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# *Employing graduates: Selection criteria and practice in New Zealand*

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## Abstract

Entry into graduate programmes is highly competitive. Although careers advisors working within higher education do their best to prepare students for engagement with these programmes; anecdotal reports suggest many graduates remain unsure what it is these employers are seeking, and how it is assessed. Our study examines both selection criteria profiles and practices, drawing comprehensive data from 20 New Zealand firms and finds that regardless of a firm's characteristics, most seek a very similar graduate profile, with the concepts of candidate 'well roundedness' and 'fit' considered most vital. Selection practices employed are tightly connected to this graduate profile. These findings shed some much needed light for graduates on what is, but also what is not, highly sought after by employers in the recruitment and selection process. They should also be of benefit to universities by assisting them to better prepare their graduates for successful transition into the employment market.

**Keywords:** graduates, university, competencies, recruitment, selection

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## INTRODUCTION

The current worldwide recession sees many job hunters competing for very few jobs. A compounding feature is that these markets are becoming flooded with graduates and this has meant positions obtained through graduate recruitment programmes have now become highly sought after (Chug, 2009).

Higher education study requires a substantial investment in terms of time, money and dedication (Baruch, Bell, & Gray, 2005). Undertaking such an investment entails confidence of some level of return with respect to career progress, and at the very least the development of personal and professional competencies. With large numbers of students graduating from universities, all of whom hold similar qualifications, and competing for a small number of graduate positions, some have begun to question the value of the degree (Candy & Crebert, 1991; Harvey, 2000; Little, 2001). The obvious concern expressed here is that the degree no longer appears to afford the guarantee a job (Brooks & Everett, 2009) and begs the question for students about what it is in terms of graduate study that will improve their chances of employment. In response to this there were calls for greater communication between academics, students and employers around the expectations of graduate employability (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999; Gilbert, 2011). This has seen an abundance of research aimed at identifying desirable graduate attributes/competencies (Jackson, 2010). These studies

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show a broad range of skills and attributes, including personal transferable competencies (such as written and oral communication, problem solving, teamwork, and interpersonal skills) (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999), technical competencies, and personal attributes (including initiative, responsibility and flexibility) (Harvey, 2000), are viewed as those most desirable and important to employers today (Ashbaugh, 2003; Jackson, 2010).

There are problems with much of this research though, in terms of both its design and its focus. In attempting to identify desirable graduate competencies, there has been an over-reliance on the use of *a priori* lists and little attention paid to the ways in which employers choose to assess graduates across these capabilities. With the ever-increasing costs of higher education coupled with growing student rolls (Binning, 2010), we see it as important that graduates make the right choices in terms of their tertiary study. Not only do they need to be adequately equipped with the desired attributes/competencies required to gain employment, but we also believe to position themselves optimally they need to be cognisant of how they might best display these qualities to prospective employers during the selection process. These issues are the focus of our paper. Specifically, we report results of a qualitative study, which examines the qualities employers look for in their graduate profiles, along with how they make assessments about these qualities during the graduate selection process.

## GRADUATE COMPETENCY

Graduate competencies are the knowledge, skills and attributes higher education students develop during their time with the institution. They include, but also go beyond the technical, disciplinary knowledge that has traditionally been the core outcome of most university courses (Barrie, 2006). Graduate competencies can be classified into two broad groups – hard and soft (these are sometimes referred to as 'task' and 'personal' competencies, respectively). Hard skills are most commonly associated with the technical aspects of performing a job and usually consist of the acquisition of knowledge (Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell, & Lay, 2002; Ashbaugh, 2003). These skills are 'primarily cognitive in nature and are influenced by an individual's Intelligence Quotient' (Rainsbury et al., 2002: 9), and reflected in their academic performance (Jaeger, 2003). This implies that academic performance, shown through grade point average (GPA), is predictive of an individual's technical knowledge (Roth & Bobko, 2000). Hard skills are commonly viewed as a threshold for employment (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), because they represent the minimum level necessary to be able to perform a work task with basic competence.

