

# Competing stakeholder understandings of graduate attributes and employability in work-integrated learning

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This study examined academics, students, professionals and careers advisors' perceptions of how the inclusion of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) in Human Resource Management (HRM) undergraduate degrees influenced students' achievement of Graduate Attributes (GAs) in Australian universities. Prior research finds that student participation in WIL can strengthen the opportunities for acquiring GAs, thus influencing their employability. Utilizing stakeholder theory 38 qualitative semi-structured interviews revealed different and sometimes competing understandings of GAs and employability, along with their link to WIL, across four stakeholder groups. Notably, a marked lack of understanding of GAs and employability was found in the student stakeholder group. These findings have practical teaching and learning implications for the embedding of GAs in higher education programs to increase student understanding of GAs and employability, and their importance for their future.

Keywords: Employability, graduate attributes, undergraduates, human resource management, work-integrated learning

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This study utilizes stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) as a framework to examine work-integrated learning (WIL), graduate attributes (GAs) and employability in the context of the human resource management (HRM) discipline. Stakeholders who affect or are affected by WIL include universities, students, academics, careers advisors, government and industry along with professional and community associations, each with their own motivations and agenda (Patrick et al., 2008; Pilgrim, 2012). The Australian Government (2016) and prior research (Leisyte et al., 2014) both recognize a need for universities to encourage greater engagement with external stakeholders through initiatives such as WIL.

University business schools have many different disciplines including accounting, economics, finance, management, marketing, operations and HRM; each studying different facets of societal issues (Agarwal & Hoetker, 2007). WIL research regularly combines these disciplines under the umbrella of business. Research examining WIL in business has identified skills gaps in business graduates. Since the 1980s industry opinion has deemed Australian business graduates as not being 'job ready' and lacking essential soft or employability skills (Jackson, 2009). Recent works continue to find dissatisfaction among employers with business graduates' ability to effectively apply disciplinary knowledge, and generic skills in the workplace (Freudenberg et al., 2011; Jackson, 2009, 2013a, 2013b). An Australian study of 211 managers/supervisors of business graduates and 156 academics teaching business units identified that "although graduates are confident and proficient in certain non-technical skills, they are deficient in vital elements of the managerial skill set" (Jackson & Chapman, 2012, p. 95). The skills lacking included leadership, critical thinking, self-reflection, conflict management, and decision-making (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). The impact of these business graduate skill deficiencies is the development of an "inadequate cohort of future managers, potentially devastating in the face of

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beleaguered economies still recovering from the global financial crisis and growing competition from the east" (Jackson & Chapman, 2012, p. 109).

While WIL research has been conducted in business disciplines such as accounting, there is limited research examining WIL, GAs and employability in the HRM discipline (Rook, 2015, 2017; Rook & McManus, 2016). A Universities Australia (2018) Report on WIL revealed that in Management and Commerce WIL participation rate was second lowest at 24.5%. With the recent shift within the HRM discipline from an being an administrative management practice to becoming a strategic partner and 'key player' in overall organization strategy (Silva & Lima, 2018) WIL is becoming ever more important for the discipline of HRM. WIL in HRM deserves separate exploration due to its applied nature in the workplace requiring an understanding of how GAs are embedded, developed, and understood in this area, and the impact GAs have on developing employable graduates. Addressing this the following research question is adopted for this study: What are the perspectives of key stakeholders about the role of WIL in developing GAs, and impacting a student's employability for the HRM discipline? This has been investigated through inductive thematic analysis of 38 semi-structured stakeholder interviews.

The paper is structured to review relevant literature on WIL, GAs, employability, and their link with the development of WIL programs, followed by an outline of the methodology and presentation of the findings. Our final section provides a discussion of the implications of the findings and suggestions for future research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Work-Integrated Learning*

WIL is an "umbrella term for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum" (Patrick et al., 2008, p. iv). WIL programs aim to bridge the gap between tacit and explicit knowledge ensuring students are work ready by enhancing their development of employability skills and GAs (Chavan & Carter, 2018; McLennan & Keating, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). WIL can be categorized into on- and off-campus activities. Off-campus WIL activities include internships, community service and day site visits, while on-campus activities include virtual projects, industry panel sessions and job readiness programs (Rowe et al., 2012). These activities differ according to discipline, available resources, and level of industry involvement. Universities increasingly utilize WIL to satisfy industry and student needs through the development of students skills to 'hit the ground running' (Jackson, 2016; Smith et al., 2009). WIL has the potential to provide students a payoff from their investment in education by improving their transition from university to work through skills development (Jackson et al., 2018), thereby becoming a strategy for universities to differentiate themselves (Ernst & Young, 2011; Rowe et al., 2018). This is particularly relevant to international students who are looking to gain local experience and transferrable skills to improve their employability (Gribble, 2014; Jackson, 2016).

