Supporting Graduates' Futures through Today's Higher Education

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Abstract

Why are so many university graduates unemployed? The research reported in this paper addresses this question from the employer's point of view and then articulates recommendations to universities regarding how to improve graduate employability. Research was conducted with 73 employers from multiple disciplines, 53 of whom were surveyed and the other 20 interviewed. There were three main findings. First, communication, motivation/initiative and leadership were the most desirable attributes and characteristics of university graduates from the perspective of employers. Second, while employers expected that university graduates had developed solid discipline-based knowledge and respectable grades, they said that they do not recruit only those who were at the top of the class. Notably, a number of the participating employers believe that many students who achieve the highest grades do so at the expense of extra-curricular activities that would help them to become well-rounded and thereby employable. Third, the top strategies and approaches employers believe that universities should be using and/or supporting to enhance the employability of graduates are work experience and internships, extra-curricular activities and volunteering. The three respective recommendations to universities for future-proofing their graduates and therefore higher education are as follows. First, embed employability throughout the everyday curriculum so that each and every educator takes responsibility for assuring discipline-based and transferable capabilities in graduates. Second, avoid making university curriculum and assessment so demanding that students do not have time or energy for pursuits beyond the classroom, and integrate their beyond-classroom pursuits with pedagogical activities to develop co-curriculum. Third, align and partner with industry, increasing opportunities for all students to participate in work experiences and/or internships. In summary, future universities are those that actively assure their graduates' futures through designing, developing and sustaining a quality student experience that prepares graduates for fulfilling careers.

1. Introduction

Employment outcomes are problematic for university graduates throughout the world [1]. In Australia, for example, four months after completing undergraduate degrees, less than 70 per cent of graduates are employed full-time [2]. Employers openly depict the problem as a mismatch between the education universities are facilitating and the resulting career preparation of graduates [3]. Overall, employers believe that universities do not pay enough attention to skills development [4]. Skills sought by employers are both technical/career-specific (hard) and transferable/capability-focused (soft) with an emphasis on communication and problem-solving within the relevant industry [5]. Universities are now actively seeking evidence-based guidance regarding strategies and approaches that will improve graduate employability [6]. This paper addresses this issue from the perspective of employers. Three questions framing the research addressed in this paper are: 1) What attributes and characteristics do employers expect of graduate employees, 2) Do employers prefer graduates with top grades, and 3) What strategies and approaches do employers believe that universities should be using/supporting to enhance the employability of graduates. Research-derived responses to each of these questions are applied to university practice to derive recommendations for positive futures for students, graduates and their universities.

2. Methodology

Recruitment for employer participation was conducted across Australia through approaching career fair booths, using researcher networks and pursuing snowball referrals. Efforts were made to recruit employers from a diverse range of industries. Two methods of data collection were used – surveys and interviews. Although there may be minimal uncontrolled overlap between the employers who participated in the survey and employers who were interviewed, recruitment for interviews was not conducted directly from among survey respondents. Both paper and online versions of the same survey (n=53) were used. The survey was one back-to-back page and took five minutes to complete. The survey directed employers to tick listed employability strategies their organisations value when recruiting graduates. The twelve listed strategies were derived from a literature review, and were those

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that were empirically linked to improvements in graduate employability. Interviews (n=20) were conducted one-to-one for a one-hour duration. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Two team members separately conducted thematic analysis of transcripts and a third team member reconciled the analyses. Employers were directly asked the three questions listed in the introduction, but analysis considered responses to these questions as well as the full transcript. For example, most employers listed desirable graduate attributes and characteristics at multiple points in the interview and not just when asked the question directly.

3. Participant demographics

Survey respondents and interview participants were located across Australia and came from a large number of diverse industries. The Australian Bureau of Statistics' *Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification* (ANZSIC) framework was used to identify the industries of research participants. Each company name was searched online and the sub-categories applied to identify the appropriate industry. Industries of interviewed employers are illustrated below as example (Figure 1).
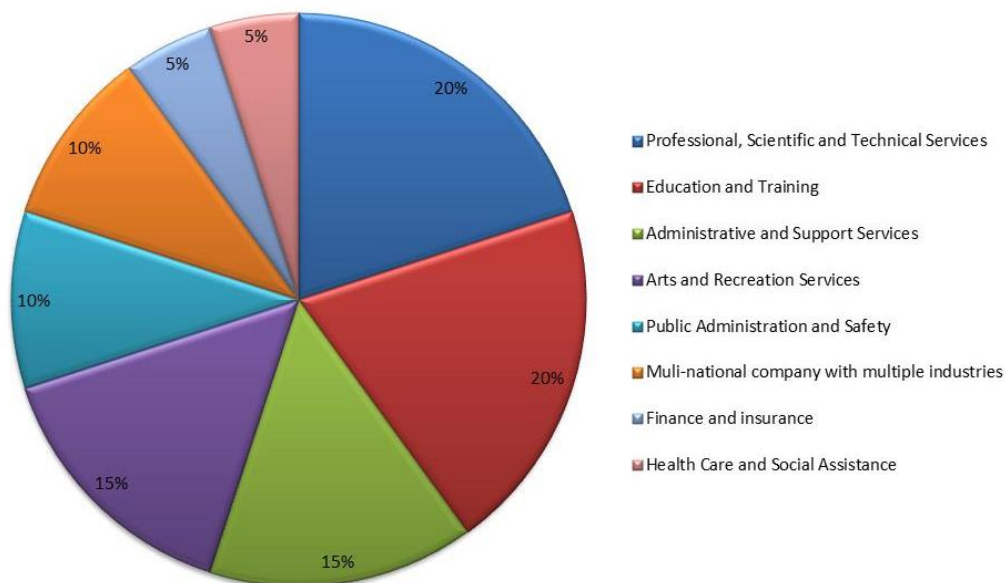

