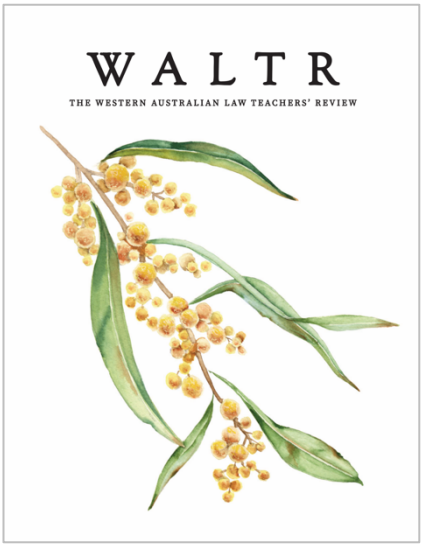

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GRADES OR WORK EXPERIENCE?

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF GRADES & PRACTICE-BASED EXPERIENCE ON GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT

LEIGH SMITH, PNINA LEVINE & BRENDA ROHL *

Which of academic performance or work experience is perceived by students to be more important for graduate employment? The authors surveyed student participants in the Bachelor of Laws, Bachelor of Science and other Science-related degrees at a Western Australian university to investigate. Participants were surveyed in relation to (a) factors related to academic performance and work experience, and (b) curricular work experience and non-curricular work experience, in relation to their perceived importance to employment outcomes. Participants also engaged in a hypothetical job candidate ranking exercise, ranking job candidates with varying academic performance and work experience for a graduate role. The findings show that while many law and science participants perceived academic performance to be important, law participants placed greater importance on academic performance than science participants did. Some participants also appeared to be informed by their perception of the views of industry. Therefore, academic staff and higher education institutions must ascertain and have regard to employer perceptions in relation to the relative importance of academic performance and work experience.

I INTRODUCTION

The connection between attendance at university classes and academic performance has been the subject of considerable research, both in Australia and internationally.[1] Working while studying is often suggested as a reason for student non-attendance and reduced

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[1] See, eg, Louis Winnifred et al, 'Teaching Psychology in Australia: Does Class Attendance Matter for Performance' (2016) 68(1) *Australian Journal of Psychology* 47; R Nazim Khan, 'Attendance Matters: Student Performance and Attitudes' (2022) 30(4) *International Journal of Innovation in Science and Mathematics Education* 42; Siobhan Lucey and Maria Grydaki, 'University Attendance and Academic Performance: Encouraging Student Engagement' (2023) 70 *Scottish Journal of Political Economy* 180.

academic performance.[2] A related, but less-studied question arises; is academic performance or work experience perceived as more important for graduate employment by students? Such a question is important, in terms of outcomes for students, and organisationally where 'graduate employment metrics' are used 'to gauge institutional success'.[3] Should academic staff be emphasising to students the importance of class attendance and participation, or should they be advising students to take every possible opportunity to gain work experience? Is the best approach a combination of the two? These are the questions that inform the present study, which is focused on students' perceptions of the importance of academic performance and work experience across two undergraduate cohorts (law, primarily Bachelor of Laws, and science, primarily Bachelor of Science) at a Western Australian university.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next part, an overview of the relevant literature is provided. The focus here is on studies that examine student perceptions with respect to graduate employability and/or employment outcomes. In Part III, the research question and aims are outlined, with the former relating to whether academic performance or work experience is perceived by students to be of greater value in obtaining graduate employment. In Part IV, the research methodology and participant profile are provided. The current study used a Qualtrics survey to capture the views of 128 law and science students at Curtin University in Western Australia. In Part V, the results of the study are outlined and analysed, with a focus on the extent to which students view: (i) academic performance and work experience as important to obtaining graduate employment and how, and why, they rank their relative importance (ii) there to be a distinction between the value of curricular and non-curricular work experience to obtaining graduate employment, and (iii) the differences between prospective (hypothetical) job candidates as being relevant to potential employers making decisions around who to employ for a graduate position. Part VI provides a brief commentary on the limitations of the study and opportunities for further research. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of two key implications from the study, (a) that students' perceptions are influenced by their encounters with industry and (b) that there appears to be a disciplinary dimension to the relative importance of grades and work experience, namely that as a general proposition, law students tend to perceive grades as more important than science students.

[2] Khan (n 1) 60; Caitlin Cassidy, '"The Death of Campus Life": First Major Australian University Dumps Face-to-Face Lectures, Leaving Staff "Furious"', *The Guardian* (Web Page, 13 September 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/sep/13/adelaide-university-dumps-face-to-face-lectures>; Jedidajah Otte, '"I See Little Point": UK University Students on Why Attendance has Plummeted', *The Guardian* (Web Page, 28 May 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/may/28/i-see-little-point-uk-university-students-on-why-attendance-has-plummeted>; Denise Jackson, 'The Relationship between Student Employment, Employability-Building Activities and Graduate Outcomes' (2024) 48(1) *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 14, 14 citing Ralph Hall, 'The Work-Study Relationship: Experiences of Full-Time University Students Undertaking Part-Time Employment (2010) 23(5) *Journal of Education and Work* 439, 447.

