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## Determining factors in graduate recruitment and preparing students for success

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## **Determining factors in graduate recruitment and preparing students for success**

### **Purpose**

Our study investigated graduate employer perceptions of determining factors in recruitment decisions and their preferred use of recruitment channels. We drew on the employability capitals model to interpret findings and identify ways to better prepare higher education students for recruitment and selection. This is particularly important in declining graduate labour markets, further weakened by COVID-19.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

We gathered data from surveying 183 Australian employers from different organisational settings. Responses were analysed using descriptive and multivariate techniques, the latter exploring variations by role type, sector and organisation size.

### **Findings**

Our findings reaffirmed the criticality of students having the right disposition and demonstrating professional capabilities during recruitment, highlighting the value of building cultural and human capital during university years. Recruitment channels which require students to mobilise their identity and social capital were prioritised, particularly among private sector organisations. Work-based internships/placements were considered important for identifying graduate talent and developing strong industry-educator partnerships, needed for building networks between students and employers.

### **Originality**

Our study provides valuable insights into determinants of graduate recruitment decision-making from the employer perspective. These highlight to students the important role of capitals, and how they can be developed to optimise recruitment success. We present practical

strategies for universities to build their students' human, social, cultural, and identity capital. Our findings on the prioritisation of recruitment channels among graduate employers from different sectors will enable students and universities to better prepare for future recruitment. We emphasise that student engagement with employability-related activities is a critical resource for effective transition to the workplace.

## **Introduction**

The graduate labour market faces new challenges. The demands of the 'knowledge economy' apply renewed pressure on those entering the workforce (Watt and Costea, 2020) while COVID-19 is severely impacting on graduate recruitment levels worldwide (Institute of Student Employers, 2020). Earlier recessions have meant high levels of unemployment (Corsetti *et al.*, 2019; Kilic and Wachter, 2018), aggravating already rising trends among graduates, particularly those aged under 25 years (Corlis *et al.*, 2020) and of generalist programs (Ghignoni *et al.*, 2019). While those holding tertiary qualifications are better positioned in their job applications (Boyadjieva *et al.*, 2020), they progressively compete with non-university graduates (Vendolska and Kačerová, 2016), leading to concerns for the net financial gain of degree education (Donald *et al.*, 2018). Close attention to graduate employability is further catalysed by graduates' short-term employment outcomes generating widely publicised league tables that may influence prospective students' choice of institution.

Employability is increasingly framed with the student as a client (Tomlinson, 2016), resulting in universities undertaking the role of building students' various forms of capital to support their career success. Human capital are those capabilities which contribute to the 'job currency of the future' (Deloitte, 2019) and enable a more seamless transition to work and career (Ghignoni *et al.*, 2019). Social capital assists students in establishing partnerships with industry for career purposes (Bridgstock, 2019). Cultural capital development helps students to understand their disposition, attitudes, and 'personality package'. This supports them in identifying graduate employers with similar cultures, better positioning them to signal their value during recruitment (Tomlinson, 2017). Identity capital brings about a stronger sense-of-self, leading to a personal narrative that articulates students' strengths and achievements to prospective graduate employers (Holmes, 2013).

Building these capital resources in students is important not only for their individual employability, but also enhancing universities' own profile and success as graduate employment outcomes and industry engagement become increasingly tied to university funding (for example, Australian Government, 2019; 2021). The need to build these various forms of capital has prompted universities to expand students' access to activities involving professional associations, work placements, foreign language training, study abroad opportunities (Byrne, 2020), career fairs, networking events, and job application support (Ghignoni *et al*, 2019). These enable students to accumulate experience that sends a positive signal to employers (Boyadjieva *et al*, 2020). That said, barriers to capital formation exist, such as confusion over which capabilities to prioritise (Suleman, 2016) and a lack of time and access to tailored support to meet recruiters' expectations (Albandea and Giret, 2018; Ghignoni *et al.*, 2019).

While there has been significant research on industry expectations of skills among new graduates, less apparent is empirical analysis of critical factors when selecting for employment, particularly from the employer perspective. Cai (2013) highlights how labour market uncertainties and rapidly evolving work contexts are contributing to our lack of understanding of what determines employers' recruitment decision-making. Empirically investigating the antecedents of graduate hiring decisions is critical for universities to better support and prepare their students for future career success. To fill this research gap, our research questions were: (RQ1) what factors are important in graduate recruitment decisions in diverse organisation settings; and (RQ2) how important are the different channels for recruiting graduates in diverse organisation settings? The paper is structured to review relevant literature on graduate recruitment channels and decision-making, followed by an outline of research design, findings and implications for educators, students, and industry.

