

# Employability, Western Sydney University and the Next 10 Years **Excerpts from the final report**

July 2019

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"Perhaps universities need to go back to the future. Enterprise skills are important. But if all that our students gain from us are specific vocational and professional competences, we will fail to instil in them the intellectual resilience that they require for change. Many of our graduates will shift their careers. Many more will discover that their careers transform from within. Their success will depend not on a credential but on the intellectual skills they can display in a future world..."

Peter Shergold

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These excerpts are taken from the final report that presents the findings and recommendations of a project about the way in which the concept of employability is changing and what the implications are for Western Sydney University in the context of its current decadal planning process.

Martin Stewart-Weeks from Public Purpose conducted the project and is writing the final report.

This brief summary of insights and implications from the draft report will be used for two discussions with WSU's senior management team and with others inside and outside Western who have been involved in the project's earlier stages. The results of those discussions will be integrated in the project's final report.

## Introduction

There is a paradox at the heart of the concept of employability.

On the one hand, an enduring combination of knowledge, capabilities and personal attributes (basically, a mix of "aptitude" and "attitude") is as likely to provide the foundation for employability now and into the future as it consistently has in the past.

On the other hand, just as people feel much hasn't changed in what makes someone employable, they are just as ready to accept that everything has changed. They recognise instinctively that a new world of work and larger shifts in society and the economy are testing those attributes whose enduring relevance needs to be redefined for contemporary conditions.

The conundrum that affects policy, strategy and practice is a version of the paradox that "if you want things to stay the same, things will have to change". Resolving that paradox requires Western, and its students and other stakeholders, to settle on a few agreed and widely shared expectations that consistently inform the way in which the employability "promise" is defined and reflected across all dimensions of the University.

These are testing times for Western graduates for which they (quite rightly) expect to be prepared. Many of the changes are unsettling and full of risk. But they bring opportunities too. Effective preparation will be a collaborative endeavour to which all parties – students, employers, policy makers, the community and of course learners themselves – bring an array of "capital" assets whose combination is the key to success.

That will demand some new thinking and practice at practically every level and in every facet of the University's work. The notion of employability is already responding to the increasingly complex interdependence between learning and work over a whole lifetime. That process carries implications for Western's positioning and brand into the next decade.

Success for Western and its graduates assumes a more widely shared and common understanding of, and consistent approach to, questions of employability in a very different and rapidly changing world. And along the way they necessarily touch on some deep questions about the meaning of work and learning, about class and opportunity and about the role and purpose not just of Western but of universities themselves

Employability is a lens through which to rethink some challenges that impact the way Western works and how it engages its learners. It also invites the search for answers to some policy and philosophical questions that imply big choices for Western's institutional foundations as well as its operational performance in curriculum, staff skills and capabilities, student engagement and a refresh of the relationship between students, the University and employers.

In the context of Western Sydney University's current process of 10-year planning, this project looked at what being "employable" means, how concepts of employability are changing and what some of the implications are for the University.

The project reflects insights from three streams of work.

A series of design sessions and focus group discussions engaged WSU students past, present and future, academic and professional staff, and employers. They were augmented by some individual interviews that explored in more depth how perceptions and experiences of employability play out in the interaction between learning and work.

And, in the third stream, some of the considerable literature and previous research and studies on different aspects of employability was analysed for their insights and ideas.

## The headlines

These are the project's three headline findings and recommendations:

1. **Employability is at the heart of the Western experience.** It's a concept that combines some enduring characteristics with some new demands and implications for students, employers and the University. These are being driven by big changes in the economy, in society, in the world of work and in the role, purpose and performance of universities and their relevance and legitimacy as part of a changing Australian learning and skills sector.
2. **The five "capitals" model - human, social, psychological, identity and cultural - should be further developed and adapted** as a consistent response by Western a contemporary concept of employability. It assumes a combination of experience and expertise that students, the university, employers, families and the broader community contribute to a more rounded notion of employability and opens up a wider range of options to define and achieve graduate success in the transition from learning to work.
3. Despite the fact that employability touches virtually every aspect of the University's brand and performance and carries major implications for its future direction and identity, there is **no consistent and stable view across the different parts of the University about employability**, what it means, how it is changing and how the University should be responding. There isn't sufficient profile or recognition for the employability work and rethinking that is being done and of which this project is a part.

