



ROLE OF VIRTUAL LEARNING PORTALS IN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY AND LEADERSHIP IN THE MODERN AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In today's fast-paced modern business environment, higher education providers are trying to understand how they can better equip potential leaders with communication and leadership skills paramount for today's workforce that would in turn support in the growth of its workplace. For this, some have developed, implemented and utilised different tools, techniques and facilities.

This research aims to gain a deep and thorough understanding of how 'Virtual Learning Portals' can enhance Torrens University's postgraduate students' employability, effective decisions making and organisational growth once they graduate. Overall, it is essential to understand how the utilisation of such virtual learning portals can cultivate communication skills, teach leadership traits, enhance employability, improve effective decision making and facilitate organisational growth. To achieve this, firstly, understanding the impact of virtual learning portals (e. g. OneCampus and Toastmasters International) gains significance.

Once, an in-depth knowledge of OneCampus and Toastmasters International's effect on postgraduates' leadership and communication skills is gained; then, the graduates' perceptions on leadership and communication skills' influence on their employability and effective decisions making will be studied.

The results of this research can help us to evaluate whether such virtual learning portals can enhance our graduates' organisational growth or not. It further can support in modifying OneCampus if deemed necessary so that the overall employability of Torrens University postgraduates and organisational growth can be increased.

Keywords: Virtual Learning Portals, Communication, Leadership, Employability, Effective Decision Making, Organisational Growth.

1. Literature Review

Beginning with a simple definition for the term *soft skills*, this paper delineates that communication skills and leadership traits are an integral part of this broad umbrella. Soft skills can be defined as *interpersonal skills*, which includes but is not limited to communication skills, listening skills, empathy, leadership, negotiation, coordinating, and emotional intelligence, to name a few.

Although the focus of this paper is to enhance leadership traits and employability using virtual tools such as OneCampus and Toastmasters, literature does expound that there is no specific trait for a good leader (Drucker, 1996). (Drucker, 1996) unfolds that leadership is not an innate quality but is an acquired one, where a leader can be either introvert or extrovert. This said, existing works on leadership also unravel that a good leader has that communication skill to clearly articulate the vision and the mission of his organisation. Thus,

communication which is *sine qua non* gains increasing prominence in leadership and to achieve this quintessential quality, the role of virtual learning portals gains excellent focus.

Whilst discussing the importance of these virtual learning tools used by Laureate Universities Australia, a brief discussion on student engagement is deemed necessary. Although not considered greatly relevant, a quick understanding of the term indicates that student engagement is the holistic involvement of students in a class (Fleming & Baume, 2006) and this engagement could be cognitive, behavioural, intellectual and emotional (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). It is imminent that there is a hiatus between the soft skills that exist in the young graduates and those required for leadership. An element of cultural shyness is also seen to be one of the contributing factors. Therefore, by way of filling this existing gap, suggestions extrapolate the use of technological aids that assist in improving employability and effective decision making through effective communication.

The term technology used in this paper implies the effective use of various learning management systems (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.) and educative portals adopted by tertiary educational institutions. To fathom the idea with ease and convenience, Torrens University Australia has been chosen for this study. In particular, this working paper highlights how one of the educative portals of Torrens University Australia called OneCampus plays a significant role in developing soft skills in potential leaders. Equal importance is also given to the role of Toastmasters that is a networking international business club. Toastmasters appears to have a renowned reputation for improving soft skills such as communication, engagement and leadership through their active training programs, activities and networks. It appears that optimal use of these educative portals and international business clubs seem to have a profound influence in empowering the young with the required communication skills that could enhance their leadership and employability (Buckley, Wasimi, & Sekhar, 2019).

To fulfil the other purpose of this research, namely, *employability*, this paper, also focuses on the need for having the right communication to enhance the quality of decision-making. With decision-making considered to be an integral part of leadership, effective use of these various learning management systems along with participation in such international business clubs like Toastmasters is recommended in this working paper.

With the approval of the Ethics and Research Committee, this paper aims to survey and find out the effectiveness of these tools in fostering employability, effective decision making and organisational growth.

2. One Campus

Connecting its students and staff to diverse content, thought-provoking ideas and global perspectives, OneCampus is a virtual learning portal offered by Laureate Universities Australia. This learning portal primarily aims to explore and promote all the skills required by employers and prepares students for better employability and leadership roles through effective communication, engagement and minimal inhibition (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.).