## **Background review**

### ***Factors in graduate recruitment decisions***

Earlier research indicates there are numerous factors that underpin graduate recruitment decisions (for example, Pollard *et al.*, 2015). Some are beyond universities' locus of control. For example, secondary school academic performance remains important for some employers (Pollard *et al.*, 2015), and being privately educated can lead to improved graduate employment outcomes (Berger and Winters, 2016; Jha and Polidano, 2015).

For factors within universities' control, there is mixed evidence for the impact of university academic performance. Some studies have reported that course average positively impacts on wages (for example, Rudakov and Roshchin, 2019), while others note weak labour market returns on high grades (van der Klaauw and van Vuuren, 2010). Attended institution is also considered influential. Graduates of prestigious institutions, such as Group-of-Eight universities in Australia or the UK's Russell Group, are known to achieve more favourable employment outcomes (Drydakis, 2016; Li and Carroll, 2019). While international accreditations are considered to enhance Business Schools' perceived status and educational quality (Chang *et al.*, 2016; Subraamanniam *et al.*, 2021), this does not necessarily lead to greater career success among graduating cohorts (Bieker, 2014).

A further prominent factor is work experience (Phan *et al.*, 2020), particularly that which is embedded in the degree (Byrne, 2020) and relevant to advertised roles (Foundation for Young Australians [FYA], 2016). Jackson and Collings (2018), along with others (for example Nunley *et al.*, 2017), found internship/placements reduce the likelihood of underemployment after graduation. These curriculum-based work experiences, often referred to as Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), better enable transitioning students to adjust to work culture, processes, and practices (Jackson, 2016; Jackson and Collings, 2018).

A dominating factor in graduate recruitment literature is the criticality of evidenced professional attributes and capabilities - also referred to as core, generic or employability skills. These have been classified in many ways, with a plethora of institution-based and national graduate capability frameworks emerging in recent decades (for example, Australian Government, 2002; 2013). In particular, graduate employers emphasise the need for strong communication and collaborative skills (Australian Association of Graduate Employers [AAGE], 2019; Suleman, 2016).

Amid rapidly changing work contexts due to globalisation and evolving technology, there has been growing attention to graduates' enterprise skills. These enable graduates to contribute meaningfully to their profession and drive change and innovation. Key examples are creativity, digital literacy, critical thinking, awareness of ethical standards, and problem-solving skills (Byrne, 2020; Succi and Canovi, 2020). Having a positive and entrepreneurial mindset is important for graduates to flourish in increasingly complex and diverse work environments, spanning attributes such as resilience, curiosity, flexibility and adaptability (Olivier *et al.*, 2014; Vendolska and Kačerová, 2016).

It is important to note that personal characteristics and circumstances - social class, gender, ethnicity, labour mobility, disability - can also influence employers' graduate selection decisions (Burke *et al.*, 2020; Pitman *et al.*, 2019). Selection criteria may, therefore, not always align with selection in practice.

### ***Graduate recruitment channels***

Drivers in the choice of recruitment channels among Australian employers include cost efficiency, branding and value proposition (Jepsen *et al.*, 2015). These can vary by sector and industries. The AAGE (2019) survey highlights that average marketing spend per graduate position in the private sector (for example, \$1408 in Banking and \$2308 in Law) is almost



double that of the public sector (for example, \$910 in Federal Government and \$678 in State Government). Channels broadly include advertising on social media; internet job boards, dedicated employer graduate recruitment webpages; and specific print media (AAGE, 2019).

Jepsen and colleagues (2015) found online advertising and application processes are more cost-effective, enabling employers to use sophisticated software that generates applicant skills profiles and organisational fit, reducing the volume of applications to be processed. Adding to these, University career fairs enable employers to differentiate their product and brand, allowing graduates to assess employer attributes for cultural fit. Other pathways for filling graduate positions include the direct transfer of interns within an organisation to graduate roles (Wilson, 2016), and accessing candidates through known networks and referrals (Gilani, 2020). Gilani recommended that institutions encourage their industry partners to adopt blind application approaches, removing candidates' details to eliminate nepotism and bias.

### ***Building capital to meet recruiter expectations***

In the context of the posed research questions, this paper draws on the capitals model (Tomlinson, 2017) to consider how universities can effectively develop students to meet the expectations of recruiting employers. Tomlinson asserts that human, social, cultural and identity capitals are critical resources for students' effective transition to the workplace, and thus important factors for selection into employment.

Human capital, the knowledge and skills expected for effective workplace performance (Becker, 1964), is often developed by universities through authentic curricula that aligns with industry requirements. The International Labor Organisation (2019) recommends co-creating curricula in dialogue with employers to meet industry needs and using internships and work-related programs to familiarise students with contemporary work settings. These form part of

the broader notion of WIL, where industry/community engagement is embedded into learning and assessment as a formal component of the degree program (Jackson, 2018).