The examination of WIL in the discipline of HRM is limited as the discipline like many others (economics, marketing, accounting) can often be categorized more broadly into WIL in business degrees. While this may be the case, research (Rook, 2015, 2017) has identified a range of WIL models being utilized in HRM, and that the development of such models are influenced by the challenges of implementing WIL into the curriculum including: a lack of resources; a clash of agendas among stakeholders; legal and ethical issues; competing expectations; the HRM profession and academic perspectives of WIL (Rook, 2017). The models being developed and implemented include traditional placement models; models where the workplace comes to the classroom and presents a problem to be

solved by the student cohort; online simulations; student reflection models on current or past workplace experiences (Rook, 2015). Thus, the varying models being utilized in the discipline supports the decision to use a broad definition of WIL to guide the qualitative interviews in this research. Therefore, this study adopted the broad definition provided by Patrick et al. (2008) in order to remain open to the interpretations of WIL that participants may provide.

### *Graduate Attributes (GAs)*

Barrie, the first in Australia to examine the nature of GAs, defined GAs as the “skills, knowledge, and abilities of university graduates, beyond disciplinary content knowledge, which are applicable to a range of contexts” (Barrie, 2004, p. 262). The term GA is used interchangeably in the literature with other terms such as ‘graduate capabilities’ (Oliver, 2010), ‘graduate outcomes’ (Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone, 2018; Smith & Bath, 2006) and ‘work ready or job ready skills’ (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). The range of interchangeable terms for GAs also reflects on the lack of a shared definition of GAs by the relevant stakeholders. A further concern identified is that various stakeholders assume student acquisition of GAs or skills, whereas in reality skills gaps persist (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Jackson, 2016).

In Barrie’s (2004, 2006) research a lack of consistency and misinterpretation of GAs was found among the academic stakeholder group. However, since then there has been more effort to embed GAs within university curricula, and similarities between academics now exist across Australian Universities. This is perhaps in part due to the accreditation of qualifications through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which defines graduate attributes as generic learning outcomes incorporated into qualifications. Unfortunately, there has been little attention paid to the AQF by other than academic stakeholders.

These GAs are the transferrable, non-discipline specific skills a graduate may achieve through learning that have application in study, work, and life contexts (AQF, 2013). The AQF categorizes these GAs into four broad categories (2013, p. 11): (1) fundamental skills: for example, literacy and numeracy; (2) people skills: for example, working with others; (3) thinking skills: for example, learning to learn; decision making and problem solving; and (4) personal skills: for example, self-direction, acting with integrity. These GAs are embedded within courses through structuring of the learning outcomes, activities, and assessments at the individual subject and degree level.

The AQF also implies that these attributes are not guaranteed by successfully completing a qualification “...a graduate may achieve through learning”. A graduate’s capacity for developing attributes will influence their employability upon graduation. Research on generic attributes and teaching and learning methods indicate they are best developed by active approaches (Moy, 1999). WIL is an active process where the world of work is connected with curriculum. WIL can be a site for personal and general forms of learning as well as for the further development of technical and/or professional knowledge (Hager & Holland, 2007).

### *Graduate Employability*

Employability has been viewed as serving an economic purpose (e.g., achieving full employment 1950-1960s), having occupational knowledge and skills (1970s), and as a way of matching labor supply and demand at the company level (1980s) (Forrier, 2003). From the 1990s organizational trends such as downsizing, privatization and outsourcing led employability being viewed as a labor market instrument used by individuals as a new form of job security, ensuring career possibilities beyond the

borders of organizations (Clarke, 2008; Forrier, 2003). The debate recently shifted to the concept of graduate employability. In the UK, graduate employability is “the potential a graduate has for obtaining and succeeding in graduate-level positions” (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p. 2). In Australia employability is about giving graduates opportunities for developing a set of attributes relevant to their chosen profession and generic attributes, skills or abilities to be applied in a range of contexts (Barrie, 2004; Cranmer, 2006; Holmes, 2001).

Holmes (2013) examined three competing perspectives on employability: possessive, positioning, and processual approaches. The most dominant approach in the literature, the possessive, is based on the assumption that employability may be defined in terms of certain characteristics of graduating individuals. This aligns with the graduate attributes approach to employability. The social positioning approach critiques this perspective by arguing that skills or attributes relate strongly to issues of social positioning and societal reproduction (Holmes, 2013). This perspective links debates about a person's cultural capital and acceptability within social structures with employment acceptability, thus placing increased significance on social as well as academic qualifications.

