

Transitioning from study to work

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Summary

Universities dedicate significant effort to student orientation, but less is allocated to students as they transition out of university.

So, what can students do to help themselves navigate the passage from student to employee?

Reflection and metacognition are tools that students can use to manage this transition, as well as determining suitability for their desired job. Specifically, thinking about the 'point of difference' that your discipline offers to employers.

This article also offers suggestions for gathering insider knowledge from past graduates and promotes good practice in higher education through the implementation of 'capstone' courses.

Finally, a reminder that successful preparation for work includes the application of knowledge learned in a degree, which can be achieved by seeking out work-integrated learning opportunities or through volunteering.



Thinking back to your university orientation, you may remember transition activities that aimed to orient you into the role of 'student' (Gale & Parker, 2014; McMillan, 2013).

However, you may not have the same memories at the end of your degree while you prepared to transition into the workforce, as it is assumed that students start at different points but converge homogeneously at graduation with a developed set of skills and attributes.

Using an example from the recent Graduate Outcomes survey, 60.8 % of employed psychology graduates report that their skills and knowledge are underutilised in their current position (Social Research Centre, 2018).

These results challenge the assumption that all students leave their degree with clearly articulable skills. Instead, it seems that some graduates feel their degree left them unprepared for the work they wanted to engage in.

The term 'outduction' (Morgan, 2013) has been developed to address this preparation gap and refers to the transition from study to the workplace. Psychology education literature can help with outduction: Winstone & Hulme (2019) recommend that reflecting upon and identifying any successful strategies employed in previous transitions can help navigate future transitions.

What skills did you develop?

When I consider the previously mentioned survey results, I believe they could be interpreted in a few ways.

Firstly, that the students were applying for jobs that did not align well with what they studied; that the job did align but the course did not adequately develop the skills they purported to have developed; or, that job and skills were in alignment but students were unaware that these skills were developed during their degree.

The dissatisfaction noted in the results of the graduate outcomes survey is important and reflects what is already known: that the development of vocationally relevant skills are highly important to graduates (Clough, 1993, p. 43).

It suggests that both teachers and students need to clearly signpost what they are getting out of their degree. So, it is advised that you **take the time to identify skills that you are developing as you progress through your degree**. This demonstrates metacognition: reflecting on how your learning aligns with the role(s) you wish to transition into.

To identify these, you can look to your university-developed list of graduate attributes – these provide you with a general sense of what skills your courses aimed to develop as generalisable skills. Then, try to find discipline-specific attributes from your discipline's accreditation body (if your discipline requires accreditation from an external body). As you are studying, you can also identify skills being developed through course learning outcomes.

```
myProgrammingSkills(){
  ul.skills
  +skill('programming', '98%', '(html - js, css - etc. etc. etc.)')
  +skill('planning', '80%', '(I can plan very well every day in my life)')
  +skill('organisation', '77%', '(I am good with organising my life)')
  +skill('visual design', '75%', '(I am easily leading me with my design)')
  ht(style="margin: 0") }
ht my[personal="skills"]
ul.skills
+skill('creativity', '98%', '(creative thinking about things in my life)')
+skill('learning', '93%', '(I would describe myself as fast learner)')
+skill('communication', '89%', '(I understand all your requirements)')
```

What job are you preparing for?

But how can a student consider the roles that they are suitable for?

Seeking out 'insider knowledge' for the varied roles that psychology graduates are suited is a powerful tool to help students align expectations with opportunities, and can aid outduction (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2011).

Ask your student association to arrange an event with graduates that are working in a broad range of positions. Request that these graduates provide job preparation tips and highlight the skills developed during their degree that are applied in their current role.