[3] Anna Rowe, Denise Jackson, and Jenny Fleming, 'Exploring University Student Engagement and Sense of Belonging During Work-Integrated Learning' (2023) 75(3) *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 564.

II LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Employability is frequently discussed in the higher education literature.[4] With higher education funding now often linked to matters such as graduate employment outcomes,[5] this attention is likely to continue. Like others,[6] in this paper we adopt a definition of employability developed by Beverley Oliver,[7] building upon the work of Mantz Yorke.[8] Oliver defines employability as follows:

> Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefit themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.[9]

Employability can be distinguished from employment, specifically employment outcomes,[10] with the latter often focused on a student or graduate's ability to obtain work within a specified period after graduation.[11] Despite their differences, the two concepts of employability and employment are related, with the latter often perceived to be indicative of the former.[12] However, it is not necessarily the case that a student/graduate with high employability will have positive employment outcomes (and vice versa).[13]

A range of activities are identified within the literature as helping to improve students' employability and employment outcomes.[14] For example, Kinash et al refer to '12 different types of strategies' including, for example, 'capstone' units, 'careers advice', 'international

[4] See, eg, Denise Jackson and Anna Rowe, 'Impact of Work-Integrated Learning and Co-Curricular Activities on Graduate Labour Force Outcomes' (2023) 48(3) *Studies in Higher Education* 490; Trina Jorre de St Jorre and Beverley Oliver, 'Want Students to Engage? Contextualise Graduate Learning Outcomes and Assess for Employability' (2018) 37(1) *Higher Education Research and Development* 44; Shelley Kinash et al, 'Discrepant Stakeholder Perspectives on Graduate Employability Strategies' (2016) 35(5) *Higher Education Research and Development* 951; Alex Tymon, 'The Student Perspective on Employability' (2013) 38(6) *Studies in Higher Education* 841.
[5] Jackson (n 2) 15; Denise Jackson and Ruth Bridgstock, 'What Actually Works to Enhance Graduate Employability? The Relative Value of Curricular, Co-Curricular, and Extra-Curricular Graduate Learning and Paid Work' (2021) 81 *Higher Education* 723, 724.
[6] Trina Jorre de St Jorre et al, 'Science Students' Conception of Factors that will Differentiate them in the Graduate Employment Market' (2019) 10(1) *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 27, 29.
[7] Beverley Oliver, 'Redefining Graduate Employability and Work-Integrated Learning: Proposals for Effective Higher Education in Disrupted Economies' (2015) 6(1) *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 56, 59.
[8] Mantz Yorke, *Employability in Higher Education: What It Is – What It is Not* (Report, Learning and Employability Series 1, 2006) 8.
[9] Oliver (n 7) 59.
[10] Jackson and Rowe (n 4) 490; Tymon (n 4) 842–3.
[11] Kinash et al (n 4) 951–2.
[12] Jackson and Rowe (n 4) 490.
[13] Jackson and Bridgstock (n 5) 725. Cf Jill Alexander and Carol Boothby, 'Stakeholder Perceptions of Clinical Legal Education within an Employability Context' (2018) 25(3) *International Journal of Clinical Legal Education* 53, 56, who have stated that '[b]eing employable is obviously a pre-requisite to being employed but not all employable people can transition to employment'.
[14] Denise Jackson and Michael Tomlinson, 'The Relative Importance of Work Experience, Extra-Curricular and University-Based Activities on Student Employability' (2022) 41(4) *Higher Education Research and Development* 1119, 1120; Kinash et al (n 4).

exchange', and relevantly to the present paper, 'part time employment' and 'work experience'.[15]

Research shows that both employment and work-integrated learning can positively affect student employment outcomes, however, there are 'potentially damaging effects of working full time in unrelated roles'.[16] The concept of work-integrated learning within the higher education context consists of activities designed to blend academic learning and the development of capabilities relevant to the workplace.[17] These exist on something of a scale from, for example, an authentic assessment, such as a letter to a client based on a real-life factual scenario to curricular work experience, such as an internship or placement unit,[18] or clinical legal education (legal education designed to mimic legal practise, usually through a legal clinic overseen by a legal practitioner), the impact of which has recently been explored in the literature.[19]

Notably, although there is considerable research on the different types of activities aimed at improving students' employability and employment outcomes, comparisons between them are limited.[20] Kinash et al have authored one of the few comparative pieces of the impact of various activities on student employability.[21] They identify four key stakeholders in the development of employability and the promotion of employment outcomes, namely, 'higher education personnel', 'employers', 'students' and 'graduates', each of whom has a different role to play.[22] Importantly, according to Jorre de St Jorre et al, the perceptions of students in this space are underexplored,[23] albeit that they do identify three studies which merit further discussion here.[24] The three studies identified are those of (1) Tymon, (2) Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton, and (3) the study by Kinash et al referred to above.[25]