The processual approach views higher education as one stage, albeit an important one, within the biographical trajectories of graduates. Here graduate employability is an ongoing process both influenced and constrained by factors outside the control or influence of the individual, including social background. The third approach could be viewed as the process of an individual's identity formation. Hinchcliffe and Jolly (2011) have developed the concept of graduate identity as a way of deepening the understanding of graduate employability. They found that there is no one fixed identity for graduates with employers looking for a broad range of graduate experiences including understanding a graduates' diversity, personal ethics and values, intellect, ability to deliver results, and interpersonal skills in addition to a list of skills.

A recent employability initiative (Bennett 2018) embeds employability thinking in the curriculum by focusing on a strengths-based meta-cognitive approach that could be delivered by non-experts within the existing curriculum. Bennett (2018, p. 2) redefines employability as a metacognitive process: “the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work and learning across the career lifespan”. Given current resource constraints experienced in academia (Rowe et al., 2016), this initiative can provide educators with resources and support to embed employability into existing curricula.

We view graduate employability as the capacity of a student to find and maintain different kinds of employment (Brown et al., 2003, p. 11) and the ability to communicate their employability to prospective employers. This aligns with Holmes (2013) processual perspective of employability. It also combines both Brown et al.'s (2003) and Bennett's (2018) recent metacognitive views of employability. Higher education is viewed as one stage in a student's biographical trajectory that impacts on their identity through the development of skills and attributes that when articulated can assist them to find and maintain different types of employment. It is thus conceptualized as a three-part process whereby students develop the work ready skills of value to prospective employers, are able to communicate this employability thinking, and are then able to find and maintain different kinds of employment.

#### *The WIL–GA-Employability link*

WIL programs provide enhanced opportunities for developing graduate attributes through connections with the world of work, leading to increased graduate employability (Business Council of Australia, 2011; Cranmer, 2006; McLennan & Keating, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; Yorke, 2006). Smith et al. (2009) recognized WIL as an important vehicle for the development of GAs and employability skills.

Further, Freudenberg et al.'s (2011) study found that students participating in WIL gained generic skills and a recognition of the importance of generic skill development when compared to non-participants. These claims continue to be supported by recent studies that reiterate WIL programs as instrumental in enabling students to develop the skills and attributes that will make them likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen careers (Jackson, 2013c, 2015; Oliver, 2010, 2013). The hierarchical link - that WIL enhances opportunities to develop GAs leading to a student's increased employability - is explored here from the perspectives of academics, careers advisors, professionals, and students within the context of the HRM Discipline.

### *A Stakeholder Approach*

Key stakeholders involved in the development and practice of WIL in HRM are the participants in this research and include; Academics, Careers Advisors, Professionals and Students. Universities need to engage more with external stakeholders and develop partnerships and trust with communities to strengthen their commitment to providing employable graduates (Leisyte et al., 2014; Rook & McManus, 2016). Levin et al. (2010) acknowledge that identifying stakeholders that can influence partnerships and involving them in discussions can provide important strategic insights. While there is no universally agreed upon definition of stakeholder theory or its application to education, it has been acknowledged that identifying stakeholders that influence or impact on partnerships can provide important strategic insights (Levin et al., 2010). Freeman (1984) defines a stakeholder as any group or individual who is affected by or can affect the achievement of the organization. This encourages organizations to be cognizant of all stakeholders and provides the foundation for stakeholder-based arguments that organizations should be managed with concern for all relevant stakeholders (Freeman 1984; Laplume et al., 2008). When one considers WIL and the development of WIL programs from a stakeholder theory lens, the focus becomes one of recognizing different stakeholder perspectives and needs when designing and implementing WIL programs in order to facilitate a collaborative approach to improve WIL experiences and outcomes for students, employers and universities (Jackson, 2016; Patrick et al., 2008). For a detailed description of the stakeholders involved in this study and their characteristics, refer to Table 2.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Qualitative Study*

This research utilized semi-structured interviews (Yin, 2009) to explore various stakeholder understandings and views in WIL in HRM programs. To locate relevant stakeholders a search of all Australian university websites for those with undergraduate HRM degrees was initially undertaken. Potential participants were the individuals involved in teaching and managing these degrees. Following an approved protocol (Western Sydney University WSU HREC approval H9354) potential participants were contacted via their university email, provided with an information letter, and invited to participate in a semi-structured interview. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in this study where potential participants were targeted initially (purposive) via email, and as the data collection began, participants were able to refer others suitable for the study (snowball). Four stakeholder groups (academics, careers advisors, professionals, and students) were identified as key to the development and implementation of HRM programs. All those who responded positively to our invitation were included as research participants.