WIL may be work-based (internships/practicums/placements), virtual or on-campus (placements/client-based projects/consultancies/simulations), undertaken individually or in multi-disciplinary teams. It can be discipline-focused, the dominating learning outcome being the acquisition and practical application of technical knowledge and skills, or generalist and designed to build professional capabilities, such as community-based (service) learning. Many emphasise the role of WIL in enhancing human capital (Artess *et al.*, 2017), particularly internships/placements which signal the accrual of relevant work experience (Jackson, 2015).

Social capital refers to the value gained from developing and leveraging social ties and networks (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019). This includes enhanced understanding of labour market opportunities and effective ways to navigate them, that ‘insider knowledge’ that is positively associated with employment outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017). Cultural capital, students’ understanding of the values, norms and practices associated with the organisation (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019), is also central during recruitment. Cultural fit has proven critical, with employers wishing to match candidates’ disposition and capabilities to existing staff and industry norms (Hora, 2020).

Universities providing students with opportunities to develop networking capabilities, and build networks, is critical for augmenting social and cultural capital (Batistic and Tymon, 2017) and for accessing labour market opportunities (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019). More career choices are available to students who engage in clubs, societies, and alumni networks (Albandea and Giret, 2018; Hao *et al.*, 2016), mentoring programs, WIL, career development events (Ghignoni *et al.*, 2019; Vendolska and Kačerová, 2016), and volunteering (Bourner and Millican, 2011; Coates, 2015). These may be embedded in the curriculum, offered as co-curricular (facilitated by the university but not a formal part of the degree program), or extra-

curricular (outside of studies, although perhaps promoted by the university to build student awareness) activities. Kinash *et al.* (2016) noted differences in their relative importance to graduate employers, making it difficult for students to select activities that optimise their positional advantage. Further, student equity groups are less able to participate in such activities due to additional commitments (Burke *et al.*, 2020), hampering their development of social and cultural capital.

Finally, identity capital refers to the development of a personal narrative which communicates students' strengths, achievements, and passions in a way that appeals to employers (Tomlinson, 2016). There are positive associations between such narratives and performance in the labour market (Holmes, 2015), suggesting self-marketability is as important as students' human capital and qualifications (Tomlinson, 2016). Jackson (2016) discusses the significant role universities play in developing students' pre-professional identities, empowering them to portray the correct message using self-presentation tools in appropriate channels (e.g. LinkedIn). Further, WIL encourages students to reflect upon best career fit which can help to develop identity capital and an appealing personal narrative (Jackson, 2016; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019). This leads to an overview of the study's research methodology.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

One hundred and 83 senior industry representatives from Western Australia participated in the study, their characteristics summarised in Table I. Western Australia was selected given its graduates are the slowest to secure full-time work in Australia (Social Research Centre, 2019) thus exploration of employment drivers in this context of intense competition would best inform student preparedness. The private sector was most represented, followed by the public then not-for-profit. Just over one-half were based in small organisations and approximately

one-third in large. There was a relatively even spread of males and females, reflective of the local labour market (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

[Table I]

### ***Procedures***

A survey was conducted during May and June 2019 to gather perspectives from a diverse range of employers. A cross-section of industry representatives that had previously interacted with the research team's Business School were invited to participate via email. Previous interaction included participation in WIL, guest lecturing, course consultative committees or as alumni. Other unknown industry representatives were recruited via emails/newsletter posts to members of local business bodies and relevant business-related professional associations. These purposive sampling approaches led to reasonably diverse and unbiased representation from different organisational types, sectors and industries.

### ***Measures***

Survey questions were designed by the research team and tested extensively among scholars who collaborate with industry partners for the purposes of recruitment. The survey was piloted, with a number of revisions implemented to improve clarity and meaning. The second iteration was reviewed prior to circulation. To enable comparisons across groups, participants initially answered questions on their gender, position and employer organisation size and sector. They then considered "what types of roles do you mostly recruit Business graduates into: (i) specific, graduate-level roles, (ii) graduate programs (defined length/structure), (iii) general roles for new workers with limited experience, or (iv) other roles.