Tymon's study focused on business students in a UK university.[26] Data collection took place through a mixture of focus groups and surveys.[27] Four central questions were asked, relating to (a) defining employability, (b) components of employability, (c) the role of the university in supporting employability, and (d) the importance of employability.[28] Interestingly, one of Tymon's key findings was that the student respondents defined employability, more in reference to employment outcomes, than broader conceptualisations.[29] Importantly, for the purposes of the present research, Tymon reflected on student perceptions around academic performance, stating that '[l]ess than 40% of first and second year groups mentioned

[15] Kinash et al (n 4) 953–5.
[16] Jackson (n 2) 27. See also at 15.
[17] Jorre de St Jorre et al (n 6) 28.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Alexander and Boothby (n 13).
[20] Jackson and Bridgstock (n 5) 725.
[21] Kinash et al (n 4).
[22] Ibid 952.
[23] Jorre de St Jorre et al (n 6) 29–30.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Tymon (n 4); Eivis Qenani, Neal MacDougall, Carol Sexton, 'An Empirical Study of Self-Perceived Employability: Improving the Prospects for Student Employment Success in an Uncertain Environment' (2014) 15(3) *Active Learning in Higher Education* 199; Kinash et al (n 4).
[26] Tymon (n 4) 842.
[27] Ibid 849.
[28] Ibid 849–50.
[29] Ibid 852.

qualifications or grades as being connected to employability, whereas for employers a degree has almost become a prerequisite.'[30]

Qenani, MacDougall, and Sexton's study involved engineering and science students in the United States of America and took the form of a survey,[31] focused on matters including student perceptions of self-employability.[32] For the purposes of the present paper, two findings are worth noting (both of which are also identified by Jorre de St Jorre, Elliot, Johnson, and Bisset).[33] The first is in relation to undertaking an internship, with Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton finding that 'students who report work experience gained through an *internship* during their academic studies had an odds ratio of 2.482 meaning that as a result of an internship they were almost 2.5 times more likely to feel highly confident of their employability,'[34] suggesting that internships are an effective mechanism to boost a student's self-confidence. Second, academic performance was also relevant, with 'a self-reported GPA of 3.00 and above … result[ing] in a student being 1.64 times more likely to feel highly confident of their employability.'[35] Notably, while these results suggest that students perceive both internship and academic performance as contributing to employability, the higher confidence gained through participation in an internship may suggest work experience activities, such as an internship, are more influential.

Given that the current research is concerned with the extent to which students in law and science perceive academic performance and work experience as contributing to employment outcomes, the results of the studies of both Tymon, and Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton provide interesting points of potential comparison. The third study, by Kinash et al is less directly relevant to the present paper. While it focuses on the use by students of a range of 'employability strategies' (twelve are identified, some of which are listed above) the role of academic performance receives limited attention.[36] However, there is one interesting observation, linked to the second of the three key areas the present research explores, namely curricular versus non-curricular work experience. Kinash et al make the point that '[n]umerous project participants shared their perception that part-time employment is rarely aligned with the graduates' future careers and overall is perceived to take away from time available to participate in strategies that authentically develop career experience'.[37] This finding suggests that there is a need for activities such as part-time employment to be sufficiently connected to the student's projected career path, in order to improve employability.

In their research, Jorre de St Jorre et al used data from a mixture of a preliminary survey, focus groups and interviews to examine the 'understanding and priorities related to employment and employability' of 138 undergraduate science students across four

[30] Ibid 850 (citation omitted).
[31] Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (n 25) 203.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Jorre de St Jorre (n 4) 29–30.
[34] Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (n 25) 207–8.
[35] Ibid 208.
[36] Kinash et al (n 4).
[37] Ibid 959.

universities.[38] Particularly relevant for present purposes, '[a]lmost all students (96%) reported that they thought about their employment prospects often',[39] suggesting that employment outcomes are an important concern for university students. Connected to that, Jorre de St Jorre et al found that 'students were more focused on employment than employability', that is, finding work to support themselves was the priority, even over, in some cases, the relevance of that job to their future career.[40] While work experience was identified as important, participants distinguished between discipline/career related work experience and unrelated work experience, with some perceiving the latter to be of limited benefit,[41] reflecting a similar point of view to that identified by Kinash et al with respect to the participants in their study.[42] Significantly, in the discussion of their results, Jorre de St Jorre et al observe that '[w]ith the exception of students who required particular grades for further study, grades were not perceived as being particularly influential ... as long as the grades were sufficient to pass.'[43] This presents an interesting contrast to other research, such as that of Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton, which, as outlined above, did find that academic performance could help build a student's self-confidence with respect to employability.[44]

Subsequent to the work of Jorre de St Jorre et al, there have been further studies that have examined the relative benefits of different activities to employment.[45] However, these are not focused on students' perceptions of the relative importance of work experience and academic performance to employment outcomes for students, and so will not be considered further.

III RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

The research question guiding the present study is:

> Which of academic performance or work experience is perceived by students to be more important for graduate employment?