Following from the invitations agreement to participate was gained from respondents from eight universities, including members from the 'Group of 8' (a collection of Australia's leading universities),

and the 'Innovative Research Universities Group' (IRU - seven universities committed to inclusive excellence in teaching, learning and research) in Australia. Included were both single and multi-campus universities with a focus on technology application and design, and creative approaches to education and research. The interviews were planned to take no more than 60 minutes, and while this was the case for the majority of participants several who engaged strongly with the issues discussed exceeded this time. Institutional locations are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1: University locations.

| Institution              | State |
|--------------------------|-------|
| University A, B, F, G, H | NSW   |
| University C, D          | WA    |
| University E             | VIC   |

The 38 participants across all groups interviewed in the study comprised 12 academics, 8 careers advisors, 10 professionals, and 8 students. These respondents were representative of the stakeholder groups from which they were drawn, with females dominating all stakeholder groups (see table 2). The academics typically had considerable (10+ years) experience in teaching and or coordinating HR programs, along with experience with WIL, while generally the careers advisors had slightly less university experience. The students were all senior undergraduate candidates with all but one student having undertaken a WIL placement, with the remaining student participant having engaged with industry on campus. While senior managers were not represented, none of the professional participants were new to the industry with all having had experience of supervising WIL placement students.

Originally, it was planned to conduct all of the interviews via Skype, however some requested phone or face-to-face interviews. Table 2 below presents further participant information:

TABLE 2: Participant characteristics.

| Stakeholder group | Selection criteria                                                                                                                | Number of Participants | Institution links           |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Academics         | Coordinating, lecturing, or tutoring in HRM relevant units which include the assessment of WIL experiences.                       | 12 (7♀, 5♂)            | University A-H              |
| Careers advisors  | Involved in program coordination and managing of the relationships between students, professionals, employers and the university. | 8 (7♀, 1♂)             | University A, B, C, E, H, G |
| Professionals     | Involved in the process and management of undergraduate students undertaking WIL placements in a HRM related degree.              | 10 (8♀, 2♂)            | University A, B, C, D       |
| Students          | Enrolled in a HRM related undergraduate degree and have experienced a form of WIL.                                                | 8 (5♀, 3♂)             | University A, B, D, G       |

### *Analysis*

Guided by a list of questions developed from the literature, participants were asked the following: 1) Did they perceive a strong link between WIL and a student's increased employability 2) their perception of GAs and employability, 3) how they felt GAs should be developed, and 4) the usefulness of employable graduates.

Initially guided by the semi-structured interview questions employed, a combination of inductive and deductive analysis was employed to report the themes that emerged from the participants' interviews. Interviews were coded using NVivo 10 following inductive coding protocols (Thomas, 2006), where one researcher coded the interviews with these codes being reviewed and confirmed independently by the second researcher.

## FINDINGS

### *Academics Perception of GAs and the Role of WIL*

Each participant described GAs differently, with only occasional overlap. GAs were described as being too generic, common sense and as soft skills that are transferrable. Some indicated universities provide the opportunity for the development of the skills, while acquiring them was not guaranteed.

I think the university can only provide experiences, which can potentially foster those capabilities, but I think the idea that people can be rubber stamped on the way out and said that their critical, creative, and ethical and able to do their job is not possible (Academic 12)

Concern was also expressed about the measurement of GAs "How can you prove it...it's almost impossible to actually test some of those GAs?" (Academic 7)

Several described the most important attributes as the ability to communicate both verbally and in writing; the ability to deal with ambiguity; and to have both critical thinking and reflection skills. Academic 1 also highlighted attributes that required further development, or at least consideration, in the development of HRM subjects: "... the GAs that my course looks at is numeracy and the fact that in HR we struggle. .... That's why the business component of it is critical".

Two recommend improving the view and functionality of GAs through teaching practices to make them relevant to students: "When we mention that about getting a job the students prick up their ears, so I've used that lever to sort of bring them to life a bit" (Academic 5); "I think GAs are embedded within the student, but I think we should teach in a way that elicits the development of those attributes" (Academic 8).