- Professional, Scientific and Technical Services
- Education and Training
- Administrative and Support Services
- Arts and Recreation Services
- Public Administration and Safety
- Muli-national company with multiple industries
- Finance and insurance
- Health Care and Social Assistance

Figure 1. Industrial classification of interviewed employers

4. Results

4.1 Attributes and characteristics

The twenty interviewed employers were asked to identify desirable attributes and characteristics of graduate recruits and successful employees (Figure 2). Employers spoke at-length on this topic and the list was long and varied. For clarity of the figure, only attributes / characteristics described by three or more employers were included. The attributes and characteristics that were articulated across the highest number of interviews were: communication, motivation / initiative, and leadership. In the context of communication, employers addressed public speaking ability, clear and concise writing skills, verbal literacy and capacity for appropriate conversations. A majority of employers described an expectation for graduates to be highly motivated and to show initiative. Other terms they used in this context were *drive*, *doers* and *self-starters.* Half of the employers shared a belief that the university experience develops graduates' leadership potential. These employers described recruiting for graduate employees who had the capacity to lead change and evolve the company. Multiple employers also expressed that graduates need to have realistic expectations for entry-level roles, responsibilities and positions, advancing to higher-level responsibilities and authority over time and through experience.
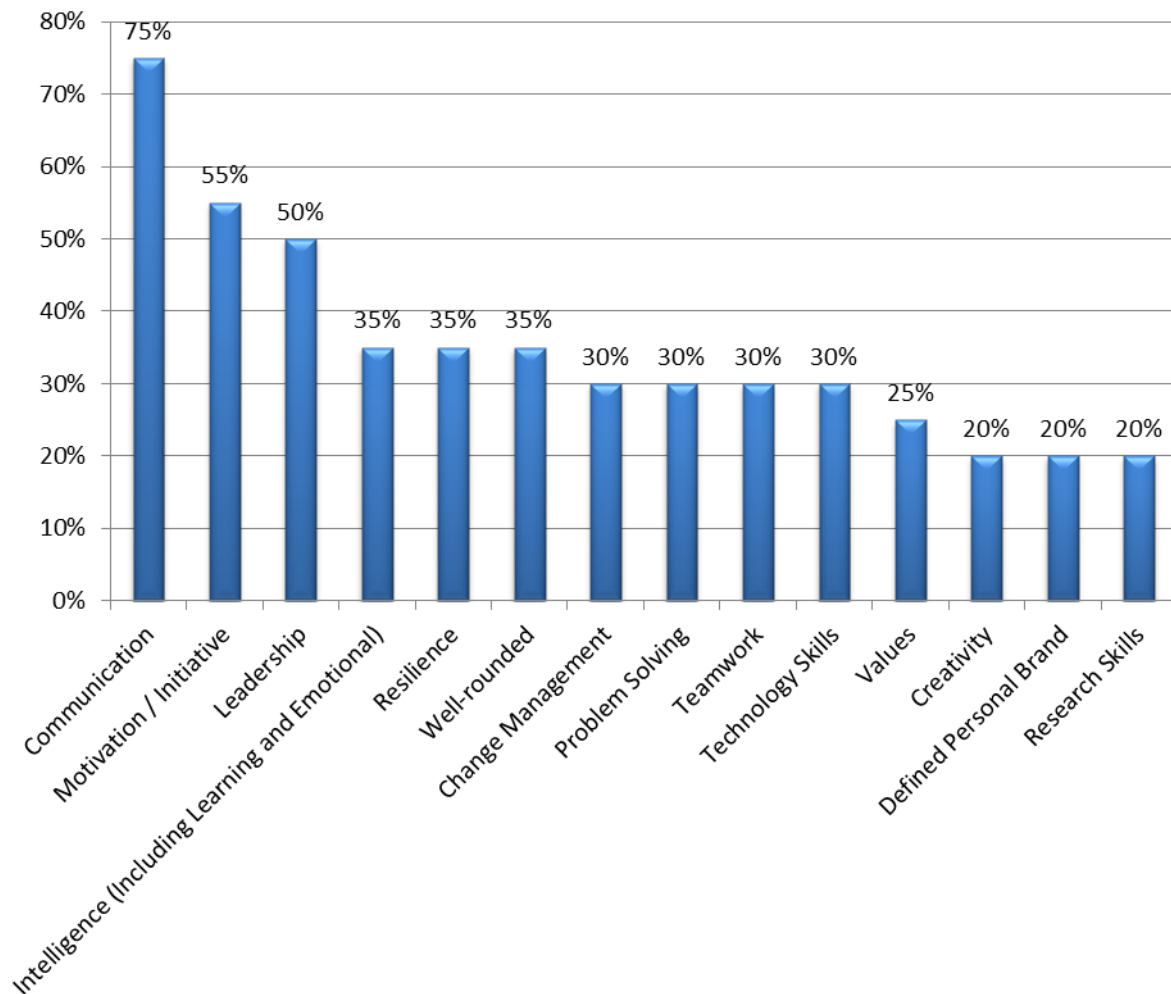
Figure 2. Employer perspective on desirable graduate attributes and characteristics