As can be seen from the above question, it is the student perspective that is the focus of the data collection and analysis. Consequently, the aims of this study are to:

1. Understand and explore student perceptions on the relative importance of (a) academic performance and (b) work experience for graduate employment;

2. Investigate whether students perceive a difference in the value of (a) curricular and (b) non-curricular work experience for graduate employment; and

3. Identify the implications of (1) and (2) for educators in the higher education sector.

[38] Jorre de St Jorre et al (n 6) 31.
[39] Ibid 32.
[40] Ibid 32–3.
[41] Ibid 34.
[42] Kinash et al (n 4) 959.
[43] Jorre de St Jorre et al (n 6) 37.
[44] Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (n 25) 208.
[45] See, eg, Jackson (n 2); Jackson and Bridgstock (n 5).

IV METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

The data for this study was collected through a Qualtrics survey of undergraduate students enrolled in law and science courses at Curtin University in Western Australia. A mixture of quantitative data (primarily Likert scales and rankings) and qualitative data (free text) was collected, along with relevant demographic data. The cohort surveyed were Bachelor of Laws (LLB) students and Science students (primarily, but not exclusively, Bachelor of Science students). These cohorts were selected because work experience (for example, legal clerkships) is not specifically required for course completion, as compared to other courses, such as teaching.[46]

This study received approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: HRE2023-0546). Potential participants were fully informed about the purpose of the survey, their rights as participants, and the potential risks and benefits associated with their participation. Measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Additionally, any conflict of interest and power differentials were considered and mitigated against.

A total of 128 students participated in the survey, although not every participant answered every question. There were 47 Bachelor of Laws (single degree and double degree) participants ('Law Participants'), 73 Bachelor of Science (single degree and double degree) participants, and another 8 participants enrolled in other, science-related, degrees ('Science Participants'). The vast majority (92%) of participants were studying full time (44 Law Participants, 74 Science Participants). Eleven Science Participants were international students. While no international LLB students participated, this is unsurprising as most of this cohort at the university is domestic.

Participants were at various stages of their degree (36 at 0-24%, 28 at 25-49%, 27 at 50-74%, and 37 at 75% or more completion). There was a mixture of Course Weighted Averages (3 between 0-49%, 12 between 50-59%, 39 between 60-69%, 51 between 70-79%, and 23 at 80% or above). These figures are broken down further in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Course Completion and Course Weighted Averages

Course	Approximate Completion (%)				Course Weighted Average (%)				
	0-24%	25-49%	50-74%	75%+	0-49%	50-59%	60-69%	70-79%	80%+
Law	16	8	9	14	1	1	20	16	9
Science	20	20	18	23	2	11	19	35	14
Total	36	28	27	37	3	12	39	51	23

[46] See, eg, the compulsory practicum units in Curtin University's Bachelor of Education (Primary Education): Curtin University, *Bachelor of Education (Primary Education)* (Web Page, 2024) <https://handbook.curtin.edu.au/courses/course-ug-bachelor-of-education-primary-education--b-edprv4>.

Information on gender and age was also collected towards the end of the survey, resulting in a reduced response rate. There were an almost equal number of female and male participants (34:33) with one non-binary respondent. While there was some variation in age, most participants (77%) were aged between 18-24. In the following discussion, the primary point of comparison is between the views of Law Participants and Science Participants, not between the views of other demographic groups within these courses.

V RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following analysis of the results is organised into three key areas: (a) factor rating and ranking, (b) a comparison of curricular and non-curricular work experience, and (c) the evaluation of hypothetical job candidates.

A Factor Rating/Ranking

Participants were asked to rate the importance (and then rank) nine factors relating to academic performance, work experience, and other matters, through the following question:

> How important do you think each of the factors listed below will be to a prospective employer, when considering who to recruit for a graduate position?

There were 32 Law Participants and 51 Science Participants who responded to this question. The results of the factor rating for Very Important and Important are extracted in Table 2 below.

Table 2. The Rating of Nine Factors perceived by Law Participants and Science Participants as *Very Important* or *Important*.

Factor	Law Participants Importance Percentage (n=32)	Science Participants Importance Percentage (n=51)	Importance Difference
Academic Performance	87.5	68.6	18.9
The amount and/or length of any legal or science-based work experience	81.3	70.6	10.7
The nature and/or tasks of any legal or science-based work experience undertaken	96.9	86.3	10.6
Work experience, not directly relevant to the legal or science-based graduate position	37.5	27.5	10
The business (area of legal or scientific practice) of the host or employer for the legal or science-based work experience)	56.3	51.0	5.3
Legal or science-based work experience within the hiring employer's workplace	87.5	84.3	3.2
Higher education provider (university)	46.9	49.0	-2.1
The reputation of the host or employer for the legal or science-based work experience	59.4	62.7	-3.3
Specific Unit(s) Studied	46.9	54.9	-8