Another Academic suggested that lecturers should integrate the teaching of various units, so that students do not view them as siloed courses. In contrast, another was concerned with the conceptualization and objectives of WIL and GAs, believing that the purpose of WIL extended beyond ensuring graduates are work-ready to include citizenship and values.

... my worry is that it is [WIL] not just about ready for the world of work I think there is more ideas about citizenship and values that need to be promoted concurrently with this, and I think Work-Integrated Learning can do that (Academic 12)

*Academics and Employability*

Half of the participants described an employable person as someone with soft skills including; a positive attitude; good communication and networking skills; interpersonal and problem-solving skills; being honest and caring; and having reflection skills. Academic 1 stated: "It's a soft skill.... I think if you are employable you are work-ready and by work-ready I mean that you have some labor mobility, you can access work in different locations"

At variance were two participants who defined employability (rather than the characteristics of an employable person) as connecting theory with practice through learning in the workplace, reinforcing the WIL-employability link found in the literature. For example, Academic 8 stated:

It has less to do with the degree than the ability to apply what a person learns in a degree and I think this is where universities are getting it wrong because... they still see themselves as being a provider of liberal education, whereas the customer, the parents, the students are saying we're coming to uni to learn how to do our job better and become more employable. I think we've got to be more vocational and this is what I try and do is connect theory with practice so that they can actually take the theory and go and use it. That's what I think will make them more employable.

*Careers Advisors' Perceptions of GAs and the Role of WIL*

Career advisors described GAs as general characteristics that lead to social contribution and citizenship and thus are useful in developing employable graduates. Three participants stated that GAs are viewed differently depending on whether you are an academic or employer, a view supported by other career advisors who differentiated GAs and employability skills on the basis of stakeholders. "Employability skills are for organizations. There is no reason for us [universities] to have just one generic thing. I think it is fine to have GAs and employability skills" (Careers Advisor 3).

When careers advisors were asked about the usefulness of GAs for developing an employable graduate, they too made recommendations. "I think the graduate attributes are really important and I think with work placement they play a big part in getting those graduate attributes" (Careers Advisor 4).

I think they [GAs] are a good thing but I think they need to be contextualized, and I think that they are probably not standard across all degrees and industries, and I think there needs to be more work in to making them relevant to a particular degree (Careers Advisor 1).

*Careers Advisors and Employability*

Like academics, career advisors characterized employability as an individual possessing specific soft skills. Skills commonly cited were good communication skills and teamwork skills. Others included the ability to read and understand the labor market; to obtain and maintain work; and transferrable skills such as negotiation, interpersonal, problem solving and leadership skills. Careers Advisor 3 stated: "Employability skills is a huge thing... it's not just one skills, its all the soft skills what employers want...generic skills, the communication skills, the problem solving, the critical analysis and leadership".

In support of this, careers Advisor 5 states "Employability is not just the skills that they gain at university, not just the theoretical skills, they have to have the generic skills, team work, communication skills... it's a case of building those skills to make them employable".

Careers Advisor 4 also stated the importance of employability:

I think it is important for them [students] to think about employability skills and graduate qualities, getting them to articulate what they might mean and then going to the market and searching for jobs in organizations... they need to know first.

*Professionals Perceptions of GAs and the Role of WIL*

Professionals described GAs as soft skills such as communication skills; teamwork and organizational skills; being flexible, courteous, respectful, adaptive and eager to learn. Two participants stated that GAs are generic characteristics of a person that can be developed through education:

I would not pay attention to GAs if someone said to me these are my GAs because I attended university and got them. I think they are more within the person themselves, and everyone is going to be really different (Professional 9).

In contrast to the career advisors' perspectives, professionals reported that GAs should be generic for reasons such as increased flexibility and transferability of soft skills. "If you've got a strong set of generic skill sets then you're more employable ..... I'm looking for people who are flexible and adaptable" (Professional 4).

In contrast one professional stated that re-developing GAs so that they are discipline specific "...gives a better idea, a more accurate picture" of what skills the graduate has. "I think there is probably room for both general and discipline specific attributes so that the student can see the relevance of them" (Professional 6).

When professionals were asked about the usefulness of GAs in developing employable graduates they referred to the skills or attributes students were lacking. One professional indicated that students are not developing decision making skills, and that this was showing in their WIL placements:

I use question technique to say well what happens if we do this and this is the result and I try and get them [students] to think of it themselves. I don't think they are used to that, they are not getting it from their university studies, they are not coming up with the decisions on their own (Professional 9).