To address RQ1, using a five-point Likert scale (1=not at all important, 2=slightly important, 3=moderately important, 4=very important, 5=extremely important), participants were asked "with regards to candidates, how important are the following factors in your

recruitment decisions: (i) university attended; (ii) Business school accreditation (e.g. AACSB); (iii) private or publicly educated; (iv) academic performance (i.e. course average); (v) demonstrated professional skills (i.e. communication/teamwork); (vi) enterprise skills (i.e. creativity/digital literacy/critical thinking/problem-solving skills); and (vii) disposition (i.e. resilience/flexibility/adaptability/positive mindset)". These seven factors were identified through a review of relevant literature. The intention was not to produce an exhaustive list of factors, rather to explore those considered important for business students and which could be targeted by universities.

Using the same five-point scale, respondents then rated "how important are the following types of WIL for identifying potential recruits: (i) internships/placements/practicum (spending time completing tasks/projects in workplace); (ii) projects/consultancies (working on real-live projects/strategies/briefs provided by industry/community partners); (iii) service learning (working on community-focused projects/tasks); and (iv) incubator/start-ups (working on different phases of business start-up with industry support). These types of WIL derived from established terminology in the literature. To ensure clarity, participants were first provided with a general definition of WIL: Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) is where industry is involved in the formal learning and assessment activities as part of students' degree courses.

For RQ2, participants were asked to rate, using the same five-point scale, the importance of recruitment channels identified as commonly used in the literature: "how important are the following for recruiting in graduate roles: (i) formal advertisement; (ii) networks/word-of-mouth/social media; (iii) recommendations from university representatives; and (iv) university career fairs. Participants were asked "do you have a preferred university Business School/Faculty that you tend to recruit from?", and "what is the *single* most important motivator for you to connect with local Business schools: (i) to access talent more easily to meet future recruitment needs; (ii) corporate responsibility and profile; (iii) to assist with

producing skilled graduates within the profession; (iv) to introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives into the workplace; or (v) to be involved in university curricula and assessment.

Finally, participants considered: “what, in your opinion, best enables you to establish connections and/or partnerships with universities/Business schools? Candidates selected one option from: (i) placements/internships/practicums; (ii) other forms of WIL; (iii) mentoring programs; (iv) guest lecturing; (v) participation in course consultative committee meetings; (vi) participation in on-campus networking events; (vii) industry liaison officers; and (viii) other.

### ***Analysis***

Survey data were aggregated and analysed using SPSS 24.0. Common method variance was examined using the Harman’s single factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), given the use of self-reported measures. A five-factor solution emerged, accounting for 66.8% of variance. The one-factor solution explained only 24.0% of variance, suggesting common method bias was not present. Measures of kurtosis and skew were within the accepted ranges of +/- 7 and 2 respectively (Hair *et al.*, 2010), suggesting data were normally distributed. Mean ratings and associated standard deviations were used to gauge employer perceptions of the importance of different recruitment channels and factors that featured in their recruitment decisions, broken down by the type of role being recruited for. One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) ( $\alpha=.05$ ) examined variations in employer perceptions on the importance of factors in recruitment decision-making. Two-Way ANOVA ( $\alpha=.05$ ) investigated any variations in employer perspectives on the perceived importance of different recruitment channels.

### **Findings**

#### ***Factors in recruitment decisions***

The importance of different factors on respondents’ recruitment decisions for specific graduate roles, graduate programs, general and other roles are shown by the mean scores in Table II.

The highest mean was recorded for ‘disposition’ of students, i.e. showing resilience, flexibility, adaptability, and a positive mindset. ‘Enterprise capabilities’ and ‘demonstrated professional skills’ were also very important, featuring far more in recruitment decisions than academic performance, university attended and business school accreditation status, or whether they attended a government-funded or private school. There were only very modest differences in the mean ratings for different role types. Academic performance – at university and in secondary school – was considered slightly less important for general and other roles.

[Table II]

One-Way ANOVA ( $\alpha=.05$ ) was conducted to investigate any variations in employer perspectives by organisation setting. The ‘other’ role group was not included given its small sample size and unknown nature. Significant, or close to, results are presented in Table III. Results indicated differing levels of emphasis on the type of school education among employers. Tukey post-hoc analysis ( $\alpha=.05$ ) reported that private or government-funded school education was significantly less important to large organisations than medium and small companies. A significant variation was recorded for final year secondary school results and post-hoc results indicated greater importance for private compared to public sector organisations. The significant variation for university academic performance showed course average to be more important to private sector organisations than those from the not-for-profit sector. The close-to significant variation for university attended ( $p=.057$ ) reported a stronger emphasis among private sector organisations, compared with those in the public sector.

