third year lectures (1 out of 12 lectures), and not at all in third year tutorials.

The demonstration of employability skills was dominated by the demonstration of analysis skills, rather than spread across the range of employability skills as claimed by academics in statements about their practice. During the follow-up interviews, one of the accounting academics with over 10 years of experience explained that the identification in a previous semester's exams of students' lack of ability to analyse and evaluate was the reason he directly demonstrates in lectures how to unpack exam questions. For the most part, it seems that demonstration of the relevance of skills in the workplace is an implicit rather than explicit part of teaching practice; rather, academics' practice reflects the priority given to knowledge of the discipline in preparation of graduates. An economic academic explained, during the follow-up interview, that the overall purpose of demonstrating through games in a lecture was to teach an economic concept by showing how to analyse a concept in practice:

I mean the technical purpose of it is I guess that it's supposed to illustrate this idea of diminishing marginal product, which it does. Sometimes it's absolutely perfect. Sometimes it doesn't work out so well. So, you've always got to be able to think on your feet of how it is you're going to describe what bits of the example do fit. (First Year Economics Subject Coordinator)

In actual practice, therefore, it seems that academics make individual decisions about integrating employability skills, resulting in differences in the extent to which they demonstrate the relevance and application of employability skills. Such differences can be explained by the characteristics of individual academics, most notably academics' level of experience and their subject discipline.

Facilitating employability skills in practice

Facilitating the acquisition of employability skills in practice was observed when academics directly and explicitly facilitated students in completing set of activities in pairs and groups, focusing on the development of key employability skills such as teamwork and problem-solving. Although all academics in this study indicated that they facilitated the learning of employability skills in their teaching practice, the author observed inconsistent teaching practice over the 12-week observation period (see Appendix 6). The facilitation of employability skills' acquisition was observed more often in tutorials and workshops. This reflected the academics' view that tutorials and workshops were designed to be interactive.

The workshop is meant to be interactive, whereas the lecture is not structured to be interactive. (Third Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

Some disciplinary differences were also observed in the extent of facilitation of activities enabling students to practice employability skills. Such facilitation was rarely observed in economics classes; it was observed more regularly in accounting classes: on more occasions in

first year accounting tutorials (11 out of 12) and third year accounting (9 out of 12) tutorials than in first year accounting lectures (5 out of 12) or third year accounting lectures (3 out of 12). In contrast, with the exception of two first year economics tutorials, the academics were mostly observed working out tutorial problems on the whiteboard, with little observed facilitation of activities that would enable students to practice employability skills. As accounting is considered to be an applied discipline, providing direct opportunities for students to rehearse the employability skills required for professional practice is more likely to be perceived as part of accounting culture, as indicated by the following quote.

I think it's the next step in their learning. They have to learn to move away from being the apprentice... they have to start making these decisions for themselves (First Year Accounting Subject Coordinator).

Despite the view that the learning of employability skills is a part of the accounting discipline, the facilitation of relevant activities in accounting lectures, tutorials, and workshops was seen to be inconsistent across accounting classes. Tensions faced by academics in making choices between different teaching practices were noted during follow-up interviews.

I always worry a little bit about forced group work. So, some students, rightly or wrongly, but they want to just... particularly in a lecture, if I ask them to do tasks in a lecture, some of them sort of get a bit, 'I'm in lecture mode. Just tell me what you want to tell me... and let me go.' I don't blame them for that either, but I guess I'm always trying to think of ways to make the lecture okay, so that's why I either try to show a video or show something, or give them an example that's different, or get them to do something in the lecture. (Third Year Accounting Subject Coordinator).

The experience of tension in relation to decisions about teaching practice was apparent in an academic who was concerned that focusing on developing communication skills during a lecture risked taking the focus away from the development of students' technical accounting skills. The following quote illustrates this.

So, the fact that they've got to talk to each other and convey is important - we're in the business of communication in accounting. So, they've got to be able to communicate. It's not just all one-way or one form of communication even though that is an important function. I think sometimes I go too far. I need to remind them sometimes that the basics and the calculations and the technical stuff are really important. So, I'm actually forcing myself to say that more often. (Third Year Accounting Subject Coordinator).

Consistent with academics' concerns about integration of employability skills into a lecture, there was a consensus among academics holding a tutor role that integrating development of particular employability skills into their tutorials would take the focus away from content delivery—their primary role. Tutors explained that their capacity to integrate development of some employability skills into their teaching practice is limited because their role as tutors does not include curriculum design, while the requirements of the overcrowded curriculum and consequent time constraints mean that they adhere to just what is expected in their classrooms.