Although technical skills provide the foundation, it has recently been suggested higher education students should develop more than technical skills to succeed; with soft skills being viewed as those that promote career success (Lange, Jackling, & Gut, 2006; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Soft skills are deemed important because they are transferable and today's knowledge-intensive environment workplaces require a workforce which is adaptable, flexible and embraces a willingness to learn (Bennett, Dunne, & Carré, 1999). Soft skills comprise interpersonal, emotional skills and organisational skills (Ashbaugh, 2003; Coll & Zegwaard, 2006). They are built up from personal characteristics, including one's principles, values, motives and attitudes (Rainsbury et al., 2002), and thus, are a function of an individual's personality. Commonly cited soft skills include, but are not limited to: communication skills, positive attitude, adaptability, ability to cope with stress and working in a team (Ashbaugh, 2003; Lange, Jackling, & Gut, 2006). These skills are considered essential to: (i) build trust between employees and supervisors; (ii) retain happy and loyal staff; and (iii) remain a highly efficient organisation (Ashbaugh, 2003). Consequently, to succeed at work it is increasingly accepted that employees must develop a range of personal and intellectual competencies, beyond technical knowledge (Harvey, 2000; Jackson, 2010). Having established those competencies deemed desirable in employment, from a graduate's perspective this then begs the question, how do recruiters make assessments about these during the selection process?



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## GRADUATE SELECTION

Effective selection practices involve the comparison of candidates to accept those who are suitable and reject those who are unsuitable through use of a series of assessments (Mathis & Jackson, 2007). Those selecting from a pool of university graduates face a number of unique challenges (Keenan, 1995). For example, graduates are typically selected for their potential within an organisation rather than their demonstrated performance represented by work experience. The myriad degree types, disciplines, structures and institutions can complicate matters further as they are rarely comparable, especially when considering the level and type of soft skill development associated with a qualification (Barrie, 2006; Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven, & Furnham, 2010). Large numbers of applications are typical for graduate positions, even more so with a tight labour market and this also tests the process, possibly rendering traditional selection methods as inappropriate, invalid and/or ineffective (Carless, 2007). These differences have led some organisations to develop their own templates for the effective selection of graduates, and the key distinctions in these processes now become the focus of this discussion.

In the pre-screening phase, the application form is often used (Hodgkinson, Daley, & Payne, 1995; Stewart & Knowles, 2000). Useful for its objective, manageable and timely characteristics, applications are usually accompanied by a curriculum vitae (CV) and covering letter and are used to quickly scale down a large pool of candidates (Keenan, 1995; Robertson & Smith, 2001). The use of online recruitment methods, as opposed to paper applications and CVs, has no doubt further contributed to the efficiency of this process (Parry & Tyson, 2008). It is suggested that in reviewing the application form, employers increasingly use not only grades but also the degree and institution as a coarse-grain first-stage sifter that allows organisations to select a group of graduates who will progress to the next stage of the process. There is widespread support for this approach (Roth & Bobko, 2000; Smetherham, 2006). Some research even shows grades to have more importance than does the major subject area in the degree, especially as more employers recruit 'exotics' – graduates with degrees in areas other than the core business of the organisation (Harvey, 2000). In stark contrast to this is the longstanding view that an applicant's interests, work experiences, literacy skills and their style used in completing the form would be better indicators of performance than grades (Wingrove, Glendinning, & Herriot, 1984).

Once past the first screening process hurdle, graduates face several more forms of assessment as prospective employers try to build a robust picture of them during what is commonly referred to as the profile-building phase. Forms of psychometric testing have grown in popularity since the 1980s (Williams, 1994; Keenan, 1995) and comprise a broad spectrum of tests aimed at measuring cognitive ability, specific technical skills and/or personality (Jenkins, 2001). The approach of the 'assessment centre' is also utilised, typically by larger employers. This tends to incorporate psychometric testing, interviews, group discussions, role-plays and group exercises with the aim of helping the employer to better understand the applicants' competencies and abilities within a particular role (Keenan, 1995; Stewart & Knowles, 2000).

