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Driving the career readiness agenda in Hong Kong higher education

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The concept of “career readiness” can trace its origin to earlier studies about learning and employability in higher education as well as management of student life cycle. Since then, career readiness has evolved into a major concern for public funders and regulators of higher education. Policy researchers contend that following the expansion of higher education and subsequent institutional commitment to ensuring student success, the current stage is about emphasizing employability as the primary indicator of graduate outcomes. This policy shift projects the university-employer interface into the spotlight and creates a favorable condition for promoting work-based experiential learning in higher education. While all postsecondary education institutions in Hong Kong give due regard to graduate employment as a measure of successful “university to work transition,” most of them however do not offer structured courses to train their students in skills for lifetime employability. This leads to the question of whether the status quo is desirable and what would be an effective lever for effecting change. Should coaching students for career readiness remain the responsibility of career development office or can academic staff also have a role to play in supporting it? What are the different approaches for teaching about “work life” in the crowded undergraduate curriculum space? Answers to the above would depend on how much the higher education sector in Hong Kong is prepared to embark on a “whole-of-life” approach to develop “work conscious” and not just “work ready” graduates. The new direction will help to generate a positive effect on higher education institutions in Hong Kong for them to compete through curricular and pedagogical innovations in support of the career-readiness agenda.

KEYWORDS

career readiness, employability, work conscious, work ready, working life, work-based experiential learning

Introduction

Career readiness is defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in the US as “the foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management.” According to NACE, there are eight of these core competencies including: career and self-development; communication; critical thinking; equity and inclusion; leadership; professionalism; teamwork; and technology. The concept of “career readiness” is important to students because it denotes their career currency, and to higher education institutions, it reminds them to think about the curriculum and the co- and extra-curricular

activities that can be useful in advancing the career goals of students. To employers, it impels them to work with higher education institutions to co-develop students through internship and other forms of work-based experiential learning. Career readiness has a longer history of usage in UK higher education in relation to professional degrees but is now combined with employability skills to help signal that graduates have to be prepared for a career journey and not jobs *per se* because workplace roles are continuously being reconfigured and future skills are demanded in order to stay competitive. Educational policy researchers conceive of the current drive toward career readiness as representing the third wave of transformation in higher education where the first wave is about widening access and the second wave is to ensure student success. The convergence of the worlds of education and work requires that higher education institutions pay attention to skills in demand, adopt work-based pedagogy, work toward labor market alignment, create pathway from learning to earning and heighten partnerships with industry (Deegan and Martin, 2018). In policy terms, all the mentioned efforts are to develop the human skills that matter for closing the skills gap, which effectively shift higher education from a supply-led to a demand driven model. Against this backdrop, it is not uncommon to find higher education institution making explicit promise to its students to “to deliver high-quality tuition and excellent employment, each of our students will be employed” (this statement is declared in the website of Satakunta University of Applied Sciences).

Within academia, the promotion of career readiness is nothing foreign. It can be traced back to an earlier concept about “employability” fostered in studies conducted by Yorke (2006) on behalf of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom. Similarly, in Australia, works on student lifecycle approach has led to it being connected to employability (Bates and Hayes, 2017). In the US, the Common Core State Standards although intending to reform K-12 learning has had a major impact on colleges and universities equipping students to be career ready (Green et al., 2023). Outside academia, the topic of career readiness has aroused a multitude of interests, such as: public funding agencies and regulators for monitoring of graduate employment outcomes (e.g., Office for Students in the United Kingdom); think tanks (e.g., Institute of Higher Education under the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and international development lenders (e.g., International Finance Corporation under the World Bank) who are concerned about the economic returns of a degree education; educational technology companies who are keen to disrupt current educational delivery model by supplying work-relevant skills to students in collaboration with or independent of universities; and politicians who are determined to link education to work and to cut out ineffective programs that fail to meet employment targets (Belgutay, 2021; Mason, 2023). Academics have mixed reception toward the rising pressure for change with some arguing against the atomization of curriculum into skillset (Kuh, 2019) while others especially in university management generally sharing a sense of urgency to act. Writing about career readiness, Reed (2021) who is Associate Vice Provost at the University of Montana states thus: “We have arrived at a point where colleges and universities need to step-up with career readiness. No longer can institutions resist or neglect their role in preparing students for

work. To do it well, we will require a complete overhaul (burning down the house) of what we think a postsecondary education is all about.”

