Emsi

Case Study: The University of Sydney

How a world renowned university is using data to further improve its graduate employability

A prestigious university on a mission to improve lives

Founded in 1850, the University of Sydney (UoS) is the oldest university in Australia, and is also amongst the most prestigious Higher Education institutions in the world, consistently making it into the Top 50 best universities according to the QS World University Rankings (it is currently rated 42nd). With 34,000 undergraduate and 25,000 postgraduate students each year, it is also a key institution for the Australian and wider Asia-Pacific professional labour market, and its reputation as one of the world's best universities in terms of Graduate Employability has been confirmed by QS, which currently rates it as the 5th best across the globe in this category.

At the heart of the university is the aim to improve lives by equipping students with the leadership qualities that will prepare them to go out into their communities and serve at every level. Yet with the world of work undergoing a period of rapid change, especially in terms of the skills that are being demanded by employers, the university has recently been looking for new ways to try and understand the impact it is having, so that it can keep up with these changes and ensure that it continues to meet the needs of students, employers, communities, and the wider labour market.

A proactive approach to understanding graduate outcomes

For a university that is ranked so highly in terms of Graduate Employability, there could be a temptation to rest on its reputation, and to assume that its alumni are always going to get great jobs. However, at a time when more questions are being asked of universities to evidence their outcomes, UoS is taking a highly proactive approach, by seeking to gain a far better understanding of what specifically its alumni are actually doing in the workplace.

To help them achieve this, the University's Deputy Vice Chancellor, Professor Pip Pattison, recently commissioned Emsi to undertake a major research project to analyse what the institution's former students are achieving in the labour market. In particular, they were keen to find out the following:

- **What is the interaction between our graduates' degrees and the career pathways they have pursued?**
- **What kinds of skills are our graduates using, and how do these make them distinct?**
- **How can we use this data to benchmark our performance and identify where and how we can improve?**

According to Ainslie Bulmer, the University's Education Portfolio Executive Director, the primary purpose in commissioning the report was to put a lot more science behind the University's understanding of what its alumni are doing:

> *What we were particularly keen to find out, is how closely our course areas are aligned with what our graduates are doing, and whether there are particular skills that they have that give them an advantage in the labour market. The Emsi report is full of insights that help us understand these issues much better.*

Identifying Graduate Outcomes

The report is divided into two main sections, the first of which is focused on Graduate Outcomes, using Emsi's graduate profiles data to analyse the careers pathways taken by the University's alumni, in order to identify how well the institution reaches different occupational labour markets from its different course subjects, where its graduates are most active in the labour market, and how they fare in terms of accessing higher end job opportunities. The analysis looked at a total of 1.9 million profiles across all Australia's Higher Education institutions, with a "concentration index" used to compare the share of UoS graduates in 20 different career areas with graduates from all other universities. By doing this, it was possible to establish career pathways where UoS has a higher or lower concentration of graduates than from all other universities.

For instance, the study found that UoS graduates are more likely to find careers in fields like Legal and Regulatory Services; Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations; and Business and Financial Analysis than is typically the case for all other graduates. In an accompanying analysis of wage profiles, the study also found that UoS alumni are, on average, paid slightly more than graduates from other universities, but there are also a number of key areas where they are paid significantly more.

Understanding Skills Clusters

The second part of the report is devoted to examining skills clusters. Using Emsi's unique methodology, this part of the analysis looks at the strengths of particular course subjects in the labour market by identifying correlations between skills, with a view to establishing where particular groups of skills cluster together into a single role. By doing this, it is possible to get a sense of whether and where UoS alumni are finding niche positions, what skills they find valuable, and where their skills are different from those of their peers graduating from other institutions. The University opted to look at four particular clusters - Business; Law; Humanities and Social Science; and STEM - and amongst many other findings, the research revealed that for UoS graduates in Business and Social Sciences, they typically have a far greater emphasis on change management and stakeholder management compared to graduates from other institutions.

How does the University hope to use these findings?

Having received the completed report, there are a number of different ways that UoS is considering using the findings. These include:

- **Internal Discussions:** The wealth of detail about particular subject areas in the report offers a great opportunity to facilitate conversations across faculties about graduate outcomes in those subjects.
- **Engaging Employers:** Having identified many of the actual skills their graduates are using, UoS hopes to be able to explore with employers whether enhancing those skills within courses would add more value.
- **Informing students:** The findings can be used to help students and prospective students understand possible career pathways, and UoS is hoping to use the data to help their cohort make more informed decisions.

For a university with a world class reputation, particularly for Graduate Employability, the research has not only helped confirm much of what was known anecdotally, but it has also provided a more scientific basis from which improvements around future employability can be discussed and implemented. As Ainslie commented:

> *Emsi's report provides us with a benchmark, both in terms of how we move things forward internally, and also how we are faring against peer institutions. We now have solid evidence, which we can use to better plan how we are going to keep up with the rapid workforce changes we are seeing, and so provide an even better service to all our stakeholders.*