The result is a set of responses that are disparate and disconnected which results in a mixture of confusion and frustration by students, staff and employers alike.

Western should:

1. Develop a consistent and widely shared definition of employability, based on the 5 "capitals" model and its implications for the University's future priorities and brand
2. Prepare a detailed analysis of the action needed across different dimensions of the University's work - including especially its operational performance in curriculum, staff skills and capabilities, student engagement and a refresh of the relationship between students, the University and employers - to reinforce shared and widely known definition of employability, why it matters and how the University should be responding to its changing implications for students, employers and staff
3. Deepen the relationship between students, employers and the University to entrench a common approach to, and understanding of, employability and its implications based on mutual respect and a practical understanding of the attributes of employability.

## 13 insights

Drawing on the three streams of research, these are **the chief insights from the study**:

- What it means to be employable relies on attributes of knowledge, capability and personal motivation that are persistent, but which are being tested in a very different and rapidly changing world of learning and work and their interaction.
- Employability is co-produced from a more complex mix of assets and resources, reflected in the “capitals” model, that learners, the university, the broader community and employers bring to the process. As the complexity, speed and intensity of their interaction grows in the context of the changing world of work and shifting structures of employment, new demands are being made of all players in the game, especially the University.
- Building on WSU’s current brand association and the “promise” of employability as it changes and become more complex will require a deeper knowledge of the assumptions and expectations of students, staff and employers and a more consistent approach to defining its meaning and implications across many different aspects of the University’s work.
- The notion of an employability “promise” is convenient and powerful but needs to be treated with some care. It reflects assumptions and expectations that have always featured prominently in Western’s brand and identity, and for delivering which for many of its graduates the University has earned a considerable reputation.

But especially in the current changing context of work and employment, it is not Western’s job to produce graduates who are “fully finished” and guaranteed to find a job or a career. What constitutes the “promise” as it makes sense in the current and emerging social and economic conditions is at the core of the conversation, which can become a powerful frame for innovation and reform across the University.

- For students, employability is a function of a rounded education that includes, but goes well beyond, acquiring technical skills or mastery of a specialist body of knowledge and expertise.

It also includes the ability to use existing, and to accumulate new, networks and connections across the university and in the outside world. It also includes becoming more confident about putting together a personal narrative of skill, capability and personal attributes of motivation, curiosity, a willingness to work hard and an assumption that learning for work and life will continue in different contexts and over a lifetime. The transition between the two worlds will become more frequent and intense and take place in new patterns of place and context as the lines between the two become increasingly blurred.

- For some, it remains true that coming to Western has a more transactional quality which assumes a narrower exchange for a credential, the “piece of paper”, which if it is not sufficient as a “promise” of employment is a necessary condition for any prospect of success in a changing labour market. Students and staff alike are aware, though, that the relationship between having a degree, getting a job and prospering over a lifetime or work is less certain or straightforward than it was.
- For staff, the opportunity to know their students in ways that helps them to add the connections, networks and other “soft” skills that are so important for finding work and building a lifetime of satisfying work is appealing.
- However, it is difficult to reconcile the time and space for that level of individual engagement in the context of a higher education market, and an associated business model, that assumes rapid growth in overall student numbers and a consequent pressure to manage a workload driven by volume and throughput.
- Employability is a big part of Western’s identity and position in the market now and into the next 10 years. It touches pretty much every dimension of the University’s work and operations. The work being done to clarify a shared view about the way employability as an idea, and as an influence on Western’s brand, culture and practice,

isn't as widely known or understood as it should be. And that work should drive a more consistent approach to responding to the different dimensions and implications of employability instead of an approach which tends to reflect the piecemeal and disconnected way in which different teams and parts of the University end up tackling it.