Producing career-ready graduates, whose role is it?

Compared to other developed economies, pressure on the Hong Kong higher education system to prioritize employability as a graduate outcome comes less from funding agencies or stakeholder’s demand as the Special Administrative Region has enjoyed a low unemployment rate (2.9% in second quarter of 2023) and been experiencing labor supply strain due to reduction of the working population. Rather, there is keen media scrutiny that compares graduate earning as a proxy measure of institutional program competitiveness. As such, issues like return on investment (ROI) of university education, skills mismatch in the job market, the future of work and training on future skills, and career-readiness preparation, have received lesser attention. In Hong Kong, the assumption about university graduates being work ready is commonly accepted to follow from the preset institutional graduate attributes. However, questioning of the graduate attributes in meeting employer’s needs is seemingly lacking and a fine divide exists between academics and administrative career services office in supporting student’s study-to-work transition. A direct result of this is the relegation of career readiness to a non-core issue in student learning as well as the obfuscation of the role of the teacher in preparing students for their next steps after graduation in the world of work.

What has been described about Hong Kong’s situation runs counter to the general observations for the Asia-Pacific region where graduate work readiness challenges loom large and the topic had been extensively researched (Cameron et al., 2017). In most countries in the region, sensitization to labor market supply and demand factors, focus on skills development to meet industry needs, improving graduate job matching, and stakeholder coordination, are now legitimate concerns of the higher education sector. To pay attention only to graduate employment measured by the lag period from time of graduation to finding a job and cross-institutional comparison of graduate earnings (as in the annual statistical collection and reporting of the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong) fall far short of the notion of imparting graduate career readiness. Such an approach ignores the effects of prior educational achievement (whether direct entrants to university or transfer students from associate degree and higher diploma), socio-economic background (different economic strata, ethnic minorities, new migrants) and other heterogenous characteristics of the student population, as well as intake quality across institutions.

Another way to look at this is whether universities should be concerned about producing work ready graduates or graduates with a high level of work consciousness following Small (2020). In the latter, students are primed to think about the meaning of work and to find purpose in their working life as well as resolving ethical dilemmas at work without compromising too much on their personal values. To think of work as employment is a short-term aim while to take career as a lifetime goal means truly understanding about career changes and navigating it to achieve sustainability in one’s working

life. The educational effort behind this can be no small task, leading [Hoffman and Collins \(2020\)](#) to argue about putting employment at the center of university education and teachers helping students to learn about the 21st century labor market and improving choices for disadvantaged learners to overcome structural barriers of inequality in employment outcomes. As universities have invested heavily on enhancing the “social life” of students on campus and through outreach activities and exchanges, it would appear to be a missed opportunity not to talk about the “working life” in the curriculum and courses. A balanced pedagogical precept for higher education should take “social life” and “working life” as contributing equally to the maturation of graduates for their successful transition into society and work, which also matches with the stated aims of career readiness preparation. For academics, their role can include reflecting on personal understanding about career readiness and taking an active interest in discussions about the topic. This is to be followed through by figuring out ways to teach the “working life” and arranging work-based experiential learning for students. Being aware of the philosophical debate about long-term purpose of higher education and short-term objective of skills training, teachers can instead take a pragmatic stand to explore where to accommodate learning about “careers” in the higher education curriculum to steer clear of the divisive argument.

Evaluating different curriculum-integrated approaches

The Hong Kong higher education system is equipped with the infrastructure to accommodate a curriculum-integrated approach for educating students about career readiness. Action points would include stating learning outcomes in relation to work readiness skills, adaptations to the general education courses and wider usage of work-integrated learning beyond generic internship arrangements. The following is a description of each of these approaches together with analysis of their ease of implementation and impacts on students and staff.