OneCampus, in a nutshell, comprises of a few different areas of focus, such as;

- Communication skills;
- How to be valued as a team player;
- How to thrive in times of change;
- Analysing and solving problems;
- Adopting a growth mindset through learning and self-development and;
- Achieving goals by always moving forward.



Figure 1: One Campus; How Ready Are You?
Source: <https://onecampus.laureate.net/#/home>

Delving deeper into each of the above, to facilitate organisational growth and ability to *communicate* is seen as the essential pre-requisite (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.). This trait is expected to be accompanied by a confident body language, succinct thoughts and precise articulation. Alongside communication, active listening is encouraged to transform into a complete leader because leadership involves extensive listening to gather as much information for quality decision-making. Like the Law of Supply in the study of Economics, communication and quality decision making hold a positive correlation which is demonstrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Correlation Between Information/ Communication and Decision Making

Leadership can take various forms such as transformational, strategic, democratic, team, facilitative, cross-cultural and Laissez-faire, to name a few (12 Different Types of Leadership Styles, n.d.). This said the three basic types are those of *authoritarian*, *democratic* and *laissez-faire*. While *authoritarian* form of leaders rules their teams, *democratic* leaders are those who endeavour to include everyone in their team in their decision-making process. As the term implies, the *laissez-faire* form of leaders allows the group to function without too much interference. Irrespective of the type, the ability to lead a team in an organisation, the ability to solve problems or suggest solutions through effective processing of information and timely decision-making is believed to increase employability

To create that oneness in an organisation, it is considered imperative to *be a part of the team*. OneCampus expounds the importance of being able to work with the right set of people despite having a diverse environment and also displaying the ability to sort out any differences. Conflict management which is believed to be a quintessential trait of an Expert leader, calls for a leader to ask the right kind of questions, listen carefully rather than being bigoted and learning to disagree without being disagreeable (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.) in order to arrive at best decisions for an organisation. Alongside, emotional intelligence is believed to enhance the quality of leadership (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.).

Leadership calls for a continuous *change* and continuous improvement which according to OneCampus could be handled either by resisting the change or adapting the move or even better by anticipating the move and preparing to prove one's leadership conclusively (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.). Change calls for new knowledge, skills and opportunities that help the growth of an individual and in turn the organisation. Adapting to changes increases employability (How ready are you? Learning Series, n.d.).

Communication is not just about voicing one's opinion, but also finding *a suitable solution for a problem*. This involves avoiding a confirmation bias where we have framed an idea and have found all the evidence to support our view. It is observed that when there is an information overload, it could lead to bad decision making. Leaders should be armed with information for a quality decision making but that said, an information deluge obfuscates the quality and timeliness of decision making (Ackoff, 1967). Literature delineates that leaders of any level need the information they require and are aware of the type of information they are after.

With a view to continuous growth and improvement, OneCampus also instils a growth mindset, *sine qua non* in leadership. Leadership demands an all-round expertise (e. g. a negotiator, collaborator, decider and a key strategist) in decision-making indicating that a leader has to be capable of conflict management, cohesion in the team. This said effective communication at all levels of leadership is encompassed in this mindset called *willingness to learn* or merely *the growth mindset*. Mindset could either be a *fixed* or a *growth* mindset; while a fixed mindset is rigid showing no willingness to learn, quitting when faced with a challenge, a growth mindset calls for constant improvements using feedback.

Progress is a process and challenges are a way to improve. Mistakes become a part of the entire learning, indicating that holistically, leadership takes a new form at every different level. A Novice leader polishes himself/herself to become an Expert at some stage. This expert level of leadership calls for key strategic decision making accompanied by varying degrees of challenges. Overall, a *growth mindset* increases the chances of *employability*.

It is therefore evident from all the above that OneCampus, a virtual learning portal of Laureate Universities Australia, provides opportunities to explore and develop some of the employable skills such as effective communication, that is quintessential for employability. Besides being corroborative in aligning the educational qualifications with skills required by prospective employers, feedback from industry experts, practical application of one's acquired knowledge and the tools made available overall enhances the competitiveness of young graduates by helping them hone their leadership skills that in turn leads to the growth of an organisation holistically.