Another suggested that students are not being taught several important things at university including the role of HRM and how to perform simple HRM tasks. They suggested that the curriculum be more focused on measurement, human behavior, supply and demand; making the connection between theory and practice explicit:

So even if just say one subject 'introduction to HR' and then teaching it as HR is there to drive business results like any other, coz at uni [sic] they tell you that first you need to make people happy in the workplace first so they work better, but that is only half of it. HR should be more focused on measurement as well, where you have to measure human behaviour with supply and demand. .... University teaching needs to directly make the connection between theory and how that theory is used in the workplace. (Professional 10).

*Professionals and Employability*

All had similar views of employability. Half defined employability as belonging to a person with the right attitude and soft skills. "... Often, we will employ someone based on their attitude rather than their knowledge and experience..."(Professional 1). Profession 4 states "Employability is a person's suitability for the position in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude".

Other professionals explained their understanding of employability by making the point that an employable person has the right balance of attitude, skills and knowledge; specifically, a balance of past work experience, cultural fit, qualifications and good grades. Professional 7 indicated that they had done some research on the topic of employability and found the term to be vague and that the ambiguity of the term compounded the issues of the measurement of employability.

*Students Perceptions of GAs and the Role of WIL*

All expressed a frustration or lack of understanding of GAs. The majority stated they had not heard of GAs, and did not know what they consisted of. Student 7 noted that GAs are deficient in making someone more employable, while a further participant added: "...I do not have anything to do with them"

Two students who had heard of GAs stated that they should be discipline specific so that other students may see the relevance of them - indicating that even students who see the relevance of GAs understand that most others do not.

It was also reported that the assessment of GAs was not fair, as those students, who complete their degree through relying on others (such as through group work) will still be reported as having these attributes, and that the attributes are vague and dependent on what you put in.

Students were also asked to consider the usefulness of GAs in developing employable graduates, but as all had participated in a WIL experience and many could not identify what GAs were, most could not answer this question. This lack of knowledge lead to several recommendations for improving the way GAs are viewed, developed, and integrated "I think they should have them but make them more realistic"(Student 1).

...it [GAs] needs to be more than just a couple of paragraphs in the learning guide. I think they need to change the way they are being developed, in every degree and in every job ..... just saying those things and not integrating them into everything you do throughout university renders them useless. (Student 4).

Another recommended that lecturers should use real life examples in their teaching, as they enable students to make the connection between theory and the workplace. They also expressed their frustrations with the HRM degrees on offer. A student moved from one university to the other as a result:

It feels like private colleges offer more experience than universities and I found that at [University A] when I was doing their HR subjects, they are so behind in the way that they structure their learning and at [University B] in terms of learning, they are so much more eager to understand...I just feel that some universities have different perspectives, like [University A] must have had a very philosophical theoretical perspective about getting a uni [sic] degree,

whereas [University B] has a more practical, engaged and modern perspective...I just realized for HR you need experience and practicality so that's why I moved. (Student 8).

### *Students and Employability*

Views of employability varied, however some similarities with the professionals' views were found. As for other groups, students described the characteristics of an employable person as someone who is desirable to an employer, work-ready, having work experience and as a person with determination and initiative to learn and further themselves in their job rather than providing a definition of employability: "It's how desirable the person is when it comes to an employer" (Student 1); "I think that employability is where the person might not necessarily have the skills that are needed for the job but they have the personality and the willingness to obtain the skills even if they don't have them yet" (Student 3). Three students reported employability is having a good attitude and being able to fit the organizations culture and employment criteria. For example, student 5 stated "My understanding of it is just upon graduation where you fit as a candidate". This is similar to two professionals' views that an employable person is someone with the right balance of attitude, past work experience and cultural fit with the organization.

Overall, the findings highlight several key differences within and between stakeholder participant groups on how GAs and employability are defined, the graduate skills that are deemed important, and how GAs should be developed. All agreed that currently GAs are not useful with one student participant stating GAs "are deficient in making someone employable" (student). The findings are summarized in Table 3.

## DISCUSSION

This paper extends Barrie's research by examining the views of additional stakeholders (careers advisors, professionals, and students). While Barrie (2006) identified that academic perceptions of GAs differ, we found all stakeholder groups viewed GAs differently - the view of GAs being influenced by the role of each stakeholder. This is an important finding as regulatory authorities assume GAs are universally understood, and base directions in regard to the measurement or desirability of GAs on this assumption. We support Barrie's (2004) findings that rather than GAs being collectively understood, individuals create their own understandings. However, this is now a surprising finding given the recent attempts made in the AQF to provide a shared understanding of graduate attributes, raising the question: why do differing views of GAs still remain across stakeholders?