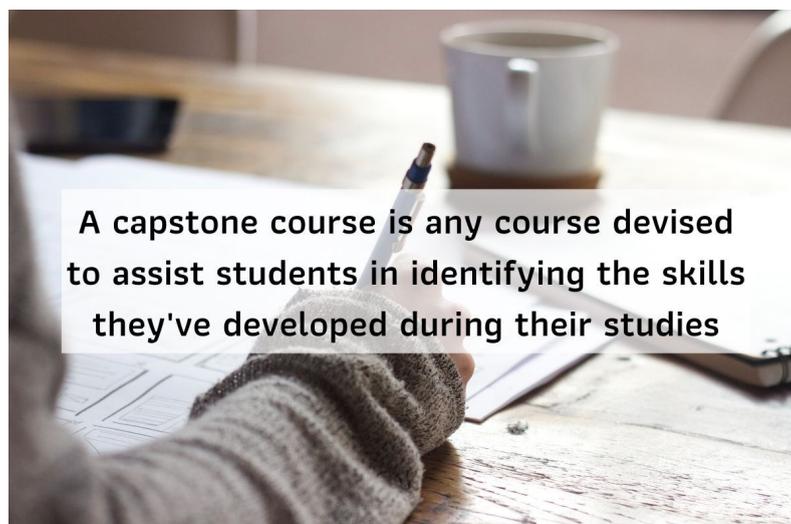
As an example from psychology, there is an Australian Psychological Society (APS) [Student Engagement group](#) that organises such events for current students. If you are from a different discipline, perhaps similar events are available for you to attend?

Seek out experiences that allow you to apply those skills before graduation

Look to participate in any capstone like opportunities during your degree - or perhaps suggest this to course coordinators.

There have been examples of this in practice: Morris et al. (2013) developed a capstone course for final-year undergraduate psychology students. The capstone course was devised to assist students in identifying their skill development during undergraduate studies.

Students reflected on their use of skills, attributes or knowledge that were applied to solving problems presented in coursework. Importantly, the capstone course promoted the recognition of discipline mastery, which Winstone & Hulme (2019, p.8) state is "an important enabler of a successful transition".



A capstone course is any course devised to assist students in identifying the skills they've developed during their studies

Do you have a ‘point of difference’?

Your ‘point of difference’ needs to be identified for you to be recognised as valuable to a diverse range of employers.

Identifying what I had mastered was a challenge in a broad STEM+ field like psychology (Trapp et al., 2011). Psychology gives me an understanding of human behaviour, which could be my point of difference as a psychology graduate, but psychology has more than this to offer to potential employers.

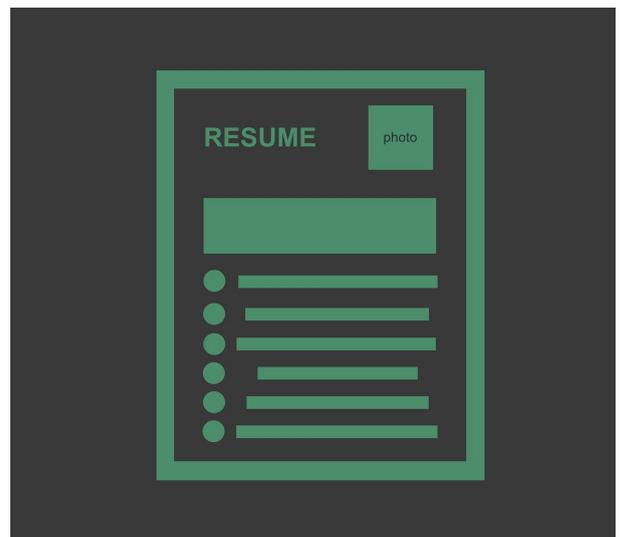
Recent work to identify a psychology’s point of difference is happening in Psychological Literacy (PL) research. PL is a term that can be used to identify the skills and attributes of psychology graduates, defined as “the general capacity to adaptively and intentionally apply psychology to meet personal, professional and societal needs” (Cranney, Botwood & Morris, 2012, p.4). However, PL is a recent concept so the picture of student capabilities is still being developed.

Don’t underestimate work experience!

Taking work integrated learning opportunities or placements as often as you can will allow you to demonstrate skills in a real-world context. An increasing number of disciplines in Australia are developing work-integrated learning opportunities, with placements aligned with the future employment settings.

Even if your university does not formally offer these placements, you can seek out skills-aligned experiences independently or through a volunteer organisation.

These experiences help to reduce the chasm between knowing and applying in a way that provides desirable experience for your curriculum vitae (CV), as well as building confidence. These experiences help navigate the transition from study to work by reducing the gap in preparedness that graduates reporting feeling as a ‘little fish in a big pond’ in a new workplace (Winstone & Hulme, 2019).



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