Life after graduation as a "very uncomfortable world": an Australian case study

Lisa Perrone and Margaret H. Vickers

The authors

Lisa Perrone and Margaret H. Vickers are based at the School of Management, College of Law and Business, University of Western Sydney, Penrith South, Australia.

Keywords

Graduates, Case studies, Phenomenology, Research, Higher education, Recruitment, Australia

Abstract

Few studies have addressed the experiences of a graduate’s transition from university to the world of work. Understanding how graduates react and respond to this journey will provide universities with the ability to prepare and equip students for the road ahead. The purpose of this particular Australian case study was to extend understanding of the experience of making the transition from university to work, and to identify questions for further study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and analysed for clusters of common themes. Four themes emerged from the case study: “an uncertain feeling”, “inflated expectations”, “the work experience paradox” and “a low time”. It is hoped that understanding this graduate’s experiences will assist higher education institutions, recruiting companies and students to better understand and prepare for this significant life passage.

Electronic access

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0040-0912.htm

After graduation: an unexplored journey

Making the transition from tertiary study to the workforce is a journey undertaken by thousands of graduates each year. With some three to six years of higher education behind them and their degree firmly in hand, graduates set out to find themselves a job. These graduates make decisions regarding career and employment choices, undergo a job search and, if successfully recruited, progress into possibly their first career position. However, the significance and poignancy of this life transition has been largely ignored and underestimated. It is one that will affect their quality of life, especially in the short term. It can also be a time fraught with stress, anxiety, shock, fear, uncertainty, loss, loneliness, depression and feelings of low self worth. These are feelings not routinely anticipated by students. They are also experiences that are not widely understood by the business community, by tertiary institutions or by scholars of the higher education experience.

Much attention has been focused on the importance of the early experiences of undergraduate students in mass higher education systems. The problematic nature of transition from school to university (Elsworth et al., 1982; Ramsden, 1992; McInnes and James, 1995; Hargreaves et al., 1996; Latham and Green, 1997; Earl et al., 1998), as well as the experience of students once at university, has been examined by many (Watkins, 1982; Williams, 1982; Williams and Pepe, 1983; Lewis, 1984; Mitchell, 1990; Emjay Research Consultants, 1995; McInnes and James, 1995; Latham and Green, 1997; James et al., 1999). There has been attention to the first year experience and levels of student satisfaction (Watkins, 1982; Williams, 1982; Williams and Pepe, 1983), how students adjust to the larger social setting (Mitchell, 1990), the personal world of the university student (Lewis, 1984; McInnes and James, 1995) and that students are most likely to form lasting outlooks and values with respect to higher education and lifelong learning, including establishing that there is often a gap between student expectations and the reality of the experience, during the first year of higher education (McInnes and James, 1995, p. 11.2). Importantly, it has been noted that students undergo rites of passage as they move from the membership of one
community (school) to another (university) (Christie and Dinham, 1991).

Additionally, the literature also looks at the experience of searching for a job after
finishing university. There are numerous publications and internet sites offering
insights, tips and strategies for job search success (for example Lussier and Noteman,
1997; Bolles, 1999; GCCA, 2000; Koen and Lee, 2000; O'Brien, 2000; Phillips and
Weddle, 2000). Student job-seekers are informed about ways to develop their career
goals, improve their resumés, create attention-grabbing covering letters, develop,
contact, pursue job leads and amaze interviewers at their subsequent job
interviews. However, the usefulness of these publications remains questionable and they
certainly do not provide a complete picture of the story of the shift from university life to full
time career employment – a transition involving much more than a job search.

Further, not only do different authors offer differing and contradictory information, very
few publications are designed with the new graduate in mind (Rowarth, 2000). Finally,
unless graduates are aware of and seek out such publications, they offer little assistance.