However, neither of these approaches match anywhere near the popularity of the interview (Hodgkinson, Daley, & Payne, 1995; Carless, 2007). Many organisations regard the interview as the single most important factor in their decision-making process (Keenan, 1995), using it to corroborate prior information gleaned. However, the interview process is not perfect and is susceptible to errors in information processing, and the comprehension and appraisal of competencies (Anderson & Shackleton, 1990). The final step usually employed in the selection process involves some form of reference checking (Kleiman & White, 1991). With graduate selection, it is likely this process would only incorporate verification of one's academic qualifications, as graduates are unlikely to have previous and related employment histories from which a useful reference would be attained.



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## THIS STUDY

This study undertakes a comprehensive examination of graduate competency profiles and graduate selection methods. Specifically, we draw on the perspective of the graduate recruiter to identify what attributes are deemed the most desirable in contemporary graduates and how assessment of these attributes are made during the selection procedure. Given the increasing levels of media attention currently being afforded to the topic of graduate employment we consider our examination to be both a very timely and worthy contribution to this field.

## METHOD

Few, if any, studies employ a qualitative research approach to the examination of desirable graduate attributes inside graduate selection practices. After obtaining ethical approval for our study, a sample of 50 eligible firms was identified, of which we were able to make contact with 32. Of these, 20 agreed to participate in either a face-to-face or a telephonic interview. Our sample used the Careerhub database (an online intranet targeting New Zealand students) to limit participation to (a) those firms with defined graduate selection programmes and (b) who are currently engaged with higher education institutes.

### Sample profile

The 20 firms sampled all have operations located in New Zealand, with one-half of these firms also comprising part of a global operation. Four have their main operating office located in Australia. Firms are drawn from a mix of small, medium and large[1] employers (see Table 1[2]), representing a broad spectrum of industries (see Table 2). It should be noted that, most likely attributable to the number of multinational firms in our sample, it is not wholly representative of New Zealand enterprises in terms of size [97.2% of organisations hire 19 people or less (Ministry of Economic Development, 2010)]. All firms engaged in graduate recruitment within the past 2 years, with most doing so either once or twice within the past calendar year. The types of positions sought are very broad, including editors, engineers, tax consultants, policy advisors, lawyers and retail staff (see Table 3). The numbers of vacancies available through these graduate recruitment programmes ranged from three in one organisation to 135 in another, with most seeking between 10 and 30 graduates at any one time. Applicant pools ranged from four to nearly 100 per position being offered.

The person designated most responsible for graduate recruitment was our targeted interviewee and during our initial contact, this person was advised of the purpose and the design of our study. Interviews took place over a 2-week period. In a purposeful move away from using lists of pre-determined attributes, we opted to use an in-depth semi-structured interview design. Responses were unprompted. Interviewees were asked to focus on their own experiences in describing features they believe are important when considering graduate employability and selection. Interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and a thematic coding approach to data analysis was used. We deemed a thematic coding approach as most appropriate for our purposes because of its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It allowed us to let themes emerge from the data rather than trying to fit the data into some pre-determined criteria. To ensure confidence with themes identified, this process was independently repeated with multiple coders.

[1] By OECD standards, small organisations are those with <50 employees, mid-sized are those from 50 to 250 and large are organisations that employ 250+ (Morrison 1999).

[2] A number of participants describe their organisation as a 'professional service', a term that captured a range of consulting, accounting, legal services and public service firms.



