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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Forging employability ecosystems through virtual industry experiences

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ImpactEd

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This Pecha Kucha presents a longitudinal study on a simulated employability initiative within the Australian higher education context. It highlights how virtual industry experiences, using the Forage platform, can be utilised to develop industry-relevant skills and enhance student employability. Virtual industry experiences are provided through a simulated environment which allows engagement with a wide range of industries and roles, at no cost to the student or organisation (Ćerimagić et al., 2022). Our study examines how virtual industry experiences provide work-based learning opportunities for Australian students to develop employability skills and confidence for the workplace.

In a competitive and rapidly evolving higher-education environment, employability has emerged as a key measure of institutional success and student value (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Kinash et al., 2016). Virtual industry experiences are gaining prominence for their scalability, inclusivity, and capacity to integrate authentic work-based learning across disciplines (Smith et al., 2020). We draw on connectedness learning (Bridgstock & Tippett, 2019) and graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017) perspectives to argue that virtual industry experiences contribute to employability beyond the practice of discrete workplace tasks: they support the formation of professional identity (Jackson, 2016), build confidence and networks, and develop students' capacity to translate learning across contexts. Our study contributes to a growing research area on developing employability skills (Ćerimagić et al., 2023a; Ćerimagić et al., 2023b; Ćerimagić et al., 2022; Jackson, 2016; Jackson & Dean, 2023; Oliver, 2015).

The initiative examines deidentified student data from engagement with the Forage platform across the Australian higher education sector and considers how the Forage as a virtual industry experience may improve and strengthen employability outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was utilised, examining quantitative and qualitative data over a two-year period. Quantitative data captured student engagement and completion metrics – including platform usage data showing more than 317,000 Australian users and over 511,000 enrolments – while qualitative data explored perceptions of relevance, accessibility, and learning impact.

The findings suggest improved student confidence, perceived employability, and satisfaction. We present the outcomes from a national perspective to determine the effectiveness of utilising virtual industry experience to promote student employability skill development within the Australian higher education sector. We report on the benefits and challenges of virtual industry experiences to promote employability skill development. Our study contributes to a key research and industry area for developing work readiness (Universities Australia, 2023).

The 20-slide PechaKucha format will follow a problem-to-practice narrative: why traditional placement models are insufficient on their own and what virtual industry experiences can offer. Audience engagement will occur through a live poll. The session will close with a reflective task on work readiness skill development.

This research directly contributes to higher education research by reporting on a key area for employability innovation and developing work readiness skills.

Keywords: Simulated WIL, virtual industry experience, employability, work readiness skills; Australia

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