Others have examined the psychological impact of the job search itself. The job search
frequently entails high levels of stress (Stumpf et al., 1983). As work roles are an important
part of self-concept, the inability to locate employment can create severe psychological
consequences (Hayes and Nutman, 1981; Caplan et al., 1989). It is also acknowledged
that some degree of rejection by potential employers is almost inevitable in today's economic climate, even for highly qualified individuals. Successful job searchers also
experience apprehension and stress related to the uncertainties inherent in the search
process. However, for many job searchers (and, in particular, those having difficulty
finding a job), these pressures accumulate as the search progresses (Barber et al., 1994).

One well established reaction to the stress of search is avoidance or withdrawal. This may
occur directly, as the job searcher avoids the possibility of experiencing rejection through
not making job applications and succumbing to learned helplessness (Plumly and Oliver,
1987). More indirectly, lowered self-esteem or self-efficacy may result. This, in turn,
lowers the motivation to continue the search

(Ellis and Taylor, 1983; Kanfer and Hulin, 1985; Eden and Aviram, 1993).

Today's graduate labour market is substantially different from what it was ten or
20 years ago. Where it was once the case that graduates faced a favourable labour market, it
is now less predictable, more rapidly changing and more competitive (OECD, 1993; Conner
and Pollard, 1996). This is due to the rapid development of a mass higher education
system, which is resulting in a much larger supply of graduates to the market place
(OECD, 1993; Andrew and Wu, 1998; Holmes et al., 1998). High rates of
organisational downsizing, delayering and outsourcing have also produced immense
uncertainty about the kinds of careers that now exist for graduates (Coates, 1995;
Hawkins and Winter, 1996). These trends have resulted in graduates increasingly finding
work outside of the commonly recognised graduate occupational destinations and
occupying a much more diverse range of jobs than in the past (OECD, 1993; Andrew and

Finally, the majority of studies cited above have been quantitative in nature. Rather than
exploring the life experiences of graduates as they move from university life to the world of
work, research has been directed toward monitoring annual activities of the graduate
population. For example, every Australian university now participates in the annual
Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) for the Graduate Careers Council of Australia
(GCCA). A number of Australian universities also conduct student and employer surveys in
addition to the GCCA's (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs,
Higher Education Division, 1999). These projects aim to track the activities of recent
university graduates who have completed their bachelor degree in the previous year,
targeting graduate starting salaries, and the number of graduates who are employed,
unemployed or continuing on with further study (GCCA, 2000). The Australian Bureau of
Statistics (ABS) also provides a detailed quantitative profile of graduates in its
monthly Labour Force Survey (ABS, 2001), as well as through additional quantitative
publications such as Transition from Education to Work (ABS, 2000) and Qualified People Less
Likely to be Unemployed (ABS, 1999). These publications examine those undertaking
higher education, percentages of students
graduating and percentages of graduates employed. Others have examined graduation rates more generally from higher education (Long et al., 1995). These publications, while useful, do little to provide us with a rich picture of the experiences graduates face as they journey to the workforce. This is notably acknowledged by the GCCA in their graduate destination survey. They concede that “these figures provide a snapshot ... but not the whole picture” (GCCA, 2000, p. 5).

Fortunately, the literature does not completely dismiss the personal experiences of graduates. There is a growing body of work taking an in-depth look at graduates’ working or career experiences during the first few years of employment after graduation (for example, Keenan and Newton, 1986; Nicholson and Arnold, 1989a, b; Graham and McKenzie, 1995a; Holmes et al., 1998; Holmes, 1999; Holton, 1999; Arnold and Mackenzie-Davey, 2000). It has been recognised that the move from higher education to employment deserves particular attention, as it is such a major transition (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a). Graduates move from university with high expectations and feelings of optimism, which are likely to be balanced with a natural apprehension associated with such a major life change (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a, p. 5). Some have even noted that the managerial career that follows a university education might serve as a vehicle for the realization of self (Adamson, 1997, p. 246). However, the graduate identity in a changing graduate labour market is shifting to a place of uncertainty and discomfort. The increasing expansion of graduate numbers leads one to conclude that there will not be enough graduate recruiters to absorb these large numbers of graduates (Jameson and Holden, 2000). Given that identity involves the views of those around us, a changing graduate market must be reflected in the graduate identity (Jameson and Holden, 2000). Higher education is a process where an individual may develop their identity as a graduate – that is, as one who is highly educated (Holmes, 1999). Developing the graduate identity is a social process, emergent from the dynamic interaction of the expression of identity aspirations on the part of the individual, and the identity attributions of society. A graduate’s identity may create certain expectations, which influence the graduate when they are measuring employment opportunities. The type of job an individual graduate secures will either affirm or disaffirm graduate identity (Holmes et al., 1998).