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Table 1. Profile of participants

| *Industry* | *Number of participants* |
|---|---|
| Publishing | 1 |
| Professional services | 10 |
| Utilities | 1 |
| Retail | 3 |
| Public service | 3 |
| Information technology | 1 |
| Transport | 1 |

Table 2. Profile of firm size and offshore operations

| *Number of employees* | *Number of firms* | *Number of firms with an off-shore component* |
|---|---|---|
| <100 | 2 | 1 |
| 100–199 | 2 | 1 |
| 200–299 | 3 | 2 |
| 300–399 | 1 | 0 |
| 400–499 | 1 | 0 |
| 500–999 | 4 | 2 |
| 1,000–9,999 | 4 | 2 |
| 10,000+ | 2 | 2 |

Table 3. Profile of recruiting areas

| *Job area* | *Number of firms recruiting in this area*[a] |
|---|---|
| Commerce | 12 |
| Science | 3 |
| Engineering | 2 |
| Information technology | 2 |
| Policy | 2 |
| Law | 1 |
| Maths/Physics | 1 |
| All areas | 1 |

*Note.* [a] The total adds to more than 20 (the number of firms in the survey) as some firms recruit in more than one area.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, this research explores the key attributes and competencies sought in graduate appointments. The ability to learn, well-roundedness, analytical skills, communication skills, critical thinking skills, having an achievement orientation, having an engaging personality, fit with the organisation, level of interest in the chosen job or field, leadership qualities, people skills, resilience, teamwork and technical skills were identified. Some of these are reflected in competency profiles reported in the literature and



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identified earlier in our paper. However, there are some additions and omissions worth noting. A review of various university websites along with the higher education literature itself (Crossman & Clarke, 2010) reveals cultural and ethical awareness and understanding of important features in graduate profiles; however, these are both features that did not surface in our study. Similarly, the graduate competency literature identifies a customer service and a quality orientation, along with computer literacy, organisational skills and a strong emphasis on attributes associated with understanding oneself and others (Rainsbury et al., 2002) as competencies commonly sought by employers, but our study found little if any mention of these. Well-roundedness, on the other hand, is an important attribute sought by graduate employers, but one that does not feature on either of the aforementioned lists.

## Selection process

The three identified phases – pre-screening, profile-building and verification – are now discussed in turn.

### *The pre-screening phase of the selection process*

This is the first phase, and it involves a hard and fast cut of the significant number of applications that may be received for the available positions. Of the 20 organisations interviewed, all described the use of an application form as the first step in their selection process, 63% of which were handled online. When compared internationally, this figure is relatively high (Parry & Tyson, 2008). In using the application, most see it as an objective and uniform measure of assessment. For example, one firm states, '[we] simply can't look at every CV as [we] had 2814 applications in 2010' (Firm 5). While some organisations look for specific conditions, such as 'the basic right to work in New Zealand' (Firm 6); or basic role requirements such as accreditation into an industry (Firm 17), most review the graduate's GPA. Indeed, in respect of the latter we found 90% of our interviewees claimed to utilise an applicant's grades at some stage during the selection process, with 83% of these reporting doing so in the initial application phase. The following quotes are illustrative of this situation:

> Grades [are] the first indicator. If you are looking at a résumé, grades are the first indicator of … how well a student has done (Firm 11)

> I will look typically at B+ to A … someone who averages in that area. If they're averaging B− I don't need to go there (Firm 4)

These findings support the claims made by Harvey (2000) that employers want bright graduates and, therefore, use grades as the first filter. However, contrary to the literature, employers in our sample did not see grades solely as a predictor of technical abilities (Roth & Bobko, 2000) but rather appeared to see them as evidence of a graduate's potential:

> [grades give an insight into an applicant's] attitude, their willingness to learn, and their ability to learn (Firm 3)

> [grades are] an indication of future behaviour in terms of drive for results (Firm 20)

> [grades are a sign] of how well a student is able to commit to things (Firm 11)

We identified considerable spread in the acceptable grade threshold that organisations will accept as evidence of this. When asked specifically about actual cut-off points, of the 16 organisations that provided this detail, some 69% believed 'B' grades to be acceptable. Indeed, for many a 'B' grade