Most of it's implied [expectation to teach students to develop employability skills] and a lot of it's because it's really quite tough to find time to do anything that's outside of the materials being covered [subject content]. Like when I'm able to I'll mention about how

this relates to actual economic policy and what not, but that's time permitting. (First Year Economics Tutor)

For the most part, the tutors indicated that they adopt a range of interactive activities for managing lesson content rather than integrating employability skills development. The tutor's quote below illustrates the tensions between facilitating activities for acquisition of content knowledge and for facilitating activities for the practice of employability skills.

So, I don't really think about it in terms of employability when I'm doing that but it's more to make sure that the quality of the learning across the class. So, if one group's going to present to the entire class and I didn't do that [probe/ensure they are on the right track], they might present a really poorly structured, poor quality answer and then the rest of the class will suffer and not be able to learn that content as well. So, if I go in and ask probing questions and I get them on the right track, get them thinking about the right things, so when someone's presenting and they're running through it, they're learning themselves or when they present to the class it's clear and it can be well understood by everyone else. (First Year Accounting Tutor).

The tutor's quote below illustrates further the tensions between content knowledge acquisition and employability skills.

I don't want students to get bogged down in the wrong stuff. I guess that suggests that the focus here is to understand the economics and not to get too bogged down into the written work. (First Year Economics Tutor)

It seems that for that tutor, the facilitation of student activities for practising employability skills is considered an indirect component of their teaching practice. This discussion about facilitating acquisition of employability skills in practice, regardless of the mode of teaching delivery, illustrates the range of complexities encountered by teaching academics in trying to teach discipline content while finding time to focus on the development of the skills of a work-ready graduate. It is the position of the author that the facilitation of opportunities for acquiring employability skills should be explored by academics and should be actively pursued in lectures as well as in the more traditional spaces of the tutorial or workshop.

Assessment of employability skills

While academics during the initial interviews supported the direct assessment of a range of employability skills as prescribed in their subject curriculum documents, there is evidence to suggest that the assessment of employability skills is mostly an indirect part of assessment practice. It was observed that a limited number of employability skills are assessed, typically only analysis skills (see Appendix 7). It seems that the assessment of content knowledge takes priority. One academic, for example, explained that it is more important to assess students' understanding of the concepts of the discipline rather than to assess their actual written work.

One of things that we don't put that much emphasis on is the presentation of the assessment. We are very much focused on understanding the intuition and getting the economics right. The presentation is not hugely important and that's pretty consistent through a lot of economics, is that there's very, very little formal essay writing. There's very, very little I guess formal written communication at all. (First Year Economics Tutor)

As indicated in the following quote, the assessment of written skills is an implicit outcome of assessment.

Assessment is set to test their understanding. I would hope we do more than assess their knowledge. I think knowledge you can rote learn but understanding requires students to apply and explain clearly. I wouldn't say we explicitly do it [assess students' written skills], however, the assignment does have a fair bit around presentation [of the written report], grammar structure. (First Year Accounting Subject Coordinator)

As can be seen in the two excerpts from the interview data above, the academics who participated in this study by and large assess discipline knowledge and content more often than they assess employability skills, despite indicating that they assess their students on a range of those skills. This illustrates some of the inconsistencies encountered by academics in this study in their approach to the teaching and assessment of employability skills within their specific discipline.

Discussion

This study investigated the extent to which academics integrate employability skills development into their teaching and assessment practice. To conduct this study, academics' understanding of employability skills and their espoused theories of employability skills' integration in practice was explored against their actual teaching and assessment practice. The findings indicate that while accounting and economics academics defined employability skills in a manner consistent with the understanding driven by industry—that is, skills that transcend discipline knowledge and technical skills—it was found that a number of factors influence the skills that are prioritized in, and/or integrated into teaching and assessment practice, including the discipline within which academics work; their academic position (whether they are a lecturer or tutor); the teaching space within which academics work (lecture, workshop, or tutorial); and their level of teaching experience. Thus, while academics were observed using a range of indirect and direct practices in integrating some employability skills development into their teaching and assessment practice, such practices occurred inconsistently and were not systematic across and within subjects and disciplines. Discussion and demonstration of employability skills were observed in all types of classes, that is, in lectures, tutorials, and workshops, but not consistently in all subjects under consideration in this study.

It appears that academics make individual decisions that are constrained or enabled by their discipline, academic position, or experience, indicating, as argued by Ashwin (2008, 152), that the relationship between structures and individual agency shifts 'over time and between situations'. Experienced academics, more so than novice academics, tend to rely on their experience to tailor their teaching and assessment practice to integrate employability skills development. They reported, for example, being influenced by their experience of the quality standards of students' work impeding students' ability to complete the subject assessments and the final exam. In contrast, novice academics (early career academics and tutors), it seems, have a stronger inclination to adhere to subject requirements, particularly the obligation to cover required content in the time given, or to focus on assessing understanding of subject content rather than employability skills.