Unless employers are aware of the significance of being a graduate, then much of the social significance of this identity characteristic will be lost (Jameson and Holden, 2000).

Graduates are said to proceed through a number of stages after joining an organization:

1. uninformed optimism;
2. informed pessimism;
3. hopeful realism; and
4. informed optimism (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a).

The move into their new role can also involve separate adjustment processes: individual change and role change. If this change is too extreme, the experience can be unpleasant and may be resisted (Mackenzie-Davey and Arnold, 2000, pp. 462-3). Graham and McKenzie (1995a, b) examined graduates’ personal experiences when starting work, finding that virtually all the graduates who participated in the research project experienced some degree of transitional problems, including cultural shock, stress, inflated expectations, resentment and uncertainty (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a). Discourse analysis in another study revealed that respondents had difficulty articulating the change in themselves during this transition phase. Responses revealed the complexity they were associating with possible changes to their personality, as well as complex reasoning surrounding accounts of changed attitudes and values (Mackenzie-Davey and Arnold, 2000, p. 476).

Conversely, the same study showed respondents remarking on their increased self-confidence, thus confirming their ambivalence (Mackenzie-Davey and Arnold, 2000, p. 478). Interestingly, other studies argued that, while competency levels may change a great deal over the period of this transition, large changes in personality, attitudes and values are less common (Arnold et al., 1999; Nicholson and West, 1988).

The first few days and months in a job can make a lasting impact on the graduate’s perception of their workplace, and their commitment to it. It is particularly important that organizations should live up to the expectations built during the recruitment
process (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a). Holden and Jameson (1999) comment on the problem of graduates reporting being underemployed and underutilized, as well as their shock in response to the amount of work they were faced with (Holden and Jameson, 1999, pp. 239-40, emphasis in original). While graduates reported performing satisfactorily, they believed themselves to be operating at very low skill levels, well below their expectations (Holden and Jameson, 1999, p. 239). Unfortunately, there is often a very weak link between the strategic objectives underpinning graduate recruitment and what actually happens (Graham and McKenzie, 1995b). The importance of a good start is regarded as being of critical importance in handling this important transition (Graham and McKenzie, 1995a).

In sum, while much important work has been done about the transition from high school to university, and then, later, about the graduate search for work, there has been little qualitative investigation of the experience of graduates during the transition through life after university, as they leave one phase of life in search of another. As the job market continues to tighten and the number of graduates continues to increase, it becomes increasingly important to understand this journey; its complexity, poignancy and lengthy duration. It can no longer be assumed that graduates, even of the highest calibre, will find this an easy life passage.