It is possible to make several observations about the data in Table 2. First, speaking generally, Law Participants tended to view the factors as more important than Science Participants, with six of the factors having a higher rating for Law Participants than for Science Participants. Second, Law Participants placed a greater importance on academic performance than Science Participants, with 87.5% of Law students rating it as Very Important or Important, but only 68.6% of Science students giving it the same rating (making it the factor with the greatest importance difference). Overall, however, this aspect of the present research is more consistent with the findings of Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton,[47] in that academic performance is viewed as important by a majority of both Law Participants and Science Participants, contrasted to that of Jorre de St Jorre et al who found it to be of limited importance.[48] Noting that both previous studies involved science students (and not law students), the present findings suggest that there may be a discipline influence on student perceptions. Third, the highest rated factor for both Law Participants and Science Participants is *the nature and/or tasks of any legal or science-based work experience undertaken*, suggesting that both law and science students recognise the value that work-experience related to their career can provide. However, and not shown in Table 2, when considering Very Important only it is *legal or science-based work experience within the hiring employer's workplace*, which is rated highest for both Law Participants (68.8%) and Science Participants (58.8%).

Having rated the importance of each factor, students were then asked to rank them, with Rank 1 as the most important factor. As with the previous question, 32 Law Participants and 51 Science Participants responded here. Table 3 sets out the three highest (or four highest, where there is an equal split) factors for Rank 1 and Rank 2.

Table 3. The Ranking of the Nine Factors (where Rank 1 is the most important).

		Law Participants (n=32)	**Science Participants (n=51)**
Rank 1	Highest	Academic performance (43.8%)	Legal or Science-based work-experience within the hiring employer's workplace (39.2%)
	Second Highest	Legal or Science-based work-experience within the hiring employer's workplace (15.6%)	The nature and/or tasks of any legal or Science-based work experience undertaken (17.6%)
	Third Highest	The nature and/or tasks of any legal or Science-based work experience undertaken (12.5%)	Academic Performance (11.8%)
			The amount and/or length of any legal or Science-based work experience (11.8%)
Rank 2	Highest	Legal or Science-based work-experience within the hiring employer's workplace (31.3%)	The nature and/or tasks of any legal or Science-based work experience undertaken (23.5%)
	Second Highest	Specific unit studied (21.9%)	The amount and/or length of any legal or Science-based work experience (21.6%)
	Third Highest	The amount and/or length of any legal or Science-based work experience (15.6%)	Academic performance (19.6%)
			Legal or Science-based work-experience within the hiring employer's workplace (19.6%)

[47] Qenani, MacDougall and Sexton (n 25) 208.
[48] Jorre de St Jorre (n 6) 37.

As can be seen from Table 3, *academic performance* was the single highest Rank 1 factor (43.8%) for Law Participants, while for Science Participants, it was equal third (11.8%). Clearly, therefore, Law Participants perceive academic performance as more important to gaining graduate employment when compared to Science Participants. By contrast, for Science Participants, *legal or science-based work experience within the hiring employer's workplace* was the single highest Rank 1 factor (39.2%), compared to the second highest Rank 1 factor for Law Participants (15.6%). More so than Law Participants, Science Participants appear to perceive a benefit in seeking to gain employment with an employer with whom they have already worked. However, looking at the ranking more holistically, it is notable that six of the nine factors relate to work experience in some way (excluding *academic performance*, *specific unit(s) studied*, and *higher education provider*). When these are combined, 50% of Law Participants (n=16/32) and 80.4% of Science Participants (n=41/51) ranked a work experience factor Rank 1. While it is still clear that work experience is viewed more importantly by Science Participants than Law Participants, even for Law Participants, 50% deemed an aspect of work experience the most important factor. The qualitative data helps to shed light on why this is the case.[49]

Amongst the Law Participants who perceived academic performance to be more important than work experience, ranking it first, three main themes can be identified from the qualitative data. First, there was a general perception of the importance of academic performance. For example:

> I believe to even get past the initial stage - grades are vital. ... (Law student).
>
> Academic performance is an objective indicator of the intelligence and diligence of a potential employee. ... (Law student).

Importantly, the fact that they perceived academic performance to be the most important did not mean that work experience was unimportant. For example, the second student quoted above went on to say:

> ... Legal experience is the second most important indicator because *almost* anyone can study law but the majority will not be good at practicing it or have any passion for it. (Law student).

Second, Law Participants drew attention to their experience in seeking work, and the views that they had developed through those processes. For example:

> Throughout my experience, my academic performance has always been the baseline for my competitiveness. Throughout my interviews, relatively high importance was placed on my progression throughout my degree, and the narrative that I was able to attach to my academic performance throughout the degree. This may partly be due to me having relatively limited legal experience, however, it did feel like my practical experiences were seen as a bit of a box to be ticked. (Law student).
>
> I left them in the order they appeared because that's what made the most sense to me. Additionally, when speakers came to divulge their experiences when I was in first year, they

[49] Where student quotations have been used, they are unedited and therefore may contain grammatical and other errors.