The variation in teaching and assessment practice observed means student exposure to employability skills development opportunities via the subject curriculum may vary from discipline to discipline and subject to subject within the same degree program. The extent to which students acquire employability skills through their whole degree program during their university studies is therefore unknown. This may explain the continued deficit among graduates in the acquisition of employability skills that is reported by industry.

There are some limitations associated with this study: it is restricted to academics in one institution, one degree program, and two disciplines, and is focused on examining understandings and practices of academics teaching at the undergraduate level at one moment in time. Nevertheless, offering insight into academics' actual practice is an important contribution to the understanding of academics' response to the employability skills agenda. This study therefore makes an important contribution to understanding academics' practices because it is set in the authentic workplace of the academic, using in-depth and detailed observational data.

The employability skills question is a pressing one for Australian universities in the context of the realities of a continually changing higher education environment. Expanding this research to cover a larger number of subjects, disciplines, and institutions is highly recommended. Research investigating teaching and assessment practices in different subjects and disciplines would be valuable in further understanding the challenges, constraints, and demands faced by academics in contemporary universities. Additionally, it may provide greater insight into the extent to which external and internal factors influence understanding and practice of employability skills development across academic disciplines and institutions in the tertiary sector. As argued by Barnett et al. (2001), disciplinary differences need to be investigated so that institution-wide strategies and policy can consider the variations in curriculum. As graduate employability skills development is an issue of growing importance in higher education, nationally and internationally, future research should also include an investigation of academics' understanding of the issue, and their actual practices, at a national and international level.

Acknowledgements The author thanks Dr. Chi Baik and Ron Baird for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

Appendix 1. Semi-structural interview questions

Interview protocol: Semi-structured interviews.

Project: An examination of the extent that academics integrate employability skills in the business curriculum

Date of interview

Time of interview

Place

Interviewer

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

Project Description

Proposed Questions

1. What is your understanding of employability skills?
2. What skills do you think your students should possess upon the completion of your subject?

3. What would you describe as your role in preparing future graduates with required employability skills?
4. What do you know about the university's direction with regard to the integration of employability skills within curriculum?
5. To what extent is the integration of employability skills integrated at the program level of your faculty?
6. What do you think is the best way to prepare students with a broad range of skills that will prepare them for employment in the workplace?
 - What is the purpose of lectures/tutorials/workshops/e-learning delivery?
 - What is the purpose of assessment?
 - Room that you teach from – is it conducive to the practice/learning of employability skills?
7. Have you made any recent changes to your curriculum that seeks to include employability skills? If yes, in what ways? If not, why not?
8. Do you see the need to make changes to your curriculum in the future? Why/Why not?
9. Other questions/notes

Appendix 2. Selected subjects and classroom types (for each macrogenre)

Subjects	Macrogenre sequence of lessons over 12 weeks	Classroom type observed	1 class per week	Duration
First year accounting	Lectures		12 weeks	2 h
	Tutorials		12 weeks	1 h
Third year accounting	Lectures		12 weeks	2 h
	Workshop		12 weeks	1.5 h
First year economics	Lectures		12 weeks	2 h (2 × 1 h)
	Tutorials		12 weeks	1 h
Third year economics	Lectures		12 weeks	2 h (2 × 1 h)
	Tutorials		12 weeks	1 h

Appendix 3. The observational protocol

Direct observation of teaching practice protocol

Project: An examination of the extent that academics integrate employability skills in the business curriculum

Description Notes	Reflection Notes
Subject Code/Name	
Semester	
Week Number	
Date of observation	
Time of Observation	
Observer:	
Academic being observed:	
Position of individual being observed:	
Topic	
Type of teaching delivery	
Describe place of observation (layout, physical setting)	
Introduction/Opening to teaching delivery	
Describe Teaching delivery	
Closing	

Appendix 4. Follow-up semi-structured interview questions

Interview protocol: Follow-up semi-structured interviews

Project: An examination of the extent that academics integrate employability skills in the business curriculum

Date of follow-up interview

Time of follow-up interview

Place

Interviewer

Interviewee:

Position of interviewee:

Project Description

Questions about curriculum documentation

1. Tell more about learning outcome (x, y, z)
2. Give me an example of how you set out to ensure learning outcome (x, y, z) was achieved by the students.
3. Tell me more about (x, y, z) learning and teaching activity? Why was this included? What are the benefits it has for student learning or the acquisition of employability skills

Questions about observed teaching and learning activities (including any online activities)

1. Tell me more about (example of observed teaching activity).
2. Why did you decide to do (example) during (specific tutorial/lecture/workshop)?
3. What is the purpose of (example of activity/questions/tasks)?