- Employers do not expect Western to deliver graduates who are the “finished product”, and accept they have a role to contribute to the employability outcomes that students want. As much as they expect some level of mastery of technical and specialist domain knowledge, they also look for a range of personal attributes that, by and large, are captured in the concept of ‘soft’ or ‘enterprise’ or ‘transferable’ skills, which will include things like curiosity, willingness to pitch in and work hard, teamwork, the ability to collaborate and a desire to solve problems and work things through when contexts and circumstances change.
- For Western, responding to changing notions of employability requires a level of speed and flexibility in its response that some (staff, students and employers) feel is not sufficient at the moment.

Rising competition from other traditional and new providers in the region, coupled with changing expectations about the positioning and “brand” value of traditional degree-based higher education learning and skills development are putting a premium on the agility with which Western responds. The risk is that the University remains too slow and bureaucratic which makes it harder to innovate and try new responses.

- Some, mostly but not only university staff, resist the admonition for more speed and agility which ignores the role that universities have always played in balancing the more instrumental and pragmatic demands of preparing graduates for the world of work and the enduring intrinsic values of research and scholarship. There is tension and ambiguity in this for the University as it navigates the uncertain tension between the instrumental and the intrinsic, which universities have always done. As one (external) contributor noted, a “slow” response by the university to “fast” and uncertain external changes is both a weakness and a strength.
- A final insight provides one possible jumping off point for Western’s response to these old and new challenges. There is a lot of literature and research about employability and its impact on university strategy and performance. This report reviews some of that literature. And yet there is a sense that Western itself doesn’t know enough, not so much about the literature and what has been researched in other contexts, but about what its own approach should be and how that approach should be determined, communicated and then prosecuted as a common and shared approach across all relevant dimensions of the University.

There is no shortage of information and knowledge, but there is still a way to go to fashion an agreed and distinctively Western response. This project, and the work already underway that provides its context, provides a good base for that response.

## Six conclusions

In this final section, the report presents a series of conclusions drawn from the evidence and research it has presented. For each conclusion, the report explores implications for Western primarily, but also for other stakeholders where that is appropriate and then makes some recommendations for action.

### **Conclusion 1 Employability at the heart**

Employability is at the heart of Western’s sense of its identity and purpose and, at a time of great change in work, the economy and society, is an especially important part of the conversation about the University’s future. In many ways, employability is proxy for a discussion about the purpose and value of universities more fundamentally.

However, the discussions about changing notions of employability and their significance, and the work already being done within the University, don’t have the profile and recognition they need. The result is an approach that is fragmented and inconsistent which risks a mixture of confusion and frustration by students, staff and employers alike.

### *Implications*

Curiously, for a University that boasts a strong brand reputation in this area, at least by some measures, there isn't a widely shared sense of a distinctively Western "promise" about employability for its graduates.

The biggest implication is the risk of disparate, inconsistent and possibly contradictory responses from different parts of the University. That, in turn, raises the prospect of varying levels of support and engagement with students and a variation in the overall student experience that could erode aspects of Western's brand and positioning.

A second implication is the possibility that the absence of a common view across the University about what employability means, how it is changing and how the University should be responding across all dimensions of its activities could mean that decisions are being taken across those different dimensions without realising their potential impact on employability. In areas like student experience, curriculum reform and innovation, university-business collaboration, staff recruitment and training and brand and marketing, how the university positions on issues of employability is crucial.