Heideggerian phenomenology and an exemplar case study

The interviews with Jason (a pseudonym) were undertaken as part of a larger phenomenological study into the experiences of graduates who have completed their undergraduate degrees. Phenomenology is concerned with the need to capture the subjectively experienced life of informants as interpreted by them (Taylor, 1993, p. 174). As Vickers (1997, p. 102, 2001) explains, Heideggerian phenomenology is about telling a story that is sometimes unique, sometimes generalisable. Value is placed on all stories – they constitute new knowledge. The underlying intention is not just to describe the phenomenon (as it would be with Husserlian phenomenology) but also to interpret it (Vickers, 1997, 2001). We attempt here to capture the rich and poignant experience of one graduate’s journey, sharing it through the use of an exemplar case study. A very important advantage of case material lies in the richness of its detailed understanding of reality. Case study research is undertaken giving special attention to complexities in observation, reconstruction and analysis. It also, importantly, includes the views of the actor or actors involved (Zonabend, 1992). An emic case values most highly individual experience rather than replication ability. This exemplar case was selected because it vivified strong instances of particular patterns of meaning (Leonard, 1989, p. 54) making it possible to draw attention to what can be specifically learned from a single case (Stake, 2000, p. 435). In this case, it was the unexpectedly uncomfortable world Jason now faced.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Jason and were guided by the purpose of the study and the theoretical underpinnings of the research (Minichiello et al., 1990). Carter (1999) explains that this method produces a richness of data unobtainable through other means, through the use of open-ended questions and the ability to explore concepts. This method worked well with the phenomenological philosophy, helping to guide the structure and content of the interviews (Thompson et al., 1989; Valle and King, 1978). The goal of the phenomenological interview is to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989, p. 138). Here, Jason’s feelings and insights regarding his experiences after graduation were revealed.

After graduation: a very uncomfortable world

Jason: It’s a very uncomfortable kind of world for me. I don’t like it much.

For Jason, life after graduation is “a very uncomfortable kind of world”. It is one fraught with difficulties and adjustments. It is one he was not familiar with. By his own admission, it is a world where he feels “lost” and a world where he no longer occupies the comfortable, long-held and familiar role of student. It is this world – and his passage to it – that is explored here.
Jason is a well-educated, well-spoken, confident person. He graduated with a double major in accounting and marketing from a prestigious university and, prior to that, excelled at an even more prestigious school. Charismatic and thoughtful in his approach, Jason attained good marks at university, lead a large cadetship at school, played chess at State level, and enjoyed debating. He is, by most Western social and academic measures, highly successful and ambitious for further success in a business career. When the interviewer first met Jason, he was dressed smartly in business attire, having just finished work for the day. Jason had been gone from the university for 15 months and had been working as a graduate trainee accountant for the last seven. Unfortunately, Jason has also just been told that his position is being made redundant. The exploration of Jason’s journey after university revealed several clearly defined themes, which are dealt with here:
- an uncertain feeling;
- inflated expectations;
- the work experience paradox; and
- a low time.

An uncertain feeling
The first issue that became evident in Jason’s narrative was his feelings of being overwhelmed and uncertain when he left university, in particular, feeling unprepared for the significant, life-impacting decisions and options that now faced him:

Jason: I say [university is] kind of like being in jail. You’re institutionalised in a big way, because you have this very predictable path. I mean from kindergarten, you know, you’re going to have your little milk break at midday. You know exactly what’s going to happen throughout the day. You know when you are going to have your holidays. And it’s like that for 12 years of schooling and, then, when you move on to university, for another three years. It’s when you get out of that, when you actually have to start making some decisions – some big decisions – then it becomes very hard. It’s like, “My God. I’ve never had to decide anything before. I’ve never really had to take that much of an interest in my own direction.” I mean choosing a university degree can be a decision. I mean, I just put it off and did commerce. You can do anything with a commerce degree. It’s a “wonderful” thing.

From Jason’s account, it would seem that one of the reasons that he might have chosen to undertake a commerce degree was its broad scope, thus allowing him to avoid the need to make concrete decisions regarding his future career path in the early part of his university education. A commerce degree in Australia offers a broad curriculum and, for one still uncertain about their future career path, this choice offers one way of “buying time”. For Jason, his indecision and uncertainty about his future allowed him to also defer his job search (and associated choices), offering a form of avoidance and deferral. He shared his predilection for such choices:

Jason: When I finished the HSC [Higher School Certificate or Leaving Certificate – final high school exams in Australia], I had no idea what I wanted to do, so I did a commerce degree. When I finished university I still had no idea of what I wanted to do. So I went off on a rather large holiday.