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indicated a balance between the important technical skills and as well as the subjective soft skills. This is also consistent with Roth and Bobko (2000), who indicated that GPA partially captures cognitive ability, as well as soft competencies like motivation, effort, flexibility and time management. A higher GPA does not necessarily guarantee advancement though, with some not viewing this relationship to be a linear one: 'if you are looking for "A+" folk, then you run the risk that they have spent all their time in the university library. There is a place for those people, but not in my organisation' (Firm 4); and, '"A" students often can't communicate, "B's" are fine and "C's" might not get an interview' (Firm 2). Interestingly, these sentiments, although shared by many of our interviewees, are contrary to the work of Negash (2010) whose research supported a link between cognitive ability and other core competencies, and high grades. Finally, when it came to verifying grades, a feature relied upon in pre-screening assessments, only 25% of our interviewees reported asking for an actual copy of an applicant's academic transcript.

Along with grades, some 95% of our sample considered the well-roundedness of an individual to be an extremely important and influential factor impacting the likely progression of their application into the second phase of the selection process. Indeed, throughout our interviews it became very apparent well-roundedness was more influential than GPA for most. For example:

> I'm looking for someone who's well rounded. If they just happen to be straight A and they're great footballers or rowers or musicians or whatever, then that's fine. But I look to see, and I specifically ask questions during the interview, to make sure that they're not straight A's simply because they've lived over in the University library. (Firm 4)

> Reasonable grade average and we're looking for well rounded all rounders. So we're looking for people with good leadership skills, involvement in sport or cultural activities, good communication skills. (Firm 13)

The term appears to reflect one's extra-curricula activities and these could take the form of sporting endeavours, travel, community involvement or some other form of interest outside of the university. These experiences were perceived by employers to represent in the graduate, among other things, an ability to organise, to juggle multiple tasks and to develop interpersonal and leadership skills. Typically, these qualities are measured subjectively by assessing the experiences of the applicant. To illustrate, one firm looks for things such as, 'leadership skills, or things like soccer captains, duxes, head girls or head boys or interactive part time work' (Firm 15). Some firms prioritised this information and these types of experiences very highly, for example, '[we like] applicants [who] can show us that they are well-rounded individuals, so we don't particularly like applications that focus on academia' (Firm 17). Others did not, 'Given the number of applicants … we don't even look at every résumé of every graduate that applies. We simply can't!' (Firm 5).

Interviewees also indicated they used the application and accompanying cover letter and CV to gain some measurement of the literacy skills of the applicant. For example, 'if a cover letter isn't well written then we won't take it any further' (Firm 1). In all, we found the CV to be an important technique employed in the pre-screening phase. It provided valuable information about the applicant's characteristics, core competencies, mannerisms and personality. As one firm summed it up, 'the CV probably speaks a million words' (Firm 15) and this broader interpretation of material presented within the CV is consistent with that found in the research of Stewart and Knowles (2000).

### *The profile-building phase of the selection process*

Here the organisation starts to assess the competencies of the graduate, utilising a range of selection devices, typically via formal and/or informal interviews, psychometric testing and 'assessment days'.



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The most common technique employed within the profile-building stage was the interview. Despite interviews having a low validity (Di Milia & Smith, 1998), every organisation confirmed their use in the selection process. Cognisant that graduates do not have great levels of work experience, many organisations tailor their interview questions to suit the graduate profile and thus they are somewhat unique. For example, one firm asks 'a couple of … brain teaser type questions to check that they've got a few brain cells to rub together' (Firm 3), they then check the graduate's employment expectations and, at the same time, gauge levels of communication and interpersonal skills. This focus on assessing soft skill proficiency during the interview phase was a strong theme to emerge from our interviewees, and one that is consistent with the literature (Harvey, 2000). Particular qualities sought included: teamwork, engaging personality, communication skills, leadership skills and an achievement orientation.

