



Innovation Case Study

Sciences PLUS Program

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CONTEXT

Griffith Sciences Professional Learning for Undergraduate Students (PLUS) is an co-curricular program designed to introduce students to the concept of employability and to help them engage in practical steps they can take to develop, recognise and articulate their employability skills. The program is designed to be undertaken by students across the course of their degree and is characterised by a series of manageable and achievable career-development activities aligned to the student lifecycle. Students are required to record their experiences in an ePortfolio to ensure they engage in active and ongoing reflection to consolidate their learning in both curricular and extra-curricular contexts. PLUS is available to all students with the Sciences Group – this includes the broad discipline areas of architecture, aviation, engineering, environment, ICT, planning and science.

The PLUS program was initially introduced as a trial program in Semester 2, 2014, with 28 students participating. It was made available more broadly in 2015, with approximately 150 students completing the initial workshop and actively engaging in follow-up activities. In 2016 the program was offered as a self-directed online program and as an intensive workshop-based program – numbers are difficult to track, but enrolment in the PLUS Learning@Griffith site (the platform by which the program is delivered) increased to 629 students.

Although originally intended as an extra-curricular program, in mid-2015 the Sciences Group adopted PLUS as the platform to develop integrated and embedded employability-based learning. This is a unique aspect of the program compared to others of its kind, as the flexible nature of PLUS is designed to integrate employability-based learning with discipline-specific learning, and students are therefore introduced to employability within the context of their discipline. Academic staff and the Employability Curriculum Consultant work collaboratively to adapt PLUS activities for assessment, or to ensure students are made aware that specific tasks, assignments or projects completed within a course have strong potential to demonstrate their employability and should therefore be included in their PLUS ePortfolio.

“Overall, my experience with the PLUS and ePortfolio program was one that was very valuable and rewarding. I now feel much more aware of my skills and attributes as a soon-to-be professional in the workforce.”

RATIONALE

The role of higher education institutions in developing students' employability has been under scrutiny in recent times, and there is general consensus that the HE sector does have an obligation to ensure graduates are 'work ready' and 'job capable'. Beyond this, is the concept of the 'future of work.' This phrase has been adopted to convey a sense of the fast-paced changes to jobs and workplaces, the diverse skills graduates will need to be successful in these workplaces, and to highlight the need for graduates to be prepared to navigate diverse careers. There is evidence that the need to address these issues is particularly relevant for students in undergraduate STEM programs, as employers have frequently reported a mismatch in the skills graduates have and the skills they need. The PLUS program was introduced to provide both the incentive and the mechanism for students to engage in career learning activity that will have a positive impact on their preparedness to enter the workforce and to make a positive and meaningful contribution in a graduate role (and beyond).

Given the transition of the PLUS program from a fundamentally extra-curricular program, to one that has embedded aspects throughout the Sciences Group, the second critical rationale for the innovation was the need to understand and work around the limitations many students encounter in terms of their engagement with career learning. That is, they perceive that it is important and necessary to engage in career learning, but they simply cannot 'spare' the time in light of the competing demands on their time. Both the extra-curricular program (with its clear, structured approach) and the embedding of PLUS tasks in the curriculum seek to address this issue.

DESCRIPTION

PLUS was developed as a 'one-stop-shop' to help students understand the need to engage in ongoing career-development learning and to help them identify *what* they should be doing and *when*. It provides a scaffolded approach to career learning, and emphasises the need for students to be consistently proactive to prepare for the transition from student to professional. Students are introduced to a series of manageable steps they can take to develop their employability, aligned to the student lifecycle, in the areas of 'Explore Your Options' (transition in / first year), 'Get Real Experience' (transition through / middle years) and 'Expand Your Prospects' (transition out / final year). Tasks are further categorised within each of these broad areas to give students' an understanding of the diverse range of activity they can engage in. Within each category students are provided with up to five activities, including a rationale (why they should do it), a 'how to guide' (what they should do), resources and a suggestion about what they should include in their ePortfolio. The clear structure and 'bite-sized' nature of the steps encourages students to engage in employability-based learning actively routinely, decreasing the likelihood they will simply do nothing because it seems too overwhelming. Students in the program are supported by regular workshops, weekly reminders, individual consultation and collaborative group discussion.

"In regards to the job interview...I couldn't have gotten as far without my polished resume and would not have even got my foot in the door if it were not for my professional network - both things that I would not have without the PLUS program. I am very grateful for the work that you have done and are doing and you should know that all of this is definitely working."

To date the PLUS program has been accessible for students via a Learning@Griffith site, however, a version of the program is currently being developed within the PebblePad Personal Learning Platform. This version will allow for more built-in, interactive worksheets – further encouraging students to actively reflect on their experiences, and allowing them to create a rich collection of their work to evidence their employability.

IMPACT

Student feedback about the PLUS program has been consistently positive since its introduction in 2014. The PLUS program was adapted by the Program Director for the Graduate Diploma of Clinical Physiology in the School of Natural Sciences. PLUS was applied within that program to facilitate students successful progress across the lifecycle stages (transition in, throughout and out), and to ensure the approach to employability within the program was holistic, with an emphasis on personal development and life-long career planning. The Program Director was the winner of the “Employability in the Curriculum” award. Student testimonials highlighting the role of PLUS in this program are included below.

Tags: *Employability, Career Development, Curriculum, Griffith*