3. Toastmasters – International Business Club

One of the initiatives taken by Laureate Universities Australia to help improve communication, leadership and employability in young graduates is that of Toastmasters International. Toastmasters is a non-profit educational organisation that inculcates the art of effective communication through its public speaking and promotes leadership traits through a network of clubs. With over 350,000 members, Toastmasters, with its motto *build a better you*, focus on the following essential skills for effective leadership and employability (Paths and Projects, 2019) and that is shown as a screenshot in figure 3 for easy understanding:

- Improving public speaking skills;
- Gaining self-confidence and self-awareness that is an essential trait in emotional intelligence required in all levels of leadership roles;
- Practice writing speeches and presenting to a group knowing your target audience;
- Be in a growth mindset with unlimited personal growth through constructive feedback from peers;
- Learn to maximise potential;
- Building leadership skills;
- Work on networking in a small and supportive environment and;
- Practice and master the Conflict Management, Communication and Cohesive environment all which sums up leadership.

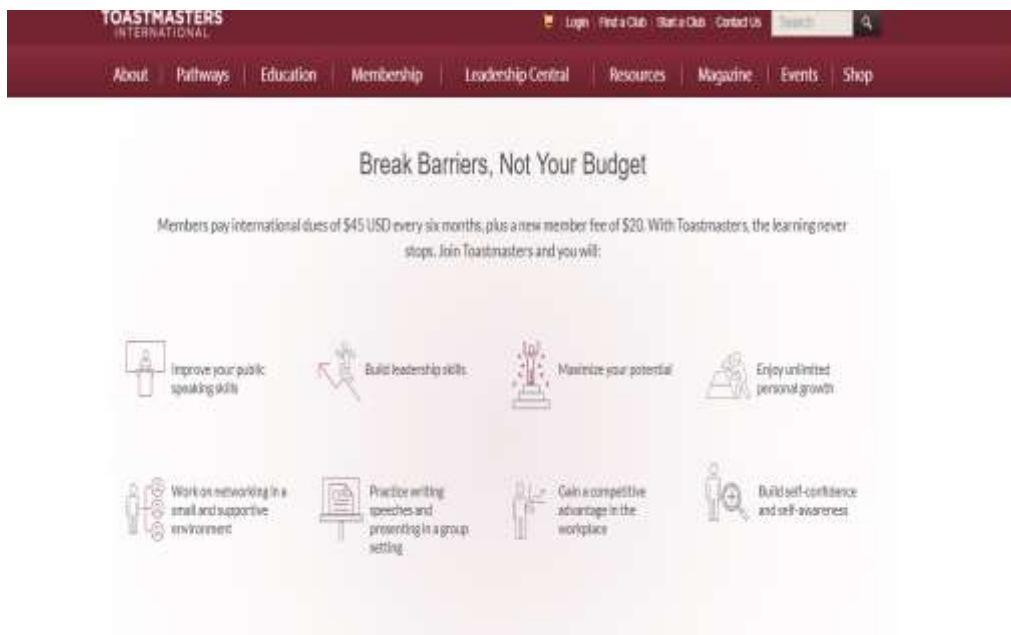


Figure 3: Toastmasters

Source: <https://www.toastmasters.org/about/all-about-toastmasters>

Alongside the above, Toastmasters International also offers a few projects/pathways to help improve leadership skills and employability (Toastmasters - Laureate Universities Australia, n.d.); A few relevant pathways have been chosen for this working paper, such as:

- **Dynamic Leadership:** helping to build all the essential traits for a good leader, this project also focuses on understanding the role of effective rather than efficient communications. Dynamic Leadership, most importantly entails providing those required skills to defuse conflicts in the organisation besides adopting a mindset for continuous improvement and change.
- **Leadership Development:** focussing on time management and public speaking, this project helps to develop all the skills for an effective leader through effective communication.
- **Motivational Strategies:** with another requirement for sound leadership being the ability of a leader to build a strong team and building connections with people working around; motivational strategies also prepares one with skills to bring about inspirational motivation to successfully lead groups to help accomplish tasks.
- **Team collaboration:** to become a collaborative leader, this project inculcates active listening, interpersonal communications, motivating the effective team application of leadership holistically.

Other pathways that are worth a mention are also shown using the screenshot in figures 4 and 5:

- Persuasive influence;
- Strategic relationships;
- Visionary communication;
- Engaging humour and;
- Innovative planning.