Another distinguishing characteristic that serves to secure a position for a graduate is the degree of 'fit' that exists between the applicant and the organisation. In line with the work of Di Milia and Smith (1998), 55% of our sample report they use the interview to make assessments about organisation-applicant fit. While many organisations agree to use objective and potentially arbitrary initial threshold measures, there is a common understanding that 'if two candidates are neck and neck, we will not go back and base it on their grades' (Firm 9). Rather, it is the degree of 'fit', which is the extent there is an appropriate match between the values and beliefs of the workforce and those of the organisation itself (Bourdieu, 2000) that is the determining factor. This is largely because 'fit' is the feature these organisations believe is closely aligned with, and has the most potential to influence productivity. It is also something that many believe cannot be taught to new recruits. This is exemplified in the following comment, 'fit is the stuff you can't teach: working as part of team and being able to add value, thinking what skills this person is going to add and complement the team that is already there' (Firm 9). Fit can be masked by other competencies, for example, 'When I interview I am looking for interpersonal skills … which fit is a part of … it is 85 percent fit and 15 percent technical' (Firm 2) and, consistent with the literature (Karren & Graves, 1994), it is a feature considered to be linked to turnover, 'if someone doesn't have fit, they aren't going to last' (Firm 19).

Finally, we also identified a few organisations who use the interview as an opportunity to check any 'alarm bells' (Firm 1) which might have surfaced earlier, such as gaps in study, poor psychometric test results or a poor academic transcript. How all the aforementioned attributes and competencies are measured during this process is, however, less clear. We believe gut feeling plays a significant role here, especially as we found strong evidence to suggest judgements about candidates are formed very quickly during the interview process. For example, one interviewee stated, 'you can actually tell within a minute whether they [are suitable] as well as how engaging, on to it, self aware they are and how they listen' (Firm 13). The hastiness of this assessment is supported by another interviewee who claimed, '"[candidates] are eliminated within the first 3–5 minutes of the interview" as their competencies have failed the first impression test, "the interview"' (Firm 4). Thus, it seems measurement of the candidate's performance using this technique is a subjective one, potentially open to interpretation by the interviewer.

In this study, 12 of the 20 firms engaged in some form of psychometric testing process, with a diverse range of attributes and competencies under consideration. Some were looking for communication skills, while others looked for critical thinking skills. In terms of the relationship between the use of psychometric testing and assessing desirable competencies, one interviewee suggested, 'cognitive ability tests … tap into how well people learn new information … so how university students bring in their technical skills as well as their on the job learning' (Firm 12).

Only one-quarter of our sample made use of assessment centres, and for around one-third of our sample the assessment centre encompassed both the testing and interview phases of the selection process. Further analysis revealed these were the larger firms employing in excess of 500 people.



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**Table 4. Selection techniques and assessment of attributes/competencies by firm**

| *Competency/attribute* | *Application* | *Interview* | *Psychometric assessment* | *Assessment centre* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ability to learn | 17, 18 | 14, 18 | 12, 18, 19 | 9, 12, 20 |
| Analytical skills | 4, 6 | 7, 13 | 5, 7, 12, 19, 20 | 5, 12, 20 |
| Communication skills | 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18 | 1, 3, 5, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18 | 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 20 | 5, 18 |
| Critical thinking skills | | 4, 10, 13, 18 | 2, 5, 18, 19 | |
| Achievement orientation | 9 | 12, 13 | 2, 12 | 9 |
| Fit with the organisation | 8, 10, 19 | 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 11, 13, 15, 19 | 8 | 5, 9 |
| Interest in chosen job/field | 6, 8, 16 | 3, 12 | | |
| Leadership qualities | 5, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20 | 4, 5, 11, 13, 19, 14 | 19 | 12 |
| Networking/people skills | 9, 10, 15 | 2, 10, 14, 18 | 5, 8, 17 | 12, 18, 20 |
| Personality | 15 | 2, 3, 5, 13, 20 | | |
| Resilience | 8, 15 | 8, 9 | | 9, 12, 20 |
| Teamwork | 5, 6, 7, 14, 16, 20 | 4, 5, 11, 15, 16, 17 | 7, 8, 9, 19, 20 | 12, 18, 20 |
| Technical skills | 1, 2, 4, 13 | 7 | | 18 |
| Well-roundedness | 2, 3, 4,10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20 | | 17 | |

For many of the smaller organisations, the efficacy and costs of this approach appeared prohibitive. The most common competencies measured during by the assessment centre are analytical skills, people skills (including such things as the ability to present, work in a team, and to build rapport with others), along with resilience.

