SEAMEO International Conference on Leadership and Management in Higher Education: Driving Change with Global Trends

Sub-theme: Enhancing the Employability of graduates from higher education

Title: Ready for Work and Life: How RMIT Vietnam's Personal Edge program prepares graduates for success in an increasingly competitive jobs market.

Authors: Felicity Brown, Eric Asato and Hanh Tran Thi My - RMIT University Vietnam

Abstract:

In 2014, the concept of an employability skills program was proposed and incorporated into RMIT Vietnam's Strategic Plan. The two drivers behind the project were graduate outcomes and the perception by key employers of the low 'work capital' and minimum 'professional social maturity' of graduates.

Over the course of the past 5 years, Personal Edge has evolved into an experiential employability skills development program with students producing a digital portfolio upon completion of the program.

In this session, you will learn the story of how RMIT has integrated Personal Edge with Practera's digital learning platform to engage students through gamification features to create a digital portfolio of employability skills.

The idea was to create a platform where students could store learning artefacts (photos, videos, certificates, projects, etc.) to document their achievements, and reflect on their experiences to articulate to future employers. An iterative approach using elements of design thinking and user-centric development was used to capture the needs of students, staff and industry. This included the opportunity for students to co-create elements of the app and give frequent input during several stages of the process such as a student competition to come up with final designs. The Personal Edge App is the outcome of this close collaboration between university and industry stakeholders, technology providers and students.

In December 2017, the 'PE App' was officially launched. As at April 2019, there have been more than 1806 workshop reflections recorded and students have crafted over 700 skills reflections, together with multimedia files as evidence to display on their digital portfolios.

During the Q&A, will share our insights, successes, challenges and their vision of how the Personal Edge program and its mobile app will continue to drive engagement and employability outcomes in the future.

Conference Paper:

1. Why an employability skills program?

At RMIT University we strive to produce graduates who are ready for work and life. We aim not only to give students a high-quality learning experience, but also to prepare them for life and work after university in a practical and well-rounded manner.

Employers demand that university graduates have not only industry-specific knowledge (hard skills) gained in degree programs, but also soft skills such as communication, teamwork and leadership. In 2014, the **Personal Edge** co-curricular employability skills program was developed by RMIT University Vietnam as part of an effort to equip students with skills that will make a difference in their future.

From the 2019 RMIT Vietnam Graduate Outcomes Survey, which surveys students 3 months after completing their degree, over 82.6% of graduates were in full-time employment, 19.1% were in further studies, and 10.4% had their own business (a graduate can identify in more than one category).

Nevertheless, with the global economy entering Industry 4.0 and the need to develop 21st century skills for the future of work, Personal Edge has continued to evolve into an experiential employability skills development program with students producing a digital portfolio upon completion of the program.

2. What is Personal Edge?

Personal Edge is the program that, along with academic studies, will enable students to develop the right skills to impress future employers and bring their career aspirations to life. The skill sets developed within **Personal Edge** can also give students practical advantages during their studies at RMIT Vietnam and be useful in their personal lives.

Every semester, students can attend a variety of Personal Edge learning experiences - a series of activities aimed at helping them develop a wide range of knowledge and skills alongside formal academic study. Activities are delivered by industry leaders, professional trainers and coaches, RMIT Vietnam academics and professional staff, and alumni.

Personal Edge is organized around 6 key skill sets that employers seek in high potential staff. Employees, entrepreneurs and independent professionals who develop these skills early and keep nurturing them are more likely to succeed as global leaders and change agents in every context.

Developing these skills is not a one-off exercise. Graduates will continue their journey all through their lives and will need to upgrade and polish these skills on an ongoing basis.

Personal Edge is a great head start and enables students to head in the right direction with an edge early in their career, whichever it will be.

