

TERTIARY OPEN DAYS

Soft skills a key part of equation

Take a critical perspective

BRYANNA Biondich had never heard of the Bachelor of Applied Leadership and Critical Thinking when the Western Sydney University student was first invited to enrol in the degree.

But with just a few months to go before she graduates from the course, she couldn't be happier with her decision.

"It gives the hands-on experience you might not get with a specialised degree; I know I didn't get any with my Bachelor of Social Science," says the 22-year-old, who was completing a double major in criminology and child and community studies at WSU's Bankstown campus when she was told she was eligible to apply.

"I like the reflection it provides, the theories of leadership and how you can apply them, and to question how you make your decisions," she says.

The course also includes 60 hours of work experience, which she is soon to begin with the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC), and which she hopes will lead to a career working with young offenders, as a customs officer or with the Australian Federal Police.

"It will hopefully be a really good stepping stone for the career I'm aiming for," she says.



Bryanna Biondich studies a Bachelor of Applied Leadership and Critical Thinking.

Academic achievement is only one part of the job hunt, with skills such as communication rated just as highly, writes **Polly Simons**

ONCE upon a time, academic results were the best indication of the career you could expect after graduation. Ace every test and you could be assured that the right doors would open when it came to finding your first full-time job.

Increasingly, however, top marks are no longer enough to get you into the job of your dreams. "Soft skills" – those nebulous abilities such as communication skills, collaboration and conflict resolution – are replacing technical knowledge as the go-to abilities for employers seeking the next generation of leaders.

So how can you choose a course that will maximise your chances of developing them?

WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

"Soft skills are best described as emotional intelligence – things like organisation skills, the ability to influence people, collaboration and listening skills," says Adam Shapley, senior regional director at recruitment company Hays.

Often, they're the small things that make a big difference in creating a happy workplace, such as punctuality, good manners and the ability to articulate yourself clearly and politely.

While these might sound like the type of skills everyone has, the reality is very different.

Research conducted in the UK last year predicted that by 2020, the careers of more than half a million British workers would be held back by a lack of soft skills. In Australia, an analysis commissioned by the Foundation for Young Australians last year found employers

were 20 per cent more likely to ask for "enterprise skills" such as problem-solving and creativity than technical skills when posting job advertisements for young people.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

But surely, the ability to speak five languages while spouting legal precedents is more valuable than simply turning up to work on time? Not necessarily, says Jane Lowder, founder of career company Max Coaching.

Several studies have shown a correlation between good soft skills and high levels of workplace performance and productivity, while today's rate of technological change has made adaptability and being able to work well with people more important than ever.

"To be competitive in the global market, you have to be nimble," says Lowder.

"Perhaps soft skills were always needed, but this has shone a light on them."

CAN THEY BE TAUGHT?

Perhaps it's not surprising then that soft skills are becoming the focus of many degrees, such as Western Sydney University's Bachelor of Applied Leadership and Critical Thinking.

"We were finding that when they arrived at university, students would pick a discipline, but they lacked real-world experience," says Associate Professor Joanne Lind, head of WSU's The Academy, which runs the program.

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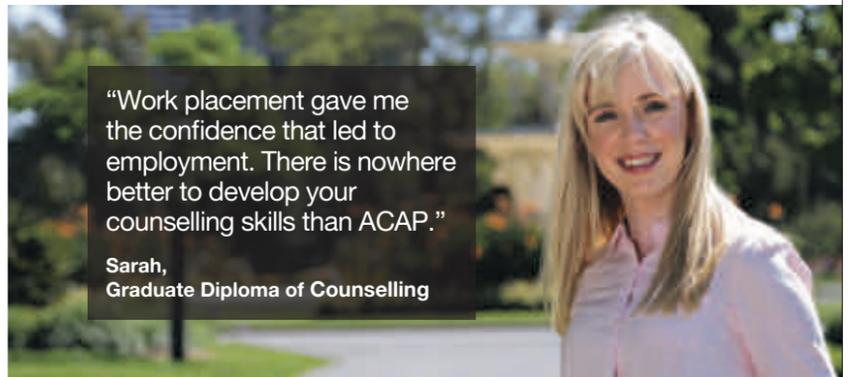
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Many modern employers rate soft skills of equal importance to technical proficiency and educational qualifications.

those who have achieved a certain grade-point average, the course aims to equip the next generation with the skills they need to succeed.

As part of the course, students complete an internship either in Australia or overseas and participate in activities designed to build skills such as critical thinking and teamwork.

“Feedback has been really positive,” says Lind. “Students have really valued it and the chance to get that broader experience.”

TAFEs and private colleges have long been aware of the importance of work-ready skills.

According to Rahul Nath, head of Digital Design at JMC Academy, students of the Bachelor of Digital Design (Visual Communications) have the chance to build their soft skills almost from their first semester, working on real-life projects as well as completing a formalised internship. “Agencies want people with technical skills like Photoshop but, more than anything, they want someone who has a fit with the company,” he says. “They work in small groups and want someone who knows how to work with them.”

HOW CAN YOU DEVELOP THEM?

Even if you have your heart set on attending a particular institution, there’s still plenty you can do to ensure you have the skills you need.

Looking for courses that offer internships or work experience is an easy place to start, or ask whether placements can be arranged. Courses with strong industry links can be invaluable in ensuring you’re up to date with the latest research and give you access to networks and contacts to help you stand out from the crowd. Don’t forget other elements of uni, either.

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

Top 10 skills employers value most:

Communication	49%
Academic results	24%
Teamwork	22%
Aptitude	21%
Interpersonal skills	20%
Leadership skills	20%
Work experience	20%
Cultural fit	18%
Motivation	18%
Adaptability	14%

Source: Graduate Careers Australia Graduate Outlook 2014 Report

Participating in clubs, sports and societies – whether that’s captaining the netball team or organising Pokemon tournaments – can help mark you out to employers and develop the sort of skills that will make you employable.

Part-time jobs are also a good way to build your skills, particularly if they involve working as part of a team with strong structures and systems in place. “Many employers love McDonald’s for this reason,” says Lowder.

If you’re planning ahead, gap years not only give you time to make career decisions, they can also help you turn that career into reality.

“Research bears out that employers prefer those who have taken a gap year, as it shows they can manage independently,” says Lowder.

“Taking the opportunity to step outside your comfort zone, whether a different country or a different organisation, is very important.”

Ultimately, however, Lowder says it’s about attitude. “It’s massively important to go in with the attitude of listening and learning,” she says.

“Everything at work is relationships, so unless you have the skills to build these relationships, everything is going to take longer and be harder to achieve.”

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*Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2015