### *Recommendation*

1. The conversation about employability and its significance for Western should be expanded and accelerated, with a higher profile and recognition across the University. That could involve a program of meetings and conversations across the University, supported by a digital information campaign, to expose a much greater proposition of the University's staff and student community to the ideas, insights and implications of the employability issue.
2. Its implications across different aspects of the University's work and operations should be analysed in more detail as the basis for a practical plan for those areas about what they need to do in their own work and planning to embed a consistent approach to employability and how that approach impacts their work and planning.

### **Conclusion 2 Adopt the five capitals model**

The five "capitals" model offers a framework for thinking about Western's response to employability, and to the opportunities for shifting concepts of graduate success, which is appropriate, well accepted and should be further developed and adapted to take account of concerns raised in this project.

### *Implications*

Western needs a way of talking about employability, and framing its implications and potential, that is accessible, common and shared. The five "capitals" model, at least from the response in this project, is intuitively accepted and generally admired. Given the progress that the University has already made in adapting the model to form the basis for a Western approach, it makes sense to continue that work.

The research and discussions have identified some issues that would add to the impact and value of the model. One is the need to emphasise the importance of the context within which the 5 "capitals" or assets are developed and utilised for each learner, which is inevitably going to be different and varied. Another is to draw out ways in which the model can integrate the needs and expectations not just of students and learners, but also of staff, employers and others whose experience and expertise combine within those five capitals to animate the employability potential.

Another implication is the need to invest some time in turning the model into accessible and attractive communication materials – which has already started with some of the presentations from the Graduate Success team – that can help to draw more people across the University community into its thinking and implications.

### Recommendation

1. Western should adopt the five “capitals” model of graduate employability and success as its common and consistent framework for addressing the different dimensions of the employability challenge. The model is already being adapted and developed for the University’s needs, and that work should be accelerated, including taking into account the findings from this project.
2. Developing the five “capitals model should provide a good opportunity for widespread engagement with, and contributions from, students, staff, employers and the wider community. It is a piece of work which should, at a more substantial level than has been possible in this project, reflect the “co-design” opportunity to build deeper and more extensive relationships with students, employers and staff.

### Conclusion 3 Embed an agreed set of employability attributes

Students, staff and employers agreed on many of the attributes that make someone employable, not just now but over a lifetime of work and learning and, increasingly, navigating the more frequent transitions between the two. A more widely shared set of attributes that can be embedded at the heart of the Western experience and brand would be powerful, as would a more consistent and systematic engagement between the worlds of work and learning.

### Implications

Using the five “capitals” model, it would be a valuable exercise to map out the range and mix of attributes that Western believes form the basis of employability for its graduates.

Part of the value of this exercise would emerge from the process of working through the many different frameworks and lists of employability attributes to pick the set that most fit the culture, position and strategic priorities for Western. In effect, it would be a way to adapt the current graduate “success” attributes to provide a clear statement of the mix of skills, aptitudes and personal characteristics that Western would like to nurture in its graduates.

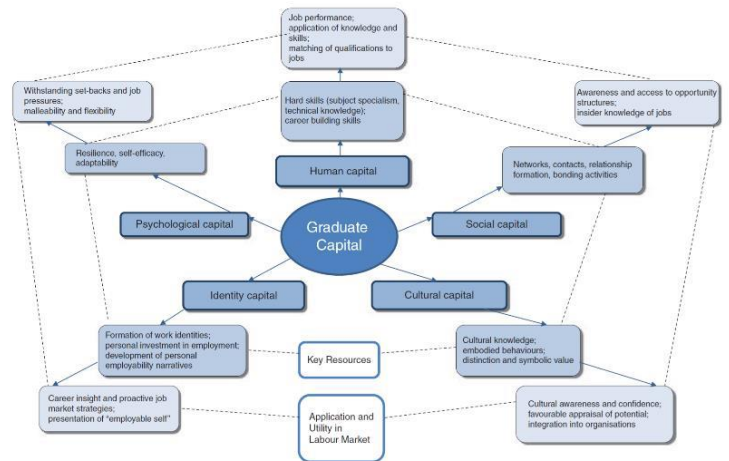
But part of the value of the exercise would come from a co-creation approach to this work, using the task to bring together students, staff, employers and other stakeholders in a process of deliberation to form a common view about what the attributes should be.