> stated that employers where scrutinising their academic performance and questioned them about it during interviews. Being that law encourages a lot of networking, it seems to be a lot about who you know AND what you know. (Law student).

For students like these, the voice and perception of those in the legal profession was particularly significant in the formulation of their own views. Interestingly, the voice of academic staff (the third theme) was viewed with a degree of scepticism. For example:

> It was explained by a lecturer in first year that we should focus on getting good grades over working as that was most important thing to employers - it now appears to be quite dated advice. (Law student).

> In first year a lecturer explained that we were better off studying than working as it would detract from our grades, that has made me think that the importance in industry is placed on marks which may be incorrect. I have noticed that the work experience students have a good understanding of practical tasks like legal letters. … (Law student).

Comments such as these highlight the need for academic staff and higher education institutions more broadly to understand what is valued by industry with respect to graduate employment. Engagement with industry could help inform career-related advice provided by academic staff to students.

While only 11.8% of Science Participants ranked academic performance Rank 1, the reasons given broadly reflect those of the Law Participants (ie, a general perception that academic performance is more important and a perception that employers value academic performance above experience). For example:

> I believe , Skill set is more Important than experience . I am from IT background and with rapid changes in technology and frameworks, We have to catch-up with them. (Science student).

> Academic performance would be key for the employers to choose candidates. (Science student).

Given that Science Participants ranked *legal or science-based work-experience within the hiring employer's workplace* as the most prominent Rank 1 factor, it is also useful to consider how they reached their conclusion. Some made relatively general observations about the value of work experience. For example:

> Work experience will trump anything for a employer, academic results are almost a nonfactor once you have worked a couple jobs/positions in the field. (Science student).

> I feel that relevant work experience is highly preferred over academic achievements. (Science student).

Other Science Participants provided a greater level of detail, drawing specific attention to the significance of having previously worked for the prospective employer:

> Having work experience with the hiring employer gives you an extreme advantage when applying, knowing people in the workforce will almost always land you the job over someone who doesn't even if you are slightly less qualified. ... (Science student).

> Unless there were issues, I expect employers would preference people they have already worked with as they have already formed a relationship. Also, if they have already demonstrated some competency in the role either within the business or another similar company, that would be weighted higher than academic performance, which does not always reflect performance in an actual workplace. ... (Science student).

The weight employers are perceived to place on work experience is reflected in multiple responses:

> In the mining industry, companies are desperate for geologists so the work is plentiful. What determines your rank and ability to be employed is due to the amount of experience you have and not determined by academic performance. I have a high weighted average grade and have been turned down by companies because I had no experience. I applied for a vacation program spot ... and got turned down for the role. ... As mining was my only experience with some transferable skills to the oil and gas industry, I thought it would be good to highlight those skills to the interviewers, however I was told I talked too much about it. Overall, I think employers are seeking worker's with experience regarding the nature of their business. (Science student).

> As a recent graduate who went into the work force and has come back my seniors and bosses at my work places all valued work experience and specific industry experience over everything else and lowkey pretty much said the education system does nothing since they teach you everything in the field anyway and recent grads arent taught how to apply their knowledge / real world skills.. which is why ive ranked any sort of work experience above academics ..they also really didnt care where i studied..just that I had the degree they looked for. (Science student).

Law Participants who ranked discipline-related work experience with the hiring employer first (ie, above academic performance) also drew attention to both the value of a prior work experience with the prospective employer and the role of employer perceptions:

> ... I put experience within the employer's workplace #1 because it is the only direct proof to an employer of work quality, the rest are proxies. ... (Law student).

> In my experience as someone who has both worked and studied in law since 2020, I feel that my workplace experience in law has been what has given me access to employment opportunities. I feel this way because when I get through to job interviews for law clerk and paralegal roles, I am asked far more about my work experience in law than my academic experience and academic performance. A job applicant with real-world practical skills but mediocre grades will be looked upon more favourably than one with an exceptional academic record but a lack of real-world experience. (Law student).

> From previous experience I have heard multiple directors of law firms say they prefer experience over grades. However students who are achieving very low grades would likely not be considered. (Law student).

The final student quotation above (noting it is from a law, not a science, student) presents the notion of grades as a threshold, that is, a minimum required for serious consideration by a prospective employer, but beyond which they are of limited utility. To an extent, this echoes Jorre de St Jorre et al's findings discussed above (in that provided a student passes, grades are generally of limited utility).[50] Arguably, however, the most prevalent theme across the responses is that related to the voice of industry. Both Law Participant and Science Participant views as to the relative importance of academic performance and work experience seem to be particularly shaped by what those in industry have told them, whether directly or indirectly.

B Curricular or Non-Curricular?

The second major area of investigation centred on the significance (if any) of a distinction between curricular and non-curricular work experience. Students were asked:

> Do you think it matters to a prospective employer whether the legal or science-based work experience is undertaken as part of a course (eg, internship for credit) or not?

The results, provided by 32 Law students and 49 Science students, are set out in Table 4.