Thanks to **Personal Edge** experiences students develop and evidence how they can be a:

- Creative Thinker
- Confident communicator
- Cross-cultural team player
- Ethical leader
- Digital Citizen
- Career strategist

Skill Set Descriptions (From the Personal Edge Student Handbook):

Creative Thinker

Whether working for your business or for an existing organisation, you will be expected to make a contribution, with your ideas and your ability to see and seize opportunities.

This skill set is about taking initiative, imagining new possibilities, and bringing them to life. Being a creative thinker also means adopting an entrepreneurial mindset, looking for opportunities and quickly adapting to changing environments.

Example of a Creative Thinker's behaviours:

- Use imaginative processes to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns or relationships.
- Embrace, investigate and respect the worth of divergent thinking.
- Take an open, flexible, playful and persistent approach to designing, developing and realising their work.
- Embrace problem solving, initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to productive and innovative outcomes for the enterprise/industry/community.
- Apply sound planning and organisational skills that promote and contribute to the strategic planning of their enterprise or organisation.

Confident Communicator

All organisations expect key workers to be able to communicate confidently in a variety of channels: face-to-face, but also through new technologies and social media.
This skill set is all about being a confident and professional communicator no matter what the situation is.

Example of a Confident Communicator's behaviours:

- Use communication technology in a manner that contributes to the effective management and execution of a range of tasks.
- Can chair a meeting and manage small group dynamics achieving measurable goals
- Can craft multimedia and cross-media messages adapting the style to various communicational channels.
- Presents confidently to both small and large audiences in an energetic and captivating way.
- Can craft communication strategies to promote her/himself or an organisation.

Cross-Cultural Team Player

With an increasingly multicultural and global workforce, navigating cultural differences is a key skill. Developing this skill set will facilitate your success in multicultural environments and it will also mean for you to find the right fit between yourself and your workplace. Differences also extend to individual characters and this skill set will give you the right tools to build positive relations with co-workers and become an effective team player.

Example of a Cross Cultural Team Player's behaviours:

- Recognise and respect the role of cultural difference and diversity in work and social contexts.
- Practise non-discriminatory attitudes in relation to all kinds of difference and diversity, not simply culturally but also those based on gender, religion, sexual orientation, identity and ability.
- Acknowledge and critically reflect upon personal attitudes, decisions and conduct.
- Work in diverse teams to solve complex problems through respectful communication, negotiation and cooperation to effect positive change.
- Can adapt to new contexts being aware of his/her own cultural biases.

Ethical Leader

Leadership does not mean holding a position, it is rather everyone's business; through leadership, individuals get together to accomplish extraordinary things. By developing this skill set, you will not only begin growing effective leadership behaviours, but also reflect on where you stand and how you can make ethically sound decisions.

Example of an Ethical Leader's behaviours:

- Is aware of her/his values and beliefs.
- Motivate other people through constant encouragement and appreciation.
- Ha a vision of her/his long-term professional and personal goals and can communicate it convincingly to other people.
- She or he is not afraid to challenge the status quo and bring up innovations.
- Works to build trust among the people she or he works with.

Digital Citizen

No matter which industry you will join in the future, you are expected to be digitally proficient in your workplace, learning and applying new technologies to contribute to the efficiencies and growth of your company.

This skill set is about working with tools, media, and information using digital technologies in an ethical, legal, confident, and productive manner.

Example of a Digital Citizen's behaviours:

- Select and apply digital tools and processes appropriate to purposes in communication, productivity, collaboration and decision making
- Successfully locate, organize, evaluate, filter, create, and share information and ideas in the digital space.
- Behave ethically in using digital tools, processes, and information to succeed in life and work.
- Continue to develop digital skills, embracing the speed of change, and recognising that the more we know, the more we will need to learn.

3. How do students develop employability skills?

One of the distinctive features of the Personal Edge learning experience is the learning model. Students will engage in experiential learning, that means **learning from experience and reflection.**

Students show their learning through two steps on the Personal Edge web Application.