[Table III]

### ***Role of WIL in graduate recruitment***

Table IV presents mean ratings for the importance of different types of WIL for identifying potential graduate recruits, again broken down by role type. The highest mean was recorded

for internships/placements/practicum with over 40% of employers considering them ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ important when recruiting across roles. They were particularly important for recruitment into graduate programs and other roles. Internships were followed by projects/consultancies, with little variation in importance by role type other than for other roles which, again, recorded a higher mean score. Service learning and incubator/start-ups recorded the lowest means across the different role types, although means were notably higher for other roles. Around one-half of respondents suggesting these were ‘slightly important’ or ‘not important at all’ for all role types. Incubators/start-ups were less important to general and other roles, compared to specific graduate roles/programs.

[Table IV]

### ***Importance of recruitment channels***

Greater variation was observed for the perceived importance of recruitment channels across role types. Mean and standard deviations are summarised for the different channels by role type in Table V. Results indicates that, overall, networks/word-of-mouth/social media were considered most important. This was followed by recommendations from university representatives, then formal advertisements. University career fairs were considered the least important with a considerably lower mean score.

[Table V]

Two-way ANOVA ( $\alpha=.05$ ) was conducted to examine any effects of sector and role type on the perceived importance of recruitment channels, as well as organisation size and role type. Again, the ‘other’ group was excluded for this analysis. Significant results are presented in Table VI. Results show networks/word-of-mouth/social media significantly varied by role type, sector and an interaction of sector and role type. Post-hoc analysis ( $\alpha=.05$ ) report that the private sector attributed greater importance to networks for recruitment purposes compared



with the public sector. Post-hoc analysis indicated there were no significant differences for role type. Regarding the interaction, simple effects revealed that the importance of networks significantly varied among only not-for-profit respondents across the different role types,  $F(2,22)=15.902, p=.000$ . Post-hoc analysis showed that networks were used significantly less for recruiting into graduate programs than specific and general roles.

[Table VI]

Formal advertisement reported significant variations by organisation size, sector, role type, and an interaction of sector and role type. For organisation size, post-hoc analysis showed a significantly higher mean rating for large organisations compared with small businesses. Regarding sector, post-hoc analysis reported that those from the public sector favoured this channel compared with the private sector. Again, post-hoc analysis reported no significant variations by role type. For the interaction, simple effects indicated that the importance of formal advertisement varied significantly only for those in not-for-profit organisations,  $F(2,22)=7.431, p=.003$ . As with networks, post-hoc analysis revealed significantly less importance was assigned for recruitment into graduate programs compared with specific and general roles.

There were several reported variations for university career fairs. For sector, post-hoc analysis showed that public sector respondents favoured career fairs compared with both private and not-for-profit sectors. For organisation size, post-hoc analysis reported that those from large organisations assigned significantly greater importance than those from small businesses. Regarding role type, university career fairs were considered significantly more important among those who recruited into structured programs than general roles. For the interaction, simple effects showed the favouring of university career fairs significantly varied for those in medium-sized organisations,  $F(2,22)=3.741, p=.040$ , and large organisations,

$F=(2,52)=3.360, p=.042$ . Post-hoc analysis reported that career fairs were considered more important for those recruiting into graduate programs, in both medium and larger organisations.

Only 15% of respondents indicated that they prefer to recruit from one particular business school. Approximately one-half attributed this to prior affiliation or relationship with the university, including their own alumnus status. When asked what was the single most important motivator for connecting with local business schools, 42% selected 'to access talent more easily to meet future recruitment needs', 27% 'to assist with producing skilled graduates within the profession', 18% 'to introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives into the workplace' and the remaining 12% selected 'corporate responsibility and profile', 'to be involved in university curricula and assessment' or 'other'. Table VII presents factors that successfully enabled industry to connect and partner with business schools, affirming the importance of WIL as a collaboration for industry and educators.

[Table VII]

### **Discussion/implications**

Findings indicated that just under one-quarter of participants recruited students into formal graduate programs. This is significantly lower than the approximate one-half evidenced by the AAGE (2019) and Graduate Careers Australia (2016), the latter varying across small (19.4%) to large (84.6%) organisations. Although this finding may be sample-specific, it causes concern as predicted long-term declines in graduate recruitment worldwide from COVID-19 (Institute of Student Employers, 2020) may further impact on graduate program offerings.

Graduate programs often incorporate modern practices that meet the aspirations of the younger generation and attract and retain graduates, such as extensive coaching/feedback and career development planning (McCracken *et al.*, 2016). Characterised as giving cost-effective return on recruitment investment, the graduate program is considered standard across sectors

(Clarke and Scurry, 2020). It provides a valuable opportunity for personal, professional and leadership development through inductions, structured rotations and mentoring programs. Any reduction may lead to lesser employer commitment to workplace training and even greater expectations that HE institutions' will prepare 'workforce-ready employees' (Chhinzer and Russo, 2018).