There is, however, some similarity in the perspectives of academics, careers advisors, and professionals. Following Barrie (2004), each of these stakeholders had a traditional view of GAs as generic capabilities or attributes. More recently with the push to include employability skills in higher education, different frameworks have arisen that include ways of embedding both transferrable skills and discipline specific content into courses (Oliver, 2010, 2011, 2013). Participants supported this shift in defining GAs as those common-sense soft skills that are transferrable, including skills such as being adaptive and eager to learn. However, given recent research it is surprising that stakeholders continue to view GAs as generic, and do not relate them to the specific skills required for their professions. This assists explaining our key finding that students did not know what the expected GAs were for their courses.

TABLE 3: Stakeholders views on Graduate Attributes.

|                                                      | Academics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Careers advisors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Professionals                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Students                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Perception of GAs                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Generic</li> <li>- Common sense</li> <li>- Transferable soft skills</li> </ul>                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General characteristics leading to social contributions and citizenship.</li> <li>- Employer mission statements</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soft skills: Communication skills; Team-work and organizational skills</li> <li>- Being flexible, courteous, respectful, adaptive and eager to learn.</li> <li>- Generic characteristics developed through education.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The majority of students had not heard of GAs and did not know what they were.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| How GAs should be developed in the curriculum        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Integrated across the curriculum rather than confined to individual units.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contextualized so that their relevance can be seen by each stakeholder</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General for increased flexibility and transferability of soft skills.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- GA is vague and dependent on what you put in.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Usefulness in developing employable graduates        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not useful. Acquisition not guaranteed</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not useful.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not useful. Identified skills lacking such as decision making.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most students could not answer.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Perceptions of employability / an employable person. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Possessing soft skills such as a positive attitude; good communication and networking skills; interpersonal and problem-solving skills; being honest and caring; and having reflection skills.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soft skills such as good communication skills and team-work skills.</li> <li>- The ability to read and understand the labor market; skills to obtain and maintain work.</li> <li>- Transferrable skills such as negotiation, interpersonal skills, problem solving and leadership skills.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Someone with the right attitude and soft skills</li> <li>- Having the right balance of attitude, skills and knowledge; specifically, a balance of past work experience, cultural fit, qualifications and good grades.</li> <li>- The term is vague, and that the ambiguity of the term compounds the issue of the measurement of employability.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Desirability to an employer, the work readiness of the individual and having work experience.</li> <li>- Has determination and initiative to learn and further themselves in their job.</li> <li>- Has a good attitude and able to fit into the organizations culture and selection criteria.</li> </ul> |
| HRM specific comments                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Numeracy knowledge and skills need further development.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Further development of the role of HRM and how to perform simple HRM tasks.</li> <li>- More focus on measurement, human behavior, supply and demand, and making the connection between theory and practice explicit.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A more modern and practical approach to HRM needed.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

The GA-employability link is re-inforced by research which found WIL having a positive effect on students' capacity to acquire attributes and skills needed to be employable (Bridgstock, 2009; Cooper et al., 2010; Freudenberg et al., 2011; O'Reilly & Khoury, 2010). When participants in this study were asked about the usefulness of GAs in developing employable graduates, the responses from the academic, careers and professional stakeholders were an overwhelming no, while only two students knew what GAs were. This finding may be due to the generic rather than role specific view of GAs, and raises further questions to be addressed about the clarity of the WIL-GA and employability link.

Across all stakeholder groups a common theme emerged that GAs needed improvement. All recognized the need for GAs to be contextualized so that they are discipline specific; however much of the literature on GAs in Australia, including government standards, refer to GAs as being generic skills or learning outcomes that a student may achieve in their course (Barrie, 2006; Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2012). Moreover, in HRM it was suggested GAs and skills should include understanding the role of HRM and the application of simple HRM tasks. This study found one of two things in a classic case of which came first, the chicken or the egg: (1) participants whom stated that they want GAs to be discipline specific lack understanding of the purpose of GAs OR (2) they lack understanding of the role and purpose of GAs because they are not discipline specific and therefore their relevance is not seen. Whichever the case may be, skills gaps are still being found in recent graduates (Jackson, 2013b), reinforcing the need for more inclusive approaches such as Oliver's (2010, 2013) assurance for a learning framework where both generic and discipline specific attributes or capabilities are considered.