Overall, it appears the profile-building phase does not overly concern itself with assessing technical skills and cognitive ability. This seems to be the remit of the pre-screening phase. Instead, permeating this phase is the move from the use of objective thresholds to more subjective assessments related to aspects such as the personality and fit of the applicant, along with their potential to perform.

### *Verification*

Typically, this involves a combination of formal checks and/or reference checks with the aim being to corroborate and substantiate assessments made earlier in the selection process (Kleiman & White, 1991; Hodgkinson, Daley, & Payne, 1995). Of the 20 canvassed organisations, 13 reported using a reference check or verification device. This is much lower than the rate reported by Carless (2007). Part of the reason for this low uptake is likely due to graduate applicants not having accumulated a work history for prospective employers to verify. Indeed, we found widespread support for this with the following quotes typifying the sentiments of our sample, 'you're not generally checking up on what work they have done before hand. It's more about [whether] the individual is telling us the truth' (Firm 4), and, 'reference checking is an important part of our process but not a significant part given graduates haven't had … any significant work experience … so we don't find a lot of added value' (Firm 5).

A full summary of all the competencies sought by our sample of graduate employers and the selection techniques they employed to assess these competencies is presented in Table 4.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

With graduate supply increasing, two effects present: it is harder for graduates to distinguish themselves, and for employers to discern the best graduate for their organisation. Our study explores these issues by examining the profiles, criteria and processes used in the selection of graduates. A number of important observations are made. First, we find a striking degree of similarity inherent in the graduate profiles sought by employers, and second, despite the differing organisational contexts of these firms, each appear to follow a remarkably similar process of pre-screening, profile-building and verification.

An often cited adage among university students is that 'C's get degrees'. What we hasten to point out to these students, however, is that while this is certainly true, they might not be positioning themselves optimally to gain their desired employment. This is because at the pre-screening phase, their GPA is an important feature. Something that was not quite so clear-cut from our data though was what grades actually signified to recruiters. Indeed, here we find some contradiction and misconception. An obvious way for graduates to avoid these stereotypes is to provide solid evidence of 'other' attributes early in the screening process. Drawing on the work of Brown and Campion (1994) these 'other' attributes can be seen to comprise human qualities other than ability, 'such as interpersonal, leadership, and motivational attributes' (p. 898), with recruiters reportedly considering these 'with substantial frequency' (p. 906) when evaluating résumés. In our study the most important and most often cited 'other' attribute identified is well-roundedness and our review of Brown and Campion's work leads us to conclude this closely resembles their motivational dimension[3].

[3] Our respondents' reference to well-roundedness appears to closely mirror their depiction of motivation. Notwithstanding well-roundedness is identified by Brown and Campion as a category of non-ability distinct from motivation. However, as they provide no description we cannot be sure if it also overlaps with our concept.



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In relation to both the pre-screening phase, where we found the application the most common technique employed, and the profile-building phase, where the interview is the most common technique used, we again identify well-roundedness to be a highly prioritised and important characteristic sought. Strong evidence of this appears hugely advantageous to the applicant. The extent to which there is organisation–person fit is also a feature closely scrutinised during the profile-building phase with the interview being a primary mechanism for making this assessment. We suggest graduates, before submitting their application, gather sufficient information about the prospective employer to be satisfied in their own minds they actually do actually 'fit' with the culture of the employing firm.

