

TOP PROFESSIONAL VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



National Careers Manager Kaplan Business School

Will Phelan is the National Careers Manager at Kaplan Business School, leading a nationwide team that delivers career development and employability support to over 20,000 students and alumni across six campuses. With more than a decade of experience in higher education and employment services, he is passionate about helping international students build confidence, professional identity, and meaningful careers in Australia. Will has been with Kaplan for eight years and continues to drive innovative initiatives that bridge the gap between study and the world of work.



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How did your personal and professional journey lead you to your current role in student engagement?

I grew up surrounded by the performing arts and was convinced drama would be my future. I trained as a secondary school teacher with the aim of teaching drama — but once in the classroom, I quickly realised it wasn't the right path for me.

Like many twenty-somethings, I set off overseas and landed in London. To fund my travels across Europe, I took a role helping long-term unemployed people back into work. That's where it clicked: careers are not just about pay cheques — they're about identity, dignity, and belonging. Supporting people to rebuild their lives through work was incredibly powerful, and it sparked the passion that still drives me today.

When I returned to Australia, I worked in employment services, detoured briefly into agency recruitment, and eventually found my way to Kaplan Business School in a work-integrated learning role. Eight years later, I now lead the national Careers team. It was here that I realised higher education and student engagement weren't just "a job" — they were a community I wanted to be part of. In the end, I discovered I did love educating students — just not in the way I first imagined.

“SUPPORTING PEOPLE TO REBUILD THEIR LIVES THROUGH WORK WAS INCREDIBLY POWERFUL, AND IT SPARKED THE PASSION THAT STILL DRIVES ME TODAY.”



Presenting a Careers Excellence Award at a High Achievers Student Event, where outstanding students are recognised with awards and a celebration.



Outside one of Kaplan's schools in New York City — Kaplan Inc. operates globally across 27 countries.



With tertiary students at the Study Queensland office in Brisbane, exploring employability and career development opportunities.

Can you share some examples of how your work has positively influenced the lives of university students and enhanced their overall experience?

Students don't come to Australia simply for lectures and textbooks. They come seeking opportunity: a better life, a world-class education, and the chance to build meaningful careers. That's why graduate outcomes matter — they show whether students achieve what they set out to do and shape how they remember their time with us.

One of the most powerful ways we influence those outcomes is through Work Integrated Learning (WIL). When I joined Kaplan Business School, WIL existed in just one undergraduate program. Today, it has expanded into a national offering across eight programs, with **one in six students completing a placement, one in four securing ongoing employment, and 96% recommending the experience to their peers.**

The numbers are impressive, but the real impact is personal. WIL builds confidence, professional identity, and belonging. It helps students see themselves not just as learners but as future professionals with a place in Australia's workforce. For me, that is the clearest sign that our work is enriching the student experience and changing lives for the better.

What achievement in your role related to student engagement and retention are you most proud of, and why does it stand out to you?

An achievement I'm especially proud of is the KBS Business Consulting Project, run with Practera in 2023 and 2024. Unlike internships, it was entirely co-curricular — students weren't required to participate. Its success is significant because students chose to take part for its relevance, engagement, and value.

The outcomes were outstanding: **over 90% felt more confident in what they could offer employers**, clearer about their career direction, and better able to communicate their strengths. **Nearly 90% developed global skills** — a capability that sets them apart in today's workforce — and students described the project as transformative, bridging the gap between theory and practice in ways that reshaped their confidence and career outlook.

Equally important was the role of our Careers Advisors, who mentored student teams and gave the program depth. For me, this project proved that well-designed co-curricular initiatives can be as impactful as the formal curriculum in boosting student engagement and retention.

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A Note from the Founder

Will is a leader in higher education, with a passion for students and a "Say yes!" mentality to getting involved. We love working with Will at our events, especially across QLD!

What challenges have you faced in your role, and how did you overcome them?

Careers and employability roles in higher education are fast-paced, complex, and constantly under pressure to adapt. With technology and labour markets shifting so quickly — especially with the rise of AI — there is always something new to respond to. At Kaplan Business School, where the majority of students are international, that challenge is amplified, but it's also what makes the work so rewarding.

Our staffing ratio is about one advisor to 750 students, compared with closer to one to 2,000 in many universities. This allows us to provide a more personal level of support, yet challenges remain. Embedding career development consistently across the curriculum is still a work in progress, and another major hurdle is accessing and using data in ways that truly inform strategy.

What helps us navigate this environment is creativity, teamwork, and strong leadership support. Our executive team genuinely understands the value of employability, which gives us the confidence to innovate.

We've embraced AI early — not only to improve productivity but to explore new approaches to teaching and learning. And we stay focused on the student experience: our feedback ratings consistently sit at 4.4/5, showing that students see us as approachable, supportive, and invested in their future.



With students and an industry guest speaker during a Careers Workshop at the Gold Coast campus.

“OUR EXECUTIVE TEAM GENUINELY UNDERSTANDS THE VALUE OF EMPLOYABILITY, WHICH GIVES US THE CONFIDENCE TO INNOVATE.”