4.2 Importance of grades

In a context of low employment vacancies, will only those who graduated with grades of the highest distinction be shortlisted? Interviewed employers were asked the extent to which grades matter. Only one of the seventeen employers who responded to this question replied that only graduates with outstanding grade point averages are recruited. The other employers all stated that a satisfactory standing is necessary to inspire confidence that the applicant has suitable intelligence, literacy and commitment. However, beyond this level, other factors, such as a well-rounded perspective based on diverse experiences are more influential. One employer described an acceptable grade point average as a 'hurdle' and elaborated that the hurdle should not be too high. A few of the employers said that they had found that graduates who had the top overall grades had achieved these honours at the expense of other university pursuits including extra-curricular activities such as sport and student societies. As a result, these employers felt that the highly academic students had not adequately developed their attributes and characteristics that would make them suitable employees.

4.3 University employability strategies

A literature review identified twelve strategies that have been empirically linked to improvements in graduate employability. The research survey directed employers (n=53) to tick the strategies undertaken by students that their organisation values when recruiting graduates. The top strategies ticked in descending order were – work experience/internships, extra-curricular activities and volunteering. In order to derive more detailed employer perspectives, interviewed employers (n=20) were directly asked to suggest strategies and approaches they think universities should use to support graduates' employability (Figure 3). A large number of strategies and approaches were described.