One of the implications of an exercise of this sort would be to produce a revised “graduate attributes” definition that, having emerged from a wide engagement with different perspectives, would have considerable appeal. The outcome could form part of the University’s marketing and communications with ideas and themes that would have a high level of recognition and intuitive empathy and support.

Another implication would be the chance to use the exercise to improve the relationship between the University, students and employers. This would include rethinking the alumnus framework for a longer term engagement with Western graduates as lifelong learners and as people who can share experience and expertise back with further Western students as their own careers evolve.

Based on the feedback from the interview and discussions undertaken for this project, there would be considerable support for a chance for the three corners of the “employability triangle” to have a reason to work together on something as fundamental to the overall relationship as this. A chance to contribute to a common statement of what employability means in practical terms would be welcomed and would add to Western’s reputation in this discussion.

### Recommendation



1. As part of the further development of the five “capitals” model as the basis for a Western framework for thinking about, and acting on, issues of employability the University should develop its own inventory of attributes and capabilities for graduate success and employability.
2. This work should build on the current definition of graduate attributes and draw on the research summarised in this report and the synthesis of some of the common attributes provided earlier in this report.
3. As with the “capitals” model itself, this work should provide opportunities for engagement with, and contributions from, students, staff, employers and the wider community.
4. Western should also continue with, and accelerate, the work already underway with Present Company, to provide both a platform and new tools that bring a mix of design, artificial intelligence and data analytics to the challenge of helping students and others navigate with greater confidence the choices they need to make for effective learning to work transitions and how, as a result, to calibrate their response in terms of knowledge, skills and capabilities.

#### **Conclusion 4 Aligning a rounded education with the business model**

The value of a rounded education, both in its own right and because it also makes people more employable, that teaches people to think and that develops a range of skills and capabilities that include a body of domain-specific knowledge, a range of “soft” or “transferable” skills and capabilities and the knowledge and habits of engaged and productive citizens, has emerged strongly from this research.

The problem is that the implications of this approach for the University’s way of working and engaging with students (slow, deep, long term and relational) seems often to run counter to current business models driving University performance (fast, short term and transactional) driven by the changing competitive structure of higher education.

##### *Implications*

There’s a tension in this conclusion, drawing on several strands of the project’s research, whose resolution would be especially powerful for Western’s reputation and profile as university engaging a contemporary approach to employability.

Part of the tension comes from the need to adopt something of a “back to the future” framing of the essential role and purpose of the university. As the Chancellor pointed out in the quote at the top of this report, narrowing Western’s value to its graduates down to a more or less transactional set of vocational skills may not be in the best interests of either the students the University, the economy or society more broadly.

Perhaps the timing is right for Western to reach more explicitly for a definition of its role and value that integrates enduring values of critical thinking, learning to learn and learning for life as a engaged and productive citizen in Australia and the world as not only the core of its offering but as the research and scholarly based attributes from which the resilience, creativity and adaptability necessary to flourish in a changing world of work emerge.

##### *Recommendation*

1. In the context of the current decadal planning process, Western should explore definitions of its role, purpose and value that more explicitly embrace the virtues and value of a rounded education for life and work as the core of its graduate “promise”.
2. The University should better understand the extent to which current business models make it harder to engage the ways of teaching and research that would be consistent with a commitment to a rounded education and the ability to tailor a more consistent integration between learning and work for all Western students,

## **Conclusion 5 Systematic interaction between learning and work**

The underlying assumption of a more nuanced and persistent approach across the University to employability is that Western knows its learners well. It knows how they have arrived at the University and the mix of skills and experience they bring to the development of the five "capitals".