Step 1: Reflection and plan for transfer

At the end of every workshop, students complete a reflection and to plan how to use what they learnt in a future project.

DESCRIBE:

What are the main learnings I gained from this experience?

REFLECT:

What are the connections between what I have just learnt here and in my past experience? How is it important to me?

PLAN:

What specifics steps will I now take to apply what I have learnt? In which specific context will I apply what I learnt? How will I document my achievements to do the evidence submission?

Step 2: Achievement submission

After applying what they have learnt, students will be requested to submit evidence of their achievements and a short reflection.

Students submit it on the Personal Edge App using the STARLP structure to guide you reflecting and doing a pitch to employers in an interview:

Situation: The context in which this experience took place

Task: What was actually required of me in that situation?

Action: What did I do given the situation and the task?

Result: What happened as a result of your actions?

Learnt / Plan: What did I learn from the experience? / What might I do to develop these skills further?

4. How do students evidence the skills?

The evidence can take the form of pictures, videos, certificates, project powerpoints, reports etc. - any learning artifact that can appropriately show that the student applied what they learnt in the real world. These visual documents will be displayed on the Personal Edge Digital Portfolio.

The Careers and Industry Relations team will receive evidence submissions and give feedback about their relevance to the skill set and potential employers.

The most recent, highest mark per skill set will be published on a digital portfolio, which can be added to resumes and LinkedIn profiles. Two exemplar digital portfolios can be seen at bit.ly/RMITportfolio and bit.ly/portfolioRMIT

5. Future of Personal Edge

As a purely co-curricular program, this is an optional experience that 44% of the student body has registered for. However, not all these students actively engage in the achievement submissions to publish their digital portfolio. To increase engagement, the Careers & Industry Relations staff are collaborating with academic lecturers to embed Personal Edge achievement submissions with course learning objectives in assignments where relevant to the employability skill sets. The skills set reflections will not receive an academic grade from the lecturers, so this will not guarantee that 100% of the students will submit, but it will raise awareness of how course assignments indeed contribute to the development of transferable skills for future careers.

Additionally, RMIT Vietnam has recently rolled out digital credentials (aka Creds) to help students develop their own skills and experiences through online courses, actively preparing them for future life and work. Students can access modules online at any time, and do not need to wait for the next face-to-face workshop. Upon completing these online courses, students will receive a digital badge, which can be the evidence in the Personal Edge achievement submission.

Biographies:

1. Felicity Brown, Manager Career Consulting and Development, RMIT University Vietnam

Felicity Brown has 30 years' experience in the banking, government and education sectors. Originally from Australia, she has been based in Asia for 16 years including Malaysia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan and currently in HCMC, Vietnam. Felicity has worked at RMIT University Vietnam since 2014. She holds a Masters of Career Development and is the Manager, Career Consulting and Development. Felicity is passionate about working cross-culturally and helping clients develop personally meaningful careers in times of change.

2. Eric Asato, Career Consultant, RMIT University Vietnam

After completing his MBA from Seattle University in 2009, Eric moved to Vietnam for a life change to become an English teacher. Many of his students were confused as to why an MBA graduate would want to teach English. His answer 'I'm passionate about helping students achieve their goals'. For over 7 years, Eric taught English and lectured business classes until moving into the Careers & Industry Relations department at RMIT where he continues to teach employability skills. Feel free to connect with Eric online: https://vn.linkedin.com/in/ericasato

3. Hanh Tran Thi My, Student Professional Development Consultant, RMIT University Vietnam

Hanh holds a Bachelor of International Business degree from University of Economics HCMC. Before embarking in the education industry, she had 4.5 years of experience in Human Resources at Suntory PepsiCo Vietnam Beverage, specializing in Training & Development.

Loving working with people to help them with both personal and professional development, Hanh chose to develop her career in training and consulting. She has a strong passion for helping everyone that she has the chance to work with experience continuous improvement.