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## Business graduate performance in oral communication skills and strategies for improvement



Denise Jackson\*

Faculty of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Room 2.455, 270 Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, WA 6027, Australia

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### ABSTRACT

Global competitiveness and increased knowledge sharing have accelerated the importance of oral communication skills in today's graduates. Accordingly, oral communication dominates assurance of learning standards and is frequently cited as one of the most desired graduate employability skills. Previous research, typically focused on employer perceptions, largely indicates graduate oral communication skills do not meet industry expectations. This study investigates how 674 recent business graduates perceived their own capabilities in oral communication skills, noting variations by background/demographic characteristics. Overall, business graduates rated their capabilities in oral communication highly although mean ratings for the 14 sub-behaviours varied. Certain sub-behaviours varied with graduate age and time spent working since graduation. Findings suggest a disparity between graduate and employer perceptions on the standard of oral communication skills upon graduation. Participants also considered the effectiveness of different learning activities for developing oral communication skills during their undergraduate studies. Popular learning activities were individual/group presentations and small group projects. The number of activity types engaged in during degree studies did not significantly impact perceived capabilities and only peer feedback, individual and group presentations caused significant variations in certain sub-behaviours. Despite graduates reporting opportunities for a wide range of learning activities, these are not always effective. Strategies for education and professional practitioners for enhancing graduate oral communication skill outcomes are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Employability skills, often referred to as generic, core, professional or non-technical skills, continue to attract considerable attention and resourcing in the tertiary education sector. These skills are a consistent and increasing concern in student learning in higher education (HE) generally, as well as in business fields specifically. Now an essential component of the graduate toolkit, they are considered more important than technical expertise in the recruitment and selection of new graduates (Australian Association of Graduate Employers [AAGE], 2011; Confederation of Business Industry [CBI], 2011). They comprise a broad range of skills which enable graduates to effectively and innovatively apply their technical expertise in the workplace. Although there is some discussion of whether the required skill sets vary by discipline and cultural context (see Jones, 2012; Tempone et al., 2012); team work, communication, self-management, data analysis, critical thinking and problem solving skills are typically deemed important in graduates in developed economies (AAGE, 2011; CBI, 2011; Hart, 2010).

\* Tel.: +61 0 8 6304 2794; fax: +61 0 8 6304 5235.

E-mail address: [d.jackson@ecu.edu.au](mailto:d.jackson@ecu.edu.au).

Communication typically dominates skill frameworks and is believed by employers in developed economies to be one of the most important skill sets in new graduates (Council for Industry and Higher Education [CIHE], 2011; Graduate Careers Australia [GCA], 2012; Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote, 2012). The skill set – encompassing both oral and written communication – is comprehensive as business today requires graduates to communicate virtually, face-to-face, informally and formally on a national and international basis with a multi-cultural and multi-generational audience. Despite being cited as the most sought after skill set, it is considered by some to be most lacking in recent graduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2010).

Previous studies have typically focused on employer perceptions of graduate workplace performance and the growing importance of oral communication, with relatively little attention to graduate perspectives. Given ambiguity among stakeholders on the precise meaning of employability skills (Barrie, 2006), and their manifestation in the workplace, it is important to also explore graduate perceptions of their performance in these skill areas. This study aims to investigate how recent business graduates perceive their own capabilities in oral communication and which learning activities developed their skills to assist in devising and implementing effective curricular interventions. Research objectives are to (i) measure oral communication skill capabilities in recent business graduates; (ii) identify any variations in oral communication skills by background/demographic characteristics and learning activities completed at university; and (iii) identify learning activities most used to develop oral communication skills. The paper is structured to first review relevant literature, followed by an outline of methodology, presentation and discussion of results and, finally, consideration of implications for stakeholders in undergraduate education.

The study is set in Australia with responses gathered from 674 business graduates across all 39 Australian universities. As Australia shares similarities in culture and historical skill development initiatives, problems and cited gaps with many developed economies, findings may be generalised. Distinct cultural differences between Western and Eastern teaching in undergraduate business programs (Zhu, Iles, & Shutt, 2011) and an overall lack of understanding of the impact of geographical and cultural differences on skill requirements and development (Velde, 2009) means findings may not necessarily be applied to less developed regions worldwide. Emerging research on industry dissatisfaction with graduate oral communication skill sets in these regions, however, may render findings of interest.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Employability skills

The emergence of employability skill development in HE has followed a similar pattern across several developed economies, particularly those considered culturally-similar such as North America, UK, Australia and certain parts of Europe. The conception of employability skills has been central to education strategies and practice for several years (Bowman, 2010) yet the focus on HE's role in producing work-ready graduates has grown in recent times, highlighting the need for explicit employability skill development in undergraduate programs. Rapid changes in technology, increased knowledge sharing and strong global competitiveness, particularly from developing economies such as India and China (Department of Innovation, University and Skills [DIUS], 2008), have prompted industry calls for graduates who are enterprising, adaptive and can work in teams, manage cultural diversity, problem solve and think critically.

Government acknowledgement of the need to up-skill graduates has prompted education reviews, such as Australia's West Review (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998) and the UK's Dearing report (Dearing, 1997), on the need to develop undergraduate employability. These reviews have accentuated the need to guide HE providers on implanting skill outcomes into undergraduate programs. With varying lead times, the initial focus was on constructing national skill frameworks which articulate those skills required by industry. Australia's national framework (Department of Science and Training [DEST], 2002) defines eight skill groupings which are considered generic across different sectors. Concerns for differing stakeholder perceptions of the precise meaning of the framework's skill groupings due to ambiguous terminology (Taylor, 2005), in addition to its currency given the rapid changes in technology and working practices, impede effective utilisation of the framework.

A more recently commissioned framework provides more detailed skill descriptors on the core skills for employment but is not yet mandated in Australian education sectors (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012). Other prominent skill frameworks articulating what constitutes a work-ready graduate include the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2011); the Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], 2010), and the UK's Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2012a).

In Australia, HE institutions are required to develop their own set of 'graduate attributes' which encompass the skills defined in the national framework and any capabilities, skills and traits considered relevant to their own institutional context. Although the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council [BIHECC]'s (2007) review of Australian HE institutions indicated this was largely the case, others maintain implementation is not consistent with some providers progressing little beyond surface mapping strategies and recommended policy statements (Barrie, 2006). Beyond Australia, employability skill outcomes are integral to the international undergraduate program accrediting body of Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB] and the QAA (Gersten, 2012). At each degree qualification level, there are also specific guidelines on the employability skill outcomes which Australian, US and UK students should be able to demonstrate

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