Only those described by 10 per cent or more of the interviewed employers were included on the figure. Consistent with the surveyed employers, the top strategy was work experience and internships. The majority of employers expressed a strong belief that all university students should engage in an internship or work experience placement while enrolled in university in order to expand their networks and gain industry-based skills and perspective. Half of the interviewed employers stated that the university curriculum and assessment should not be exceedingly heavy to allow students time to volunteer while in university. The employers expressed a preference for volunteer experiences that align with the chosen discipline / career path. They expressed that volunteer work on a graduates' resume provided impressive evidence of motivation, initiative and a willingness to contribute to communities. An illustrative comment from an employer was, 'I'm interested in knowing what they've done to extend themselves. So what have they done at university besides study? Have they played sport? Are they part of student societies? Have they volunteered? What do they do for a part time job?' Forty per cent of employers commended career services within universities for providing effective supports to students in such areas as creating strong applications and developing interview skills. Employers expressed a belief that students should start accessing these services as early as their first semester. Employers also stated that employability is overly allocated to university career services and should be embedded throughout the curriculum and assessment. Many interviewees stated that student assessment should be more closely aligned with the types of work graduates would be doing in their careers and that employability should be explicitly and regularly considered and discussed throughout the degree at the subject level. Aligned with their comments regarding grades, thirty-five per cent of interviewed employers emphasised the importance of extra-curricular activities, stating that what the student pursues beyond the classroom (sport, music, student societies) is what makes them unique and distinctive, and helps them develop important graduate attributes and characteristics. A few of the employers discussed co-curricular activities, whereby the employers encourage students to use these pursuits as the basis for graded project work.
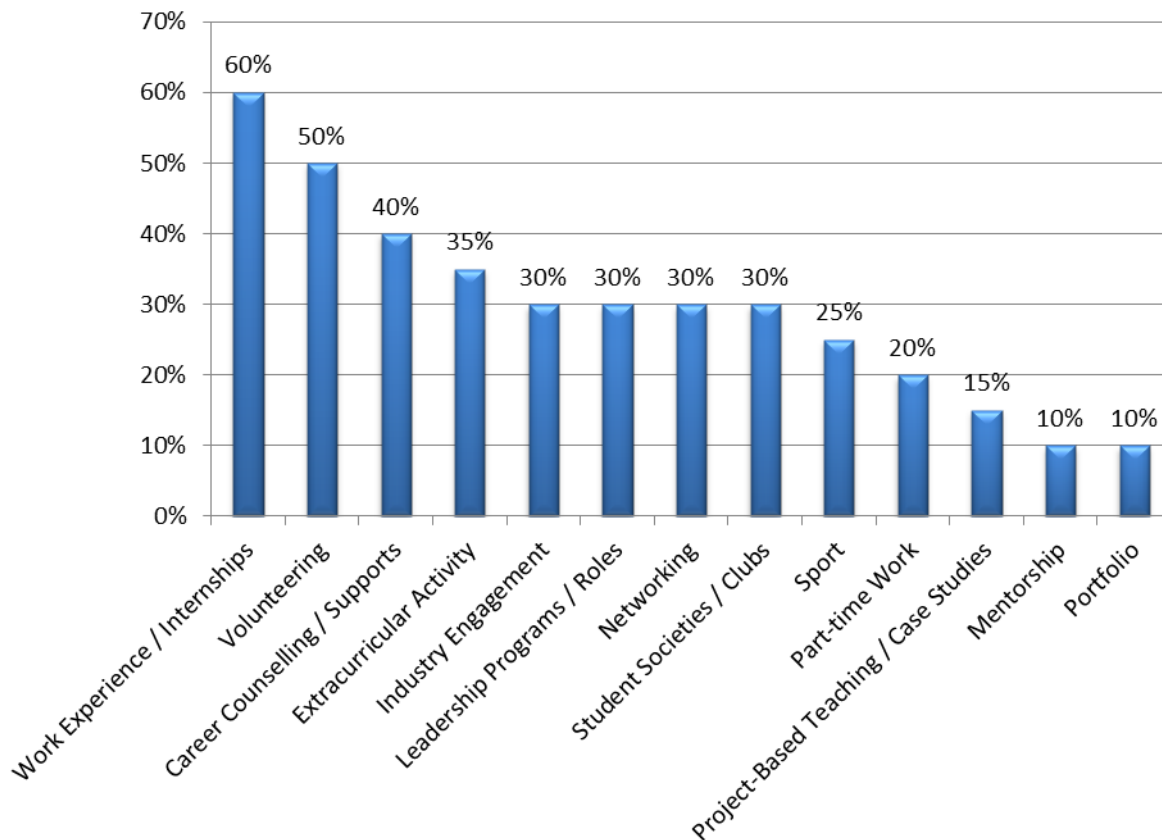

Figure 3. Employability strategies endorsed by interviewed employers

5. Discussion

A salient theme across the vast majority of employer interviews was the importance of a well-rounded student experience. Many of the employers were vocal that the university experience is about more than academics and that employability is advanced when students engage in pursuits beyond the classroom and their studies. An illustrative quote from one of the employers was, 'I look for a resume that almost looks like they've been working for four years in addition to studying. They've been working part-time, volunteering or doing community work. I like to find people that look like they've been busy and have a full life, that they're doing lots of things apart from just studying and sitting in their room.' The emphasis on extra-curricular activities evoked the question as to whether the university experience is worthwhile in the context of employability if employers are most valuing what students do beyond their studies. A number of the employers were vocal about the positive value-proposition of university education. These employers expressed a view that while particular employability strategies such as internships and career counselling / supports can contribute to graduate outcomes, the golden key is embedding employability strategy and mission across and throughout the university experience, including in assessment. Furthermore, most of the employers were adamant that greater industry presence and perspective is necessary throughout university education. This might include industry guest lecturers, but also student activities and assessment that challenge them to do some of the types of work that they will experience in their degrees.

6. Conclusion

In response to the interviewer's question as to whether universities are adequately preparing graduates for employment, an employer said, 'Some do a good job of teaching people to think and that's the skill you actually need. A good degree should teach you how to think, should teach you how to critically analyse information and how to present options, and to argue with the silly thing that someone else said in the meeting.' Three recommendations to universities for future-proofing their graduates and therefore higher education deriving from this research are as follows. First, embed employability throughout the everyday curriculum so that each and every educator takes responsibility for assuring discipline-based and transferable capabilities in graduates. Second, avoid making university curriculum and assessment so demanding that students do not have time or energy for pursuits beyond the classroom, and integrate their beyond-classroom pursuits with pedagogical activities to develop co-curriculum. Third, align and partner with industry, increasing opportunities for all students to participate in work experiences and/or internships. In summary, future universities are those that actively assure their graduates' futures through designing, developing and sustaining a quality student experience that prepares graduates for fulfilling careers.

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