Table 4. Law and Science student perceptions on whether it matters to employers that work experience is undertaken as part of a course.

Response	Law Participants (n=32)	Science Participants (n=49)
Yes	10 (31.3%)	15 (30.6%)
Maybe	13 (40.6%)	18 (36.7%)
No	9 (28.1%)	16 (32.7%)
Total	32 (100%)	49 (100%)

Interestingly, the difference in percentage of Law Participants and Science Participants that responded *Yes* to the question (ie, that there is a difference in curricular vs non-curricular work experience) was very small (within 1%). For these students, the dominant theme was the perception that choosing to undertake work experience (rather than being required to undertake it) showed character and commitment:

> I think it is relatively important as work experience is always valuable, however, showing that you have worked outside of your courses parameters (able to get a job on your own) shows great independence and ability. (Law student).

> There's a big difference between enforced work experience versus work experience of a students own initiative. If a student is willing to seek work experience with their own initiative, it shows interest to develop experience in that respective field. This is a demonstration of the applicants character. (Science student).

[50] Jorre de St Jorre (n 6) 37.

While the *Maybe* and *No* responses had a greater degree of divergence than the *Yes* response (3.9% for Maybe, 4.6% for No), the differences were both under 5%. For the *No* responses, it was the outcome of the work experience, not how it was obtained, that was the central consideration:

> I don't think it matters to a prospective employer whether work experience is undertaken as a part of a course. I think it just matters as to whether there has been ANY work experience. … (Law student).

> Any work experience is good work experience, most employers don't care how you got it but what you did during it and how well you can demonstrate those things in both the resume and interview. (Science student).

Within each discipline, it was the *Maybe* response (40.6% Law Participants, 36.7% Science Participants) that received the most votes. This suggests that there is a degree of uncertainty about the extent to which the curricular vs non-curricular work experience is important. In addition, there is limited difference in the *Yes* and *No* responses (a difference of 3.2% for Law Participants, in favour of Yes, and a difference of 2.1% for Science Participants, in favour of No), suggesting that this area is opportune for additional feedback from employers and industry.

C Hypothetical Job Candidates

The third major area for investigation involved asking students to rank six hypothetical job candidates, with a mixture of academic performance and work experience:

> Consider the hypothetical job candidates below. Please rank them in order (by dragging and dropping) of the likelihood of being recruited by a prospective employer for a graduate position (with one being the most likely). Where the candidate has undertaken any work experience, assume they have performed to a satisfactory standard.

The six hypothetical job candidates were:

- **C** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 70%. In addition to their academic performance, they have undertaken one discipline-specific internship unit (with a notable employer in your discipline).
- **K** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 70%. In addition to their academic performance, they have been employed on a part-time (one day per week) basis for the last year with a notable employer in your discipline.
- **S** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 70%. They have not undertaken any discipline related work experience but have extensive work experience in an unrelated field.

- **X** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 85%. They have not undertaken any work experience.
- **M** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 70%. In addition to their academic performance, they have been previously employed by your firm/business on a 4-week summer project.
- **O** is a final year single degree student in your discipline. They have a course weighted average of 60%. In addition to their academic performance, they have worked in the discipline for five years on a part time basis, with a leading employer.

As can be seen from the above description of each hypothetical job candidate, there is a range in Course Weighted Average (60% to 85%) as well as in the nature, duration, and type (curricular or non-curricular) of work experience. Table 5 shows the results of the ranking, focused on Rank 1 and Rank 2, as well as Rank 6, with Rank 1 being the hypothetical job candidate most likely to be recruited. There were 30 Law students and 42 Science students who responded to this question.

Table 5. Law Participant and Science Participant rankings of hypothetical job candidates as to the likelihood of being recruited by a prospective employer for a graduate position (where Rank 1 is the most likely).

		Law Participants (n=30)	**Science Participants (n=42)**
Rank 1	Highest	K (26.7%)	O (42.9%)
		M (26.7%)	
	Second Highest	O (23.3%)	M (23.8%)
	Third Highest	X (13.3%)	K (21.4%)
Rank 2	Highest	K (40%)	K (31.0%)
			O (31.0%)
	Second Highest	M (20%)	M (19.0%)
	Third Highest	X (13.3%)	C (16.7%)
		O (13.3%)	
Rank 6	Highest	S (40%)	S (47.6%)
	Second Highest	O (26.7%)	X (45.2%)
	Third Highest	X (23.3%)	O (4.8%)

Table 5 shows that Law Participants rated candidates K and M the highest. Both are similar, with a 70% course weighted average. The key distinctions between the two are in the duration of the work experience and whether it was with the employer in question or a different, but notable, employer in the field. Candidates K and M also featured highly in the Science Participants' rankings. Consequently, the data would tend to suggest that both Law Participants and Science Participants consider that a mixture of solid academic performance

and some relevant work experience is desirable. This notion of balance is reflected in a number of the qualitative responses to this question:

> I ranked the candidates this way as I tried to find a balance between quality and amount of work experience and grades. Overall, I did place amount of work experience higher than grades. (Law student).
>
> I feel like they would want people with good knowledge of the discipline but also relevant work experience where possible, I feel like a balance of both would be preferred over very good employment experience or very good grades. (Law student).
>
> Although academic performance is important, experience, particularly within the field (and even more so with the specific business) is likely more valuable to employers since they may prioritise applicants that don't need as much training/hand holding and are ready contributors to the business. (Science student).
>
> A balanced good performance in uni and work experience in a related field is the best. (Science student).