Employability is described as someone with soft skills. The skills stated differ but include good communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork, negotiation and problem solving skills, leadership skills and reflection skills. Students looked to employers to define employability, a perspective held by employers whereby an employable person is desirable to an employer, which may mean work readiness, work experience, good attitude and fit with organizational culture, or the right attitude and skills. The literature on employability is complex and contestable. Each of the participants of this study aligns with the approach whereby employability is viewed as a set of certain characteristics, or skill sets that students will possess when they graduate (Clarke, 2008; Holmes, 2013; Ithaca Group, 2012;). This is a dominant discourse found in the employability literature, however, recently a shift in the way employability is viewed means we no longer are looking for just a set of skills. Rather it is argued that employability should be viewed as an ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work and learning across a career lifespan (Bennett, 2018). This highlights the need for individuals being responsible for developing their work-related identities through feedback and interaction with others and the field of employment (Tomlinson, 2012; Holmes, 2013).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In stark contrast to literature (Barrie, 2004; Cranmer, 2006; Holmes, 2001, 2013; McLennan & Keating, 2008) another dominant theme was that GAs were not useful in developing employable graduates. Academics, career advisors, and professional stakeholder groups explicitly stated they saw no link between GAs and employable graduates. Alarming, students who had participated in a WIL program did not know what GAs were, highlighting that the link between WIL- GAs and employability is not strong in the HRM discipline. This is an important finding as it highlights the need for key stakeholders responsible for developing WIL programs to work collaboratively so that the purpose of such programs are achieved. This does not mean that students in this study did not acquire the attributes that were embedded within the WIL program. These attributes may have been developed

throughout their studies without them being aware of the way they were defined, and may ultimately lead to increased employability.

The confusion among students about GAs, combined with the different terms used in the study by the stakeholders, has led to terms in the HRM discipline being used interchangeably. Therefore, a pressing need exists for improving the way GAs are conceptualized and taught, as evidenced by the lack of understanding of the purpose of GAs. As recommended by one of the participants, these concepts could be brought to life by implementing and re-enforcing them in everything that the university does, as well as contextualizing them so that each stakeholder sees their relevance. It is important that this be considered in practice so that key stakeholders are on the same page about what GAs are important for students to develop and how WIL will contribute to this goal and employability.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Academics in this research were selected based on their role in coordinating, lecturing or tutoring HRM relevant units that included the assessment of WIL experiences (see table 2), those HRM academics not engaged in WIL development were excluded. Before generalizing these findings to trends within higher education, further research that considers the perspectives of those academics in HRM not directly involved in WIL is recommended.

The different and often competing perspectives between stakeholders' embedding GAs into subjects and those completing the WIL subjects, highlights a disjuncture between theory and practice. Theory and research continue to see the benefits and links between WIL participation and the positive acquisition of a set of GAs for increasing a student's employability. It is also apparent that the participants did not share a common understanding of GAs, or WIL's contribution to achieving these. It is essential that future research embrace a variety of stakeholders and not concentrate, as in the past, on the perspectives of single stakeholder groups.

This study found that students were unaware of GAs. While it is important to note that the small number of student participants may have contributed to the difference in the findings in relation to knowledge of GAs, that engaged student participants lacked this awareness is of concern. This limitation (small numbers of respondents) was somewhat mitigated through the recruitment and selection of participants. In selecting student participants, as with all other participants, care was taken to include variation in the demographics (institution link). Future research should address specific reasons why this disconnect has occurred in the discipline area of HRM in conjunction with what is best practice in WIL in HRM. Stronger industry representation may provide a broader view of the opportunities and challenges to come in developing WIL in HRM in higher education in Australia.

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## About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues dealing with Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE). Since then the readership and authorship has become more international and terminology usage in the literature has favored the broader term of WIL, in 2018 the journal name was changed to the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning.

In this Journal, WIL is defined as "*an educational approach that uses relevant work-based experiences to allow students to integrate theory with the meaningful practice of work as an intentional component of the curriculum. Defining elements of this educational approach requires that students engage in authentic and meaningful work-related task, and must involve three stakeholders; the student, the university, and the workplace*". Examples of practice include off-campus, workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (Co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, etc. WIL is related to, but not the same as, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's main aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, co-op/WIL practitioners, and researchers. The Journal desires to encourage quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of effective practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is ongoing financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ), [www.nzace.ac.nz](http://www.nzace.ac.nz) and the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and received periodic sponsorship from the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the World Association of Cooperative Education (WACE).

## Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily of two forms; 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider best practice submissions.

*Research publications* should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

*Topical discussion articles* should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

*Best practice and program description papers.* On occasions, the Journal also seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of best practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

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