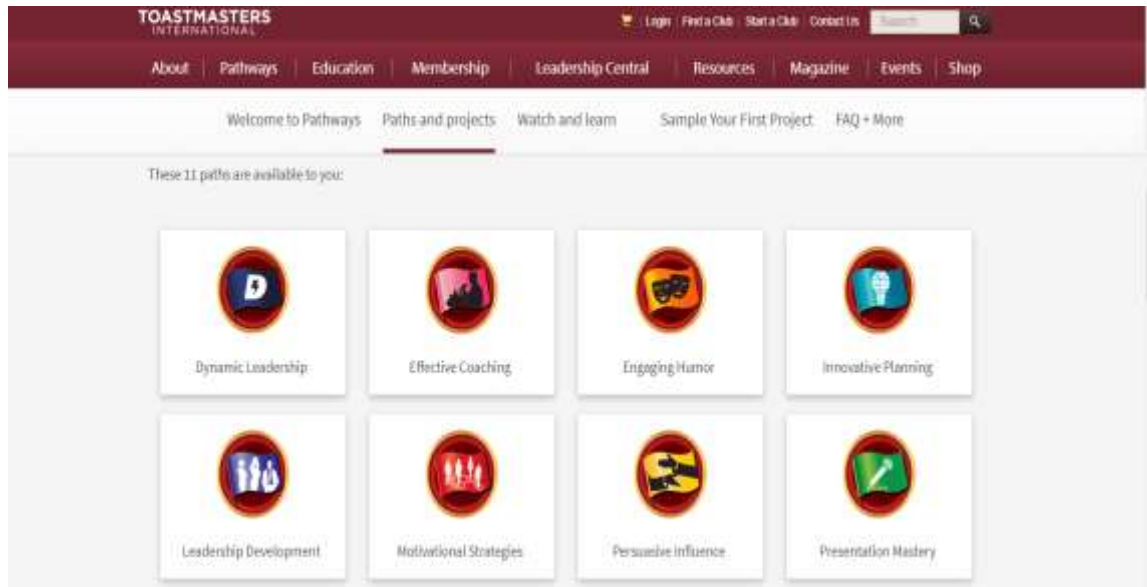


Figure 4: Pathways

Source: <https://www.toastmasters.org/pathways-overview>



Figure 5: Pathways

Source: <https://www.toastmasters.org/pathways-overview>

From the above, it is imminent that Toastmasters International, with its core values such as integrity, respect, excellence and services, has a mission to empower people to be better communicators and leaders. Overall it can be observed that such international business clubs build greater self-confidence, excellent communication, dynamic leadership qualities that promote employability and organisational growth.

4. Research Plan and Conclusion

In addition to the above discussed *in principio*, this working paper aims to study the correlation between OneCampus and Toastmasters International and communication skills and leadership. In this line, this working paper does give adequate importance to communication skills for evolving into a better leader and for higher employability and effective decision making that could contribute positively to organisational growth. This is being represented in Figure 6 for greater clarity of the stated purpose.

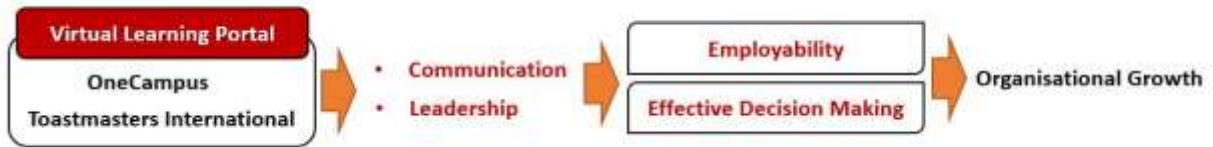


Figure 6: Role of educative portals in communication and employability

Overall, fFigure 6 expounds how using these technology-assisted learning portal lead to a better improvement of soft skill that ensures better employability and effective leadership. To fathom how OneCampus and Toastmasters International business club instils communication and leadership in young graduates, this research plans to survey Torrens University students who are part of Toastmasters International Business Club and OneCampus. The authors believe that such a survey would help to have a good grasp of students' perception about the extent of soft skills they have developed through OneCampus and Toastmasters Club related activities. Overall, the outcome of this research is assumed to provide an in-depth overview of how learning portals influence the employability and organisational growth of our young MBA graduates.



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