Findings provide strong support for the importance of human capital when recruiting for graduate programs, specific graduate roles or general positions for inexperienced workers. This aligns with other studies' that emphasise enterprise capabilities among graduates, particularly adaptability, creativity, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (AlphaBeta, 2019; Deloitte, 2019). The criticality of communication, a positive mindset and teamwork also echoes earlier research (for example, Cattani and Pedrini, 2020; FYA, 2016).

Despite universities' efforts to develop graduates' human capital, there are ongoing concerns for skill deficits (Pennington and Stanford, 2019; Tsirkas *et al.*, 2020) and the need to find ways to improve development (Morley, 2018). One recommendation is establishing a capabilities framework that guides the scaffolding, mapping, learning, and assessment of industry-required skills and attributes in the curriculum. An example is that developed by Jackson *et al.* (2020) which also enabled stakeholders to evaluate and benchmark student performance during WIL to industry standards.

Embedding reflective activities that encourage students to consider their strengths, weaknesses, accomplishments and areas for development is important. Also, explicitly encouraging students to communicate their key capabilities from early stages of study will build their identity capital and help to promote more effectively the professional they are becoming (Klemme-Larson and Bell, 2013). Further, facilitating credentialing processes where students can evidence and articulate their achievements – such as embedding ePortfolios, LinkedIn profile development, micro-credentials and digital badges within the degree - will not

only encourage and endorse capability development, but also build students' cultural capital (Kalfa and Taska, 2015). This should culminate in a personal narrative that reflects their professional identity and clarifies skills, knowledge and cultural fit, enabling them to compete in recruitment and talent identification processes more effectively.

That strong academic performance remains important in recruitment decision-making provides some support for Wang and Crawford's (2019) finding that students with a higher course average are more likely to secure elite work placements in private organisations. It appears important that universities counsel students on the need to remain focused on strong academic achievement, given evidence that extra-curricular employability-related activities, including paid work, can have a detrimental impact on academic results (Byrne, 2020; Thompson *et al.*, 2013). Students would benefit from support strategies to help balance their commitments, resources and engagement in activities designed to help them become the rounded graduate that employers desire.

Beyond human capital, private organisations' favouring of students who attend prestigious universities, and an emphasis on private schooling among smaller businesses, shows that status still has a role to play. Targeting students from high status institutions is not, however, considered an effective way of sourcing quality graduate talent and anonymised recruitment processes may help to alleviate such bias (Pollard *et al.*, 2015). The relative lack of importance of accreditation in recruitment decision-making suggests that business schools may improve their graduates employment outcomes by focusing more on pedagogy and curriculum that build student capitals, rather than indicators of quality and status. Accreditation will remain important to attract students, given its relevance for international university rankings.

Findings emphasise the importance of strong industry-educator partnerships for networking and talent identification purposes. Employers broadly rely on educators to make

recommendations on strong graduates for potential roles more than formal advertisements and university career fairs, and clearly wish to aid in the development of future talent pipelines and production of skilled graduates for their profession. Developing strong industry partnerships are best enabled through WIL, its mutual benefits recognised in the national strategy (Universities Australia *et al.*, 2015), in complement with other initiatives such as networking events and mentoring programs. Educators partnering with industry to co-create curricula and effectively deliver authentic learning experiences is valuable (see Ruskin and Bilous, 2020), potentially facilitated through course consultative committees or similar arrangements.

Subraamanniam *et al.* (2020) highlight how collaborative research and alumni networks can also foster industry partnerships and enhance business schools' status. In particular, encouraging alumni and industry partners to mentor students, engage in networking activities and facilitate WIL will help to build students' capital and prepare them for recruitment and future work. Industry-educator relationships may be further strengthened through academic secondments in industry, along with implementing effective bi-directional processes for knowledge and skills sharing, communication, and needs analysis (Gertner *et al.*, 2011).

In terms of the relative value of different forms of WIL, internships/placements/practicums were moderately important for identifying talent, particularly graduate programs. This may explain some organisations' extensive investment in in-house internship/vacation programs which can serve as a pipeline into graduate programs. Actively promoting both university-facilitated and externally organised internships to students, and supporting them through application and recruitment processes, may ultimately lead to improved graduate employment outcomes.

Importantly, WIL should be made available to all, enabling every student to glean the benefits from building different forms of capitals and improved employment prospects (McCarthy and Swain, 2019). This requires universities to develop strategies that actively

alleviate known barriers to participating in WIL, such as removing academic entry criterion, supporting arrangements that reduce costs and logistical issues (arising from childcare, travel and clothing), and having dedicated preparatory support for international students to aid cultural adjustment when entering the workplace (see Jackson, 2020).