However, Jason was eventually forced to take control over his future, and make some decisions regarding his career path. However, this was not necessarily any easier, having been deferred for so long.

Inflated expectations
One particularly problematic experience for Jason was his own inflated expectations about how easy it would be to find work, in addition to the level of work he was likely to find. As he embarked on the passage from tertiary educational institution to employment, Jason found his expectations about where his degree would take him were grossly overestimated. He explained:

Jason: At the beginning you think you’re invincible. You think you’re just going to fly right into a job. You think they’re going to say, “Yes. You’re a graduate! Please have this job! Have this office! Have this wonderful kind of life!” And then you realise it’s not the case. You suffer from these illusions that you went to [a prestigious school], you went to university, you’re going to get the job. It’s not the case.

What is striking here is the mistaken belief by Jason that if one obtains a university degree, one is guaranteed to get, not just any job, but a wonderful job. This perception (or illusion) is not unique to Jason. Holmes et al. (1998) have argued that completing tertiary education creates certain expectations for students in regards to employment. In this case, Jason assumed that a university degree alone would secure him a good job. However, given the nature and competition of the graduate market, this assumption needs to be addressed so that university leavers are in a
position to more realistically appraise their future employment prospects.

Unfortunately, at the current time:
... new graduates looking for work ... are to employers what school leavers once were: there are lots of them and most should expect to take ground-floor jobs first (Konkes, 2001, p. 31).

Jason confirmed that he came to see this, but only after months of rejection and unemployment. He recalls:

\textit{Jason: [I thought] people are just going to want to employ me. I'm going to have to fight them away. You do get to the realisation that you're not that special. You're just another graduate. I mean there are 30,000 people at Sydney University, of which about a third of them graduate each year. You're hitting the job market with all those other people.}

The other side of these inflated expectations comes once work is found. Disappointment in the job eventually offered and accepted was also high. The job that Jason secured (his current job) was offered after two-and-a-half months of searching. It was that of a trainee graduate accountant in a medium sized health organisation. He reflects bitterly on this employment choice:

\textit{Jason: I thought the job that I'm doing at the moment was going to give me a lot of skills. But it hasn't really been what I expected. It was a bit of a disappointment, quite a substantial one actually ... I believe this position needed a trained monkey. A lot of what I'm doing is very mindless, repetitive kind of work. It's not the interesting and exciting career path I'd thought I'd have.}

When asked if he had any last thoughts or feelings about his job search, Jason was determined to offer advice to other graduates facing a job search. The interviewer was struck by the rawness and sharpness of his disappointment:

\textit{Jason: What I'd like to say is, “Don't settle for second best when you're looking for a job. It is something that will become a significant thing in your life.” I regret settling for this job. I should have gone for something else. It's a bad choice, but it's something I'll have to live with and make the best of. It took too long to discover it was the wrong choice to back away from it quickly.}

Jason's disappointment in his employment should not be dismissed. Employment status does have significant psychological consequences for the young person and satisfying paid work is an important factor leading to healthy psycho-social development in the young person (Winfield \textit{et al.}, 1993). Without it, there may be a real danger that they will not develop a satisfactory self-concept or sense of identity (Erikson, 1959). The psychological damage due to unsatisfactory employment is comparable to that due to unemployment (Winfield \textit{et al.}, 1993).

\textbf{The work experience paradox}

One of the difficulties that faced Jason during his passage from university life to a career position was the paradoxical expectation that many prospective employers had that he – as a university graduate – should have substantial work, even management, experience. Graduates need to get a job to gain the required experience, while employers continually assert the need for significant work experience in addition to their degree to secure an entry-level graduate position. Jason is convinced, however, that relevant business experience whilst at university would have considerably increased his chances of obtaining a better position.

