

**21ST CENTURY LIFE AND CAREER SKILLS:
BUILDING AN EMPLOYABILITY PATHWAY
IN AN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM**

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ABSTRACT

The P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning was developed to illustrate the skills that 21st Century students need to thrive in a changing world including life and career skills. Employability is 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke, 2004). Employability in the 21st century means being employable, regardless of the prevailing economic climate.

A 2015 group report, Improving RMIT's graduate employability and outcomes, presented the outcomes of a benchmarking analysis of employability strategies across 18 comparable and best practice universities, and identified that a clear employability strategy aligned to the university's overarching strategy was a distinguishing feature of universities with high graduate employment outcomes. While acknowledging RMIT Vietnam's current success in graduate employability rates, it was proposed that a coherent institutional strategy transparent to all stakeholders was needed.

RMIT Vietnam employability framework seeks to reimagine the student experience by constructing a coherent narrative for students around the development of their employability skills that begins the day they commence their studies and to integrate an emphasis on employability skills into the culture of the institution at every level.

This paper will present how RMIT Vietnam's employability pathway integrates existing programs such as personal edge, existing employment preparation and career support and sees these leveraged within the internal program curricula. A pathway is mapped and evidenced throughout programs across soft skills development and project-based WIL experiences, with a high impact internship experience being an important milestone in the journey.

INTRODUCTION

The P21's Framework for 21st Century Learning was developed to illustrate the skills that 21st Century students need to thrive in a changing world including life and career skills. Employability is 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more

likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Mantz Yorke 2004).

Employability in the 21st century means being employable, regardless of the prevailing economic climate. This concept is very pertinent in this era of economic and technical disruption where labour market needs are in constant and rapid flux. An industry sector which may have high labour market demand when a student enrolls in a degree may be in decline by the time the student graduates. Similarly new jobs and career opportunities will be available to our graduates, that had not even been imagined when they enrolled.

To meet the needs of all stakeholders (students, parents, employers, government, RMIT) students need to be agile, resilient and have the ability to future-proof their career in a rapidly changing labour market environment, globally and locally in Vietnam.

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The proposed *RMIT Vietnam Employability Pathway* provides a scaffolded, end to end student experience that nurtures, develops, and offers concrete and practical support to ensuring the employability and work readiness of all RMIT students and alumni.

BACKGROUND

Graduate employability at RMIT Vietnam is a consistent area of strength that has yet to be capitalised upon as a differentiator in the market, or as a well-defined and salient feature of the student experience within and in complement to formal program curricula. Innovative and quality practices are well established in some areas. However, consultations between the various stakeholders indicated that the overall picture was of a range of services, including both intra and extracurricular experiences for students, being delivered independently and lacking overall coherence.

Disjointedness was particularly evident between the services and programs provided by careers centre and the emphasis on employability within some areas of academic programs.

RMIT Melbourne is currently responding to a relatively poor performance on graduate destination surveys in recent years with the launch of the Graduate Futures and Careers Project. As a result, the articulation of an employment pathway can leverage substantially off existing products, services and projects. This exercise did not require starting from scratch, but rather connecting the existing dots to construct one overarching narrative surrounding an employability strategy.