However, it is X and O that are arguably the most interesting. Despite being the highest performing student academically (with a course weighted average of 85%), X has no work experience. Law Participants and Science Participants treated X very differently. For Law Participants, X was rated 1st by 4, 2nd by 4, and 6th by 7. However, for Science Participants, X was rated 1st by 0, 2nd by 0, and 6th by 19 (and 5th by 18). The Science Participants' perception on X was clearly, therefore, overwhelmingly negative, whereas for law, X drew both strongly positive and negative views. O (with a course weighted average of 60%), by contrast, was viewed very positively by many Science Participants, rated 1st by 18, 2nd by 13, and 6th by only 2. However, for Law Participants, the response to O was very mixed, rated 1st by 7, 2nd by 4, 3rd by 6, 4th by 2, 5th by 3, and 6th by 8. Two points can be made with respect to X and O. First, there are clearly some Law Participants who view strong academic performance as imperative, and able to overcome a lack of work experience. That view is not shared by those Science Participants. However, the second point is that there are many Science Participants who believe that a weaker academic performance can be overcome by extensive work experience. The Law Participant responses are far more mixed on this point.

Significantly, Law Participants and Science Participants were united in their treatment of S. While S had a decent, but not exceptional, course weighted average (70%), they did not have any discipline related work experience (although they did have some work experience). S was ranked 6th by the most Law Participants and Science Participants, at 40% and 47.6% respectively. S, therefore, reflects the risks identified by Jackson and others that work experience not clearly connected to a student's discipline can pose.[51]

[51] Jackson (n 2) 27. See also: Kinash et al (n 4) 959; Jorre de St Jorre et al (n 6) 34.

VI LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

While the present research offers insight into student perceptions of the relative importance of academic performance and practice-based experience for graduate employment, there are some limitations, which could help inform further research in this space. First, the qualitative data makes clear that employer/industry voice is a key consideration in how students perceive the relative importance of academic performance and work experience. As part of the broader research project, the research team developed and piloted an employer survey instrument, with a view to wider distribution in the future. While the number of responses from the pilot is too small (five law and three science employers, although not all completed every question) to fully draw out the possible implications, they do allude to the possibility that the student perception of what employers' value in making decisions around graduate employment may not be entirely accurate. For example, five employers (three law and two science) answered the hypothetical job candidate question. Notably, four of the five (two law, two science) ranked O last (the other law employer ranked X last). Further, three law employers indicated that a minimum course weighted average for recruitment existed in their organisation (one between 60-69%, one between 70-79%, and the other did not disclose the range), and two indicated no. One science employer indicated they did (70-79%) and one indicated no. Further research is necessary to explore employer perceptions on matters relating to graduate employment, to better inform stakeholders. Second, the present study is a point-in-time perspective. Further research could incorporate a longitudinal component, measuring changes (if any) in student perceptions over time, looking at the evolution of their views over the course of their degree and into graduate employment. Third, the present study was focused on a single institution; there could be value in a multi-institutional comparison. Finally, the survey did not ask students what their own career aspirations were or if they had a specific job in contemplation when undertaking the survey. Some students may have been thinking about a particular type of position when they completed the survey (for example, even within the legal industry there are potentially a variety of graduate roles). Further research could seek to integrate each participant's specific career aspirations with their responses to broader questions around their perceptions of grades and work experience.

VII CONCLUSION

The present research has sought to build on the existing literature and explore student perceptions on the relative importance of both academic performance and work experience on employment outcomes. Two main implications can be drawn from the analysis. First, many Law Participants and Science Participants appear to view both academic performance and work experience as important for graduate employment outcomes. However, the results show that a distinction may be able to be drawn between the perceptions of students in different disciplines, as Law Participants appeared to place greater importance on academic performance than Science Participants. Whether such a disciplinary distinction is present in the views of employers and industry is a matter for further research. Second, it is imperative

that academic staff and higher education institutions ascertain and have regard to student and employer perceptions of the relative importance of academic performance and work experience. As seen above, some students regard the views of academic staff with a degree of hesitancy. Higher education institutions and their staff must familiarise themselves with current industry expectations, whether that be through research, advice from advisory boards and similar bodies, or even informal discussions with industry contacts. Understanding what industry values in a graduate employee can allow academic staff and higher education institutions to communicate more accurately to their students on the relative merits of academic performance and work experience. Evidence-based messaging, at all stages of a student's degree, could be used to better manage student expectations and inform priorities. Such insights could also help to further shape the embedding of work-integrated learning in higher education.