This notion of well-roundedness repeatedly surfaces in our study. We find there is significant coherence about the importance of well-roundedness to recruiters in our sample. So what is well-roundedness? From a philosophical standpoint it conveys that a sense of balance has been achieved in one's life (Hurka, 1987), and in a more general sense, it is described in the literature as a person who has developed a multi-faceted set of skills and capacities. Similar to our study results, Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee (2002), in their study of graduate competencies, find graduate well-roundedness is able to be demonstrated with a portfolio approach. This approach entails students showcasing their competencies across all the ensuing criteria: communication capacity, computer literacy, interpersonal/social skills, critical thinking/leadership and teamwork. In our study, the term also appears to depict a comprehensive assessment by recruiters, but there are two key points of difference. First, the criteria are much less refined with a more holistic picture, often derived from the graduate's life experiences, being sought (similar to the concept of motivation discussed previously); and second, the criteria for assessment is not uniform but instead it appears to be tailored to the organisation. Unlike the work of Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee (2002), our concept does not reflect a core or a standardised set of characteristics. Rather, the criteria for a well-rounded graduate appear tacit, comprising a more fluid and, we believe, organisationally oriented measure. As well-roundedness is a concept somewhat idiosyncratic to the organisation, its indices for assessment are selected and subsequently calibrated by the organisation to meet the needs of the organisation. Features represented in this index might include assessments about personal accomplishments and activities outside of academia; work proclivities; cultural fit; and possibly perceptions regarding university rankings and degree value. This notion of well-roundedness is not dissimilar to that put forward by Arkoudis Hawthorne, Baik, Hawthorne, Leach, and Bexley (2009), in which some assessment with regards the graduate's personal characteristics, attributes, diversity of experiences and skills, and also the degree of cultural fit, is made.

This then begs the questions: Is this a new construct worthy of inclusion in the lists profiling graduate attributes? Or is this usage of the term simply capturing the bundling of existing attributes and competencies? Graduate recruiters in our study, as noted earlier, seemingly use well-roundedness as demonstrative of high levels of motivation, and this along with ability are well known to be key determinants of job performance (Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970). Closer inspection shows that many of the core characteristics comprising its assessment, however, are not novel, so it could be considered the latter. On the other hand the distinctive and organisationally oriented qualities that we identify in our study suggest that, at the very least, it appears to be conceptually different to existing graduate profile attributes and also current notions of well-roundedness. We therefore suggest it is the former, but add the caveat that although often cited, the full meaning of well-roundedness remains unclear, and thus we consider further research is warranted.

Putting this feature of our work aside, we now turn to consider a second important aspect to surface from our data; what we did not find in terms of what is desirable, and what is considered worthy of assessment during the graduate selection process. We identify a stark difference between employers and universities in relation to the importance of cultural and ethical issues. This is a



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significant finding for two reasons. First, these are both features identified in the higher education literature as being crucial to graduate employability (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). The second reason is that many studies exploring graduate competencies use *a priori* lists (e.g., Burchell, Hodges, & Rainsbury, 2000; Coll & Zegwaard, 2006), and in doing so, it is assumed the competencies referred to in these pre-determined lists are the complete set of competencies regarded as important by the employer. However, our results indicate this may not be the case.

This study has a wide range of implications for students, practitioners and higher education institutions. From the student perspective, higher education is an expensive investment, both in the opportunity cost of forgone employment and in the face of ever increasing course fees. These results provide graduates with some insight into the functioning of graduate employment programmes, and in this highly competitive market it is hoped these might benefit them as they seek to transition themselves into the employment market.

Practitioners might also be able to reflect on their own procedures, and in drawing comparisons with those outlined here, may possibly exercise greater consideration as to what it is they do and why. In this vein, it is interesting to note that practitioners in the New Zealand graduate recruitment context, like those in the United Kingdom (Parry & Tyson, 2008), appear to have embraced online recruitment, at least as far as the pre-screening phase is concerned, and we see this as suggestive of a move away from the more conventional methods of recruitment and selection.

Finally, higher education institutions have an onus of responsibility not only to enhance the employability of their graduates but also to provide up-to-date and accurate career advice. This study provides some valuable insights into how they might achieve this outcome and in doing so meet the needs of their students. In this regard, we see a tertiary system that fosters students to develop both within the learning and the wider social environment might be positioned well to serve the needs of employers and the wider labour market.

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### Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2013.25

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