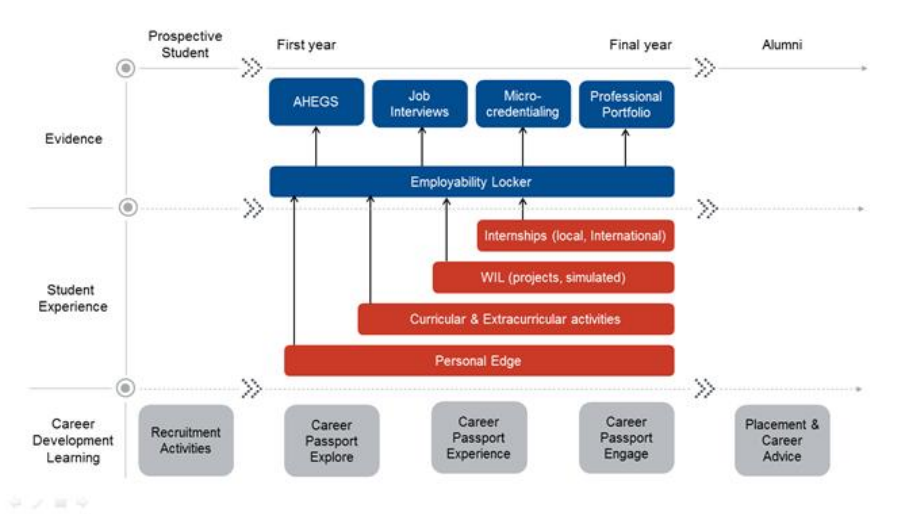
CREATING AN EMPLOYABILITY PATHWAY

As an institutional strategy, the coherence of an employability pathway depends on collaboration across departments and an integrated perspective across initiatives and programs that have complementary objectives, but sit within different areas. A fully realized implementation of the pathway as a seamless and prominent aspect of the student experience at RMIT Vietnam requires the following to be successful:

- Refinement of pathway design and communications; consultation with marketing and other key stakeholder groups (academic staff, careers centre staff, alumni, industry engagement, recruitment);
- Feedback on the proposed design from students, parents and industry regarding the clarity of the pathway and the appeal of its component parts;
- A clear mandate from the president's executive to implement the strategy;
- A supporting program of internal and cross unit activities (seminars, showcases, learning communities, curriculum and program mapping) to embed the principles of employability in the cognitions and practices of all staff.

ELEMENTS OF THE PATHWAY

An initial attempt to represent the interrelationship of employability activities diagrammatically is represented below. This diagram captures the end to end nature of the proposed pathway, commencing with a career focused recruitment strategy prior to enrolment and moving beyond the student experience to ongoing support in the alumni space.



The first two layers of this map are explained in more detail in the following sections.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT LEARNING

RMIT Vietnam provides students with many opportunities to develop employability skills, both within the curriculum and extracurricular. But simply having these skills is not enough. Career development learning 'empowers students to identify, develop and articulate the skills, qualifications, experiences, attributes and knowledge that will enable them to make an effective transition into their chosen futures, and manage their careers as lifelong learners, with a realistic and positive attitude' (Stanbury, 2005). It teaches students how to make sense of their experiences in a way that is meaningful and appropriate for them, make the link between the experiences and employability skills, then present evidence of these skills in a way that is attractive to an employer.

Providing effective career development learning is much more than simply helping a student get their first job. It teaches students how to

- adapt and change to repeatedly change work roles;
- actively engage in learning throughout life;
- develop the employability and life/career management skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century; and
- proactively design and manage their life/career progression.

To be effective career development learning should not occur in a vacuum or in isolation from the curriculum. It should be embedded within the curriculum to ensure graduates become successful alumni who are able to continue to navigate the world of work in an ongoing and sustainable way.

The Careers and Employability Service at RMIT Vietnam offers different types of services and courses for current and past students throughout their university and post-university journey. Besides coordinating internships, offering job placements, providing career consulting and counselling and preparing students for employment, the unit also runs networking events and career weeks tailored to specific disciplines. Additionally, it also offers a free non-credit bearing program called Career Passport. Career Passport is a co-curricular career development learning program delivered at RMIT Vietnam every semester and has been designed to benefit all students, regardless of the degree program or stage of their degree. It is divided into 3 stages: Explore, Experience and Engage. Explore is aimed at students who are in the early stages of career development; Experience is for students in the mid stage; and Engage is for students who are ready to graduate or apply for internships.

	Explore <i>New students</i>	Experience <i>Mid-course students</i>	Engage <i>Exiting students</i>
1	Who am I? Developing self awareness	What are the essential employability skills?	Strategic job search
2	What would my ideal career look like?	Building a personal brand	Winning resumes and cover letters
3	What possible jobs can I do?	How to use LinkedIn	Ace the face-to-face: How to do well in job interviews
4	What should I do next? Taking action	How to Network	Network your way into and succeed in your first job

Alumni Relations regularly receives enquiries from employers keen to hire RMIT alumni. Once vetted, these positions are advertised on social and professional media channels and the RMIT website if requested. A resume databank proposal is under development to address expectations of employers that the university maintains resumes of all alumni who are looking for jobs or internships. In addition, a number of alumni networking events are organised in both SGS and Hanoi campuses. These activities enable alumni to support alumni and current students in identifying employment opportunities.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Effective learning for employability can occur across a variety of student experiences including within the general curriculum, extracurricular activities, non-placement WIL (Work Integrated Learning) activities and placement WIL activities (internships).