Matching learning outcomes to work readiness skills

Ease: high; impacts: high on both students and staff

The two aspects of defining a degree education—graduate attributes and learning outcomes are now standard features of all tertiary level programs in Hong Kong. In those programs with professional recognition, additional mapping to industry standards is required when undergoing professional accreditation. However, these actions taken are still insufficient to allow employers to understand what skillset the graduate can bring to the workplace. Thus, skill mapping between work readiness skills and learning outcomes proposed by [Schweinsberg et al. \(2017\)](#) has become a useful fourth variable in program documentation to externalize skills development at the course level. The continuity of graduate attributes, professional standards, learning outcomes, and work readiness skills can enhance the student’s understanding of the value of courses taken and the purpose of coursework and assessment. When there is

accessibility and clarity of information provided to students, everyone stands to benefit. In practice, academics can embed employability into curriculum and course design ([Cole, 2022](#)) by using templates such as the “employability heatmap” (developed and used by Nottingham Trent University) to realize translation of theory to practice.

Customizing general education courses

Ease: medium; impacts: medium on students and high on staff

All four-year undergraduate programs in Hong Kong require that students study a range of general education courses for broadening purpose to complement their disciplinary major. The GE courses that take up to 25% of the curriculum space can be theme-based or operated on a distribution requirements model. While it is customary to specify generic skills gained from GE courses, efforts are still lacking to introduce coupling between work readiness skills and coursework. The movement to reconfigure GE coursework for employability skills development is gaining momentum in the US where advocates include those from within and outside academia ([Peasley, 2021](#)). A further step to get more value out of GE courses is to design bespoke career readiness course where the focus is on training the student to think about their future work life and to consider the series of career decisions that they will have to make as an adult. Such course can adopt a problem-oriented approach of conceptualizing challenges in the working life as a “wicked problem” (e.g., Life Design course in the University of Central Missouri) or use a design thinking approach to interpret and give meaning to the work life ([Burnett and Evans, 2021](#)). Both approaches are empowering on the student and have the advantage of personalizing the learning experience. However, the actual impact on students would depend on their individual choice of GE courses to take so the benefits might turn out to be unevenly distributed. On the other hand, staff training to adapt GE courses for career readiness training often starts with a small group of enthusiastic staff (e.g., Washington State University’s Core-to-Career fellowship) but may gradually diffuse to the wider body of academic staff when given proper institutional policy support. Drawing from these overseas examples, curriculum innovation for GE would likewise serve Hong Kong well in furthering the career-readiness agenda.

Sharpening internship as work-integrated learning

Ease: low; impacts: medium on students and low on staff

The notion of incorporating work-based experiential learning into the curriculum is also not new to the bachelor degree landscape in Hong Kong but the extent to which it has been applied (compulsory or optional) and supervised (for credit or extra-curricular) can vary a lot across programs. The term WIL is meant to encapsulate various forms of learning undertaken by a full-time student while on workplace attachment, usually on a part-time basis. Apart from mandatory practicum placement for professional degrees in education,

engineering, healthcare and hospitality services, other types of internship often do not carry the rigor of WIL required to expose students to authentic working environments that allow for validation of knowledge and skills learned against current industry practices. Jackson (2018) has observed a similar weakness in unstructured internships and the lack of employer engagement in Australia, which present as a real hindrance to realizing career-readiness training through WIL. The main difference between unstructured internship and WIL relates to the quality of learning experience where the principles of preparation, feedback and supervision underpin WIL while a loose arrangement applies to unstructured internship. Although the participation of employers and industry is crucial for operating WIL schemes as part of the formal curriculum, the additional effort required to engage these external stakeholders is at the same time compounded by a mixed reaction of students and teachers who may have varied responses to changing unstructured internship to mandatory WIL. For students, WIL can create a better linkage to employment after graduation but not everyone is prepared to commit to work attachment alongside academic study. A selective group of students and subject disciplines may have more access to WIL that produces an inequitable gradient working to cancel out its benefits. For teachers, to ensure that learning experience from WIL will be assessed and related back to the curriculum can be a daunting task to fulfill, and thus would cause them to shun this responsibility and pass it on to administrative coordinators. Without doubt, WIL is most suitable for imparting career readiness to graduates but the implementation hurdles have to be fully taken into account.