\textit{LP: What do you think sets you apart, gives you a competitive advantage over other graduates?}

\textit{Jason: [pause] I think having some experience. I think, instead of working in a maintenance workshop in my university holidays just to get some money, I should have been going out and getting some work experience, paid or unpaid. That would have, in so many cases, tipped me over the line. Just three months worth of experience would have been enough for me to get a lot of the jobs that I went for. I'm quite certain of that.}

The issue of gaining relevant work experience while still at university is currently being debated. Employers in Australia and elsewhere have, for some years, expressed concerns that young people emerging from higher education do not have the skills that employers need (Davies, 2000; Arnold \textit{et al.}, 1999). Various studies have demonstrated that work experience is an important factor that recruiters look for in graduates (for example, Brougham and Casella, 1995). In addition, recent reports in Australia, such as the Business/Higher Education Round Table (1993, 1995) Reports and the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Higher Education Division (1999) Report on employer satisfaction with graduate skills, have strongly advocated the development of effective learning, language and communications skills at university for both reasons of employability and lifelong learning (Candy \textit{et al.}, 1994). Similar
expectations in the preparation of graduates have been echoed in reports in the US (Boyer Commission Report on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, 1998) and the UK Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997). Blackstone (1998) argues that higher education must have effective links with the world of work, so that it can deliver the skills and knowledge to maximize the value of graduates. However, Kitchener and Brenner (1990) sound a warning against expecting total success. They argue that learning from relatively complex experiences in the unfamiliar world of work (which requires a substantial measure of reflective judgement), demands a level of maturity that students in the 18-22 year age group may not possess.

Further, Jason's expectations that business experience will have helped him may not always be accurate. Entry-level work, especially if unpaid, is notorious for requiring mindless obedience and patience with the photocopier, rather than allowing educated, intelligent students to excel in communication and language skills, and other business-related competencies. Perhaps employer expectations are becoming unreasonable in an increasingly tight job market. For example, Jason describes his experience with one recruiting company:

Jason: [The recruiters] liked me. They thought I was a charismatic person. They did an actual on-the-job testing, so I was actually doing the job for part of it, and they liked the way I was doing things. But then they decided that, as a long-term thing, I didn't have enough experience to be able to perform the job properly under adverse circumstances. Quote, unquote ... I found that with nearly every interview, the interviewer said, "We like you. We like your personality. We think you're a great, interesting kind of person, but you don't have enough experience." In a lot of cases, I'd say that if I had a year's more experience and my degree I would have got the job.

Many business graduates would find Jason's experience comforting, perhaps, to find that they are not alone, and yet unsettling too, as the problematic and paradoxical nature of securing that extra year's experience sinks in. Even the best students, who are busy through university passing their exams and assessments, working at a casual job for some money, may not realise the majority of graduate recruiters will be examining not only their academic results, but their relevant work experience and extra curricular activities. To see examples of these expectations, one needs only to peruse an organisation's graduate recruitment brochure or click onto their graduate recruitment homepage. Employer expectations might be argued to be overly high, with charity and volunteer work, community service, management experience, excellent grades, superior presentation and communication skills being routinely demanded, especially of the entry-level graduate. Still another question remains as to whether students are sincerely unaware of these requirements or, in psychodynamic terms, are employing defence mechanisms, denial perhaps, to avoid the inevitable (Workfield et al., 1993).

A low time
Jason's journey from university to the workforce was a very painful experience for him. Besides feeling the shock and disappointment of his unrealised expectations, Jason also struggled with his own feelings of worth as a person in the face of ongoing job rejections. He recalled:

Jason: Well, [the job search] wears you down very quickly, keeping a level of distance from it, because they're rejecting you personally. They don't want to have you working for them. If you're selling a product as a door-to-door salesman, then you can say, "It's the product they are rejecting." But when it's a personal rejection, it really can be quite painful in a lot of cases.