Project-based WIL and consultancies were also moderately important for recruitment purposes and can be delivered virtually and on-campus, enabling a wider spectrum of students to participate with positive outcomes (Sachs *et al.*, 2016; Rees, 2019). The low importance assigned to service learning is surprising, given the reportedly high regard for volunteering among graduate employers (Australian Business Deans Council [ABDC], 2018), yet may reflect a preference among employers of business graduates for relevant work experience that fosters the development and application of discipline skills, rather than a generalist experience focused on social responsibility. Incubators/start-ups may still be gaining popularity due to their infancy in the HE sector or perhaps employer perceptions of needing to invest significant time and funds may inhibit their popularity.

The importance of informal/formal networks and social media for recruitment, particularly in the private sector, highlights the need to develop networking capabilities among students. This will build their social capital (Batistic and Tymon, 2017), enabling them to make connections with others who can mentor, advocate and recommend, enhancing recruitment opportunities. Facilitating networking for students is imperative (Bridgstock, 2019) and can involve workshops organised through professional associations that engage students in informal conversations with industry representatives, teaching them to ask intelligent questions, listen and adapt to others (ABDC, 2018). Although less important overall, formal advertising of roles and programs was still considered valuable by those in the public sector, as well as larger organisations. This highlights the need for conventional communication

channels with students of advertised graduate recruitment opportunities, and may reflect internal barriers, such as access to new technologies and procedures around social media.

While support for recommendations by university representatives is an important channel, it was not overwhelming. Findings highlighted the value of universities maintaining solid relationships with industry and having representatives that are clearly defined and easily contactable for recommending suitable students for recruitment purposes. University career fairs were found to be the least effective channel overall, perhaps due to employers' different graduate recruitment cycles, or employers' restricted human resource budgets (Gordon, Adeler and Scott-Halsell, 2014). They were more popular among larger and public sector firms who favour traditional recruitment channels, and were considered more important for graduate programs. Given prospective students' preference for career fairs, particularly those held face-to-face (YouthSense, 2020), universities may wish to consider ways to reformulate them to appeal to more organisation types. Importantly, career fairs offer potential benefits for students to network with prospective employers, gaining cultural capital through developing understanding of how industry representatives look, sound and behave (Gebreiter, 2020).

As a final point, evidence suggests optional employability-related activities, designed to prepare students for recruitment, are often poorly attended due to competing demands on students' time (Bradley *et al.*, 2019). Further, employability-related, extra-curricular activities often do not achieve comparable effects on employment outcomes as those embedded in the curriculum (ACEN, 2020). Therefore, embedding skills-based and career-focused interventions in the degree may better engage students (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2019), particularly those from equity groups who are less able to participate in co-/extra-curricular activities due to resource constraints (Bathmaker *et al.*, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to provide much-needed empirical insights into graduate recruitment hiring decisions, exploring favoured channels and factors influencing decision-making in diverse organisational contexts. We showed that recruiters base their decisions on a range of factors, thus preparing students is a complex task. We empirically verified the importance of students having the right disposition and demonstrating professional capabilities during the recruitment process, highlighting the value of building cultural and human capital during university years. Recruitment channels which require students to mobilise their identity and social capital were prioritised by employers, particularly among private sector organisations. Universities must engage their students proactively in several different activities to build pathways for development that cater for all students.

Our study informs students and educators on where to prioritise their efforts and the most promising initiatives for optimising recruitment success. Internships,/placements, along with projects and consultancies, are the most important initiatives for identifying talent. This highlights calls to embed work-based WIL opportunities in contexts where offerings are traditionally elective and often only available to the academic elite and advantaged groups better able to manage demands on resources and time.

We advance our understanding of different graduate mechanisms and how these vary across roles and different organisational settings, helping universities and students to prepare accordingly. Informal networks and social media were perceived as more important recruitment channels, emphasising the development of social and identity capital so students are aware of, and can effectively communicate, their key capabilities to create appeal among established networks.

Our study has limitations. First, our sample is not statistically representative of Australian employers and self-report responses may be subject to bias. The quantitative survey



does not allow for a more nuanced understanding of the posed research questions and the contribution of various forms of capital. Findings could be potentially enriched with interviews as a mixed-method study, particularly for exploring ways to build industry-educator relationships. Future research could compare current findings with a post-COVID-19 context to help understand the impact of transformational global events. It could also explore educator perspectives on how universities can better support students' development of capital resources to prepare them for graduate recruitment. Richer insights into variations across different industries, sectors and fields, and exploration of how certain employability-related interventions can build capitals to improve recruitment performance would be useful. Finally, exploration of a greater range of factors in recruitment decision-making could further advance understanding in this important area.