Apart from the above approaches, there are other creative ways of teaching traditional subjects such as history and literature emphasizing on their relevance to modern day workplaces. For business students taking a literature course, character analysis can provide a useful vista to leadership, strategy, organizational behavior and human resource management issues. It would depend on the ingenuity of teachers to bring a practical slant into their teaching by establishing associations to the world of work.

Discussion

After introducing the many ways of integrating career readiness training into the curriculum and teaching, the logical question to ask is whether the above-mentioned curricular and pedagogical interventions would make a difference on students, stakeholders and the higher education system.

As far as pastoral care is concerned, the answer is probably yes. Teachers in higher education in Hong Kong are often heard referring to their students as “sai lo” or kids even though all of them have passed the age of 18 to be considered young adults. The tendency to infantilize students as children is commonplace across all the Chinese-speaking communities including mainland China and Hong Kong. However, this phenomenon is perhaps more of a characteristic of developed societies rather than being specific to one particular culture. Drawing on the work of bio-archeologist and UCL academic, Dr. Brenna Hassett, she proposes that humans have an extraordinarily long childhood that can last until the age of 40. The evolution of childhood is thus intertwined with the period spent in higher education where many students in their mid-to late twenties have no genuine experience of the labor market at all. Her research raises an interesting

observation that the process of growing up can be thought of as both anthropological and biological (Hassett, 2022). Learning to become an adult in society has to naturally incorporate notions of earning a living to seek a productive life. Given the prolonged period of schooling and delayed entry into the job market, the task to educate young people about this life goal must be assumed by teachers in higher education who should set themselves up as role models and mentors. Based on such an understanding, the influence of higher education teachers educating about career readiness is no less significant than the efforts of parents and career counselors.

When higher education teachers get involved in educating students for career readiness, they themselves become promoters of work-based experiential learning. A working definition of work-based experiential learning is the combination of work readiness skills and career readiness insights. On the latter, it is important for students to be given a multi-dimensional perspective across the range of real world situations that is unconstrained by any subject discipline and which is embedded in workplace practices (Spanjaard et al., 2018). Among the different kinds of workplace experiential learning, internship has been shown to have the highest correlation to career outcomes (Tiessen et al., 2018). In fact, a survey of employers in Hong Kong also indicates that apart from digital skills, internship experience is valued more than educational background (Hong Kong Business, 2022). While it is now a must for educators to work with employers to seek out internship opportunities, and which may also involve policy direction and incentive measure from the government, the scope for working with stakeholders can go beyond these two to include human resource (HR) professionals (Verma et al., 2018). A multi-stakeholder approach with input from human resource management (HRM) can help to sharpen understanding about what skillset are in demand in order for universities to fine tune their training on work readiness skills. The constant mediation by the teacher though interacting with various stakeholders to make courses relevant is another evidence of the critical contribution that they can make.

For the Hong Kong higher education system which is facing a new reality of integrating into the Greater Bay Area (GBA), the competitiveness of its universities and colleges vis-à-vis other higher education institutions in Guangdong Province will unlikely be decided by research prowess as the volume of indexed research outputs has been surpassed or matched by many national and provincial universities in the southern Guangdong region. Capitalizing on its longstanding connection to the international higher education system, universities and colleges in Hong Kong have to maintain their teaching and learning practices in line with international trends to make a distinction from mainland counterparts in the GBA. To do so would require that emphasis be placed on equipping students with career readiness skills which are transferable across workplaces and would serve the students well in their entire career life cycle. No other career readiness skill is more significant than critical thinking skills which is defined as “the ability to develop valid arguments, evaluate evidence, understand implications and consequences, and differentiate between causation and explanation.” In those higher education systems that stress more on technology subjects and use of didactic teaching, a study has found decreases in critical thinking skills from freshman to senior years (Loyalka et al., 2021). This finding offers much food for thought to higher education teachers in Hong Kong when comparing educational practices with the mainland. The Hong Kong higher

education system is more diversified, with a strong capacity and readiness to experiment with curricular and pedagogical innovations from overseas. Surely, educating for career readiness cannot be missed out as one of those innovations and it will help to secure an edge for the higher education sector in Hong Kong through the quality of graduates produced who will not only work locally but also in the GBA for the foreseeable future.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

BC: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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