A broad range of activities within the general curriculum contributes to development of employability skills. As well as technical, discipline specific activities; these also include delivering presentations, group work, writing reports etc.

RMIT Vietnam students have the opportunity to undertake many extracurricular activities. While they are participating in these activities, they are (often unwittingly) acquiring many employability skills. Extracurricular activities at RMIT VN include Personal Edge, Mentoring Program, Volunteering, LEAD program and Business Plan Competition.

The Personal Edge program was developed in response to feedback from key local employers who felt RMIT Vietnam graduates lacked the 'personal skills' required in multinational organisations. Personal Edge is designed to help students develop 3 'Personal' employability skills: self-awareness, personal/career Management and personal Development

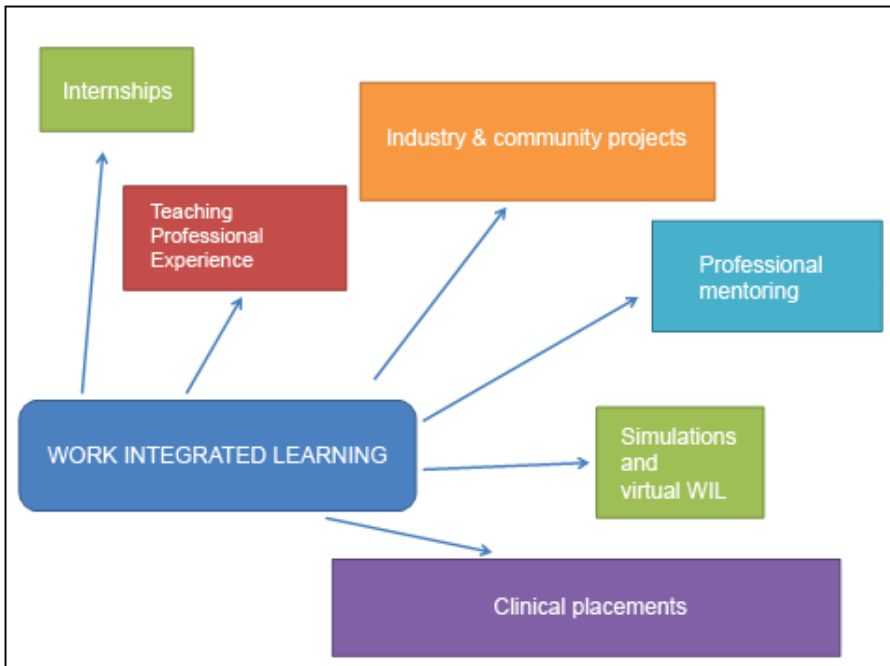
The program consists of a menu of modules delivered in an interactive workshop format. The aim is that, over the duration of the student's time at RMIT, they undertake numerous modules which will result in the award of 'Personal Edge' certifications.

To integrate the program into student life, all new RMIT Vietnam students undertake 3 foundation modules during their orientation. In Week 7 of every semester, a selection of 'elective' modules is available for all students at any stage of their degree. These modules also map to the 3 Personal Skills themes and include SMART Goal Setting and Developing Emotional Intelligence to name a few.

a. WIL (Projects, Simulated)

The 2014 Statement of Intent (ACEN, 2014) defines Work Integrated Learning (WIL) as 'an umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum.' It is the aspect of integrating theory with practice, usually within an assessment, that differentiates WIL experiences from 'work experiences'.

WIL programs, are described as 'student learning for credit designed to occur either in the workplace or within a campus setting that emulates key aspects of the workplace (Beard and Wilson, 2006).



The RMIT global WIL procedure requires that all programs entail at least two WIL experiences for students, and requires that those WIL experiences be assessed. Apart from the internship experience (known as a placement in Melbourne), WIL may take the form of an authentic project (e.g. students producing work in response to a brief from an industry or community based partner) or may entail working in a simulated virtual or built environment (e.g. In Vietnam the Capsim software or finance trading lab provide WIL opportunities).