Jason also relayed the hurt of having his job search efforts ridiculed by a potential employer:

Jason: I had one guy laugh at me. I walked in and he said, "No way, not a chance. Just stop wasting my time."

For Jason, this particular experience was an extremely painful one, still remembered months after the incident. While most likely not a universal reaction from employers (as explained by Jason), it does spark the need to put the treatment of graduate job seekers by recruiters and organisations into the spotlight. Jason's journey was also made more difficult by the social isolation he experienced from the friends he once saw regularly at university:

Jason: It was kind of a difficult time. Part of the thing too was that when I did go away [on holiday] I lost contact with a lot of friends that I'd had from university, because we just didn't keep in contact for four-and-a-half months. And
a lot of people that I was just really used to spending time with at university I didn’t see anymore. It was just this very lonely time in Sydney... There was a very low time where I was in Sydney and I was just going, “God, this is not how I want to be.”

Clearly, this period in his life has been a difficult one, characterised by disappointment, rejection and uncertainty, and one in which his regular peer network, and the social support it would have provided, was absent. However, from these negative experiences, Jason still saw the positive. He acknowledged that his accounting job has provided him with information management skills, office skills and organisational skills, which will make him, in Jason’s words, “more of a selling proposition” for his next job search. Learning from this, he plans to be “a little more ambitious” and is resolute that he will not “take anything less” than what he wants. As he puts it, he is determined to “go for life”.

Life after graduation

This case study explores the experience of being a graduate after university. The model developed raises some new and revealing insights into the experiences, expectations and psyche of graduates and employers. An important finding relates to the student understanding of the graduate labour market and the graduate recruitment strategies of organisations. Literature is available on the graduate labour market that, as we have seen, is highly competitive. Literature is also available on graduate employment opportunities, especially commentary on the enormously high expectations that recruiters have for applicants to entry-level positions. However, this case study indicates that some university students may be completely unaware of the challenges awaiting them after graduation. As Jason’s story demonstrates, his beliefs and expectations about the employment opportunities and privileges that awaited him after university led to disappointment, regret and lost opportunities. Another insight gleaned from this case is the likelihood of student procrastination, especially with regards to life-altering decisions surrounding the direction of their employment future. Where this lack of decisiveness exists, the possibility of avoidance being utilised as a defence strategy arises. As Jason terms it, it is a “kind of an escapism thing from having to make a decision about anything”.

Previously, the personal journey of graduates has not been explored. The exploratory – and vivid – picture that Jason’s story depicts, highlights the need for more studies that focus on the richness that phenomenology (and other qualitative methods) offer. Universities and other tertiary educators should consider carefully their role in unreasonably building the expectations of students, especially as the role of the “corporate university” continues to escalate. Students also should be encouraged to take a greater responsibility for their own expectations and outcomes from their degrees, through investigation and participation in the debate about the role of and flaws within current higher education practices as a preparation for work. Lastly, this study might spark a close scrutiny of the inflated expectations that recruiters are increasingly insisting upon from graduate job seekers.

References


Business/Higher Education Round Table (1993), Graduating to the Workplace: Business Students’ Views about their Education, Business/Higher Education Round Table (BHERT), Commissioned Report No. 3, Melbourne, May.


Emjay Research Consultants (1995), Research Report: Choosing a University, A Qualitative Study, conducted for University of Western Sydney, Office of the Vice Chancellor, Public Relations, University of Western Sydney, Sydney.


Life after graduation as a "very uncomfortable world"

Lisa Perrone and Margaret H. Vickers


McInnes, C. and James, R. (1995), "First year on campus: diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates", Committee for Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT), Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.


Williams, C. (1982), The Early Experiences of Students on Australian University Campuses, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Williams, C. and Pepe, T. (1983), The Early Experiences of Students on Australian University Campuses, University of Sydney, Sydney.

Williams, C. and Pepe, T. (1983), The Early Experiences of Students on Australian University Campuses, University of Sydney, Sydney.
