

Submission to the Education and Employment References Committee Committee

Inquiry into the Australian University Graduates and Employment Outcomes

Submitted by: Mijica Lus

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Executive Summary

This submission is made in my personal capacity as a young professional, migrant, and community advocate currently working within state government as a policy adviser. It reflects lived experience navigating higher education and the transition from university into employment.

Students and graduates can be understood as the primary stakeholders or “end users” of the higher education system, with outcomes ultimately reflected in their ability to secure meaningful employment, adapt to change, and participate effectively in society.

While Australian universities provide strong academic foundations, there is a growing gap between theoretical learning and practical workplace readiness. This is particularly evident in the context of rapidly evolving labour markets and the increasing influence of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

This submission highlights the need for stronger integration between academic study, practical experience, and holistic student development, including structured collaboration between universities and community organisations. It also emphasises inclusive pathways that reflect the diverse circumstances of students across Australia.

Introduction

I am a young professional and community advocate with experience navigating higher education and transitioning into the workforce. I am also a young migrant, having moved from Papua New Guinea to Australia to pursue my studies.

My pathway into higher education began through an entry program at the University of Canberra, where I undertook a college diploma pathway. This experience supported my transition into university by helping me manage nerves and anxiety, build confidence, and develop foundational academic and personal skills. It enabled me to progress into my bachelor’s degree with greater preparedness and adaptability.

During my time at university, I also worked in a Human Resources role alongside my studies. This was my first exposure to the professional workforce and provided valuable insight into workplace expectations, organisational structures, and communication practices.

In addition, I have worked within the university sector in equity, student success support, and career support services. These roles provided direct exposure to the barriers students face in progressing through university and into employment, including issues relating to access, confidence, preparedness, and career clarity.

I now work professionally within a state government as a policy adviser. This role has provided insight into how education, employment pathways, and policy settings intersect in practice. This submission is made in my personal capacity and does not represent the views of my employer.

Entry-Level Job Market

- The entry-level job market for graduates is highly competitive, with many roles requiring prior experience.
- This creates barriers for graduates who have not had access to internships, placements, or practical work during their studies.
- Many graduates experience underemployment or employment in roles not aligned with their qualifications.
- Employers increasingly expect graduates to demonstrate both academic achievement and workplace readiness.

Skills Gap: Theory and Practice

- There is a growing gap between theoretical knowledge gained at university and the practical skills expected in the workplace.
- This gap is becoming more pronounced as workplaces evolve, particularly with the integration of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.
- Universities differ in how courses are delivered, resulting in inconsistent graduate preparedness.
- Employers increasingly value adaptability, communication, and applied problem-solving skills.
- Early exposure to workplace environments during study can significantly improve graduate readiness. My own experience working in Human Resources while studying demonstrated the value of combining academic learning with real-world exposure.

Quality of University Education

- Australian universities provide strong academic foundations; however, employment outcomes vary significantly.
- Greater integration of practical experience is needed across all disciplines.
- Universities should better prepare graduates for participation in a globally competitive workforce.
- Students should be supported to develop independence, initiative, and ownership of their personal and professional development.

Inclusion and Diverse Student Experiences

- Not all students have equal access to opportunities that support employment readiness.
- Groups facing additional barriers include:
 - International students
 - Students with disability or different learning needs
 - First-in-family students
 - Carers and parents
 - Mature-aged learners
 - Students navigating identity and inclusion challenges

- These students may graduate without equal access to networks, experience, or confidence required for workforce entry.
- Stronger community-based models within universities are needed to support belonging, mentoring, and real-world readiness.

Social and Psychological Impacts

- Difficulty securing employment after graduation can lead to:
 - Frustration and discouragement
 - Feelings of underutilisation
 - Uncertainty about career direction
 - Pressure to continually demonstrate capability
- These impacts are amplified when graduates feel unprepared despite completing formal education.

Broader Observations

- The transition from university to employment is increasingly non-linear.
- Graduates are expected to adapt quickly and demonstrate the ability to pivot across roles and industries.
- Students are the primary stakeholders in the education system, with outcomes reflecting both employability and broader life readiness.
- Universities also play a critical role as connectors between students and broader community ecosystems. However, this transition is not always well integrated.
- Universities already hold significant internal capability through equity, student success, and career services, but these supports are not always consistently accessed or connected across the student journey.
- From my experience working within these areas, many of the most valuable skills students develop, including resilience, communication, leadership, and adaptability, are often strengthened through both formal and informal community engagement.
- There is an opportunity to strengthen structured partnerships between universities and community organisations so that student development is continuous, supported, and reinforced beyond the classroom.

Options for Reform and Recommendations

1. Strengthen integration of practical experience within university degrees, including internships, placements, and industry partnerships.
2. Embed employability skills — including adaptability, communication, and problem-solving — across all disciplines.
3. Develop stronger community-based models within universities that provide mentoring, peer support, and real-world engagement opportunities.
4. Improve coordination between universities and community organisations to support continuous student development beyond formal education.

5. Ensure inclusive and flexible pathways for diverse student groups, including international students, carers, mature-aged learners, and students with disability.
6. Support universities to better align course delivery with evolving workforce needs, including the impact of technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.
7. Strengthen collaboration between universities, employers, and community organisations to create clearer and more accessible pathways into employment.
8. Adopt holistic education models that integrate academic learning with practical life skills, including financial literacy, independent living skills, and interpersonal capability.
9. Strengthen opportunities for students to develop global awareness and competitiveness in both domestic and international labour markets.
10. Review barriers to participation in work-integrated learning, including financial constraints and unpaid placements, to ensure equitable access.
11. Strengthen pathways for students and graduates to access employment within universities, supporting continuous engagement, upskilling, and contribution to the university community.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Australian university graduates in securing meaningful employment reflect a growing disconnect between education and workforce expectations. While universities provide strong academic foundations, greater emphasis is needed on practical experience, inclusive support systems, and stronger integration between education, employment, and community structures.

Addressing these challenges will require coordinated effort across universities, employers, and communities to ensure all graduates are equipped not only for employment, but for long-term participation and contribution to society.