As a result, it can offer them systematic support, advice and guidance about the best way to keep open a wider sense of what success might look like for them and more structured and predictable opportunities to navigate learning-work transitions as an intrinsic part of every course. None of these things is happening as consistently and systematically as they should at the moment which risks a more variable overall student experience than students, employers and the University would like.

### *Implications*

Integrating their learning and work lives as Western students is at the heart of the quality of the University experience. Doing that well has major implications for the University's positioning and brand and, as a consequence, its ability to attract and retain the quality of students and staff it needs to maintain and grow its position in a more competitive market.

The ability to do that well assumes the ability to learn more about students' context, background and aspirations before they arrive in the University community, while they are studying and after they leave. In the future, it's likely their interactions with Western will change as they move with different patterns of intensity and engagement between different phases of work, learning and, often, both at the same time.

A deeper engagement with, and knowledge of, students and their current and emerging capabilities across the 5 capitals" should be matched by a more consistent approach across different parts of the University. Depth and persistence of engagement and knowledge of students has to be matched by a high level of consistency with which that approach is applied across the University. When it comes to student experience, unnecessary and unexpected variability is a major risk.

### *Recommendation*

1. The University should review all the different ways in which it learns about its students and their needs, expectations and context and, as far as possible consolidate them into a method of student insight that reflects the five "capitals" model. The objective should be to use current and new methods to better understand students to fill out a deeper and more nuanced profile against the "capitals" framework.
2. In line with Conclusion 3, Recommendation 4, Western should use the work with Present Company to ensure the emerging tools and platforms on which students will be able to more accurately assess their needs and explore a wider range of "success" options, including but not only employment, also contribute to the growing ability for the University to know and understand their students
3. Western should explore new ways to use internal and third party platforms and tools that harness new digital capabilities and and data about students, staff, employers and the University's alumni that can more effectively connect them in different ways for learning, skills development and mentoring for work and life.

## **Conclusion 6 The right response across the University**

The project has confirmed not only the central importance to Western's strategic priorities and positioning of the employability conversation, but also the need for quick and concerted responses across many of the different aspects of its work and performance.

The conversations and background research for this project have reinforced that enduring attributes of employability are being tested by changes in work, the economy and society. That poses challenges and opportunities for the University both in terms of the way it responds across different aspects of its work and the speed and intensity with which those responses should be formed and implemented.



### *Implications*

In many ways, the issues around employability are a proxy for larger challenges for the University's approach to reform and innovation more generally. The impact on curriculum and new methods and modes of learning, teaching and credentialing, the need for new ways to form, understand and track student engagement and experience and the opportunity to deepen the relationship between the university and employers, for example, all carry implications for Western's ability to innovate and change.

Another implication is the way in which the University manages the interaction between the rising demand for rapid, sometimes unsettling innovation and reform and its underlying commitments to scholarship and research. The question is not whether Western can become a different type of organisation as it confronts the need for change, but how it can become a different type of university in a very different and rapidly changing world, and how quickly it needs to make the necessary changes.

The conversations in this project implied the need to combine both a set of enduring values and practices that characterise the essence of a good university but also accept the need to adapt rapidly to changing external circumstances and shifting preferences and needs in the economy and society to keep those values relevant and sustainable.

### *Recommendation*

1. Western should use the need to accommodate the implications of a more comprehensive, consistent and contemporary approach to employability as an opportunity to review the rate and intensity of reform and innovation in key areas, including particularly:
  - Curriculum reform
  - Brand and reputation
  - Student experience
  - Employer relationships
  - Staff skills and capabilities
  - Culture and motivation
2. The review should answer three questions:
  - Is Western changing far and fast enough in each of the areas to respond effectively to the risks and opportunities for the University from new approaches to employability along the lines outlined in this report?
  - What are the dimensions of current performance and approach in each area that need to be preserved and strengthened?
  - What are the implications for innovation and reform in each area for staff skills and capabilities and for the relationship between the University and employers?