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**Table I Participant characteristics (n=183)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Sub-group</b>	<b><i>N</i></b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sector</b>	Public	36	19.7
	Private	121	66.1
	Not-for-profit	26	14.2
<b>Number of employees</b>	1-49 (small)	101	55.2
	50-149 (medium)	25	13.7
	150+ (large)	57	31.1
<b>Graduate role type</b>	Specific, graduate-level	61	33.3
	Graduate programs	48	26.2
	General	64	35.0
	Other	10	5.5
<b>Gender</b>	Male	89	48.6
	Female	94	51.4
<b>Position within organisation</b>	Proprietor	35	19.1
	Director	48	26.2
	Executive Manager	21	11.5
	Line Manager	30	16.4
	HR Manager / Officer	24	13.1
	Other	25	13.7

**Table II Perceived importance of factors in recruitment decisions by role type**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Specific graduate</b>		<b>Graduate program</b>		<b>General</b>		<b>Other</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Disposition	4.54	.62	4.60	.62	4.59	.68	3.80	1.55	4.53	.74
Enterprise skills	4.33	.72	4.42	.72	4.22	.77	3.80	1.55	4.28	.81
Demonstrated professional skills	4.18	.76	4.36	.68	4.22	.85	3.80	1.55	4.22	.83
Academic performance	3.39	1.17	3.51	.94	3.06	1.01	3.00	1.15	3.28	1.07
University attended	2.51	1.09	2.20	1.08	2.22	1.09	2.10	1.10	2.31	1.09
Business school accreditation	2.23	1.12	2.13	1.01	2.16	1.16	2.00	1.05	2.17	1.10
Secondary school final year academic results	2.05	1.01	2.20	.99	1.95	1.09	2.00	1.05	2.05	1.03
Private or publicly educated	1.66	.96	1.36	.68	1.50	.91	1.40	.84	1.51	.87

**Table III One-way ANOVA - perceived importance of factors in recruitment decisions**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Sub-group</b>	<b><i>df</i> (between groups)</b>	<b><i>df</i> (within groups)</b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Private or publicly educated	Organisation size	2	177	6.967	.001
Secondary school academic results	Sector	2	177	3.149	.045
Academic performance	Sector	2	177	3.462	.033
University attended	Sector	2	177	2.905	.057

**Table IV Importance of WIL for identifying potential recruits by role type**

	<b>Specific graduate</b>		<b>Graduate program</b>		<b>General</b>		<b>Other</b>		<b>All roles</b>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Internships/placements/practicum	3.10	1.01	3.47	1.14	3.19	1.04	3.78	.83	3.26	1.06
Projects/consultancies	3.08	1.10	3.22	.93	3.11	.99	3.67	1.00	3.16	1.02
Service learning	2.61	1.10	2.49	1.01	2.71	1.14	3.22	.83	2.65	1.08
Incubator/start-ups	2.44	2.21	2.50	1.07	2.32	1.16	3.11	1.05	2.45	1.15



**Table V Importance of different channels for graduate recruitment by role type and sector**

Role type	Networks/word-of-mouth/social media		Recommendation		Formal advertisement		University career fair	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Specific graduate	3.85	.73	3.10	1.21	3.21	1.25	2.02	1.19
Graduate program	3.54	1.13	3.46	1.03	3.00	1.35	2.46	1.13
General	3.64	1.01	2.92	1.21	2.95	1.35	1.83	0.94
Other	3.60	1.17	2.70	1.83	3.30	1.64	1.90	1.29
Total	3.69	.96	3.13	1.18	3.06	1.31	2.07	1.11

**Table VI Two-way ANOVA - perceived importance of recruitment channels**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Sub-group</b>	<b><i>df</i> (between groups)</b>	<b><i>df</i> (within groups)</b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
Networks/word-of-mouth/social media	Role type	2	164	7.075	.001
	Sector	2	164	8.507	.000
	Sector*role type	4	164	5.831	.000
Formal advertisement	Role type	2	164	4.747	.010
	Sector	2	164	5.482	.005
	Sector*role type	4	164	2.824	.027
	Organisation size	2	164	13.993	.000
University career fairs	Sector	2	164	5.522	.005
	Role type	2	164	6.451	.002
	Organisation size	2	164	9.608	.000
	Size*role type	2	164	2.837	.026

**Table VII Enablers of industry and business school partnerships**

<b>Enabler</b>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Placements/internships/practicums	67	39.4
On-campus networking events	22	12.9
Mentoring programs	16	9.4
Guest lecturing	16	9.4
Industry liaison officers	15	8.8
Course consultative committee	14	8.2
Other WIL (projects/consultancies)	11	6.5
Other	9	5.3