Questions about assessment and feedback

1. Describe the skills students gained from completing assessment (a, b, c).
2. Describe what ways did assessment (a, b, c) provide students with the
3. Describe in what ways do you see feedback on assessment as a means to allow students to reflect on the skills gained/practiced/enhanced.
4. In what way does feedback on assessment provide students the opportunity to learn what skills are important for employment?

Other questions/comments

Appendix 5

Table 1 Typology: accounting academics’ observed teaching practice



Teaching practice	Examples of observed teaching practices	
Assesses employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small range of employability skills are assessed • Gives feedback on small range of employability skills (analysis and written skills) 	Direct 
Facilitates activities to apply employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives students some practice in application of some employability skills to case-studies and accounting data (analysis, evaluation, decision-making) • Gives student practice in applying some employability skills to real life case studies and accounting data. 	
Demonstrates application of employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case studies and accounting data to discuss some employability skills (analysis, evaluation and decision-making skills) • Shows how to apply some employability skills to real life case examples and accounting data (analysis, evaluation and decision-making skills) 	
Discusses employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions some employability skills for the workplace (analysis evaluation, decision-making, teamwork skills) • Infrequently explains the importance of some employability skills for the accounting role (analysis, evaluation, decision-making) 	
		Indirect

Table 2 Typology: economics academics’ observed teaching practice

Teaching practice	Examples of observed teaching practices	
Assesses employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions two types of employability skills in some of the criteria (analysis and written skills) • Gives written feedback on two types of employability skills (analysis and written skills) 	Direct  Indirect
Facilitates activities to apply employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives students practice in application of two types of employability skills to case-studies and economic data (analysis, decision-making) 	
Demonstrates employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses cases studies and economic data to apply two types of employability skills (analysis and decision-making skills) 	
Discusses employability skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentions the importance of some employability skills (analysis, evaluation) • Mentions the importance of one employability skill for the workplace (analysis skill) 	

Appendix 6. Observed practice overview

Table 3 First year accounting lecture

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (7)	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Explains the role of the employability skills in the accounting role (8)	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓
Demonstrates application of employability skills (6)			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			✓
Facilitates student activities to practice employability skills (5)	✓					✓		✓	✓			✓

Table 4 First year accounting tutorials

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (4)				✓		✓		✓				✓
Explains the role of the employability skills in the accounting role (3)	✓								✓	✓		
Demonstrates application of employability skills (2)							✓					✓
Facilitates student activities to practice employability skills (11)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 5 Third year accounting lectures

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (6)	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Explains the role of the employability skills in the accounting role (1)											✓	
Demonstrates application of employability skills (6)		✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓
Facilitates student activities to practice employability skills (3)					✓		✓		✓			

Table 6 Third year accounting workshops

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (9)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓		
Explains the role of the employability skills in the accounting role (2)									✓		✓	
Demonstrates application of employability skills (3)								✓	✓	✓		
Facilitates student activities to practice employability skills (9)	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	

Table 7 First year economics lectures

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (3)	✓					✓		✓				
Discuss employability skills of the economists (1)						✓						
Demonstrates application of employability skills (10)		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 8 First year economic tutorials

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (2)										✓	✓	
Demonstrates application of employability skills (2)					✓	✓						
Facilitates student activities to practice employability skills (2)							✓	✓				

Table 9 Third year economics lecture

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (2)	✓								✓			
Demonstrates application of employability skills (1)		✓										

Table 10 Third year economic tutorials

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Discusses employability skills (1)				✓								

Appendix 7. Employability skills identified in assessment tasks

Subject and year	Analysis skills	Critical thinking skills	Written skills	Verbal skills	Teamwork skills
First year accounting					
Tutorial participation and contribution	✓				
Group assignment	✓		✓		✓
Final exam	✓				
Third year accounting					
Workshop participation and contribution	✓				
Test					
Group assignment	✓		✓		
Final exam	✓				
First year economics					
Tutorial participation and attendance					
Multiple choice test online					
Assignment 1	✓		✓		
Assignment 2	✓	✓	✓		
Final exam					
Third year economics					
Tutorial participation and attendance					
Group assignment 1	✓				
Group assignment 2	✓				
Mid-semester exam					
Final exam					

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