

Beyond technology: What have students learned in our classrooms about their employability?

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As dedicated lecturers in our disciplines we seek novel ways of enhancing student learning, particularly in the case of complex topics or abstract concepts. We are also aware of the challenges our students face on graduation regarding their transition into the workplace. Group projects that seek to build teamwork skills, and assessment tasks aimed at developing the oral and written communication skills of our students, are designed with great care. But how aware are our students of these aspects of their learning? How well can our students identify and articulate their employability skills beyond the discipline-specific content of our subjects?

A study of 2014-2017 assessment items submitted as part of a specialised STEM Internship subject cannot be described as a ringing endorsement! The subject encapsulates disciplines far broader than Geochemistry involving students across a wide range of STEM disciplines. Despite the breadth of the cohort, clear patterns emerge. For example 1) we aim to teach our students to be independent learners, yet what they learn is that it is unacceptable to ask for direct help; 2) we aim to instil students with knowledge, yet they learn that “it’s all about answers, rather than solutions”; and 3) the groupwork and written assignments we set bear little resemblance to the tasks they will be asked to carry out in the workplace.

Clearly it would be impossible to prepare all of our graduates for every permutation of employment they may face, and it might be argued that this is hardly our role anyway. Importantly, the most critical area of learning for Internship students is an improvement of their self-awareness. On completion of this subject, the majority of interns report that they have gained a better understanding of their natural talents and areas of weakness, as well as what skills will they will require in order to succeed in the career they seek to pursue (and how close are they to reaching those goals).

Some academics fear that including a focus on employability skills will displace important discipline content in their subjects. Strategies are explored to modify assessment components in ways that require students to reflect on their broader abilities within the discipline confines of our subjects.