Program mapping currently underway in the academic centres has the potential to provide clarity around current WIL focused offerings, and to identify areas for refinement. It is anticipated that review of the current WIL activities will point to areas for potential enhancement, and desirable that in all programs WIL opportunities be offered considerably more frequently than is necessary for minimum compliance.

A series of professional development opportunities for academic staff have been scheduled since the beginning of 2016 to support their work in the WIL and internship space, and this included a visit from the WIL expert, ODLT, RMIT Melbourne to provide training on designing and assessing WIL activities. Showcase, exchanging practice and learning community sessions around WIL are also planned for semesters 2, 2016 to foster more transparency around the formal WIL experiences.

b. Internships (Local, International)

The RMIT Vietnam Flagship Internship project is developing principles and frameworks to guide high impact pedagogy around internship experiences for domestic students, and preparing to accommodate international students wishing to uptake a placement in Asia.

From Semester 1, 2016, the internship experience involved completion of targeted interdisciplinary workshops around generic skills development (teamwork, resilience, conflict resolution), a placement with clearly defined goals and expectations framing the experience as well as the possibility for students to set their own Personalised Learning Outcomes, guidance throughout from an academic supervisor, the Careers center staff members and nominated industry mentor, and negotiated assessment structures. Outcomes and learning from the experience will be captured in the employability locker.

As a corollary of the internship experience, an initiative aimed at international students is the new Culture and Context in Vietnam course which is currently being developed within Learning and Teaching. This credit-bearing multidisciplinary course aimed for initial delivery in semester 3, 2016 will be compulsory for international students taking an internship in Vietnam and optional for international students undertaking part or all of their undergraduate studies at the university. Students may take the course on arrival, prior to commencement of their program specific studies at the university. For some students this may be the only course they take on campus if they are enrolled to undertake a supervised international internship opportunity in Vietnamese industry rather than on-campus study. The course will be delivered in blended intensive mode, facilitated in the first iteration by staff from Learning and Teaching, spanning no more than 2 - 3 weeks.

The course is intended to help students acculturate to the Vietnamese environment, and to equip them with knowledge and skills that will help them navigate cultural differences and challenges encountered during their time in the country. Students will complete topic focused tutorials in a media rich online learning environment including Representations of Vietnam (pre-departure module), Economy & Entrepreneurship in Vietnam, Work, Family & Social Cultures in Vietnam, Creative Practice in Vietnam, Popular Culture in Vietnam. In the face to face environment, students will participate in experiential, inquiry based activities and analysis/reflection. Within the assessment structure, emphasis is placed on the process of developing Intercultural Competence (ICC), and the analytical and reflective capabilities that are considered to be enablers of ICC. Students are largely assessed on their capacity to apply critical reflection and analysis to their experience (the process of learning). Assessment does not entail attempts to measure levels of intercultural competence through any psychometric testing.

CONCLUSION

RMIT's Vice Chancellor has positioned ensuring an exceptional Student Experience as the first and foremost priority of RMIT Global in the coming years. This theme truly resonates at RMIT Vietnam due to the strongly student focused approach common among academic and professional staff. The quality of the student experience is the central principle that guide not only innovation and change, but the ways in which success is defined and measured in all areas, including those that are not directly student facing. This statement places the exploration, nurturing, development and practical support of student futures firmly in the foreground. In practical terms, these dimensions are achieved within the institution through services and programs such as career counselling, employability skills development, work integrated learning experiences within the curriculum, job placements, alumni support and industry liaison.

RMIT Vietnam is committed to ensuring students develop the self-knowledge, resilience and skillsets needed to negotiate changing labor market conditions with agility, imagination and confidence. The prevalence of economic uncertainty and technological change in recent years has prompted a renewal of this commitment and a rethink of how an institution strives to deliver the best experience and guarantee outcomes for students. This commitment entails continual improvement, innovation and change *across the entire institution*. In some areas this will entail disruption, a substantial refocusing of priorities, and the development of new ways of working.

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